

Responses to Empire: 'Indian' Perspectives from the Twentieth Century

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Much of what has been written about Indian responses to British rule in twentieth-century India has been dominated by retrospective perspectives: notably, of Indian nationalism or of British imperial self-justification, and of the shibboleths generated by each among its own constituencies. This has been overlaid by theory and theorising that distils from the historical material a more coherent set of perspectives than may have been available contemporaneously; and by left-of-centre positions that lean on and legitimate the anti-colonial nationalism.

This essay attempts instead to understand some of the psycho-social and psycho-political dynamics of a colonised society.¹ The relative absence of the explicit voice of the coloniser in this narrative is deliberate. Many of the colonised engaged with the empire as an implicit but ubiquitous, and then again as a somewhat stereotypical presence. For the purpose of this essay, it is also important that the term 'Indian' be provisionally treated as geographical shorthand rather than as an assumed unity or unproblematic identity. The complicity of historiography in retrospective ideological constellations inevitably makes the task of recovering contemporaneous perspectives somewhat complicated. This essay takes a strategically subjectivist view of the British Indian empire in attempting to approach the subject not from the perspective of retrospective scholarly work, but from perspectives that can be seen to have been relevant to those who experienced that empire.²

Given that much historical writing is compelled to rehearse the dominant perspectives that are the inevitable framing narratives of a field of study, this essay traces a history of the Indian nationalist movement, the narrative of which has been central to an understanding of Indian responses to British imperialism. This does not exclude the possibility of decentring some of the main concerns of writers who have written on the subject; there is much room

¹ The article is restricted to the first half of the twentieth century. For an analysis of the political cultures and languages of legitimation of post-independence India in the Nehru years, see Benjamin Zachariah, *Nehru*, London 2004, pp. 139-203.

² It has correctly been pointed out that 'imperialism' has a more precise meaning than 'colonialism'. Since I am describing relatively amorphous responses, I have opted for the less precise term. For a recent discussion of terminology, see e.g. Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism. An Historical Introduction*, Oxford 2001, Introduction.

for an opening up of debates on the actual experience of empire. This can be done by attempting to read, even into these dominant perspectives, voices divergent from or resistant to those perspectives – which is often difficult given the paucity of appropriate sources. And it can be attempted by reading the dominant narrative again, and re-presenting it with a restored blurriness that eschews the strategy of retrospective neatening.

1. The 'nationalist movement': The legacy of the nineteenth century

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a neither particularly radical nor anti-imperialist or anti-British 'nationalist' movement, could be said to have come into existence. It sought more 'representation' for Indians in the government and administration of India, and was led by an elite, largely secular modernising and self-consciously modern group of professionals and businessmen, organised within a body that called itself the Indian National Congress.³

Such men were well-versed in the histories of Britain, of British parliamentary practice and of a liberal political vocabulary that ostensibly provided the ideological possibilities of Indians being regarded as potential equals in the imperial venture, and therefore of Indian 'nationalism'. One of the Indian National Congress's early organisers, the Parsi⁴ businessman Dadabhai Naoroji, staked his claim as a British subject to a place in the British Parliament, which he won as a Liberal candidate in July 1892.⁵ Equally, these men were open to other European ideas. The earliest coherent strand of thought in Indian 'nationalist' thinking has been identified as an economic nationalism which owes much to the experiences of Germany as a late industrialiser, and in particular to Friedrich List's argument on the need for protection for industries in a newly industrialising country so that they could develop to a stage at which they could compete with more established foreign competitors.⁶ The strength

³ See John McLane, *Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress*, Princeton 1977; Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, Cambridge 1968; R. Suntharalingam, *Politics and National Awakening in South India, 1852–1891*, Tucson 1974; for a standard text-book account that still stands up to academic scrutiny, see Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885–1947*, London 1983.

⁴ The Zoroastrian community in western India were originally migrants from Persia, and referred to as 'Parsi'.

⁵ 'Let the Grand Old Man of India and the Member for Hindustan live long', Dinshaw Wacha, fellow Parsi and member of the Indian National Congress wrote to Naoroji on his election to the Commons. 'May you prove to the British House of Commons that we are a capable race, fit to govern ourselves, under the guidance of the Anglo-Saxon, and not such poor black creatures as Lord Salisbury and his tribe would make the ignorant believe.' Wacha to Naoroji, letter dated 8 July 1892, reprinted in R.P. Patwardhan (ed.), *Dadabhai Naoroji Correspondence, volume II Part I*, Bombay 1977, pp. 292–293.

of a 'nation' was centrally connected to its ability to provide alternative employment outside the agricultural sector for its citizens. Economic nationalists developed a strong critique of the damaging effects of foreign rule from Britain, and placed arguments in the public domain that ran contrary to the proclaimed British rhetoric of providing 'moral and material progress' in India through its beneficial rule. Classical and neo-classical political economy, as proclaimed in British official rhetoric, relied on the principle of 'comparative advantage', according to which countries producing what they were naturally suited to produce could with advantage trade with each other; India was naturally suited to producing raw materials for export. Indian economic nationalists pointed out that political control from overseas in the interest of an overseas country had distorted the development of India. Evidence was produced to show that an Indian economy with strong trade and manufacturing sectors had been deliberately destroyed by British rulers before and during the British industrial revolution; the possibility of an Indian industrial revolution had thereby been destroyed. The 'drain of wealth' from India and its 'deindustrialisation' were causes and consequences of British economic prosperity.⁷ The germs of a now paradigmatic description of a colonial economy were thus laid out early on.

The most prominent of the early Indian nationalists were a cosmopolitan, often Anglicised, elite. Therefore, they were often discredited both by anti- and pro-imperialist writers (contemporary and retrospective) as non-representative of Indians generally and as self-interested and 'undemocratic' cliques. Public rhetoric aside, it is claimed, this was not a pan-Indian national movement but a small set of regionally-organised and often caste-based groups; people with pre-modern loyalties masquerading as a modern movement.⁸ In some versions of this argument, they were merely businessmen looking for more space to operate profitably in a colonial economy: seekers of a certain degree of 'dependent development'.⁹ There is a certain amount of accuracy attached to these arguments, especially for later periods where businessmen's involvements in politics were motivated – and tempered – by their desire for more space in which to operate, but also by their need for the colonial state's repressive apparatus to assist in controlling their workforce.¹⁰ But business-

⁶ See Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India*, New Delhi 1966.

