

COLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY IN INDIA

Source: Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Collection: Indian Historiography, IGNOU

When we talk of Colonial Historiography the first task is to remove a possible source of confusion. The term 'colonial historiography' applies to (a) the histories of the countries colonised during their period of colonial rule, and (b) to the ideas and approaches commonly associated with historians who were or are characterised by a colonialist ideology. In British India the term was used in the first sense and only since independence the second meaning of the term has come into prominence. Today the ideology is the subject of criticism and hence the term 'colonial historiography' has acquired a pejorative sense.

In a sense colonial history as a subject of study and colonial approach as an ideology are interconnected. The theme of empire building in the historical works of the British naturally gave rise to a set of ideas justifying British rule in India. This justification included, in different degrees in different individual historian, a highly critical attitude towards Indian society and culture at times amounting to contempt, a laudatory attitude to the soldiers and administrators who conquered and ruled India, and a proneness to laud the benefits India received from Pax Britannica, i.e. British Peace. We shall study this ideology in detail later but it is important to note here that lack of consciousness of the ideological dimension was a characteristic of colonial history writing.

INFLUENTIAL WORKS OF HISTORY IN COLONIAL INDIA

Early British historical writing on India reflected growing imperial authority and changing political philosophies in Britain. In 1792, Charles Grant presented an **Evangelical view** in *Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of India*, arguing that British rule was a divine mission to enlighten a superstitious society.

By the early nineteenth century, British industrial power and global dominance fostered a confident imperialist mindset. This was epitomized by James Mill's *History of British India* (1806–1818). Grounded in **Utilitarian philosophy** and written without ever visiting India, Mill's highly influential work combined Euro-centric prejudice with a reform agenda, serving as the core training text for East India Company officers.

Subsequent writers brought more firsthand knowledge and structure to the field. Mountstuart Elphinstone's *History of Hindu and Muhammedan India* (1841) established the long-standing periodization of Indian history into "Hindu" and "Muslim" eras and became a staple in Indian university syllabi. Later, J. Talboys Wheeler offered a more professionally rigorous account in his five-volume *History of India* (1867–1876).

By 1911, Vincent Smith's *History of India* became the dominant university textbook. Writing during the rise of Indian nationalism, Smith's civil-servant perspective led him to emphasize India's inherent fragility, arguing that only strong British imperial rule prevented chaos and backwardness.

A major shift occurred near the end of colonial rule with Edward Thompson and G. T. Garratt's *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India* (1934). Written from a **liberal perspective**, it sympathized with Indian national aspirations and reflected progressive British attitudes prior to independence in 1947. Over 150 years, British historiography thus evolved from a disparaging, imperialist framework toward a more accommodative and liberal understanding of India.

IMPACT OF HISTORICAL WRITINGS IN COLONIAL INDIA

It must be noted that despite the colonial ideology embedded in historiography in British India, the early British historians of India made some positive contributions. Apart from the obvious fact that the colonial historians laid the foundations of historiography according to methodology developed in modern Europe, their contribution was also substantial in providing in institutions like the Asiatic Society and Archaeological Survey of India opportunity for Indian historians to obtain entry into the profession and into academic research. Further, despite an ethnocentric and statist bias, the data collected by the British colonial historians as well as the practice of archiving documents was and remains an important resource. Most important of all, the teaching of history began from the very inception of the first three universities in India at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. This had several unintended consequences.

The history that was taught under colonial auspices was highly biased in favour of the imperial point of view. The textbooks were those produced by the school of colonial historiography. Nevertheless, there was a positive outcome. First, along with the history of India by James Mill or Elphinstone, Indian students also read histories of England and of Europe and thus were implanted in the minds of the educated Indians the ideas of Liberty and Freedom and Democracy and Equity, as exemplified in European history, the lessons of the Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution, the American War of Independence, the struggles of Mazzini and Garibaldi in Italy, etc. Any one familiar with the early Moderate phase of the development of nationalism in India will see the relevance these ideas acquired through reading history. Secondly, professionally trained Indian historians began to engage in writing history. Writing history on modern lines with documentary research and the usual apparatus of scholarly work was no longer a monopoly of the amateur historians of British origin. Indians professionally trained began to engage in research, first in learned associations like the Asiatic Society, then in the colleges and universities, and in the government's educational services, particularly the Indian Education Service.

Thirdly, and this is the important part, the history which the Indian students were made to read, the books by British civil servant historians of the nineteenth century, created a critical reaction against that historiography. The first graduate of an Indian University, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, repeatedly reviled the British interpretation and raised the question, When shall we write our own history? Rabindranath Tagore put it most eloquently: in other countries, he wrote, history reveals the country to the people of the country, while the history of India the British have gifted us obscures our vision of India, we are unable to see our motherland in this history. This reaction was typical of the intelligentsia in India and it led some of the best nationalist minds to search for a new construct of history. Thus there developed a Nationalist interpretation of Indian history, putting to an end the hegemony of British colonial historiography.

NATIONALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY IN INDIA

Source: Bipin Chandra, Collection: Indian Historiography, IGNOU

Nationalist approach to Indian history may be described as one which tends to contribute to the growth of nationalist feeling and to unify people in the face of religious, caste, or linguistic differences or class differentiation. As colonial historical narrative became negative or took a negative view of India's political and social development, and, in contrast, a justificatory view of colonialism, a nationalist reaction by Indian historians came. Colonial historians now increasingly threw colonial stereotypes at Indians. Indian nationalist historians set out to create counter-stereotypes, often explicitly designed to oppose colonial stereotypes thrown at them day after day. Just as the Indian nationalist movement developed to oppose colonialism, so did nationalist historiography develop as a response to and in confrontation with colonial historiography and as an effort to build national self-respect in the face of colonial denigration of Indian people and their historical record.

