
The Development of Indian National Identity

And the impact of the British Raj

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This paper will attempt to answer the question “How did modern-day Indian national identity develop and in what ways was it a product of the British Raj?” In order to do this, the essay will first trace the development of a unifying national identity in British India, and then tie this to key elements of national identity in the modern-day state. In order to explore the gradual formation of a distinct national rhetoric, this paper will briefly explore the work of both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, and the roles they played in shaping Indian national consciousness.

NATIONAL IDENTITY VS. NATIONALISM

In order to define national identity, it is necessary to understand the closely linked but distinct concept of nationalism. This paper chooses to define nationalism as a belief in the significance of a geographical or demographical region and a conviction in that region’s right to independence in order to protect its culture or ethnicity. In contrast, scholars often define national identity as a sense of belonging to a state or nation, which is represented by a culture and language, and a variety of traditions.¹⁷

¹⁷ Richard D. Ashmore, Lee Jussim and David Wilder, *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 74–75.

According to academic Gianfranco Poggi, national identity is an essential ingredient of citizenship. Each nation-state is “made [a] historical reality... purposively constructed, functionally specific machine.”¹⁸ Each has a constant need to legitimize itself in the eyes of its citizens by providing a national ideology. The modern nation-state mobilizes commitment based on this idea of national identity. This commitment requires that Indian national identity be fluid, continually sustained, and able to change.

The study of how these definitions apply to different states is vast, but for the purposes of this paper we will focus on Indian nationalism.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO INDIAN NATIONALISM

British India was ruled by centralized state and political institutions. By building this overarching administrative structure, the British would unknowingly ease the development Indian nationalism. During and after Indian independence, influential nationalist leaders would emphasize that both the beliefs and efforts of the Indian people would be best served if the unity of the imperial state were kept intact but was controlled by Indians.

Unlike most colonial nationalist projects, Indian nationalists did not want to carve one piece of British India for themselves. Instead, they sought to claim the entirety of that empire, aiming to bring a land with fourteen major languages and over two hundred dialects under an overarching identity: India. According to Joya Chatterji,

¹⁸ Gianfranco Poggi, *The Development of the Modern State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978), 95-101.

“[t]he British in India were not in the business of promoting nationhood amongst their subjects: indeed, when challenged by critics claiming to speak for an Indian nation, their response was to declare that India was nothing more than a “geographical expression”.¹⁹ This geographical expression did not consist of a community that identified itself as a nation or as a strong state that sought to create a sense of nationalism. Unlike other nationalist projects in the nineteenth century (such as the Egyptians against the Ottoman Empire or the Slavs against the Habsburg Empire) India did not face internal revolutions or external wars, both of which had proven to inspire modern nationalist movements in the past.

After the War of Independence in 1857, the East India Company’s rule was replaced by the British monarchy and new structures of government were established, including governors, presidencies and provinces. A system of civil servants and subordinates was created with the express goal of involving the “natives” in government, in order to create a sense of ownership among the population without truly devolving power to them. “This new apparatus of rule sought to recruit Indians in vast numbers into the service of a government capable of intervening more effectively than before in Indian life in areas that the East India Company—its reformist policies notwithstanding—had in practice left well alone.”²⁰ To bring stability and prevent any threat of revolt, several measures were taken: more white troops were stationed in India,

¹⁹ Joya Chatterji, “Nationalisms in India, 1857-1947,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, ed. John Breuilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 243.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 245.

communications networks such as railways, roads, and a telegraph network were expanded in order to rapidly send troops across the subcontinent in case of rebellion, and irrigation projects were carried out throughout the Punjab (a geographical region in one of the northernmost parts of the Indian subcontinent). This transformation came at a huge cost. White troops were paid higher wages and taxes were raised and collected more efficiently in order to pay for widespread development.

