

### 3 Rewriting Histories of Nationalism\* The Politics of 'Moderate Nationalism' in India, 1870–1905

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[...] What is [...] distinctive about narratives of nationalism is that [...] the process of constituting a historical narrative lends itself to a certain circularity. The identification/selection of what is part of the story of nationalism necessarily occurs at the level of ideas and consciousness; but this consciousness or sentiment has then to be situated, and is often explained, in terms of the social forms and practices in which it was embodied [...].

[...] It is this form of explanation, characteristic of the history of nationalism, that this essay seeks to call into question. It does so not by denying that nationalism is both material and discursive, and certainly not by seeking to reverse the causal order, but rather by problematizing the distinction between the social or material and the discursive.

I offer for this purpose an examination of Indian nationalism, more specifically of what in the historiography of Indian nationalism is usually characterized as an early, or beginning, period. I concentrate on early or 'moderate' Indian nationalism because its claim to being part of the story of nationalism is already problematic; how it comes to be written into the history of Indian nationalism brings out clearly the principles of selection involved in narrating the history of nationalism and the sort of historical problems this narrative sets itself. This essay, then, offers an alternative or supplementary reading of a period in the history of Indian nationalism and, in so doing, also seeks to problematize the narratives of Indian nationalism. It is an essay in history, as well as on historiography.

Most accounts of Indian nationalism include, or begin with, the last two or three decades of the nineteenth century. They do so despite the fact

that in the pre-Congress era, as in the early years of the Indian National Congress (INC), the goal of Indian nationalists fell well short of full national independence, and the methods they employed in pursuit of their goals included neither mass mobilization nor the extra-constitutionalist methods that were later to be characteristic of the Congress. Why this should qualify as part of the story of Indian nationalism at all is, therefore, itself a question. Part of the answer is simply that for many historical accounts the history of Indian nationalism is synonymous with the history of the Indian National Congress, and therefore all activities associated with the Congress form part of the history of nationalism. This is either taken to be so self-evident as to require no argumentation; or else the equation is justified by the claim that the Congress was the first body organized on an all-India scale, and that sought to speak for Indians, rather than (as with earlier organizations) Bengalis, landholders, Hindus, or Muslims, or their caste brethren.<sup>1</sup>

[...]

Below, I offer a different reading of Moderate Nationalism [...]. As a first step, I identify the key elements of moderate nationalism; the individual elements that collectively constituted the discourse of Moderate Nationalism, and constituted it as 'moderate'.

First of all, this was a nationalism that raised very modest demands. The main demands articulated at the annual sessions of the Congress in its early years had to do with expanding the powers of the Provincial and Central Councils and introducing elected members into them, holding the civil service examination in India as well as England, separating the judicial and executive functions, extension of trial by jury to areas not covered by this, reduction of the increasing burden of the 'Home Charges' (particularly those charges debited to India that arose out of British military adventures), income tax reform, opposition to increases in the salt tax, extension of Permanent Settlement, reform of the police, and repeal of forest laws. The issue of 'poverty' was central to the concerns of the Congress, and resolutions to do with it generally expressed concern at the dimension of the problem and advocated measures—Permanent Settlement, Indianization of the civil service, reduction in Home Charges, the introduction of responsible government—that either by reducing the colonial drain of wealth or facilitating industrial development would alleviate the problem.

In general, this nationalism sought reform of the bureaucracy that ruled India, the key elements in such reform being Indianization of the

\* Originally published in *The American Historical Review*, vol. 104, no. 1, February 1999, pp. 95–116. In the present version some portions of the text and notes have been removed. For the complete text see the original version.