NATIONALIST HISTORY OF ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL PERIODS

Indian historians tried to prove the falsity of colonial historical narrative on the basis of analysis of existing historical sources, as also the hunt for fresh sources. Of course, they also were moved by a feeling of hurt national pride. For decades, their work was confined to ancient and medieval periods. The professional historians did not take up the modern period though, as we shall see, the economists did, basically because of two reasons: (a) most of them were working in government or government-controlled schools and colleges, there was fear that any critique of colonialism would affect their careers; (b) they accepted the contemporary British historical view that scientific history must not deal with recent or contemporary period.

Indian historians countered colonial narratives by framing India's spiritual tradition and moral values as superior to Western materialism. Simultaneously, they rejected the idea that ancient India was purely spiritual or politically inept, highlighting its achievements in statecraft, military power, diplomacy, and commerce.

To refute claims of Oriental despotism, historians cited texts like Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (comparing him to Machiavelli) and pointed to secular governance, welfare-oriented rulers, effective taxation systems, and rule of law. They argued that royal power was constrained by public opinion and advisory bodies like the *Mantri Parishad* (likened to Britain's Privy Council). Furthermore, they emphasized democratic traditions, citing village *panchayats*, representative assemblies, and early republicanism. Historian K.P. Jayaswal took this furthest in *Hindu Polity* (1915), asserting that ancient India's constitutional and democratic progress surpassed all other ancient civilizations, directly challenging Greece's democratic primacy.

Basically, the nationalist approach was to assert that anything that was politically positive in the West had already existed in India. Thus R. C. Majumdar wrote in his *Corporate Life in Ancient India* that institutions 'which we are accustomed to look upon as of western growth had also flourished in India long ago.' Thus, interestingly, the value structure of the West was accepted. It is not ancient Indian political institutions which were declared to be, on the

whole, greater, but western institutions which were accepted as greater and then found to have existed in ancient India.

The nationalists wrote approvingly of India's culture and social structure. In the bargain they underplayed caste oppression, social and economic denigration of the lower castes, and male domination. Moreover, while rightly emphasizing India's contribution to the development of civilization in the world, they tended to underplay the impact of other cultures and civilizations on India's development.

NATIONALIST HISTORY OF MODERN PERIOD PRE-INDEPENDENCE

Nationalist history of modern era came about after 1947. It didn't happen earlier because in the era of nationalism, to be a nationalist was also to be anti-imperialist, which meant confrontation with the ruling, colonial authorities. And that was not possible for academics because of colonial control over the educational system. But ofcourse there were many books written with a nationalist character prior to 1947 as well.

In the late 19th century, pioneer thinkers like Dadabhai Naoroji and R. C. Dutt built the first rigorous economic critique of British rule. Landmark books like Naoroji's *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1901) introduced the "Drain of Wealth" theory, while Dutt's two-volume *The Economic History of India* (1902–1904) detailed how colonial policies systematically de-industrialized the nation and impoverished its peasantry.

This economic analysis became the intellectual backbone of the Indian freedom movement, heavily influencing leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhash Chandra Bose to mobilize mass anti-colonial protests. Despite its huge real-world impact, mainstream history books ignored this economic perspective for decades. Histories written before and immediately after 1947 focused primarily on political narratives or praised the national movement without examining its economic roots, while neglecting alternative streams of resistance. Professional historians only began integrating this vital economic critique into Indian history during the 1960s and beyond.

NATIONALIST HISTORY POST-INDEPENDENCE

Following Indian independence in 1947, the immediate post-colonial decade saw the emergence of foundational nationalist histories aimed at reclaiming India's past and establishing an indigenous historical narrative. The grandest achievement of this period was the multi-volume project *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, edited by R. C. Majumdar in 1951, which sought to present an exhaustive, Indian-centric view of the nation's political and cultural heritage. The centenary of the 1857 uprising in 1957 marked a major moment for state-sponsored and independent historiography, producing pivotal works such as S. N. Sen's officially commissioned *1857* and R. C. Majumdar's *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857*, both of which critically re-evaluated the nature of anti-colonial resistance. Concurrently, the Ministry of Education commissioned Dr. Tara Chand to write the official *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, with its first volume published in 1961, framing the independence movement around British economic exploitation and the emergence of a unified national consciousness. Together, these early post-independence scholars

established the core nationalist framework that dominated Indian historical writing before the rise of the Marxist and Subaltern schools in the late 1960s and 1970s

Modern historians have also been divided between those, such as Tara Chand, who held that India has been a nation-in-the-making since the 19th century and those who argue that India has been a nation since the ancient times. At the same time, to their credit, all of them accept India's diversity, i.e., its multi-lingual, multireligious, multi-ethnic, and therefore multi-cultural character. Nationalist historians also have ignored or severely underplayed inner contradictions of Indian society based on class and caste or the oppression of and discrimination against women and tribes. They have also ignored the movements against class and caste oppressions. They have seldom made an in-depth analysis of the national movement, and often indulged in its blind glorification.

Nationalist historians did, however, set up a high tradition of scholarship. Their research advanced our understanding and interpretation of the past. They also contributed to the cultural defence against colonisation of our culture. Simultaneously, most of them contributed to the positive aspects of the modernisation of our society. They raised many new questions, produced controversies and initiated active debates. Above all, nationalist historical writing contributed to the self-confidence, self-assertion and a certain national pride which enabled Indian people to struggle against colonialism especially in the face of denigration of India's past and the consequent inferiority complex promoted by colonial writers.