⁷ Dadabhai Naoroji, *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, London 1901; Romesh Chunder Dutt, *The Economic History of India*, 2 volumes, London 1902/06.

⁸ This was the so-called 'Cambridge school' argument – see for instance Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (fn. 3); John A. Gallagher/Gordon Johnson/Anil Seal (eds.), *Locality, Province and Nation. Essays on Indian Politics, 1870 to 1940*, Cambridge 1973.

⁹ Andre Gunder Frank, *Dependent Accumulation and Underdevelopment*, London 1978.

¹⁰ Basudev Chatterji, *Trade, Tariffs and Empire. Lancashire and British Politics in India 1919–1939*, Delhi 1992; Claude Markovits, *Indian Business and Nationalist Politics 1931–1939. The Indigenous Capitalist Class and the Rise of the Congress Party*, Cambridge 1985.

men were by no means the best represented set of people among Indian nationalists; and the urge to nationalist self-representation and organisation as an aspect of the psycho-political conditions generated by colonial rule – among persons who were in many cases at least relatively speaking the beneficiaries of colonial rule, and who thereby contributed to undermining their own position – requires further study.

One of the shortcomings of this argument is that it neglects to make a clear definition of nationalism. A comparative framework would require an answer to the question of whether, or where, there has been a 'true' nationalism that is both expressible in a popular idiom and is not an elite-led movement. A more useful framing of the question might juxtapose the histories of nationalism(s) in India with the history of nationalism as a legitimating principle. It might be remembered that the 'national principle' was not universally acknowledged publicly before the First World War, and its implications were not even fully grasped at the end of the Second World War (the Bolsheviks placed national self-determination at the core of the Brest-Litovsk terms; Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points mentioned it, but it did not of course apply to the colonised, who were subsumed within the 'trusteeship' idea: their care was entrusted to more 'developed' nations, and 'trusteeship' was later also written into the United Nations' institutional structures). In the latter part of the nineteenth century, 'nationalism' was a possible way of legitimising claims to collective existence and therefore collective rights. In learning to use the language of (Indian) nationalism, elite groups in India were appealing to a powerful principle that was on the way to being a radical force in European history. And because a central part of the British claim to the right to rule India was either that India was not and never had been a 'nation', or that British rule had the potential of making India, not yet a nation, into one, legitimate (Indian) collectivity under British rule. Since the collectivity pre-supplied for that purpose was 'India', not a 'regional' collectivity – say 'Bengal', where, by most accounts, the nationalist movement began – the national entity that had to be imagined was the 'Indian' nation. (Since it was Bengali intellectuals who were in the first instance concerned with this imagining, as the first Indians to be subject to the full rigours of British colonial rule, it was logical that they in many cases projected the particularities of Bengal onto the rest of India.¹¹)

¹¹ See Benjamin Zachariah, *In Search of Authenticity: Bengali Narratives of Their Past and the Coloniser's Ubiquitous Presence*, in: Beate Eschment/Hans Harder (eds.), *Looking at the Coloniser*, Würzburg 2004, pp. 225-250.

2. The problem of 'authenticity' or the search for the 'indigenous'

In the early years of the twentieth century, it is possible to trace a slight ambivalence in the internal debates among Indians on the role of the coloniser, whose presence brought resources of progress and modernity, as well as of disruption. The two sides tended to alternate, and even coexist; the figure of the 'good coloniser' (who in many cases was not a person but a tendency, a set of usable ideas, or a set of unintended consequences) disappeared with time, as the pressures of the struggle for independence made the interaction between coloniser and colonised more confrontational and the sustaining mythologies of benevolent empire more and more implausible. After the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre in 1919, where British troops commanded by General Reginald Dyer fired upon an unarmed crowd to 'teach the Indians a lesson', faith in the triumph of liberal principles and therefore ultimately of the argument for Indian self-government was impossible to sustain.¹²

While the more vocal aspects of Indian nationalist politics centrally used a language that had much in common with, and drew legitimacy from, British liberal opinion, there were undercurrents and other discussions that were less explicit. Colonial education and indoctrination, devaluation by the coloniser of the 'indigenous' culture, and the partial internalisation of this devaluation also gave rise to anxieties, and eventually to searches to restore the 'indigenous' to dignified status, as dissatisfaction with being turned into a domesticated creation of the coloniser emerged. One of the problems that greatly exercised societies under colonial rule is that of the search for an 'authentic' identity, one that is not mediated or contaminated by colonial rule.¹³

By the turn of the century there were already persons and groups referred to as 'Hindu revivalists' who believed that a revival and revitalisation of an allegedly ancient tradition in the present would lift India to its proper place among nations. Despite the insistence of many of its ideologues, the claim of this neo-Hinduism to indigenous roots were shaky: it owed much to British Orientalist scholar-administrators' discoveries of Hinduism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the 'sacred texts' that formed the basis of its appeal to tradition owed their standing in many cases to British attempts to find the core principles of the society that they sought to rule in their early years in India. Movements like the Arya Samaj, which sought its wisdom and legitimation in the Vedas, allegedly the earliest known Indo-Aryan texts, which therefore contained the purest possible form of Hinduism, attempted to reach out beyond the confines of elite ideology, in part by providing in Indian

¹² See Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography*, London 1936, pp. 40-41.

