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Hist 301

The Rise of Indian Nationalism at the turn of the Century

Nearing the 20th century, India was becoming more resilient towards the British Empire. They saw the British, who saw themselves as “legitimate heirs of the Mughal Emperors,” as oppressive foreign rulers who were exploiting India.[[1]](#footnote-1) The rise of Indian Nationalism was the result of Indians recognizing that ‘their India,’ which retained old traditions, politics, and social structures, was being exploited and threatened by the British Empire. The British approached Indian society by promoting their own interests while disregarding the voice of Indians. Agitated Indians, who realized that their ways were being threatened, chose to revolt against the British. In response, Britain indebted India by modernizing the country. The late 1800s would see the formation of the Indian National Congress which would promote Indian ideals and national interests as well as other nationalist movement in South Africa led by Mahatma Gandhi. After the turn of the century, important reforms would influence growing Indian nationalism and the independence movement.

It is critical to observe the development of Indian nationalism by first discussing the impact of British colonial intentions. European empires “justified colonialism in various ways, claiming that it Christianized the heathen or civilized the savage races or brought everyone the miraculous benefits of free trade.”[[2]](#footnote-2) For the British, the East India Company would gain access to India’s markets in the 17th century. In one way, “the British conquest of India may be attributed to accident, allies and resources—and the greatest of these was resources.”[[3]](#footnote-3) However, instead of remaining as an imperial presence in India, the British government sought to take control of India and to prove to Indians that Britain could ‘civilize’ and improve their country. In the words of Adam Hochschild, “colonialism was shaped by a desire not only for money but for power.”[[4]](#footnote-4) By the 19th century, Britain boasted a vast empire stretching across the globe. India would become an important part of the British Empire and its economic prosperity. The involvement in the Indian markets and “the imposition of British colonial rule on India…[resulted in] the net extraction of Indian surplus.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This did not settle well with the Indian population, who realized their markets were fueling a society they were servants of. Over time, Indians disapproval of foreign control grew.

The problems Indians had with the British government created conflict within the country. From 1880 to 1914, around the world, “nationalism took a lead forward…” with activists “keen to brandish the national flag against foreigners.”[[6]](#footnote-6) For Indians, they were fed up with British rule. In general, the foreigner “came to symbolize the disruption of old ways.”[[7]](#footnote-7) One of the most extreme reactions to British rule was the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. Also known as the First Indian war of Independence, it ignited a feeling of resilience towards British control among Indians across the country. It was apparent that Indians wanted to return to their traditional form of government. While marching to Delhi, Indians made “the Great Mughal its rallying cry and symbol.”[[8]](#footnote-8) For the British, this rebellion illustrated a colonial power’s worst fear. Controlling India would be more challenging now that Indian nationalists had a symbol of resilience to aspire to.

The radical reactions towards colonial rule forced the Raj to take ownership of the economy. The government of India Act of 1858 forced the East India Company to transfer all rights to Britain.[[9]](#footnote-9) This would provide the British government with secure management of India’s markets. This transfer of power would contribute to greater modernization in India. After the Sepoy Mutiny, there was a period of “unprecedented European capital investment and commercial agricultural development in British India.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Railroads and telegraph would greatly improve travel and communication around India. By 1880, there was “nine thousand miles of railroad… [and] twenty thousand miles of telegraph” across India.[[11]](#footnote-11) Though there was so much development, the cost fell on Indians. If funding was needed, “the state tended to raise charges in India in order to make payments to Britain.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Therefore, heightened taxes became a burden on Indians, and whether or not the improved infrastructure benefited the country, it provided nationalists with another reason to hate the British Raj.

The establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885 would provide Indians with a stronger voice in politics. Ironically, the Congress, according to historian Peter Robb, would not have existed without the “English language, the telegraph and the railway,” which the British had effectively installed across India after the Government of India Act in 1858.[[13]](#footnote-13) These modern inventions provided Indian officials the ability to mobilize to create the congress in the first place. Nevertheless, the congress would gain popularity by hosting annual discussions around India and “became the organizational vehicle for India’s first great nationalist movement, embodying the dreams and aspirations of ‘New India.’”[[14]](#footnote-14) Because this congress was new, it had to accommodate the desires of the general Indian population. Therefore, the congress “espoused the class interests of those who sought government jobs… advanced ideals of representation… and of the national interest.”[[15]](#footnote-15) This congress represented the voice of the Indian people. Representatives from all parts of India would join the congress.[[16]](#footnote-16) And although the British Raj still had full authoritative power over India, the creation of the Indian National Congress proved that Indian nationalism was becoming an important theme in politics.

Indian nationalism would also arise in South Africa after the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi. After witnessing the racism towards Indians, Gandhi would organize Indians “collectively against the racism of that region,” not with violence, but with a “successful movement of passive or non-violent mass resistance” against British rule.[[17]](#footnote-17) Such a response in South Africa would encourage people in India to consider this form of retaliation against the Raj. His “nonviolent method of noncooperation and civil disobedience,” the technique of *satyagraha*, “tapped the deepest roots of India’s cultural heritage” and brought Indians under the same banner.[[18]](#footnote-18) For Gandhi, the most effective method of unifying Indians was by emphasizing what it means to identify as ‘Indian.’ In India, the British had already been categorized as the ‘foreigner,’ but now the identity of ‘being Indian’ was illuminated by Gandhi. In the words of Eric Hobsbawm, “it was already evident to intelligent administrators that some sort of devolution leading… to some preferably modest degree of autonomy would become inevitable.”[[19]](#footnote-19) This perfectly sums up the rise of the independence movement and Indian nationalism while also addressing the state in which Britain found themselves in. Colonialism was not working.

Back in India, John Morley, the secretary of India, and the Viceroy of India, Gilbert Elliot- Murray-Kynynmound, would implement political reforms that would further encourage Indian engagement in government. These two figures disapproved of imperialism and enacted The Indian Councils Act of 1909, which “increase[d] the ‘additional membership’ of the central Legislative Council.”[[20]](#footnote-20) By 1910, “135 Indian representatives… [had taken] seats as legislators on councils throughout British India.”[[21]](#footnote-21) The implementation of these revolutionary reforms had a profound impact, just as the Indian National Congress had had when it was established in 1885. The presence of more Indians in government allowed policies addressing national interests and the general Indian people to be enacted. The fact that two white government officials chose to reform the government system is remarkable. Hence, these actions displayed that nationalism was being brought to the forefront from multiple directions. Most surprisingly, in this case, from the British Raj itself.

India, like other countries under the control of colonial rule, were beginning to realize how necessary it was to seek independence. Indians recognized that Britain’s intentions in their country was to include India in their quest for superiority. Controlling India meant that Britain could maintain a lucrative trade route with Asia as well as provide the empire with support in that part of the world. Therefore, it was understandable why India was so important to maintaining the British Empire. However, with the rise of global nationalism in the late 19th century, Britain began facing stronger resistance from the people they oppressed. News of the successful nationalist movement led by Gandhi provided the Indian population with the hope that they could do the same in their country. With the backing of the Indian National Congress, the reforms enacted by Secretary Morley and Viceroy Minto, and the arrival of Gandhi in 1914, India was on the road towards independence.

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3. Peter Robb, *A History of India* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 106 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1998), 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Peter Robb, *A History of India*, 107 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1987), 142 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. 158 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 241 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 246 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. 250 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. 251-252 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Peter Robb, *A History of India* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 169 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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