



Intellectual architects of freedom: The role of Indian political thinkers in freedom struggle

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Abstract

The Indian National Movement is a story of trials and tribulations, of a struggle that lives on to this day. It's not just a tale of revolutionary actions and mass movements, but a saga of political organisations and deep intellectual awakening. This struggle was not only fuelled by the actions of political leaders but also by the ideas and philosophies of political thinkers who played a significant role in shaping the course of this movement. Indian Political thought has evolved over several centuries and it has had a profound impact on thinkers across periods. These intellectual architects crafted the philosophical scaffolding upon which the movement was built, influencing generations of freedom fighters and shaping the future of India.

In the context of contemporary nationalism, this article examines the key theories and ideologies that influenced Indian political thinking, emphasising the intellectuals and movements that helped Indian nationalism gain traction and how it paved the way for a varied and democratic India. Indian nationalism did not, however, emerge overnight. It was the result of centuries' worth of historical, social, and cultural forces.

Several reform movements emerged in India throughout the 19th century, challenging the country's preexisting political and social systems. These movements were crucial in developing the sense of nationalism and influencing political philosophy. Ideas and thoughts of leaders and reformers like Dayananda Saraswati's 'Shudhi Movement', Vivekananda's 'Vedanta', Raja Ram Mohan Roy's ideas on 'Rights and Liberty', Gandhi's idea of 'Swaraj, Satyagraha and Ahimsa', Nehru's 'Secularism', Tagore's 'Humanism', Gokhale, Savarkar's 'Hindutva' and many others aimed to educate the Indian populace about the value of cultural revival and the necessity of social change in India.

In this Article, an attempt has been made to discuss and analyse the contributions of several leaders as well as thinkers who contributed to the national struggle through their progressive as well as revivalistic ideas to influence the masses and ignite the spirit of nationalism, which helped us achieve independence from colonial rule.

Keywords: Satyagraha, ahimsa, secularism, nationalism, hindutva

Introduction

The British colonisation of India was an intellectual, cultural, and psychological imposition rather than just a physical conquest. Indian political intellectuals realised that regaining independence required a new vision for the country, not just political catchphrases. They analysed colonial dominance, criticised Western imperialism, and outlined a vision for an independent, free, and just India via their writings, speeches, and activities.

Raja Ram Mohan: Roy is regarded as the 'Father of the Indian Renaissance' His ideas were an amalgam of Oriental as well as Occidental schools of thought. He preached 'Monotheism' (oneness of God), the power of human reason and promoted the best ideas from the Vedas as well as the Upanishads. He didn't blindly follow the ideas of the West or the East. He took the best of both civilizations. Roy stood for the reform of Hinduism. He was against superstitions, idol worship and the evil of the Caste system. He believed the Caste system to be anti-national, undemocratic, and inhuman. Roy's advocacy for the freedom of the press and his engagement with Western liberalism made him a bridge between Indian traditions and modern democratic ideals. He was a believer and supporter of internationalism. He promoted the rights of the individual and the press and encouraged the doctrine of universal brotherhood. He laid the foundation of Brahma Samaj and worked against social evils like Sati. Roy believed in equality, was a champion of women's rights, and with the help of Lord William Bentick, got Sati abolished in 1828.

Vivekanand: He was an Indian philosopher, monk and intellectual of high calibre who gave the idea of 'Religious Socialism'. He spoke about the oneness of all religions, idealised Hinduism, and believed in idol worship. He believed in rationality and reasoning and gave the philosophy of 'Vedanta' to the world. He was a great humanist. Vivekanand shunned superstitions and urged the masses to imbibe the spirit of freedom, equality and brotherhood. He had a significant role in the rise of nationalism in colonial India and in ushering in the modern Hindu reform movement.