¹³ See Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy. Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, Delhi 1983.

languages a strong pamphlet literature that could be virulently anti-Muslim and very far from the intellectually respectable claims it sought to make elsewhere. Nevertheless, by addressing audiences in English, it maintained a rhetoric that was at least assimilable to the hegemonic language of everyday politics. The anomaly of this situation did not go unrecognised, and yet it was recognised as inevitable. As the Arya Samajist Lajpat Rai wrote in 1928: 'Nothing is more humiliating than the necessity of quoting the testimony of foreigners in defence. The process in itself involves an admission of inferiority. But there is no use hiding the fact that the white peoples of the West are not prepared to accept and believe any testimony but that of persons of their own race and colour [...]. It was necessary to keep their needs in view.'¹⁴

What the Arya Samaj owed to another late nineteenth and early twentieth century socio-religious phenomenon, the Theosophical Society, deserves further exploration: the Theosophists embraced Hinduism as 'ancient wisdom', providing for a colonised people the moment of legitimation that was not insignificant in their rediscovery of a Hindu past. In a social environment in which the culture and civilisation of India had been denigrated, continuously undervalued or considered inferior by the dominant values imposed by the colonising power, the suggestion that an Indian religion was actually considered noble by Europeans was an empowering one. Theosophy became the route for many English-educated Indians to return to 'Hinduism'. The search for a Hindu golden age, marked by an Aryan civilisation, also linked up well with contemporaneous European social and intellectual currents, and provided the possibility, attractive to a colonised people, that they could claim a similarly noble racial origin to that of their rulers, thereby undermining the rulers' moral right to rule them.

How far Indian 'tradition' was itself invented or shaped under British rule, including the extent to which the categories with which Indians negotiated or contested British rule were themselves crucially shaped by British rule, are questions that have been raised by historians: the nature of 'caste', supposedly a fundamental building-block of 'Indian' society; the category 'Hindu' itself, and its inclusions and exclusions.¹⁵ The activities of officials keen to discover the essence of 'Hindu-' or 'Muslim law' and write them down for the sake of convenient governance, or census-takers intent on cataloguing the complexity of the social fabric into manageable categories, had created a spurious neatness to categories of religious community or prescriptive codes of social interaction, and cut them off from the ebb and flow of socio-political power in

¹⁴ Lajpat Rai, *Unhappy India. Being a reply to Miss Katherine Mayo's "Mother India"*, Calcutta 1928, p. ix.

¹⁵ See Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind. Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton 2001; for the antecedents of this argument, see Bernard Cohn (ed.), *An Anthropologist among the Historians*, Delhi 1987.

which they had once been embedded. These entities then became the basis of effective politics. Once written down in administrative documents, and as political activity came to be based on these imagined categories, the categories acquired reality, retrospectively justifying the administrative imaginings. Colonial 'reality' was therefore to a large extent a creation of the coloniser. But it was a reality that the colonised inhabited, in the course of which they became habituated to it; they could in many cases imagine no other.

3. Twentieth century colonial politics and the problem of the masses

It is difficult to find the voice of the ordinary citizen, the somewhat mythologised 'subaltern' of the historiographical project that bears that name.¹⁶ Until the second decade of the twentieth century, however, there is little indication that this figure was of any particular relevance to the self-proclaimed leaders that wished to claim him (and it was usually him). Thereafter, the attempts were mired in suspicion, fear and various semi-colonial assumptions, as the central figure in the Indian middle class imagination remained the coloniser. A few illustrations from the by-now well-worn narrative of the 'Indian nationalist movement' will help to make this point.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, politics in British India was beginning to take shape in relation to colonial domination. Among self-proclaimed nationalist leaders, who sought to direct and control 'a nation in the making',¹⁷ there was also a growing tension between the borrowed but also internalised liberal idiom of legalistic, 'moderate' Indian political agitators that had so horrified Kipling in Calcutta,¹⁸ and the more 'extremist' ones who, in the early years of the new century, found prominence in the movement against the partition of Bengal and the ensuing Swadeshi ('of our own country') Movement (1903–1908).¹⁹ The latter had to find ways of reaching out to the 'masses', and sought therefore to find a suitable populist idiom.

The Swadeshi Movement was a response to the division of the province of Bengal, ostensibly an administrative measure, which was widely felt to be an attempt to reduce the importance of Calcutta as a political centre, and to create a counter-balance to the organised power of the Calcutta *bhadralok*, the middle-class 'respectable people'. The government created a new administrati-

¹⁶ See Ranajit Guha's founding statement, On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India, in: idem (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I*, Delhi 1982, pp. 1–8.

¹⁷ This was the title of the autobiography, Sir Surendranath Banerjea, *A Nation in the Making*, London 1925.

¹⁸ Rudyard Kipling, *City of Dreadful Night*, Allahabad 1891.

¹⁹ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903–1908*, New Delhi 1973.

ve and political centre in eastern Bengal in Dacca [Dhaka] and encouraged the founding of a new political group, the Muslim League, under the patronage and leadership of the Nawab of Dacca, an important Muslim *zamindar* (under British administration, a *zamindar* was a large landowner, recognised as a proprietor by, and paying land revenues to, the government). This was to encourage Muslims to organise separately from the Hindu-dominated, and allegedly anti-Muslim, mainstream of a rising nationalist movement. The resultant anti-partition agitation was the most widespread and effective anti-government movement that British India had hitherto seen. The Calcutta-based, mostly upper-caste, Hindu agitators stressed the brotherhood of Hindus and Muslims, and accused the Government of deliberately pursuing a policy of divide and rule. *Swadeshi* also stressed the importance of indigenous manufactures, and self-strengthening education, particularly in scientific and technological subjects – incorporating earlier nationalist debates about the need for national self-sufficiency and the nature of valid borrowings from the 'West'.

The movement spread quickly outside Bengal, with middle-class radicals organising boycotts and *swadeshi* demonstrations across the country. But in the search for a popular idiom, the extremists drew strongly on Hindu – and often upper-caste – symbolism. This could obscure the genuine attempt on the part of the Bengal *swadeshi* agitators to reach out across those limitations. Nevertheless, an undoubted legacy of the rise of 'extremist' politics was a rise in Hindu rhetoric in nationalist politics: the attempt to glorify historical figures who had fought against Mughal rule, now cast as alien and foreign; the worship of Mother India as a Hindu goddess; and more explicitly a reference to a glorious and untarnished ancient Indian past, identified with 'Hinduism'. The possibility of counter-mobilisation on the basis of Islam had showed itself early on, especially as some of the more enthusiastic of the *swadeshi* volunteers used coercive measures to attempt to stop poor peasants in rural eastern Bengal (most of who were Muslims) from buying British-made goods. In the absence of cheap *swadeshi* alternatives, this was hardly practical – it could only be a sacrifice made by the more affluent. The result was sectarian tension and occasional violence as religious leaders, encouraged by government officials, told Muslims that their interests and those of the 'Hindu' agitators were opposed.

