

The Growth of Nationalism in British India

Introduction

Nationalism refers to the feeling of unity, pride, and loyalty among people of a nation who wish to live under their own government. In India, the growth of nationalism was a gradual process that developed under British colonial rule. The early period of British domination caused great political, social, and economic changes. Indians from different regions began to realize that they faced similar problems under foreign rule. The exploitation of local industries, unfair taxation, and racial discrimination by British officials created a shared sense of injustice. At first, resistance appeared in small forms such as regional uprisings and social reforms, but over time it became a united movement. The spread of modern education, printing, and communication helped people exchange ideas and express their grievances. The 1857 War of Independence, though unsuccessful, planted the seeds of national consciousness. By the end of the nineteenth century, India had entered a new stage where nationalism was turning into an organized political movement.

Political and Economic Causes

The main reasons for the growth of nationalism in India were political injustice and economic exploitation. The British government excluded Indians from higher administrative positions and treated them as inferior. Important jobs in the civil service, army, and trade were kept only for Europeans. The Indian economy suffered because British policies destroyed local industries and handicrafts. Indian weavers and craftsmen lost their work as British manufactured goods flooded Indian markets. High taxes and the zamindari system made life difficult for farmers, while profits from Indian resources were sent to Britain. Educated Indians began to understand these injustices and called it the “Drain of Wealth,” a term used by Dadabhai Naoroji. The construction of railways and telegraphs, though made for British benefit, also connected people from far regions and encouraged unity. These economic and political issues created a shared feeling among Indians that they needed to stand together and demand self-government.

Role of Education and Media

Education and the press played a crucial role in spreading nationalism across India. The introduction of English education produced a new class of educated Indians who could read Western political thought. They learned about democracy, liberty, equality, and national self-determination — ideas that inspired freedom movements worldwide. Universities in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras produced leaders who later became key figures in the Indian National Congress. At the same time, Indian-owned newspapers such as *The Hindu*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, and *Kesari* began to expose British injustices and spread patriotic ideas. Editorials, pamphlets, and public lectures created awareness even among the less educated. Reform movements like those led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda also encouraged

social unity and pride in Indian culture. The educated middle class started organizing meetings and associations to discuss public issues. Through education and media, Indians discovered a collective national identity and began to think of themselves as part of one nation rather than divided communities.

Formation of Indian National Congress

A major step in the growth of Indian nationalism was the founding of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885. It was established by an Englishman, Allan Octavian Hume, with the support of Indian leaders who believed in peaceful reform. The Congress aimed to give Indians a common platform to express their demands to the British government. Early Congress leaders, known as Moderates, included Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozeshah Mehta, and Surendranath Banerjee. They worked through petitions, resolutions, and discussions to promote equality and fair administration. The Congress also encouraged unity among Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and people from different provinces. It became a training ground for future political leaders and introduced Indians to democratic procedures. Though its early demands were limited, such as more jobs for Indians and legislative reforms, it marked the beginning of organized national politics in India. The Congress grew steadily and later became the leading force in India's struggle for independence.

Growth of Political Consciousness

By the early twentieth century, Indian nationalism had become more powerful and emotionally charged. The younger generation of leaders, known as Extremists — like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, and Bipin Chandra Pal — believed that peaceful petitions were not enough. They called for direct action and the slogan “Swaraj is my birthright.” The Partition of Bengal in 1905, which the British carried out to weaken Indian unity, actually had the opposite effect. It triggered widespread protests, boycotts of British goods, and the Swadeshi Movement, which encouraged the use of Indian-made products. Meanwhile, the Muslim community also began organizing politically to protect its rights, leading to the formation of the All India Muslim League in 1906. Both communities now shared a growing desire for self-rule. Nationalism became a strong moral and political force that united millions across India. It laid the foundation for later movements led by Gandhi, Jinnah, and other leaders who finally achieved independence in 1947.