Dayanand Saraswati: He was a Hindu philosopher, educationist, social leader and a cultural nationalist. India's resistance to Western dominance in social, cultural, and political spheres was brazenly thrown by Swami Dayanand. Swami Dayanand, the most influential representative of Indo-Aryan culture and civilisation, was also the most prominent representative of India's most progressive political ideologies. He founded Arya Samaj, which had a revivalist character and gave the slogan 'Back to Vedas'. Dayanand Saraswati emphasised Monotheism, rejected idol worship, championed education, equality, social justice and advocated the rights of women and the depressed classes. He proclaimed that "India is for the Indians". This was the first call for Swaraj by any Indian.

According to Dr. S. Radhakrishna

"Among the markers of modern India who had played an important role in the spiritual uplift of people and kindled the fire of patriotism, in me, among them, Swami Dayananda has occupied the chief place."

Dadabhai Naoroji: He popularly known as the ‘Grand Old Man of India’, was an Indian political scholar and leader, social reformer, known for advocating the famous ‘theory of Drain of Wealth’, which critiqued how British economic policies were draining India’s wealth and impoverishing India. He was the first Indian Member of Parliament in Britain, and he tried to redress the inequalities of imperialism through political activities in London, where the policies were made and executed. Above all, he improved India’s political future by reshaping the British Empire from inside using its political structures, ideas, and language. Dadabhai made the Indians aware of how British rule was responsible for India’s poverty. His ‘moderate ideas and methods’ inspired early nationalist leaders and provided a factual, economic basis for the demand for ‘natural rights’ and self-rule. He said, “The bleeding of the country was in contravention of the canons of justice and the maxims of political economy. It was cruel, crushing and unwise.” He had a moral approach to political action.

Gopal Krishna Gokhale: He was a liberal leader, constructive statesman, and a social reformer who represented the moderate stream of Indian nationalism. Mahatma Gandhi regarded Gokhale as his ‘political Guru’. Gokhale said, “Nationalism was a species of self-devotion to a higher cause.” He was ‘moderate’ in his means. He believed in ‘constitutional agitation, caution, slow evolution and rational progress.’ He had faith in British liberalism and trusted the British conscience. He said, “Only a psychological approach could prepare the foundations of ‘fusion of interests’ between the British and the Indians.” With his reasoning, spiritual thinking, and universal tolerance, Gokhale championed the cause of the ‘depressed classes’. The Swadeshi movement was supported by Gokhale. To him, ‘Swadeshi meant an exalted, deep and all-embracing love for India.’

‘Gurudev’ Rabindranath Tagore: Gurudev was a poet, philosopher, author, educationist, internationalist, and a humanist. He condemned the violent cult of the country and supported international cooperation and cultural synthesis. Tagore adhered to the philosophy of ‘Satyam’, ‘Shivam’ and ‘Advaita’ of the ‘Mandukya Upanishad’. He believed in Monotheism and was the prophet of divine love, fellowship and cooperation on earth. He believed in Universal harmony and spiritual humanism. He said, “Reality alone is the truth of man”. He professed the concept ‘Universal man’ and ‘Samanvaya’, that is, social and racial synthesis, based on equality of all. Human civilization should be guided by brotherhood and humanism, not wealth accumulation. The development of strength for the realisation of rights, both individually and collectively, is a prerequisite for civilisation. Rabindranath Tagore had a deep, earnest and passionate love for Indian culture. He condemned the Western philosophy of excessive materialism, imperialism and colonialism, but, appreciated their quest of adventure, scientific curiosity and advocacy of ideals of ‘liberty, law, and efficiency’. He condemned the barbaric manifestation of imperialist arrogance and racial chauvinism. He believed in Internationalism.