Ostensibly successful (the partition was annulled in 1911), the movement nevertheless ran out of steam as a mass movement by about 1908, with its protagonists forced into a campaign of targeting individual British officials in acts of terrorism, inspired partly by Russian anarchism and partly by a Hindu revivalist insistence on the nation as a mother/goddess to be defended by valiant sons.²⁰ The 'terrorist' tradition, as it came to be called, had a long after-life; in Bengal in the 1920s and 1930s, there was a steady stream of casualties

among British Indian administrators, and British civil servants were particularly afraid of postings in eastern Bengal.

3.1. *Gandhians*. It is always said that the Swadeshi Movement foreshadowed the great Gandhian movements that allegedly led to independence: Non-Cooperation (1920–1922), Civil Disobedience (1930/31) and Quit India (1942/43, though it is very doubtful that Gandhi had any control over the last of these). The first of these was merged with the Khilafat Movement. Among Indian Muslims, the danger to the khalifa remained an emotive issue with immense mobilisational potential especially after the defeat of Turkey in the war and the harsh terms of the Treaty of Sevres, signed on May 14, 1920.

In June 1920, Gandhi proposed an alliance on condition that the Khilafat movement accepted non-violence as its guiding principle. The ensuing alliance of radical pan-Islamic and Hindu opinion fuelled an immensely successful popular movement that was a total transformation of formal Indian politics. What was not clear at the time, and was not commented upon, was the almost colonial assumption among many Non-Cooperators who thought of themselves as secular intellectuals that the ‘masses’ wanted religion and would not be moved by anything else. (The secular intellectual’s misgivings were not Gandhi’s misgivings: he said repeatedly that he thought a politics separated from religion would be devoid of morality and would be alien to Indian tradition.) A quasi-mystical religious style of politics was thus often promoted by non-believers. In this second-guessing of the ‘masses’, claims had to be made in their name, but their agendas were not central to the politics of the leaders they had somehow acquired. Religion, or a quasi-religious morality, depending on how one looks at it, was offered to the ‘masses’, but in a form that could place the Congress leadership in control. It was Gandhi who retained the right to interpret what correct behaviour was, and it was he and his deputies who castigated the ‘masses’ for not living up to the standards set for them. (This was the pattern with Gandhian politics. The Gandhian elite claimed the right to make judgements on the Indian people’s state of moral development. And if they seemed to reject given understandings of ‘modernity’ it was not because they saw themselves as anti-modern; they believed they were challenging established yardsticks of modernity and replacing them with more viable and more ‘indigenous’ yardsticks.)

The colonial government, when it wished to appear to negotiate, found persons to represent various pre-defined ‘interest groups’ or ‘communities’, entities often imagined into being, and given their apparent rigidity, by the pro-

²⁰ See Peter Heehs, *The Bomb in Bengal. The Rise of Revolutionary Terrorism in India 1900–1910*, Delhi 1993; idem, *Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism. Essays in Modern Indian History*, Delhi 1998.

cesses of imperial administration. With time, elections to local bodies, and still later, to legislatures elected on the basis of narrow property franchises and electorates divided into 'communities', with severely constrained powers of legislation, came into being. This caricature of parliamentarianism was the highest form of institutional politics in colonial India: even in the last stages of so-called 'training for self-government', at the end of the 1930s, a legislature's decisions could be overridden by the Governor of a Province or the Viceroy of India.

In this context, the importance of making up numbers from among the 'masses' was one of political theatre staged before the coloniser. In order to force colonial rulers to recognise them, and therefore to negotiate with them rather than with the ruler's own loyalist notables, anti-colonial nationalists had to demonstrate mass support – this was a prerequisite for effective bargaining with the government. By demonstrating mass support, a group could demand recognition by the rulers, posing as interpreter of the popular will, as intermediary between the 'masses' and the government, and in effect offer to act as a buffer zone between potential popular unrest and the colonial rulers. Once a group was so recognised, it also gained a relative monopoly over voicing the demands of the masses it *claimed* to represent. Whether it actually did so or not is a different matter.

3.2. *The left.* This instrumentalisation of the masses was precisely what a more left-wing movement than Gandhi's could be expected to avoid. And the Indian nationalist movement's rhetoric, under the leadership of the Congress, had at least from the late 1920s given much space to the importance of the 'masses'. The differences between left and right wings of the Congress were based on how far these 'masses' were to be at the centre of their politics. Gandhi's ability to control the 'masses' – or at least the rural 'masses' who were vulnerable to his ascetic holy man image – was useful to the right who therefore chose to identify themselves as Gandhians. But from the mid-1930s, the left organised around the Congress Socialist Party, correctly pointed out that this version of looking after the 'masses' was a form of control – of denying ordinary people agency in important matters concerning their well-being, their earnings, and their survival.

Therefore, the left's challenge to the right was in terms of organising and representing ordinary people: the *kisan sabhas* (peasant associations), the 'mass contact programmes' and the trade union movement broadly under the patronage and with the support of the (Congress) left, were the organisational forms that were to achieve this. With the growing importance of the communists inside the Congress at the time of the Popular Front from 1935 onwards,²¹ the reach of the Congress towards ordinary people could be said to have increased. This caused some anxiety on the right, but on the whole the

numbers game of both electoral and agitational politics meant that they would tolerate this as long as they could protect their interests.

