

Political climate of 19th century and nationalism history essay



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1. Introduction

In this unit I shall introduce you the various aspects of Indian National Movement during its earlier phase. Resistance to British rule had always been there, but it was in 1857 that large sections of Indian people in various regions made a combined effort to overthrow the British. That is why it is often termed as the first war of independence. Due to certain weaknesses the uprising was crushed by the British, but as far as the struggle was concerned there was no going back. This inspired a new kind of struggle. The intelligentsia, which earlier believed in the benevolence of British rule, now came forward to expose its brutality.

Political associations were formed and the Indian National Congress played a vital role in directing the freedom struggle. The main focus of this unit is the role of moderates and militant nationalists and the efforts made during the Swadeshi Movement to involve the masses into the freedom struggle.

This was also a period of cultural renaissance as far as the Indian society is concerned. Many social and religious reformers took up the battle against the social and religious evils that existed in our society. This contributed immensely towards the making of a new India.

2. Pre-Gandhi Era

2. 1. The First War of Independence

In 1857, there occurred a revolt, popularly known as the India's First War of Independence, where millions of soldiers, artisans and peasants made a combined effort to overthrow foreign rule. The Revolt was, however, a no

sudden occurrence. It was the culmination of nearly a century-old discontent with the British policies and imperialist exploitation. The British conquered India and colonized its economy and society through a prolonged process. This process led to continuous resistance by the people through a series of civil rebellions led by deposed rulers, impoverished zamindars and poligars (landed military magnates in South India) and ex-officials of the conquered Indian states. The mass base of these rebellions came from the ruined peasants and artisans and demobilized soldiers. Starting with the Sanyasi rebellion and Chuar uprising in Bengal and Bihar in the 1760s, there was hardly a year without armed opposition or a decade without a major armed rebellion in one part of the country or the other. From 1763 to 1856 there were more than 40 major rebellions apart from hundreds of minor ones. Though massive in their totality, these rebellions were, however, wholly local in character and effects and were isolated from each other.

2. 1. 1. Causes

The Revolts of 1857 started on 10 May when the Company's Indian soldiers (sepoys) at Meerut rebelled, killed their European officers, marched to Delhi, entered the Red Fort and proclaimed the aged and powerless Bahadur Shah 11 (who still bore the prestigious name of the Mughals) as the Emperor of India.

The Company's sepoy had many grievances against their employers, ranging from declining material and other service conditions to religious interference and racial arrogance. But basically they reflected the general discontent with British rule. They were after all a part of Indian society and they were 'peasants in uniform'. The hopes, desires, despair and discontent
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of other sections of Indian society were reflected in them. The sepoys' rebellion was a product of the accumulated grievances of the Indian people. The most important underlying cause of the Revolt was the disruption of the traditional Indian economy and its subordination to British economy and the intense economic exploitation of the country. Above all, the colonial policy of intensifying land revenue demand led to a large number of peasants losing their land to revenue farmers, traders and moneylenders. Destruction of traditional handicrafts ruined and impoverished millions of artisans. The economic decline of peasantry and artisans was reflected in 12 major and numerous minor famines from 1770 to 1857.

2. 1. 2. Extent and intensity

The Revolt of 1857 swept Northern India like a hurricane. Nearly half of East India Company's Indian soldiers rebelled. Everywhere in Northern India, the soldiers' rebellion was followed by popular revolts of the civilian population. According to one estimate, of the total number of about 1, 50, 000 men who died fighting the English in Avadh, over 1, 00, 000 were civilians. The Revolt soon embraced a wide area engulfing Avadh, Rohilkhand, the Duab, the Bundelkhand, Central India, large parts of Bihar, and East Punjab. There were uprising in Rajasthan at Nasirabad, Nimach and Kota. Even in Kolhapur the sepoys rose in arms. In many of the princely states of these regions, the rulers remained loyal to the British but the soldiers and people joined the rebels or refused to fight against them.