‘Lokmanya’ Bal Gangadhar Tilak gained prominence as a national leader on the Indian

Political stage during 1905-1920. As one of the greatest makers of the Indian nation, Tilak won undying fame with his memorable words, “Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it”. The trio, Bal Gangadhar Tilak along with Lala Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal were famous as ‘Bal-Lal-Pal’, the extremist leaders of the Indian National Congress. He was the founder of vigorous and valiant nationalism in Maharashtra and also started the Home Rule League in 1916. Tilak’s role was that of an agitator. He believed in Advaita philosophy and gave a comprehensive view of Hinduism. He said, “Enlightenment of the people is one of the most important techniques for the rise of a nation”. During Partition of Bengal, Tilak emerged as an all-India leader of the extremist wing of Congress and popularised the techniques of Swadeshi, Boycott, passive resistance and national education. As a leader of the people, he worked for the economic emancipation of all. As a political philosopher, he gave a theory of nationalism. His school of thought was characterised as nationalism founded upon ‘Democratic Realism’.

Aurobindo Ghosh: Sri Aurobindo was another renowned name in the history of the Indian renaissance and Indian nationalism, a versatile genius, poet, meta-physician, seer, patriot, lover of humanity and a political philosopher. Although a mystic and a metaphysician, he was always concerned with the betterment of the social collectivity. He was a synthesizer of the eastern and western moral, spiritual and aesthetic traditions. His ‘Political Vedantism’ was a concrete political philosophy for the reconstruction of the social and political life of a dependent nation. In London, he became a member of a secret society, ‘Lotus and Dagger’, for the emancipation and reconstruction of India. Aurobindo, a prophet of the Swadeshi movement who advocated for an inspired and exalted patriotism, was one of the founders of the Indian nation. For Sri Aurobindo, nationalism was a goal of life to be pursued as vigorously as religion.

Veer Damodar Savarkar: A Hindu solidarist, nationalist revolutionary, Veer Savarkar is a complex and controversial figure in history, whose contribution cannot be ignored. He was the earliest exponent of the view that the ‘Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 was the first war of Indian independence’. Savarkar held a deep respect for Hindu intellectual and cultural accomplishments, yet he believed that righteous aggression was necessary in this flawed world full of inconsistencies and illnesses. Savarkar’s ‘Hindutva’ or Hindu solidarity is a text on the political ideology of Hindus in modern times, in which he talks about the three bonds of ‘Rashtra’ ‘Jati’ and ‘Sanskriti’. He saw no conflict between Hindutva and nationalism. His Hindutva was rationalistic and scientific, which was neither opposed to humanism nor to universalism. Savarkar made a distinction between ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Hindutva’, while the latter is a political concept, the former comprehends social, educational, economic, political and cultural matters. His articulation of ‘Hindutva’ laid the foundation for a particular ideological stream within Indian nationalism. Though debated, Savarkar’s emphasis on militant resistance and cultural identity offered an alternative narrative to the dominant discourse and inspired a generation of youth to adopt a more assertive stance against colonial rule.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi: Mahatma Gandhi was a political, social and moral philosopher, who based his philosophy on the pillars of 'Satya', 'Ahimsa' and 'Purity of ends and means'. His ideas were influenced by the writings of Tolstoy, Thoreau, Ruskin, the Bhagwad Gita, the Quran, the Bible and several religious scriptures. Some essential concepts for the renewal of humanity and the reconstruction of politics and society have been emphasised in Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's philosophy. Gandhiji emerged as a true national leader who was called the 'Father of the Nation'. He won the support of the masses. Moderates took the freedom movement to the educated Indians, Extremists included the lower strata in it, but it was Gandhiji who made it a mass movement. and built the necessary momentum. However, despite the popular support, Gandhi pursued a conservative and nonviolent approach in his search for liberty from British rule. The idea of 'Satyagraha' was introduced by Mahatma Gandhi as a determined and non-violent resistance to evil. It became a tool to fight against British imperialism. Gandhi gave the Indian people a comprehensive and concrete action plan to bring about change. He promoted self-sufficiency and upliftment of villages, basic education (Nai Taleem), abolition of untouchability, Sarvodaya, Khadi and cottage industries, the theory of Trusteeship, and the winning of Indian independence.

