

Resistance to british nationalism

[Government](#)



Since the French Revolution, the idea of self-determination has spread all around the world, unifying peoples inside nations, starting new revolutions, erasing empires, freeing colonies and scaring modern states. There are few models explaining the emergence of nationalism and the definitions of this phenomenon vary from an author to another. Anthony D. Smith says it is an ideological movement aiming at reaching self-determination and independence in the name of a nation.

He also says that humanity is naturally divided into nations. But this concept is rather revealing the nationalist way of thinking because a quick look in the past is enough to show that the independence process is not instinctive. Many writers like Boyd Shafer and Louis Snyder have studied the subject since World War I in order to explain the subject but – as says Arthur Waldron – enclosing nationalism in a theory has proved to be a difficult task.

An historical case of the nationalism problem is the nationalist movement in India. Indians celebrated 50 years of independence from British rule in August 1997. The end of the empire in India was a massive blow to British imperialism.

This term paper first studies the steps of the western intrusion into India and then tries to describe how the Indian nationalism was born.

When the European community began to expand in India, a new way of life entered cities. It was copied by the indigenous people who were seduced by western techniques. Occidental education was the main vector of acculturation since young Indians were very receptive to the European

message. So the new Indian generation quickly became nationalist, socialist, and democrat.

Masters like Cavour or Mazzini were the new heroes for the young students. That is why the British government prohibited the study of British History of the XIXth century in Indian schools. But it was already too late. The process could not be stopped at that stage. Indians had acquired a better knowledge of European culture and it was not received without critique. European authors who were keen on criticizing Europe – Tolstoi, for example – influenced India.

So it seems that the introduction of western ideas and their critiques contributed to the emergence of nationalism. The initiation of the indigenous elite to Western History would have founded their quest for independence, following a nationalist scheme transmitted by occidental education. A complex of inferiority began to spread among Indians, mostly because of the British racist attitude. Europeans were neglecting the Indian society. From the 1830s, racist movements began to make British people feel superior. They considered Indians as physically and morally challenged. This inferiority was attested by the failure of traditional revolts like the Mutiny in 1857. Tara Chand¹ says that Indians were impressed by the evident superiority of their colon in war, in administration, and in industry.

Indians wanted their country to rank among the big nations, politically and industrially. From the 1870s, they became aware of their prestigious past and politicians began to use that argument in their speeches. Those same politicians also used religious festivities to spread their nationalist message.

The educated elite could do better than the Congress by using the religious field. Political activities could then enter the smallest village thanks to religion. This tactic allowed leaders to unify a rising population. Mother India was born.

1Chand, Tara. History of the Freedom Movement in India.

a. The East India Company and the Conquest of India

The intentions of the merchants who formed the East India Company and those of Queen Elizabeth I were rarely matched by the outcome. The venture failed to achieve its stated objectives -- it made little impression on the Dutch control of the spice trade and could not establish a lasting outpost in the East Indies in the early years -- and yet succeeded beyond measure in establishing military dominance and a political empire for Britain in India.

By the middle of the seventeenth century the East India Company could be found trading alongside Indian merchants in the East, and the Company shipped goods as diverse as cloth from southern India to Sumatra, and coffee from Arabia to India. Profits thus generated were ploughed back into buying the spices required back home. Gradually the Company built up its power base in India, opening up trading posts in Madras and Calcutta, and thwarted French attempts to emulate it there. From these secure foundations it was able to seek out new markets and sources for trading products.

As European interest in the East Indies increased, so the Company modified native designs and products to suit Western tastes -- the growth of the

Kashmir shawl industry, and the development of the design that has become known as Paisley being one such example.

The process of territorial expansion that started with the annexation of Bengal, the "private trade" which enabled merchant's in the Company's service to make fortunes on the side, coupled with a high level of corruption, meant that more and more men sought their fortunes in India.

The early lifestyle of the merchant adventurer in the Company's trading posts gave way to a more conventional society, with its clubs, churches and social functions. The accoutrements of civilized life had to be imported from England, and many were adapted to suit the new circumstances. Wicker picnic hampers and tonic water all evolved from the needs imposed by the harsh Indian climate. Hugely wealthy men returning from Company service to England attracted much envy as they bought up country houses and seats in Parliament, and many of these "nabobs" kept the habits they had learnt in India.

By the early nineteenth century the East India Company's writ extended across most of India.

In 1773 the British government took over some responsibility for ruling British India. The "Regulating Act" set up a governor-general and council nominated partly by the East India Company and partly by the government. It was an act for establishing certain regulations for the better management of the affairs of the East India Company, as well in India as in Europe. Here is the beginning of it¹:

Whereas the several powers and authorities granted by charters to the united company of merchants in England trading to the East Indies have been found, by experience, not to have sufficient force and efficacy to prevent various abuses which have prevailed in the government and administration of the affairs of the said united company, as well at home as in India, to the manifest injury of the public credit, and of the commercial interests of the said company; and it is therefore become highly expedient that certain further regulations, better adapted to their present circumstances and condition, should be provided and established: ...