2. 1. 3. Defeat

In the end, British imperialism, at the height of its power the world over, succeeded in ruthlessly suppressing the Revolt. The reasons were many.
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Despite its wide reach, the Revolt could not embrace the entire country or all sections of Indian society. Bengal, South India and large parts of Punjab remained outside its reach since these areas had already exhausted themselves through prolonged rebellions and struggle against the British. Most rulers of Indian states and the big zamindars remained loyal to the foreign rulers. Thus, Scindhia of Gwalior, Holkar of Indore, the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Rajput rulers of Jodhpur and many other Rajputana states, the Nawab of Bhopal, the rulers of Patiala and Kashmir, the Ranas of Nepal, and many other rulers and chieftains gave active support to the British in suppressing the Revolt.

In general, merchants and moneylenders either supported the British or refused to help the rebels. The modern educated Indians also did not support the Revolt. The leaders of the Revolt fought with courage, but could neither coordinate their struggle nor evolve a unified high command. Instead, they indulged in constant petty quarrels. The rebels were short of modern weapons and often had to fight with primitive weapons such as swords and spikes. They were very poorly organized. The sepoys were brave but at times there was lack of discipline which affected their military efficiency.

2. 2. Early Phase of Nationalism

The defeat of the Revolt of 1857 made it clear that uprisings based on old outlooks and social forces could not defeat modern imperialism. For that, new social forces, new ideologies, a modern political movement based on an understanding of modern imperialism and capable of mobilizing the masses for nationwide political activity were needed. Such a movement was initiated during the second half of the 19th century by modern nationalist

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intelligentsia. The new movement had a much narrower social base, but was inspired by new political ideas, new intellectual perception of reality and new social, economic and political objectives. It also represented new forces and forms of struggle, new leading classes and new techniques of political organization.

Many factors were responsible for the rise of this powerful movement.

2. 2. 1. Role of the Intellectuals

Initially, this process was grasped only by the modern Indian intellectuals. Paradoxically, during this first half of the 19th century, they had adopted a very supportive approach towards colonial rule for the following reasons:

They had believed that the restructuring of Indian society could occur under British rule because Britain was the most advanced country of the time.

They hoped that the British would help India get rid of its past backwardness.

The intellectuals, attracted by modern industry and the prospects of modern economic development, hoped that, Britain would industrialize India and introduce modern capitalism.

They believed that Britain, guided by the doctrine of democracy, civil liberties, and sovereignty of the people, would introduce modern science and technology and modern knowledge in India, leading to the cultural and social regeneration of its people.

2. 2. 2. Role of Colonial state

The open reactionary character of Lytton's Viceroyalty from 1876 to 1880 quickened the pace of Indian nationalism. The list of some of the reactionary methods adopted by Lytton is:

The Arms Act of 1878 disarmed the entire Indian people at one stroke.

The Vernacular Press Act of 1878 sought to suppress the growing Indian criticism of British rule.

The reduction of the maximum age for sitting in the Indian Civil Service Examination from 21 years to 19 further reduced the chances of Indians entering the Civil Service.

The holding of a lavish imperial Durbar (in 1877) at a time when millions of Indians were dying of famine and waging a costly war against Afghanistan at the cost of the Indian economy.

The removal of import duties on British textile imports threatened the existence of the newly rising Indian textile industry.

2. 2. 3. Emergence of the Indian National Congress

The time was now ripe for the formation of an all-India organization which could organize and coordinate the political activities of Indians all over the country against foreign rule and exploitation. Various attempts were made in this direction for several years. Surendra Nath Banerjee took the lead by forming the Indian Association. The idea finally got a concrete shape when a large group of political workers such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Justice M. G.

Ranade, K. T. Telang and Badruddin Tyabji cooperated with A. O. Hume, a retired English Civil servant, in holding the first session of the Indian National Congress at Bombay in December 1885. The struggle for India's independence was thus launched, though on a rather small scale.

2. 3. Moderate and Militant Nationalists

The most important contribution of the early nationalists, known as Moderate nationalists, was their economic critique of imperialism and their persistent agitation on economic questions. They analyzed all the three forms of colonial economic exploitation, i. e. exploitation through trade, industry and finance. They clearly grasped that the essence of British colonialism lay in the subordination of the Indian economy to the British economy. They vehemently opposed the British attempt to develop in India the basic characteristics of a colonial economy, viz. the transformation of India into a supplier of raw materials, a market for British manufacturers and a field of investment for foreign capital.

