

NATIONALIST APPROACH AND WRITINGS TO INDIAN HISTORY (PART-1)

(PG SEM-1, CC:1, HISTORIOGRAPHY)

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INTRODUCTION

This is a simple presentation of a very complex problem, especially because historiography is an aspect both of history and persons, and events and intellectual history. It should also be kept in view that when discussing historical approach of a historian, his or her sincerity and honesty is seldom in question. A historian worth discussing does not write to order or to deliberately serve specific interests. Though it is true that a historian's work may reflect the thinking of a class, caste or a social or political group, he basically writes through intellectual conviction or under the impact of ideas and ideologies. This is why often a historian may transcend the class, caste, race, community or nation in which he is born

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Thus concrete relationship of a historian to a particular approach to Indian history – for example, colonial, nationalist, or communal approach is evolved not by analyzing or ‘discovering his motives but by seeing the correspondence between his intellectual product and the concrete practice of the colonialists, nationalists or communalists. Quite often a historian – or any intellectual – is affected by contemporary politics and ideologies. Of course, it is an important aspect of intellectual history to study how and why certain ideas, approaches and ideologies are picked up, popularized, debated – supported and opposed—become dominant or lose dominance, or the ideas arising in one milieu are picked up in another milieu

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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. This may, as pointed out earlier, sometimes be irrespective of the intentions of the author.

Initially, in the 19th century, Indian historians followed in the footsteps of colonial historiography, considering history as scientific based on fact-finding, with emphasis on political history and that too of ruling dynasties. Colonial writers and historians, who began to write the history of India from late 18th and early 19th century, in a

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way created all India history, just as they were creating an all-India empire. Simultaneously, just as the colonial rulers followed a political policy of divide and rule on the basis of region and religion, so did colonial historians stress division of Indians on the basis of region and religion throughout much of Indian history. Nationalist historians too wrote history as either of India as a whole or of rulers, who ruled different parts of India, with emphasis on their religion or caste or linguistic affiliation. But as colonial historical narrative became negative or took a negative view of India's political and social development, and, in

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contrast, a justificatory view of colonialism, a nationalist reaction by Indian historians came. Colonial historians now increasingly, day by day, threw colonial stereotypes at Indians. Basic texts in this respect were James Mill's work on Ancient India and Elliot and Dawson's work on Medieval India. 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

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historiography and as an effort to build national self-respect in the face of colonial denigration of Indian people and their historical record. Both sides appealed to history in their every day speech and writing. Even when dealing with most obtuse or obscure historical subjects, Indians often relied in their reply on earlier European interpretations.

For example, many colonial writers and administrators asserted that historical experience of Indian people made them unfit for self-government and democracy, or national unity and nation-formation or modern economic outsiders.

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Colonial rule would gradually prepare them – and was doing so – for all these tasks. Moreover, in the second half of 19th century, the need for permanent presence of colonial rulers and colonial administration for the development of India on modern lines was sometimes implied and sometimes explicitly asserted. While the utilitarian and missionaries condemned Indian culture, the Orientalists emphasized the character of India as a nation of philosophers and spiritual people. While this characterization bore the marks of praise, the accompanying corollary was that Indians had historically

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lacked political, administrative and economic acumen or capacity. Indians should, therefore, have full freedom to develop and practice their spiritualism and influence the world in that respect, the British should manage the political, administrative, and economic affairs and territorial defense of India against foreign aggression, which had succeeded whenever India had an Indian ruler. In fact, in the absence of foreign rule, India had tended to suffer from political and administrative anarchy. For example, it was the British who saved India from anarchy during the 18th and 19th centuries. The colonial writers and administrators also maintained that, because of their

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religious and social organization, Indians also lacked moral character. (This view was often the result of the fact that British administration came into social contact only with their cooks, *syces* and other servants or with compradors who were out to make money through their relations with the Sahibs). Also, some of the European writers praised Indian spiritualism, because of their own reaction against the evils of the emerging industrialism and commercialism in their own countries.

Many colonial historians also held that it was in the very nature of India, like other countries of the East, to be ruled by despots or at least by autocratic rulers. This was the

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reason why British rule in India was and had to be autocratic. This view came to be widely known as the theory of Oriental Despotism. Furthermore, these writers argued that the notion that the aim of any ruler being the welfare of the ruled was absent in India. In fact, the traditional political regimes in India were ‘monstrously cruel’ by nature. In contrast, the British, even though autocratic, were just and benevolent and worked for the welfare of the people. In contrast with the cruel Oriental Despotism of the past, British rule was benevolent though autocratic.

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The colonial writers also held that Indians had, in contrast to Europeans, always lacked a feeling of nationality and therefore of national unity, – Indians had always been divided. Indians, they said, had also lacked a democratic tradition. While Europeans had enjoyed the democratic heritage of ancient Greece and Rome, the heritage of Indians – in fact of all people of the Orient or East – was that of despotism.

Indians also lacked the quality of innovation and creativity. Consequently most good things—institutions, customs, arts and crafts, etc. – had come from outside. For example,

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it was colonial rule which had brought to India law and order, equality before law, economic development, and modernization of society based on the ideas of social equality.

All these colonial notions not only hurt the pride of Indian historians and other intellectuals but also implied that the growing demand of the Indian intellectuals for self-government, democracy, legislative reform, etc., was unrealistic precisely because of Indians' past history.

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After all, democracy was alien to their historical character and therefore not suitable to them.

(To be continued)