More white men were brought to India to “develop” the Indian economy and local bodies were created to collect taxes. Local populations took the opportunity to call for self-government and to try to influence policy locally and at imperial centers of power, such as Calcutta and London. This process continued to escalate over the next several years, resulting in a situation where:

[T]he very structures of the British Empire unwittingly generated the motor force that drove Indians operating in these different arenas of politics to forge new linkages and alliances. These alliances were the crucial adhesive that came to bind the local, the provincial, and the all-India arenas into a single, interconnected field of politics, matching the interconnected structures of government with which it aimed to engage.²¹

THE INDIAN NATION AS AN IDEA

As the state developed in the nineteenth century so did civil society, public

²¹ *Ivi.*

awareness, and involvement. Religious, legal, and bureaucratic literati (those whose families had served British rulers for generations, including Mughals and regional nawabs) had learned English and understood European history. They began to question the disparaging “white man’s narrative” that explained how and why earlier rulers on the subcontinent had so easily been defeated. Convinced that it must be because Indians had lost their culture, some like Raja Ram Mohun Roy and Sayyid Ahmed Khan, called for modernization and reform by lobbying the British government to support educational initiatives (like Khan’s university at Alighrah) and to outlaw “backward” practices such as *satti* (the burning of widows).²² Some scholars argue that these movements were early examples of India’s emerging constitutional liberalism because such reformers insisted that it was the government’s responsibility to provide for the common good. Later, the paper will argue that Indian nationalists only sought to gather power for the greater good of those who fit their definition of “Indian.”

Towards the close of the nineteenth century, the idea of a nationalism began to come to the forefront on the Indian subcontinent. In 1893, Dadabhai Naoroji, one of the founding fathers of the Indian National Congress, said, “I am an Indian and owe duty to my work and all my countrymen. Whether I am a Hindu or a Mahommedan, a Parsi, a Christian, or of any other creed, I am above all an Indian. Our country is India and our nationality is Indian.”²³ This was became the INC’s central tenet, to influence policy issues

²² Christopher A. Bayly, “Rammohun Roy and the Advent of Constitutional Liberalism in India, 1800–1830,” *Modern Intellectual History* 4, 1, 2007, doi: 10.1017/S1479244306001028.

²³ Chatterji, “Nationalisms in India,” 249.

that concerned Indians, regardless of region or religion. By this time, all-Indian nationalism had spread beyond elitist circles, spurred by the increasing intervention of British administration and an increase in English education. This further catalyzed the creation of a “secular-intelligentsia” that pushed for nationalism.²⁴

As more natives gained an English education and became involved in local and provincial government structures, they became increasingly aware of the enforced difference between themselves and the “whites.” The blatant racial discrimination they faced turned many “would-be collaborators” against their colonial masters.²⁵ Their resentment needed an outlet; the number of printing presses owned by Indians increased dramatically. The content they produced challenged the government and included the Indian public in the conversation on the Indian nation. The desire for protection and justice from the state inspired a generation of lawyers and journalists. Slowly, the term “native” came to define one’s “Indian-ness”. The varied peoples ruled by the Raj came together under a unifying, territorially-defined sense of identity.

THE ROLE OF THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS & GANDHI

The Indian National Congress was a group of lawyers and journalists, educated elites with Western education, who sought greater native representation, freedom of

²⁴ Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1983), xxii–xxiii.

²⁵ Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875–1927* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984);

Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885–1947* (New York: Macmillan, 2000), 22–24.

press, equal treatment, and economic opportunity. The Congress contributed significantly to all-India nationalism by providing a forum for conversation and organized all-India nationalism by fashioning “a secular critique of British rule.”²⁶ Their strategy was to appeal to the British government as imperial subjects and emphasize how the very liberal values the British sought to encourage were being damaged on the subcontinent.

India paid a heavy price after World War I. Heavily-taxed merchants, peasants overwhelmed by price fluctuations and a lack of resources, and demoralized soldiers began to view the INC as a medium to express their discontent. In 1920, the British government in India responded with the concept of diarchy. They seduced moderate Indian politicians with the promise of influence in provincial councils in order to undermine the still fragile “all-India” political unity.

In the years following WWI, Mahatma Gandhi arrived in India as a critic of the state’s ability to improve social conditions and as a social and religious reformer, rather than a political figure. Unlike Khan, Roy, and other intellectuals of the time, Gandhi believed that the British were successful in conquering India because Indians cooperated with British forces. Gandhi said that Indians had enabled the British by being seduced by materialism and western ideas of modernity.