But because even the left agreed that the Congress should identify itself as a whole with the movement for Indian national liberation as a whole, this meant that 'class struggle' might be interpreted narrowly to mean struggles on behalf of the classes carried out within the Congress by its – often self-proclaimed – representatives. (Later on the Communist Party of India modified this position, during the Pakistan movement, when some compromises with the Muslim League on the basis that there were many 'nationalities' in India became possible: modelled on Soviet nationalities' policy that had of course already been abandoned in the Soviet Union with the need for Great Russian nationalism to serve the Patriotic War.²²)

However, businessmen's demands against colonial domination became *national* demands against *imperialist exploitation*. The cause of fighting *imperialists* because they were stifling legitimate Indian aspirations to *development* could disarm left wing critiques of *Indian capitalists* who were at least in certain contexts on the nationalist side. In some contexts, for instance when the Congress formed provincial governments under the 1935 Government of India Act from 1937 to 1939, this became a particularly difficult problem: the right wing of the Congress dominated the governments, and worked closely with British imperial officials to suppress workers and peasants.²³ Meanwhile the left wing of the Congress became the opposition.

Insofar as the records allow us to make this judgement (can the subaltern speak?)²⁴ we can, however, say that this was still proxy class war, with factions of middle-class political activists dividing in terms of their loyalties to their class or to others' class. They cannot speak for themselves, they must be spoken for, was the left's implicit line, especially as 'communal conflict' and caste discrimination provided evidence of the masses' irrational behaviour. This was a central aspect of organisational politics: there was the possibility of an emer-

²¹ The so-called 'Dimitrov Line' of the Comintern proclaimed a popular front of all democratic forces against fascism. But in the Communist Party of India's interpretation, fascism was capitalism in crisis at home, and imperialism was the overseas manifestation of capitalism, such that the popular front in India was united against imperialism.

²² Bert G. Fragner, 'Soviet Nationalism': An Ideological Legacy to the Independent Republics of Central Asia, in: Willem van Schendel/Erik J. Zürcher (eds.), *Identity Politics in Central Asia and the Muslim World. Nationalism, Ethnicity and Labour in the Twentieth Century*, London 2001, pp. 13-33; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Ithaca 2001.

²³ Markovits, *Indian Business and Nationalist Politics* (fn. 10), Chapter Five.

²⁴ Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, Can the Subaltern Speak?, in: Cary Nelson/Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Basingstoke 1988, pp. 271-313. In Spivak's reading this is a more complicated question than that of the written record: in representing the subaltern the historian appropriates his/her voice; in the subaltern representing him/herself in a language intelligible to historians, s/he ceases to be the subaltern.

gent leadership that was more 'organic' than that of the Congress members who were concerned with the masses, but because they did not fully participate in Congress politics their credentials were not recognised. Moreover, even if the Congress left tried to get them involved, the Congress right would have none of it. The CSP in Bengal complained, for instance, that the *praja samities* and *krishak samities*, peasant organisations that might have allied with a Congress left, gravitated towards the Krishak Praja Party, a predominantly Muslim-led party of mostly Muslim peasants, which was eventually swallowed up by the Muslim League.

3.3. *The right.* There was a relative absence of explicitly pro-capitalist or pro-imperialist right wing positions in colonial Indian politics; industrialists and pro-industrialists could hide behind a Gandhian rhetoric. Industrialists themselves claimed to be imperfect Gandhians in a less-than-perfect world: they held their wealth in trust for society, according to Gandhi,²⁵ and were therefore legitimised by him, but had no intention of giving up their machines as Gandhi claimed was desirable. Proper Gandhians of an ascetic persuasion remained anti-machinery; they are sometimes identified as anarchists of sorts, but it is far from clear that this is an accurate description, given the authoritarian and controlling tendencies of Gandhi and his followers.

There was of course a radical right: some of them former extremists and terrorists, who had served time in (among other places) the dreaded Andaman Cellular Jail, where prisoners' deaths were routine but which was the zone of contemplation from which many terrorists emerged with new ideologies; some, indeed, became communists through their period of study.²⁶ From the 1920s, there was in India a wide interest in fascism, not necessarily fully understood; but there were sections of opinion that did more than vaguely admire Mussolini or Hitler, or the successes in national discipline, economic mobilisation and collective action that seemed apparently the central characteristics of fascism. A determined group of ideologues of a Hindu race-nation-state set about producing an 'indigenous' form of fascism in earnest. Mobilisation through paramilitary groups modelled on the Black Shirts and Brown Shirts, providing schooling and indoctrination, martial arts and quasi-military training became central to this project. Defining the nation in *völkisch* terms, men like Savarkar, Golwalkar, Hegdewar and Moonje argued that the *pitribhumi* (fatherland) must also be the *punyabhumi* (sacred land), and since Muslims' sacred lands were outside India they could not be Indians unless they

²⁵ For a sympathetic interpretation of Gandhi's 'trusteeship' theory, see Ajit Dasgupta, *Gandhi's Economic Thought*, London 1996, Chapter Six.

²⁶ David M. Laushey, *Bengal Terrorism and the Marxist Left. Aspects of Regional Nationalism in India, 1905–1942*, Calcutta 1975.

changed. The ‘masses’ here were arguably more important than to many sections of organised political leadership, but were not granted much agency.

3.4. *‘Collaborators’, outcast(e)s and other marginal figures.* There is a lack of documentation on this standpoint, in contrast to elite groups with a recognised place in the ‘national liberation movement’. The coloniser often appears as a reified and undifferentiated figure in the colonised’s views of him: the colonised, as much as the coloniser, operates by conventionalised and stereotypical constructions of the ‘other’ in any given argument;²⁷ the result is a conventionalised and unreal argument with a straw man – which does not mean that power relations between the two sets of stereotypes are equal.²⁸

In India, with the exigencies of the anti-imperialist struggle placing even the communist left, potentially at least sceptical about the consequences of nationalism, in alliance with nationalism, the worst and most unforgivable of politics consisted in refusing the coalition of the ‘national movement’. Women, in this scheme of things, were expected by the ‘national leaders’ to preserve the virtue of the ‘nation’ as mothers and wives, ‘embody’ national virtue, occasionally even emerge from respectability in exceptional circumstances in support of the ‘national movement’, only to be ordered back home upon the completion of a campaign of civil disobedience, non-cooperation or *satyagraha*, strikes or ‘mass mobilisation’. Many campaigns in support of issues concerning women – the age of consent for women being a strong case in point – provoked ‘traditional’ (and often male) outrage at the possible use of colonial legislative authority in a matter so ‘indigenous’ as sexual intercourse, especially within a (child’s) marriage.