2. 3. 1. Moderates Aims and Methods

The early nationalists constantly agitated for democratic civil rights, a free press, and a democratic and non-racialist administration. In fact, it was during this period and as a result of political work by the nationalists that democratic ideas began to take root among the Indian people in general, and the intelligentsia in particular. The Moderates also agitated for the spread of modern education, science and technology. In the political field, they demanded reforms that would lead to a greater share for Indians in the administration and legislative machinery.

The weakness of the early nationalists lay in the narrow social base of the movement. The movement did not, as yet, have a wide appeal. It did not penetrate down to the masses. The Moderates' political work was confined to the urban educated middle classes. Their programme and policies, however, were not confined to the interests of the middle classes. They took up the causes of all sections of the Indian people and represented the interests of the emerging Indian nation against colonial domination.

2. 3. 2. Militants Aims and Methods

The beginning of the 20th century witnessed the development of the Indian National Movement to a new, higher stage under a new militant nationalist leadership. This was in part the fruition of the earlier nationalist agitation, and in part the consequence of the reassertion of imperialism at the end of the 19th century. The symbol of the new imperial assertion, of despotism and 'efficiency', was Lord Curzon the Viceroy since 1899. Political Indians now despaired of getting political concessions from the rulers through political argument and methods of polite agitation. Indians must, they realized, depend on themselves and take recourse to mass politics and mass agitation around the goal of independence from Britain.

The social and economic conditions of the country also pointed in the same direction: Economic decay and stagnation. The fruits of colonial underdevelopment were beginning to surface by the end of the 19th century. Symbolic in this respect were the famines that devastated the country from 1897 to 1900 that killed millions.

Several international events at this time contributed to the growth of militant nationalism. The defeat of the Italian army by the Ethiopians in 1896 and Russia by Japan in 1905 exploded the myth of European superiority. Similar was the impact of the revolutionary movements in Ireland, Russia, Egypt, Turkey and China: a united people, who were willing to make sacrifices, were surely capable of overthrowing foreign despotic rule even if it appeared powerful on the surface.

2. 4. Swadeshi Movement

Thus, conditions were ready for the national movement to advance to a higher stage. The spark was provided when the movement announced its decision to partition the province of Bengal on 20th July 1905. The decision, as the Government claimed, was allegedly based on administrative grounds. But the people of Bengal saw it as an effort to divide the nationalistically inclined Bengali people and thus stem the rising tide of militant nationalism in Bengal and India.

Political agitation was inaugurated by a general hartal and a day of fasting on 16th October in Calcutta. Huge crowds paraded the streets of Calcutta and a mammoth meeting of 50, 000 was held in the evening. Entire Bengal, from cities to villages, was reverberating with meetings, processions and demonstrations.

Soon a new form of political action was added. All foreign goods were to be boycotted and Swadeshi or Indian-made goods alone were to be used. In many places public burnings of foreign cloth were organized and shops selling foreign cloth were picketed. The new leadership also gave a call for

passive resistance to the authorities. This was to take the form of non-cooperation with the Government by boycotting schools and colleges, the courts, and government services. This part of the programme could not, however, be put into practice on a significant scale. The new leadership also raised the slogan of independence from foreign rule. One result was that Dadabhai Naoroji declared in his presidential address to the Congress in December 1906 that the goal of the Congress was “ self-government or Swaraj”.

3. Ingression of Mahatma Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose

The third and the last phase of the national movement began in 1919 when the era of popular mass movements was initiated.

During the First World War, the Allies Britain, France and the U. S. A. had declared that the World War was being fought in defence of democracy and the right of nations to self-determination. But after their victory they showed little willingness to end the colonial rule. The Indians had not only cooperated with the war effort but had considerably suffered also. They hoped of getting due returns. But they were very soon disenchanted. While the British Government made a half-hearted attempt at constitutional reform, it also made it clear that it had no intention to part with political power. A new leader named Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, took command. The new leader kept in mind the basic weakness of the previous leadership and sought to remove them. He had evolved a new form of struggle called non-cooperation and a new technique of struggle - Satyagraha, which would not remain a mere programme but were capable of being put into practice. He had already put them to test in South Africa while fighting for the rights of

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immigrant Indians. Gandhi also took up to the cause of peasants in Champaran (Bihar) and the working class in Ahmedabad (Gujarat).