...we must refuse to submit to this official violence. Appeal to Parliament by all means if necessary, but if the parliament fails us and we are worthy to call ourselves a nation, we must

²⁶ Chatterji, “Nationalisms in India,” 252.

refuse to uphold the Government by withdrawing cooperation from it.²⁷

Gandhi encouraged the all-India Congress to demand full independence, or *swaraj*, and called for Indians to boycott promotions to the provincial councils promised under diarchy (the Act of 1920). He launched a non-cooperation movement, *satyagraha*, and claimed to speak for the ordinary people of India. It was this that won the INC a “more broad-based and disparate following” than ever before.²⁸ A masterful politician, Gandhi had recruited supporters powerful enough to mobilize the masses for local campaigns. These included “rich peasants in Gujarat, prohibitionists in Karnataka, and Khilafatists in Bengal and North India.”²⁹

Gandhi spoke in a way that the common man could use and understand. Both symbolically and semantically, he sought to connect with the everyday Indian. He drew attention to the weavers, artisans, and craftsmen losing their livelihood under British rule by deciding to stop wearing clothes woven on British looms and to instead wear cloth he had made himself on a spinning wheel. “By his symbolic adoption of the spinning wheel and *khadi* (hand-woven cloth), Gandhi advertised to every Indian that British rule was amoral and illegitimate.”³⁰ In his book *Imperial Power & Popular Politics*, Chandavarkar argues that Gandhi inspired the masses because of his skill in turning “the

²⁷ Judith Brown, *Gandhi’s Rise to Power: Indian Politics 1915-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge South Asian Studies, 1974), 245.

²⁸ Chatterji, “Nationalisms in India,” 255.

²⁹ *Ivi*.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 256.

blandest metaphor and the most platitudinous axiom in a distinctly subversive direction...”³¹

Gandhi’s success was not without setbacks. Some INC members were alarmed by his mass movements. Satyagraha led to violence that eventually caused Gandhi to call off the movement because he was unable to control outbursts across the country. Many leaders abandoned non-cooperation and sought to join the provincial councils created by the British with the idea of working within the system to conquer it. Gandhi was able to push the INC through this period of instability by advocating for a new constitution for the party that would create a Working Committee, fifteen leaders who would exercise strong, centralized control over a loosely organized and divided party. Over time, it became clear that Gandhi’s ability to mass-mobilize supported the Congress’s ability to negotiate with the British over constitutional reforms. The looming threat of widespread revolt pressured the British to cooperate with the INC’s demands. The INC came to be seen as an effective vehicle that influenced the people and that represented the people.

SEPARATIST SENTIMENTS TAKE HOLD

The INC’s popular hold was not unchallenged. In the 1930s, its unifying message of all-India began to fragment with the Simon Commission, the Nehru Report, and Muslim spokesperson M. A. Jinnah’s 14 Points. Opponents claimed that minority rights were being threatened and the INC was unable to address these fears satisfactorily. At the outbreak of World War II, Congress

demanded an immediate share of central power and Jinnah, the self-appointed leader of Muslims in the subcontinent, passed the Lahore Resolution of 1940 calling for a separate state for Muslims.³² The pursuit of a national Indian identity was complicated and INC control was threatened. INC leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru denounced the Resolution and considered it insignificant, a mistake that fueled the fire for the movement for a separate Muslim nation.

During World War II, Britain’s economy suffered and the new Labour party began to look for a quick exit solution. The Raj was soon no longer sustainable for Great Britain. With political unrest and mass violence looming, as well as famine and a declining economy, India had turned into a liability. Negotiating with the INC and Jinnah’s Muslim League proved difficult as both parties had reservations against the other, however. The INC was uncompromising towards Muslim demands. In the end, British India was divided into two unequal parts designed to “cut out the troublesome Muslim-majority districts in the west and east...”³³ Out of this negotiation, Pakistan was born. As Joya Chatterji says,

[W]e have the final paradox of all-India nationalism encapsulated by the Congress: its determination to inherit the mighty imperial state constructed by the British in India led to the division of that empire. That partition was the outcome of a curious and covert political entente between the weak and unprincipled Viceroy of a

³¹ Raj Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³² "Lahore Resolution (1940)," History Pak, accessed May 06, 2016, <http://historypak.com/lahore-resolution-1940/>.

