



POL SC HELP
FYUGP Series

Approaches to Indian nationalism

**(Nationalist, Imperialist, Marxist,
Subaltern)**

PART 2

BA HONS. POLITICAL SCIENCE 1ST SEMESTER-2022-23



DSC 3: Colonialism and Nationalism in India

Unit 1. Colonialism and Nationalism:

- Main perspectives on colonialism: Liberalism, Marxism, Postcolonialism
- Approaches to the study of nationalism in India: Nationalist, Imperialist, Marxist, and Subaltern

Unit 2. Colonial Rule in India and its impact:

- Constitutional developments and the colonial state
- Colonial ideology of civilizing mission: Utilitarians and Missionaries
- Impact on agriculture, land relations, industry and ecology

Unit 3. Reform and Resistance:

- The 1857 war of Independence
- Major social and religious movements
- Education and the rise of the new middle class

Unit 4. Nationalist Politics and Expansion of its Social Base

- Phases of the Nationalist Movement: Liberal constitutionalist, Swadeshi and the Radicals, Formation of the Muslim League



Marxist Approach-1/4

- Naturally, it used the class lens and highlighted economic factors and class antagonism in narrating the Indian nationalism
- It criticized both the colonialist and nationalist views on Indian nationalism.
 - To them, colonial approach took a discriminatory view on India and its people
 - Whereas nationalist approach searched past roots of Indian nationalism which was not existing. It believed that India was not always a nation but rather a nation which was being created in modern times in which the nationalist movement had an important role to play
- According to them, although the national movement was an expression of the basic antagonism between the Indian people and imperialist government, it was a movement either directly influenced by bourgeoisie or indirectly working in the direction of capitalist development.
- It argued that although various classes, including the peasantry and the working classes, participated in the national movement, its basic character remained bourgeois, and it worked for capitalist interest.



Marxist Approach-2/4

- In this view, all nationalist leaders, including Gandhiji, came from bourgeoisie class, which was conservative and status quoist and worked for protecting the interest of the capitalist/bourgeoise class
- For them, non-violence of Gandhiji was an instrument to protect the propertied class from the proletarian violence
- In this approach, capitalist class of India collided with the colonial capitalist class to exploit the Indian masses.
- This approach linked nationalism to global capitalist structure and national movements to movement against imperialism of the late capitalism
- **Proponents:** R.P. Dutt (*India Today (1947)*), A.R. Desai (*Social Background of Indian Nationalism (1948)*), N.M. Goldberg, V.I. Paylov, Bipin Chandra (*India's Struggle for Independence*)



Marxist Approach-3/4

- **Views articulated by R.P. Dutta (*India Today* (1947))**

- revolt of 1857 'was in its essential character and dominant leadership the revolt of the old conservative and feudal forces and dethroned despotic rulers'
- Indian National Congress(INC) was created through secret manoeuvres of the colonial rule as an intended weapon for safeguarding British rule against the rising forces of popular unrest and anti-British feeling

- **Changing class characteristics of the Indian nationalism :**

- in the initial years, it represented 'only big bourgeoisie – the progressive elements among the landowners, the new industrial bourgeoisie and the well-to-do intellectual elements'.
- Later, in the years preceding the First World War, the urban petty bourgeois class became more influential.
- After the War, the Indian masses – peasantry and the industrial working classes – made their presence felt.
- However, the leadership remained in the hands of the propertied classes who prevented any radicalisation of the movement which could become dangerous to the interests of the capitalist class.



Marxist Approach-4/4 →

- Views of A.R.Desai (*Social Background of Indian Nationalism (1948)*)
 - Indian national movement developed through five phases, Each phase was based on particular social classes which supported and sustained it
 - first phase(Rammohan Roy to INC-1885): leadership of English educated intelligentsia
 - 2nd Phase (1885-1905-swadeshi movement): Emergence of new bourgeoisie(Lal-Bal-pal)
 - 3rd phase(1905-1918): broader social base which included sections of the lower-middle class
 - 4th Phase: (1919-1934): Further expanded social base- like a mass movement; but leadership remained bourgeoisie
 - 5th Phase (1934-39): growing disenchantment with the Gandhian ideology , rise of the Congress Socialists, and left parties ; movements of the peasants, workers, depressed classes and various linguistic nationalities outside congress; rise of communalism
 - However all these side events were not of much consequence and the mainstream was still solidly occupied by the Gandhian Congress which represented the interests of the dominant classes.