... And, for the better management of the said united company's affairs in India, be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That, for the government of the presidency of Fort William in Bengal, there shall be appointed a governor-general, and four counselors; and that the whole civil and military government of the said presidency, and also the ordering, management and government of all the territorial acquisitions and revenues in the kingdoms of Bengal, Bahar, and Orissa, shall, during such time as the territorial acquisitions and revenues shall remain in the possession of the said united company, be, and are hereby vested in the said governor-general and council of the said presidency of Fort William in Bengal, in like manner, to all intents and purposes whatsoever; as the same now are, or at any time heretofore might have been exercised by the president and council, or select committee, in the said kingdoms.

c. Clash of Cultures and the Reasons of the Conflict

There are three reasons for the Indian conflict:

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- the religious conflict between Hindus and Muslims
- the social conflict about the Untouchables
- the colonial conflict about the status of India

In the three conflicts, the main actor was Gandhi himself. In the first conflict, the fighting adversaries were the Hindus and the Muslims; in the second one, the adversaries were the Untouchables and Gandhi – who were fighting for their cause –, and the tradition defenders; in the last one, the adversaries were India and the British government.

So, Gandhi was the link between Indians and the government. Note that the first conflict was existing before Gandhi even intervened.

1 Internet Modern History Sourcebook

In 1857 the British faced a dangerous rebellion, commonly called the Indian Mutiny, a polemical name implying that it was the revolt of undisciplined soldiers. Actually it was a revolt of the Indian army, led by their officers, known as sepoys. Many Indians outside the army had been restless for decades. Rulers had been conquered and dethroned. Landowners had lost their property and been replaced by ones more friendly to the British. Religious sentiments were inflamed. The British regarded Indian beliefs as repulsive: they had outlawed the suttee, or widow burning, and suppressed the Thugs, a small sect of Holy Assassins. One officer even declared that the British were going to abolish the castes.

Mysterious propaganda also circulated all over India. It infiltrated the sepoys, who announced to Muslim soldiers that certain newly issued cartridges were greased with the fat of pigs, and said to the Hindus that the same cartridges were greased with the fat of the cow. Since for the Hindus the cow was sacred, and for Muslims, to touch pork was unholy, many soldiers were outraged. The sepoys mutinied in the Ganges valley, and with them the long dormant Mogul and his court, joined in to rise against the British.

India's population was rich with diverse ethnic and cultural groups. Ethnic groups were those based on a sense of common ancestry, while cultural groups could be either made up of people of different ethnic origins who shared a common language, or of ethnic groups with some customs and beliefs in common, such as castes of a particular locality. The diverse ethnic and cultural origins of the people of India were shared by the other peoples of the Indian subcontinent, including the inhabitants of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka.

The caste system was pervasive in India. Although it was entwined in Hindu beliefs, it encompassed non-Hindus as well. A caste was a social class to which a person belonged at birth and which was ranked against other castes, typically on a continuum of perceived purity and pollution. People generally married within their own caste. In rural areas, caste could also govern where people lived or what occupations they engaged in. The particular features of the caste system varied considerably from community to community and across regions.

The life of Indians was centered in the family. Extended families often lived together, with two or more adult generations, or brothers, sharing a house.

Cultural clichés and segregation seemed to be the source of nationalism in India. According to Dov Ronen, ¹ every human being is looking forward to self-determination. And when this quest is altered, groups crystallize to eliminate the obstacle. The aggression coming from outside provokes the creation of a certain group conscience. According to the same Ronen, there must be an intelligentsia as well as a proletariat to form an effective nationalist movement. In India, the development of the proletariat was late and modest. Nevertheless, the western penetration made new social categories emerge, like the intelligentsia.

The Indian National Congress was created by a group of English-speaking urban intellectuals in 1885 to lead the struggle for India's independence. The original "moderate" leadership was soon more "militant" group, led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, which demanded self-rule for India. The Congress originally advocated limited democratic reforms. In 1920 it adopted the strategy of nonviolent resistance devised by Mohandas K. Gandhi. By 1929 the Congress, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, was demanding total independence. After India gained independence in 1947, the Congress controlled the central government and most of the Indian state governments for 20 years.

2. Gandhi and his fight for freedom in India

When Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi came back from South Africa in 1914, he began supporting Britain in World War One. During this period, he was not

involved in much politics, but rather stayed on the sidelines, so to speak, occasionally helping to recruit men.

1 Ronen, Dov. *The Quest for Self-Determination*. 1979

For many years, Gandhi had been friendly with Britain, but he became extremely upset at the passing of the Rowlatt Bills, which were bills that stated that those suspected of sedition could be imprisoned without trial. He immediately called a Satyagraha ("firmness in truth", civil disobedience) struggle against Great Britain. Gandhi had meant for the citizens to use ahimsa (non-injury) methods of protesting, but they protested violently in some areas, leading to the killing of 400 Indians.