³³ Chatterji, "Nationalisms in India," 259.

declining imperial power, 'civic' nationalists in a hurry to achieve independence with a strong centre, Hindu cultural nationalists in Bengal determined to protect its unique 'genius', and leaders of the Hindu right keen to purge Mother India of Muslim traitors.³⁴

UNITING INDIA: NEHRU'S GOVERNMENT

Different social, ethnic, and cultural groups in the newly-formed, independent Indian state interpreted nationalism differently. The inclusive idea upon which all-India nationalism had so far been based was fractured. Since 1947, successive governments "worked to bring about 'the emotional integration of India', precisely because 'India' never was wholly united behind its nationalism, and because 'the nation' was imagined by its people in many contradictory ways."³⁵

The Constituent Assembly was divided ideologically between Gandhi and Nehru's multicultural brand of national identity and a desire for a Hindu India. After Gandhi's assassination by a Hindu nationalist less than two years after the Constitution was written, Nehru became the voice of a secular national identity. He aimed to create a pluralistic society and believed India's strength lay in its multiculturalism.³⁶ Hindu nationalists aimed for Hindu domination and viewed Muslims as threats to national stability. As a result of Nehru's influence during the Constituent Assembly debates, secularism became the official doctrine of the Republic

of India. All religious communities were recognized equally and religious schools were eligible for state funding.³⁷

Minorities received concessions, and Nehru sought to accommodate Muslims who had chosen to stay in India.³⁸ While a uniform civil code was proposed, Muslims were allowed to use Shariah law within their communities and freedom of religion was recognized as a fundamental right.³⁹ One of the building blocks of Nehru's pluralistic vision for India was multilingualism. Hindu nationalists wanted the state language to be Hindi, but Nehru pushed for the Constitution in English as well.⁴⁰ In 1963, English became an associate official language.

This commitment to plurality was made evident by the constitutional recognition of fifteen official languages and the reorganization of certain states based on linguistic boundaries.⁴¹ Maharashtra and Gujrat, for example, were created due to public demand in 1960. Over the first few decades of India's independence, the government showed great flexibility in accommodating regional and linguistic nationalisms by recognizing Punjabis, Nagas, and Mizos. To promote religious impartiality

³⁷ *The Constitution of India*, Article 25, accessed May 05, 2016, <http://lawmin.nic.in/olwing/coi/coi-english/coi-indexenglish.htm>.

³⁸ Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru* (London: Oxford India Paperbacks, 1984), 3 and 172.

³⁹ *The Constitution of India*, Article 25

⁴⁰ Christophe Jaffrelot, "Nation-Building and Nationalism: South Asia, 1947–90," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, ed. John Breuilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴¹ "Language Provisions in the Constitution of the Indian Union." Site for Language Management in Canada (SLMC). Accessed May 05, 2016. https://slmc.uottawa.ca/?q=bi_india_constitution.

³⁴ *Ivi*.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 260.

³⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (London: Penguin, 1946 and 1989), 50.

and a 'Hindu-only image, "the Indian Republic drew upon Buddhism to adorn itself with symbols that could be both Indian and neutral: the official emblem replicates the lions of Ashoka, the great Buddhist emperor, for instance."⁴²

This federal flexibility was a product of Nehru's secular ideology triumphing over that of the Hindu traditionalists, but it did not survive long. Neither his successors, nor the Hindu traditionalist local leaders were willing to follow through with his secularism. Hindi was declared the official language in the province in Uttar Pradesh. Despite the central government's recommendation, there was great opposition to the instruction of Urdu in state schools.⁴³ Hindi was patronized through promotion of literature, the slaughtering of cows was banned, and violence against Muslims was carried out in Aligarh, Varanasi, etc.

MODERN DAY VOICES IN INDIA

The secular framework began to come undone in the 1980s during Indira Gandhi's third term in office, after her administration began to exploit communal feelings.⁴⁴ After her assassination, Rajiv Gandhi continued this practice and eventually incited Hindu backlash, as an increasing number of Hindus felt treated as second-class citizens. Ever since, Hindu nationalists have played a much more dominant role in national politics. The

⁴² Jaffrelot, "Nation-Building and Nationalism."

⁴³ Bruce Graham, *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics: The Origins and Development of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 113.

⁴⁴ "1980: Gandhi Returned by Landslide Vote," *BBC News*, January 07, 1980, accessed May 06, 2016, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/7/newsid_2506000/2506387.stm.