To the Gandhians, women’s proverbial frailty was the downfall, potentially, of the virtuous movement as their love of luxury and ornament undermined attempts to wear khadi, coarse hand-made fabric that was heavier than the finer foreign-machine-made goods. Frail and ornamented women might also tempt the virtuous away from their duties to the nation and their vows of *brahmachari* (a word that means something in between celibate and student), or cause the male to fail in his duty to preserve his sperm and thereby his masculinity.²⁹ And yet when they were not frail and ornamental, women also transgressed. Gandhi publicly denounced ‘terrorist women’ whose participation in armed struggle against the British was to him not only non-violent but contrary to their ‘nurturing’ nature. During the Quit India Move-

²⁷ See Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India. An Intellectual and Social History, c. 1930–1950*, Delhi 2005, Chapter Two.

²⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978.

²⁹ Joseph Alter, *Gandhi’s Body, Gandhi’s Truth: Nonviolence and the Biomoral Imperative of Public Health*, in: *Journal of Asian Studies* 55 (1996), pp. 301–322.

ment of 1942/43 Gandhi was particularly keen to persuade women guerrillas to give up violence and to give themselves up to the British.

These 'unnatural' women were paradoxically often part of a 'terrorist' movement that provided Gandhi the dialectic of his success; for if not for the presence of potential violence, why was it important for the British to negotiate with Gandhi? As he came in later campaigns to be seen by the British (encouraged by his businessmen allies) as a 'moderate', the continued importance of 'terrorist' and 'communist' alternatives – movements in which women had some prominence and some, albeit still limited, agency – gave Gandhi his bargaining power with the British as the lesser evil.

Women saw for themselves an important role in radical movements to the left of the 'nationalist' mainstream. They were able to overcome the constrained and constraining roles imposed upon them by a convention-ridden society extremely touchy about social change that appeared as if it might be the impact of the coloniser. In practice, the (male) guardians of 'tradition' could present themselves as cultural nationalists, protecting an 'inner' and 'pure' domain of the nation from the depredations of the coloniser. But the radical left movements, both in theory and in practice, challenged this. Or did they? Women in the communist movement, typically eschewing marriage or at least the visible accoutrements of traditional marriage that they saw as symbolising domestic subjugation, could be seen as breaking the bounds of respectability that was allegedly central to their ability to reach out to workers and peasants; they had to visually retraditionalise themselves.

The problematic example of caste uplift movements under colonial rule is best illustrated by the career of Dr Ambedkar, of the Mahar caste, whose education (he had a PhD from Columbia University, New York) he owed to his patron, the ruler of the princely state of Baroda.³⁰ Ambedkar's championing of the cause of lower castes, his refusal to have his movement coopted into the upper-caste dominated generic category of 'Hinduism' and his willingness to use British legislative and legal protection to further his cause has led to an embarrassment among historians as to how to place him in the metanarrative of Indian 'nationalist' heroes. Was his response to the British Empire that of a collaborator? What does it mean to strategically use British – or other – legislative authority, or more generally to use governmental capacity in the absence of one's own ability to wield it? Was his an instrumental use? If one is permitted to read Ambedkar's academic writing on public finance, one finds this to be very much in the economic nationalist tradition.³¹

³⁰ See Gail Omvedt, *Ambedkar. Towards an Enlightened India*, New Delhi 2004.

³¹ Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, *The Evolution of Public Finance in British India. A Study in the Provincial Decentralisation of Public Finance*, London 1925.

It is arguable that Ambedkar was used as a counterweight to the Congress by the British government in a protracted series of negotiations leading up to the Government of India Act of 1935, in which the British attempted to refute the Congress's claim to speak for all of India by finding as many voices as possible that claimed not to be represented by the Congress. At the same time, Ambedkar's attempts to protect his perceived constituency through leaning on British power and legislative authority were crucial in enabling some sort of representation in public arenas for untouchables and low castes excluded both from the 'nationalism' of the Congress's variety (which is now commonly seen as 'majoritarian' if not sectarian) and of the more frankly Hindu upper-caste dominated *völkisch* tendencies of the Hindu Mahasabha, the form taken by the Savarkar brand of nationalism, even though both of these publicly expressed the desire to eliminate the practice of untouchability and the social disabilities that went with it. By demanding separate electoral representation for Backward Castes, Ambedkar appeared to be diluting the 'national movement' and undermining the Congress's universalising claim.

Indeed, it is the Ambedkar manoeuvre that raises an important question about 'majoritarianism', sectarianism and colonial Indian politics. If 'untouchables', 'backward castes', 'tribals' and other liminal peoples in India were not considered by default 'Hindu', then 'Hindus' could not be considered the 'majority' in India at all. ('Tribals' in particular had been the subject of great contestation between Christian missionaries on the one hand and upper-caste Hindu reformers on the other, both groups attempting to coopt them and to reinvent them in their own image.) Given the fact that 'Hindu' is to a large extent a residual category, taking positive shape and new forms under and in response to British rule, and continuing to be reshaped well into the twentieth century, a separate organisation of untouchables outside the category 'Hinduism' was a blow to both the majoritarian politics of the Congress and the attempted (instrumental) inclusions of non-upper-castes into the category 'Hindu' that was necessitated by the deliberately fragmented and sectarianised electoral politics of colonial India.

In the end, at least on this point, Ambedkar was outmanoeuvred by Gandhi, who went on a 'fast unto death' until Ambedkar withdrew his demand. Gandhi insisted that Untouchables were Hindus, and should not be separately represented; they could have seats in the legislature reserved for them as a proportion of the general (Hindu) seats. Ambedkar maintained, however, that '[t]o tell the Untouchables that they must not act against the Hindus, because they will be acting against their kith and kin, may be understood. But to assume that the Hindus regard the Untouchables as their kith and kin is to set up an illusion.'³² The two men made what is called the Poona Pact in 1932, with tremendous consequences for the colonial numbers game. 'Hindus' were now by definition a 'majority' in India.

