

# NATIONALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY (PART-2)

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**DR. MD. NEYAZ HUSSAIN  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR & HOD  
PG DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY  
MAHARAJA COLLEGE, VKSU,  
ARA(BIHAR)**



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- ▶ Nationalist approach played a vital role in Indian historiography since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indian nationalist 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. Ideological studies were regarded as a binding factor of Indian people and their sentiments. History was taken to mean as a motivating force of national awakening and made use of to instill patriotic feelings. National pride played a big role in providing inspiration to common people and historical consciousness began to grow steadily as never before.



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- ▶ The Indian historians proclaimed the colonial notion of India's tradition of spirituality as a mark of distinction and of India's greatness and superiority over the West, especially in terms of '**moral values**' as compared to the essentially '**materialistic**' character of Western civilization. At the same time, they denied the Indians' exclusive devotion to spirituality and stressed their prowess in administration and statecraft, empire building, diplomacy, taxation structure, and military organization, warfare, agrarian, industrial and commercial development.
- ▶ Many historians discovered in India's past diplomatic and political institutions analogous to those of contemporary Europe. They vehemently denied the notion of ancient Indian being inefficient in running a state. They hailed the discovery in the beginning of the 20th century of **Arthashastra by Kautilya** and said that it proved that Indians were equally



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interested and proficient in administration, diplomacy and economic management by the state. Many glorified **Kautilya** and compared him with **Machiavelli** and **Bismarck**. Many also denied the dominant influence of religion on the state and asserted the latter's secular character.

- ▶ They also contradicted the view that ancient Indian state was autocratic and despotic. The Kings in ancient India dispensed justice to all, they said. Others refuted the view that Indian rulers did not keep in mind the aim of the welfare of the people. Some even asserted the strong presence of the popular element in the state and went even so far as to say that in many cases the political structure approached that of modern democracies.
- ▶ All of them argued that government was not irresponsible and capricious. There were many limits on autocracy or the power of the rulers. There were many channels through which public opinion became effective.

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- ▶ Some historians argued that Indian monarchies were limited and often approached constitutional monarchy. For example, the *Mantri Parishad* described by Kautilya was **compared with the Privy Council of Britain**. Above all, very often the existence of local self-governments was asserted and the example of democratically elected village **panchayats** was cited.
- ▶ A few writers went so far as to talk of the existence of assemblies and parliaments and of the cabinet system, as under Chandra Gupta, Akbar and Shivaji. Quite often, the wide observance by the rulers of international law, especially in the case of war, was also pointed out.
- ▶ They denied the charge that Indian rulers took recourse to arbitrary taxation and argued that a taxation system virtually to that of a modern system of taxation prevailed.



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- ▶ **K.P. Jayaswal**, took this entire approach to the extreme. In his *Hindu Polity*, published in 1915, he argued that the ancient Indian political system was either republican or that of constitutional monarchy. He concluded: 'The constitutional progress made by the Hindus has probably not been equaled, much less surpassed, by any polity of antiquity.' (This was to counter the European view that Greece was the home of democracy).
- ▶ 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.



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- ▶ Nationalist historians countered the Colonial view that Indians were always divided by religion, region, language, and caste, that it was colonialism alone which unified them, and that their unity would disappear if colonial rule disappeared. This also meant that Indians lacked a sense of patriotism and national unity.
- ▶ They claimed that cultural, economic and political unity and a sense of Indian nationhood had prevailed in pre-colonial India. Kautilya, for example, they said, had advocated in the *Arthashastra* the need for a national king.
- ▶ This need to assert the unity of India in the past explains, in part, why Indian historians tended to see Indian history as a history of Indian empires and their break up and why they treated the period of empires as period of national greatness.



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- ▶ In Nationalist view Chandragupta Maurya, Asoka, Chandragupta Vikramaditya and Akbar were great because they built great empires. Interestingly, this led to a contradiction in the nationalist approach during the Gandhian era. On the one hand India was praised as the land of non-violence and, on the other hand, the military power of the empire-builders was praised. One curious result was that Asoka was praised for his commitment to nonviolence by some historians, others condemned him for the same as it weakened the empire against foreign invaders.
- ▶ 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. Furthermore, as in the case of political institutions, often the worth of social values and institutions was accepted and then found to have existed in ancient India.





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- ▶ The nationalist historians' approach towards ancient India had a few highly negative consequences. (i) Nearly all achievements of the Indian people in different areas of human endeavor were associated with the ancient period, (ii) It was Hindu culture and social structure in its Sanskritic and Brahmanical form that was emphasized. (iii) Glorification of the past tended to merge with communalism and, later, with regionalism.
- ▶ In any case the high water-mark of the Indian historical writing on the ancient period of Indian history was reached around early 1930s. Later, it became more and more a caricature of the writings of the earlier period.



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- ▶ Nationalist historiography of medieval India developed mostly during the 1920s and after, often to dispute the colonial and communal approaches. Nationalist historians of medieval India repeated more or less the entire nationalist approach towards ancient Indian history.
- ▶ They emphasized the development of a composite culture in Northern India as a result of interaction among Hindus and Muslims both at the level of the common people and the elite.
- ▶ They denied the colonial-communal assertion that Muslim rulers remained foreigners even after settling down in the country or that they were inherently oppressive or more so than their predecessors or counterparts in the rest of the world.
- ▶ They denied that Hindus and Muslims lived in a conflictual situation, ever at each other's throats.



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- ▶ Despite their tendency to glorify India's past and to defend Indian culture against colonial denigration, many of the nationalist historians also looked for an answer to the question: how could a small trading company, backed by a small country thousands of miles away, conquer such a large country as India with its hoary past and great civilizations. This indicated the beginnings of a critique of Indian culture and social structure, which, in turn, led to initial steps being taken towards the study of social history, especially pertaining to the caste system and the position of women.
- ▶ The contemporary nationalist critique of colonialism also led to first steps being taken towards the economic history of pre-colonial India. Also as the national movement developed as a mass movement, attention turned in the 1930s towards a study of the role of the common people in history. This trend fructified, however, only after the 1950s.



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- ▶ Nationalist historians were handicapped by the limitation of their sources. They had to rely mostly on written sources, though epigraphy and numismatics were beginning to make a major contribution. Archaeology was still in its infancy, while the use of anthropology and sociology was negligible. Economics too was seen as a preserve only of the economists.

(To be continued)