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or National Volunteer Corps, is the modern-day political representation of Hindu nationalism and is one of the largest organizations in India.

The RSS grew increasingly influential over the next 60 years. In 1955, it formed the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, also known as the Indian Workers' Union, to promote Hindu nationalist ideology (and which is now the country's largest trade union).⁴⁵ The union has helped to develop a school network, a religious framework, and has provided development assistance in impoverished areas. In addition, the RSS created the Family of the Sangh which lead to a weakening of secularism in India and the development of anti-Muslim feelings.⁴⁶

Though once dominant, the Indian National Congress suffered a historic defeat in 2014 (the country's most recent election). The INC won only 44 out of 543 constituency seats in the lower house of parliament. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which swept the election with 282 seats as well as complete control of four states, is a right wing party with close ideological and organizational links to the Hindu nationalist, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.⁴⁷ This recent turn of events developed out of a weakening of the Indian economy and the INC's failure to

⁴⁵ "Welcome to Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh," *Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh*, accessed May 05, 2016, <http://bms.org.in/pages/BMSATGlance.aspx>.

⁴⁶ Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Sangh Parivar: A Reader*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ "Election Results 2014: Historic Win for NDA with 336 Seats, 282 for BJP," *Firstpost*, May 17, 2014, accessed May 05, 2016, <http://www.firstpost.com/politics/election-results-2014-historic-win-for-nda-with-336-seats-282-for-bjp-1526377.html>.

effectively engage younger voters. In contrast, BJP leader, Narendra Modi, ran one of the most innovative and successful election campaigns that India has ever seen, making heavy use of social media, and taking advantages of the weaknesses of the then-government, such as corruption scandals.⁴⁸

Modi's victory has signaled a shift in Indian political development. His campaign focused more on ideology than his opponents and less on ethnicity, caste, language, and religion, though these factors were still visibly present. According to a Brookings article, "in 2014 they took a back seat to punishing the party in power for presiding over falling growth rates, inflation, and a rupee that had lost up to 25 percent in value before recovering."⁴⁹ This is not to say that religion is no longer a strong factor. Exit polls showed that less than 10% of the Muslim population voted for the BJP, meaning the largest minority religion is not represented by the party in power.⁵⁰ While there has been progress (there is less political corruption and fewer regional parties demanding representation, for instance), the Indian political system has a long way to go to before

⁴⁸ Narendra Modi, "Largest Mass Outreach Campaign in Electoral History of a Democracy," April 29, 2014, accessed May 05, 2016, <http://www.narendramodi.in/largest-mass-outreach-campaign-in-electoral-history-of-a-democracy-3136>.

⁴⁹ Raj M. Desai, "India's Political Development at the Crossroads," The Brookings Institution, May 19, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2014/05/19-india-political-development-desai>.

⁵⁰ Sandipan Sharma, "Bihar Exit Polls Over; the Voters May Have Turned Smarter than Netas and Pundits - Firstpost," Firstpost, November 06, 2015, accessed May 05, 2016, <http://www.firstpost.com/politics/bihar-exit-polls-hint-at-all-outcomes-voters-may-have-turned-smarter-than-netas-pundits-2497084.html>.

becoming more institutionalized, transparent, and stable.

CONCLUSION

While India developed out of a push for an all-inclusive national identity, modern-day India national identity emphasizes homogeneity. Minorities face what Jaffrelot calls "the growing Hindu-oriented xenophobia".⁵¹ Despite this, India's multilingualism is still strong. The creation of linguistic regions helped diffuse tensions at the creation of the state and ethno-nationalist separatists were largely quelled. Of course, Gandhi and Nehru deserve a huge portion of the credit for India's early success in inclusivity. Gandhi worked to make these values widely accepted and Nehru worked to incorporate them into the state structure.

Indian nation-building was strengthened in large part because of the early focus on mass political literacy and an institutionalized focus on plurality. It is important, however, to recognize that India has never been free of serious challenges in the form of regional nationalisms. India, the nation-state, survived through a process of continuous reformation, regeneration, and flexibility in order to win popular favor. While today's India is in many ways similar to the India formed in 1947, modern-day India would be wise to revisit the multicultural foundations of the state.

⁵¹ Jaffrelot, "Nation-Building and Nationalism."