By 1920, Gandhi was extremely influential among Indians. He quickly reformed the old Indian National Congress into a newer, more serious organization. He called a huge boycott of British goods and services, including schools and the like. With a leader like Gandhi, the Indian people were no longer afraid of their foreign rulers and began protesting. When police arrived, they lined up to be arrested, hoping to clog the system and stop the British. Thousands were arrested and the movement was mostly a success, but a few violent outbreaks like in the previous protest caused the INC and their president – Gandhi – to call the protest off and admit it a mistake.

Gandhi himself was arrested shortly afterward in 1922 and sentenced to six years, but he was released four years early due to appendicitis. However, even this short sentence took its toll. The INC had split into two parts and the strong bond that had grown between the Hindus and Muslims when they

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protested together had dissolved as well. Small struggles still took place in villages, prompting Gandhi to fast for three weeks, which brought about peace effectively.

Perhaps his most amazing feat was the Satyagraha against the salt tax in 1930. Instead of buying salt from the British, Gandhi and several thousand other Indians marched to the Arabian Sea and made their own salt by evaporating seawater. As a result, over 60, 000 people were jailed. A year later, Gandhi met with Lord Irwin and the two agreed to allow Gandhi to act as a representative at conferences in London, but the conferences failed to help them, and upon Gandhi's return to India, he and the other leaders of the INC were jailed. While in jail, they found out that the new constitution would discriminate against the "untouchable" caste by placing them in a different electorate.

Gandhi immediately started fasting for change. The government knew they had to change this portion of the constitution quickly, for if Gandhi were to die, revolution would be imminent. Gandhi resigned as president of the INC in 1934 and left the organization entirely to pursue a plan to educate "From the bottom up", starting with the rural areas of India, which accounted for 85%¹ of the population. He encouraged the peasants to spin and weave to supplement their meager incomes. He himself eventually moved to Sevagram and centered his program there.

When World War Two started, the INC supported Britain on the condition that they withdraw completely from India. Gandhi demanded their withdrawal as well. The British simply jailed all of them. When the end of the war came,

India became independent shortly afterward, in 1947, but it split as it became independent, forming Pakistan. Gandhi was upset that Indian freedom did not come with Indian unity, but nonetheless plunged himself into helping repair the riot ravaged areas and fasting for peace in those places where the fighting continued over religion. In that way, he performed two great feats by stopping the riots in Calcutta in September of 1947 as well as causing a truce in Delhi in January of 1948. Alas, he was not able to celebrate freedom for long, as he was shot to death on January 30, 1948, on his way to the evening prayer. Yet he died with freedom, peace, and love within his heart.

The Muslim League was a Muslim political organization founded in India in 1906. Its original purpose was to protect the political rights of Muslims in India and to prevent Hindu political control of the entire Indian subcontinent once independence from the British was achieved. For several decades the group advocated Hindu and Muslim unity within India. Under league president Muhammad Ali Jinnah, however, it came to demand a separate Muslim state from the British out of concern that an independent India would be dominated by Hindus.

During World War II, the Muslim League gave support to the British and in return the British allowed the league to gain strength. In 1947 the league succeeded in having the Muslim state of Pakistan separated from Hindu-dominated India. Renamed the All-Pakistan Muslim League, it became the majority political party in the first parliament of the newly created nation. Although the league has remained a political force in Pakistan, internal dissension and major losses in the 1954 elections, particularly in East

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Pakistan (now Bangladesh), caused the party to fragment into several factions.

1Fischer, Louis. *La vie du Mahatma Gandhi*. Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1954.

On June 3, 1947, the British Government announced the division of India. Though Gandhi had not given his consent to it, he advised the country to accept it.

On August 15, 1947, the struggle for independence was over. The British rule in India came to an end after nearly 200 years, and two sovereign states, India and Pakistan appeared on the map. Nehru became the first Prime Minister of India and Sardar Patel the Deputy Prime Minister. The whole country celebrated the day. There were singing and dancing processions and parades everywhere. Free India's tricolor flag fluttered proudly on the historical Red Fort in Delhi and the National Anthem was sung in chorus.

In the story of early resistance to British imperialism since the very beginning of the conflict, Gandhi has played a main role everywhere. His nonviolent philosophy was a key element in the story. That is why a study on this topic had to look at the relation Gandhi had with the masses and with the British. This relation is extremely dramatic if we want to understand how the beliefs of one man succeeded in convincing an entire people. To achieve goals as big as the struggle for independence and the peace between Hindus and Muslims, the action of one man was not enough; he had to rally the men looking forward to the same objectives.

The study of British imperialism in India helps to understand some current topics like Kosovo, Eire, Algeria, and Pakistan, even if in the story of India it may be the word " imperialism" that is most relevant.