This was also a period of rising prices and epidemics in various parts of the country. In many regions the peasants had been subjected to extortions in the name of war effort. Gandhi responded to the growing anger and militancy of the Indian people after the end of the World War and created the organization and techniques that would give the movement a mass base.

3. 1. Official Response

Throughout the war, the Government had carried on repression of militant nationalists. It now decided to acquire further powers to meet the nationalist challenge. In March 1919 it passed the Rowlatt Act (the Indians called it Black Act) which authorised the Government to imprison any person without trial. The Indian sentiment was outraged. In February 1919, Gandhi started a Satyagraha Sabha whose members were committed to disobeying the Act and thus to court arrest. Thus, Gandhi took the first step towards making the national movement a movement of mass political action, rather than a mere agitation. Simultaneously, he urged the Congress to increasingly rely on the peasants and artisans. Symbolic of the new emphasis was to be the use of Khadi or hand-spun, hand-woven cloth.

3. 2. Non-Cooperation and Khilafat

Gandhi and the National Congress decided in September 1920 to launch a non-violent, non-cooperation movement and continue it till the Punjab and Khilafat wrongs were removed and Swaraj established. Gandhi gave the slogan “Swaraj in a year”. The people were asked to boycott government

affiliated schools and colleges, law courts and legislatures and foreign cloth and to surrender officially conferred titles and honors. Later the programme extended to include resignation from government service and mass civil disobedience including the non-payment of taxes. National schools and colleges were to be set up. People were asked to practice hand-spinning and produce khadi, to give up untouchability and promote and maintain Hindu-Muslim unity. Provincial Congress Committees were now to be organised on a linguistic basis. The Congress organization was to reach down to the village level and its membership fee was to be reduced to 4 annas (25 paise of today) per year to enable the rural and urban poor to become members.

This first mass movement assumed unprecedented proportions during 1920-22. Lakhs of students left schools and colleges. Hundreds of lawyers gave up their practice. Majority of voters refused to participate in elections to the legislatures. The boycott of foreign cloth became a mass movement, with thousands of bonfires of foreign cloth lighting the Indian sky. Picketing of shops selling foreign cloth and of liquor shops was also very successful. In many regions the factory workers and peasants were at the forefront.

Gandhi was, however, not satisfied. On 4th February 1922 an event occurred called as the "Chauri Chaura incident" when a Congress procession of 3,000 peasants was fired upon by the police and in retaliation the angry crowd burnt the police station causing the death of 22 policemen. Gandhi took a very serious view of the incident. Feeling that the people were not yet properly trained in non-violence, he called off the entire movement on February 1922.

4. Entry of Subhas Chandra Bose in Indian Politics

During the final phase of India's struggle for independence, Subhash Chandra Bose has made an outstanding contribution. He believed in the ideology of militant patriotism. He was the spearhead of the revolutionary freedom struggle in India.

When Subhash Chandra Bose came in India, he joined Congress on the behest of Gandhiji. He met Gandhiji and Nehru and told them about his ideas of patriotism. Subhash Chandra Bose believed that only military power could wipe out the British rule from India. Both Gandhiji and Nehru were against the militant politics of Netaji. But he was so popular which led him to the position of the President of Congress.

After quitting from congress due to some political reasons, Bose asked the masses to change the face of the Civil Disobedience movement in to an armed struggle, exploiting the adversity of the British in the world war. He was jailed in 1927 due to his aggressive patriotism and was considered as the number one enemy. He commenced fast unto death on November 29, 1940 for his release from the prison.

Later he escaped from jail and went overseas to meet Hitler, Romain Rolland, Ribbentrop and other members of the Nazi hierarchy and asked them for support against the British. He got the help of the Japanese C-in-C Terauchi in the struggle to liberate India. He formed Indian National Army (Azad Hind Fauj) in 1941 and set up Provisional Government of Free India in exile. He gave a speech on July 9, 1943 which was attended by 60, 000 people. His great words " Give me blood, I will give you freedom" is still

remembered. So many people were inspired and many came to join the INA. He also had a definite plan for reconstruction of India after the independence.

Bose and his men started war against the British with the support of the Japanese army. But World War II was on its peak and Japan had to call back its troops. The INA was defeated by the British and Bose escaped to Japan. On his way he disappeared and believed to have died in a plane crash and his whereabouts are still unknown.