3.5. *'Muslim politics'*. Indian Muslims have not appeared in central positions in this narrative so far. We have largely been following the mainstream narrative; and Muslims only appear in that narrative as anomalous or as stubbornly recalcitrant, refusing to accept the imperatives of a 'mainstream' Indian nationalism. (Those who did were referred to, paradoxically, as 'nationalist Muslims'.³³) There is a separate narrative and genealogy of Muslim 'separatists' or 'separatism': a genealogy of the development of 'Muslim political consciousness' that in many narratives is a tale of the tragic and misguided 'two nation theory' that led eventually to the formation of Pakistan. The narrative suggests that Muslims were 'backward' in 'western education' and late to realise the benefits of national consciousness; when they did, they organised late and separately. Marxist and quasi-Marxist versions of this narrative rely on the separate development of a 'Muslim bourgeoisie' as the explanation of a separate Muslim nationalism; but the case for a coherent and separate Muslim nationalism in India is as difficult to make as one for a coherent 'Indian' nationalism. Institutional histories of the Mohammadan Anglo-Oriental College, or biographies of the educationist and social reformer Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, at first allegedly an 'Indian' nationalist and then the father of the 'two-nation theory' set up this narrative in its nineteenth century version.³⁴ The imperfections and incoherences of ('separatist') 'Muslim' nationalism in India (usually, among Indian writers, not dignified with the normative term 'nationalism') have come in for more close criticism than the allegedly more 'complete' 'Indian' nationalism.

The 'separatism' of Muslims is often attributed to British divide-and-rule tactics, dating back to the creation of the Muslim League at the time of the Swadeshi movement. This is not inaccurate; for instance, it is undeniable that the successful separation by the British of Muslims from the terrorist movement in Bengal in the 1920s and '30s relied on such tactics.³⁵ This is an incomplete story. Though some 'anarchists' (as they often called themselves) later became communists, or participated in the *praja* movement which comprised mainly Muslim peasants, outside certain minor successes of non-sectarian or cross-sectarian collective politics, a certain mistrust existed for a variety of reasons.³⁶ The fear of being swallowed up in a majoritarian 'mainstream' that

³² Idem, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, Bombay 1945, Chapter Two, last paragraph.

³³ See for instance Mushirul Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation. India's Muslims Since Independence*, London 1997.

³⁴ David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation. Muslim Solidarity in British India*, Princeton 1978.

³⁵ The classic case of this was the 1931 Chittagong, instigated by British and Muslim police officers in the colonial police force after the killing of a Muslim police officer by a terrorist: Muslims were encouraged to attack 'Hindu' terrorists intent on setting up a 'Hindu raj'. See Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947*, Delhi 1991, pp. 133-141.

did not represent their interests is a theme that can be followed closely in 'Muslim' responses to empire as much as in 'backward caste' ones.

The relative absence of Muslims from the Congress-led 'Indian' national movement was a matter of their learning the art of watching and waiting – sections of Muslim intellectuals, at least, watched with interest the way the Indian National Congress turned in the 1930s: if it moved strongly to the left, Muslims would seek to join. If not, the Congress could not, as a Hindu sectarian party despite its public utterances, hold Muslims and represent them. Histories of Muslims, as a potentially insecure minority or a disempowered and impoverished slight majority (in Bengal) need to be written without recourse to a narrative structure that is centrally concerned with their failure to be true 'nationalists'. There are other questions: fractures of class, political affiliation and social position cannot be answered in generic and non-individuated terms. Conservative Muslims interested in the faith, or in social control (for instance of women in public places), progressives with a liberal view of Islam, as well as many who were nominally Muslim but had no particular connection with Islam other than being identified by non-Muslims as Muslims, all ended up to a greater or lesser extent, and sometimes by default, supporting the 'Pakistan movement'. This is too complicated a tale to tell as a teleology of 'separatism' or 'Muslim nationalism' (in India).

3.6. *Numbers, negotiations and the mistrust of the masses.* A purist answer to the question of whether the disempowered leave coherent voices for the historian's retrospective access discourages us from looking in the gaps left for us by the above narratives, as also from looking at what these or alternative narratives cannot tell us. The British Civilian Malcolm Darling rode through North India on the eve of independence, asking the question 'in what way are you not free?'. The answers he received were ambiguous, perhaps geared to the audience's expectations, and refracted through multiple translations and practices; the messages Darling refined from these responses were those that were most of value or comfort to him.³⁷ Perhaps, though, we can look at the last days of the British Empire in India's explicit presence (discounting the long afterglow of unfinished business, financial and economic linkages, Cold War and Commonwealth deals³⁸) in terms of the relative agency and renewed disciplining of the 'masses'.

³⁶ See Sulagna Roy, *Communal Conflict in Bengal*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1999.

³⁷ Malcolm Darling, *At Freedom's Door*, London 1949.

³⁸ See Anita Inder Singh, *The Limits of British Influence. South Asia and the Anglo-American Relationship 1947–56*, London 1993; Robin J. Moore, *Making the New Commonwealth*, Oxford 1987.

From the 1920s, British constitutional manoeuvres for India warmed up, with slightly higher stakes after the 1935 Government of India Act. Indians could easily find themselves imprisoned in the colonial numbers game, debating whether a reserved seat here or there could be conceded, whether a proportion of the population was to be defined as 'Hindu' or 'Backward Caste' or 'Muslim'. Two processes were discernible: one was that of formal politics set up and manipulated by British governments in India and in Britain. The other sought to organise popular movements and speak for underprivileged groups in Indian society – with varying degrees of success.