Pros & Cons of the Marxist Perspective

Pros

- Using the class lens, revealed the economic motive behind Indian national movement
- Revealed the weaknesses of both the Imperialist & nationalist approach
- Kept the perspective of masses-peasants, labourers- into the centre of discourse on nationalism
- By linking nationalism to global capitalist structure, gave anti-imperial character to Indian nationalism
- Influenced post-colonial, and sub-altern perspectives

Cons

- Excess focus on economic aspects, undermined role of ideas, culture, etc.
- Contradictory: Linking anti-colonial movement to nationalism but deriding leadership of the bourgeoisie class
- Discredited leadership of Indian national movement
- Seems to discredit the entire national movement
- complete break from the past Imagining Indian nationalism as completely modern and Western phenomenon



Sub-altern Approach-1/3

- Sub-altern class: tribes, peasantry, proletariat and, occasionally, the middle classes as well.
- **Ant-elitist Approach:**
 - It rejected elitist historiography of Indian nationalism, both colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism
 - Criticized Elitist historians for ignoring the contribution of masses in national movement and negative characterization of the mass uprising the rebellion.
- It asserted that there existed a parallel subaltern domain of politics which was not influenced by the elite politics and which possessed an independent, autonomous, self-generating dynamics
 - 'As modern as indigenous elite politics, it was distinguished by its relatively greater depth in time as well as in structure'
- The people's politics differed from the elite politics in several crucial aspects
 - First, its roots lay in the traditional organizations of the people such as caste and kinship networks, tribal solidarity, territoriality, etc.
 - Second, while elite mobilizations were vertical in nature, people's mobilizations were horizontal.
 - Third, whereas the elite mobilization was legalistic and pacific, the subaltern mobilization was relatively violent.
 - Fourth, the elite mobilization was more cautious and controlled while the subaltern mobilization was more spontaneous



Sub-altern Approach-2/3

- History from Below:
 - It advocated viewing the history from the point-of-view of the subaltern classes. 'Let the Sub-alterns speak for themselves' ✓
- Rejected nationalist's narrative of charismatic leadership, which was no longer viewed as the chief force behind the national movement. It was instead the people's interpretation of such charisma which acquired prominence in this approach ↗
 - Ex: popular interpretations of the Mahatma's messages was different from Congress leaders' perception of Gandhi (Shahid Amin, in his article 'Gandhi as Mahatma') ✓
- In this view, the Indian bourgeoisie failed in its prime work of speaking for the nation, and the Congress nationalism was bourgeois and elite which restrained popular radicalism.



Changes in sub-altern approach- 3/3

- subaltern historiography on Indian nationalism went through two phases
- Under postmodernist and post-colonialist influences, many of its contributors began to question its earlier emphasis on autonomous subaltern consciousness.
- Gayatri Spivak, in her book 'Can the sub-altern speak?' assert that sub-alterns lost their voice in the knowledge/speech paradigm constructed by the elites
- Subalternity as a concept was also redefined. Earlier, it stood for the oppressed classes in opposition to the dominant classes both inside and outside. Later, it was conceptualized in opposition to colonialism, modernity and Enlightenment.
- The earlier emphasis on the 'subaltern' now gave way to a focus on 'community'. Earlier the elite nationalism was stated to hijack the people's initiatives for its own project; now the entire project of nationalism was declared to be only a version of colonial discourse with its emphasis on centralization of movement
- The ideas of secularism and enlightenment rationalism were attacked and there began an emphasis on the 'fragments' and 'episodes'.
- Proponents: Ranajit Guha (Subaltern Studies, The Prose of Counter-Insurgency); Gyanendra Pandey ('Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism'); Shahid Amin ('Gandhi as Mahatma'); Sumit Sarkar ('The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy'); Partha Chatterjee (The Nation and its Fragments); Gayatri Spivak (Can the sub-altern speak?)



Pros & Cons of the Sub-altern Approach

Pros

- Placed marginalised people at the centre of the discourse on Indian nationalism
- Revealed the elitist nature of both the Imperialist & nationalist approach
- Attempt to write 'History from below'
- Better explained the existence & features of popular politics separate from the mainstream politics
- Gave primacy to role of consciousness, class, culture, power-relation, and hegemony
- Was anti-hegemonic

Cons

- Rejecting everything considered elitist
- Discredited leadership of Indian national movement- calling it elitist
- Neglected role of idea, benevolence, and ultraism of the elite leadership
- Changes in sub-altern thoughts denotes ideological confusion
- Not independent, considered as part of neo-Marxist and post-colonial paradigm
- Seems to have discredited the entire idea of Indian nationalism



Probable Questions

- Discuss the Liberal, Marxist, and Post-colonialist perspective on Colonialism
- Give a critical account of the Liberal perspective on Colonialism
- Discuss the Nationalist, Imperialist, Marxist, and Subaltern approaches to the study of nationalism in India
- Critically analyze major ideological approaches to the study of nationalism in India
- Which approach to the study of nationalism in India convinced you most? Give arguments in support of your views.



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