It had become apparent, in the course of the Second World War, and certainly after the Quit India Movement, that Britain did not have the military resources to hold India by force after the war. The Viceroy, Lord Wavell, now saw the virtues of an orderly transfer of power to a government that Britain would be able to deal with after the war. The problem now, as the British saw it, would be to create enough agreement among the two main players in the negotiations, the Congress and the Muslim League, to effect such an orderly transfer.

Yet it was after the Second World War that the politics of the 'masses' had its moment, in part threatening to break away from the control of its self-appointed 'leaders', in particular in 1945 and 1946, the time of the trials of the Indian National Army (INA) who had fought the British Indian army alongside the Japanese, the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) mutiny, the Great Calcutta Killings and their aftermath, and the *Tebhaga* movement of sharecroppers, led by the Communist Party of India among Muslim peasants who were often at the same time supporters of the Pakistan movement.³⁹

Here, popular politics at times seemed to be in a position to set the agenda – but in the end it was *elite interpretations* of the 'people's will' that set agendas. The post-war situation had led to massive cuts in employment levels as soldiers and auxiliary staff were demobilised across the country. The anger and bitterness of the Quit India and famine years had not receded. To this were added further causes for concern by the day. It is difficult to disaggregate the various motivations for popular unrest. What political leaders saw was unrest, strikes, violence of various kinds, and almost millenarian expectations of momentous change. The timetable for British departure was now greatly sped up. The colonial power and their two interlocutors, the Congress and the Muslim League, were in effect negotiating details while claiming to represent people on the basis of their interpretations of events that were impossible to

³⁹ Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggles in Bengal 1930–1950*, Calcutta 1988; Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal*, Delhi 1972; and on INA and RIN revolt and its aftermath, Roy, *Communal Conflict in Bengal* (fn. 36), Chapter Four.

clearly interpret. All three sets of negotiators feared that the 'masses' and their activities might take over control of events.

4. Conclusions

What can we make of the juxtaposition of the visible and the invisible, of the audible and the inaudible, within the structure of a narrative that fails to narrate what it sets out to narrate, and that refuses to cohere? It would seem that an 'Indian' set of responses to the British Empire in India cannot be described unless a self-proclaimed 'national' movement provides a structure to the narrative. But this merely reifies the category 'Indian', without enabling us to get any closer to non-elite figures, or indeed to relatively elite figures who did not belong adequately in the 'national movement'.

The 1980s and 1990s answer to this dilemma was to suggest that one should abandon spurious attempts at overviews, metanarratives, etc (imposed as much, if not more, by the narrator than by the 'evidence') and concentrate on the 'fragment', which even when (or because) it was fragmentary showed up the flattening and distorting effects of the dominant perspective.⁴⁰ This was part of a worldwide trend that perceived its project as left-of-centre: of attacking the pretensions to universality of perspectives that, because they were those of the dominant (white, male, middle-class, heterosexist etc), were in fact particular. However, this overvalorisation of the particular was in danger of producing a trend that could not relate to any universal categories, or indeed any wider perspectives.

In such a context, attempts to decentre 'Indian nationalism' as the main problematic of looking at the Indian past foundered on what might be called the residual nationalism of many historians of India, including many non-Indians whose identification with India's national liberation movement was genuine.⁴¹ Attempts to recover the histories of marginal and forgotten peoples in India foundered on the rock of the paucity of usable sources, given that the written archive was dominated by colonial documents, and then on those of the epistemological and moral anxieties that beset the human sciences from the 1980s onwards. As a result, an old-fashioned elite historiography continued to provide the framing narrative. The tendency towards nationalist hagiography remained largely unchallenged, except where that nationalism

⁴⁰ Gyanendra Pandey, In Defence of the Fragment: Writing About Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today, in: *Representations* 37 (1992), pp. 27-55. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, Princeton 1993, tried to place the fragments in a hierarchy that hinted at a whole – even the fragments approach was therefore not altogether lacking in a desire for a larger picture.

⁴¹ A study of the course of the 'subaltern studies' project (12 volumes, Delhi 1982–2005) is illuminating in this regard.

tended towards sectarian definitions of the nation: a civic and inclusive nationalism was preferred to an ethnic and exclusionary one, but 'nationalism' itself was inadequately challenged.

The recent reappearance of an old demon has added a new twist to this plot. Since the late 1970s, any perspective that appeared to lean towards imperialist apologia has been systematically and justifiably attacked in scholarly circles, and it might be supposed that this discrediting has been so complete that a revival would be inconceivable. Late twentieth and early twenty-first century political developments, resulting in the revival of explicitly imperialist ventures on the part of the United States and Britain, have seen in some circles the revival of an explicitly pro-imperialist form of allegedly scholarly work, much of which has been read in neo-conservative circles in the United States and among New Labour supporters in Britain, and has found a receptive audience on television and in the popular press.⁴² However, this literature has not been taken seriously among scholars and specialists; and the historiography of India remains, mercifully, largely free of this tendency, with a few sufferers from imperial nostalgia forced into *sotto voce* asides within an established anti-imperialist consensus in the professionalised field.

But to return to history from historiography, inasmuch as they are separable: the problem remains as to how far a catalogue of life in India under colonial rule is a record of *responses* to colonial rule.⁴³ Disentangling the explicit from the implicit in terms of responses to British presence is difficult when writing about a society that had by the beginning of the twentieth century experienced over 100 years of British rule. To the extent that we can ask questions about the texture of a society, this has to be a matter of historical evidence, however imperfect and problematic this evidence might be. An *Alltagsgeschichte* of the British Indian Empire remains to be written.

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⁴² Niall Ferguson, *Empire. How Britain Made the Modern World*, London 2003, the book of the TV series; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York 1996, the book foreshadowing the George W. Bush roadshow. It remains to be seen whether this new mood – in which academics in Britain can achieve popularity by appealing to a populist nationalist sentiment that relies on pride in Britain's imperialist past; or in which academics in the United States can appeal to that country's manifest destiny in an imperial direction – is amplified or turns out to be short-lived.

⁴³ See Paul A. Cohen, 'The Problem with 'China's Response to the West'', in: idem, *Discovering History in China*, New York 1984, pp. 9-55, for his critique of such an approach.