Gandhi was a critic of the Western concept of parliamentary democracy. Mahatma Gandhi said, "The people of Europe have no doubt political power but no real swaraj." Gandhiji said "India lives in villages. Villages should be self-governing and self-sufficient units of political governance, 'Swaraj'. He promoted decentralization in the form of village Panchayats. Gandhiji gave the social, political, economic and individual dimensions of 'Swaraj'. He was perhaps not a systematic philosopher, but was surely a saint and a moral revolutionary.

M.N. Roy Manendra Nath Roy: is the exponent of 'New Humanism'. The axiological value of reason, ethics, and moral and spiritual independence is acknowledged by New Humanism. He applied generalisations and ideas from Marxism to the organisation and workings of Indian society and the economy. Roy believed that a heterogeneous, democratic party of the people from various strata would be like a political school of the nation and would train the people in the art of handling their sovereign rights and duties. He believed in an organised and partyless democracy. Roy believed in a comprehensive program, inclusive of not only complete independence, but also, establishment of a republican government, bringing about radical agrarian reforms, and social legislation. Roy was a thoroughgoing and aggressive materialist. Roy said, "No philosophical advancement is possible unless we get rid of orthodox religious ideas and theological dogmas." The individual credited with bringing Marxian (class) analysis to Indian politics and society was M.N. Roy.

Muhammad Iqbal: Dr. Iqbal was a political ideologist, religious philosopher and a renowned Urdu poet of modern India. Dr. Iqbal was deeply influenced by Rumi and Masnavi Shareef. Iqbal is popular as the composer of 'Saare jahaan se acchha' or 'Taraana-e-Hind', which praises 'watan', or 'love for the motherland'. As a religious philosopher, his work 'The Reconstruction of Religious

Thought in Islam' explored the relationship between Islamic faith, philosophy and Islam. He had a theocratic conception of political power, and advocated the Islamic religious orientation according to which individual religious experience vitally affects the social environment and the civic polity. Iqbal was inspired by the concept of religious freedom and spiritual democracy. He was a prophet of action and strength. His ideology of nationalism is referred to as 'Wataniyat', which is inclusive, religiously rooted nationalism that emphasised a Muslim identity while advocating national unity within India. He sought to balance the need for national unity with the preservation of individual and communal identities. Iqbal maintained that the term "nation" in the 20th century meant both a geographical and a political entity, and it is the latter that Islam, as a rule of human society, clashes most with.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru: Pandit Nehru was the first Prime Minister and a visionary of modern India. He sincerely advocated secularism as a political and cultural value. As a thinker, he was deeply influenced by Fabian socialism, yet he remained rooted in Indian civilizational values. Although, Socialist to a great extent, Nehru would plead for suffusing the aspects of planned developmental economy and accelerated social dynamism with humanist values. He was attached to the concept of liberty and was an ardent nationalist. He defined Nationalism in his article "Unity of India". He supported parliamentary democracy and emphasised on national integration. His idea of secularism sought to promote peaceful coexistence amongst all religions and guarantee that the state did not meddle in private religious affairs. He had faith in planning, economic development, growth, progress and accepted the concept of scientific humanism. He always wanted efficiency, rationality and through his secular doctrine tried to promote political socialisation among the Indian literate sections.

B.R. Ambedkar: Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar was an eminent political leader, writer, economist, scholar, jurist, philosopher, and a social reformer representing the interests of the depressed classes. He is popularly known as the 'father of the Indian Constitution' and one of India's most influential political figures. While the mainstream freedom struggle often focused on political independence, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emphasized the importance of social emancipation. Ambedkar exposed the deep-seated inequalities in Indian society. Dr. Ambedkar championed the cause for the human rights of Dalits. He condemned the huge inequalities and outrageous calumnies that Brahmanical Hinduism has piled upon the untouchables, and the depth of his indignation against Hinduism is evident in his works. Dr. Ambedkar's challenge to caste oppression and his demand for Dalit rights added a critical dimension to the freedom movement. His magnum opus, *Annihilation of Caste*, remains one of the most powerful critiques of social injustice in Indian history. As the principal architect of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar ensured that freedom would be meaningful only when accompanied by equality and justice. His intellectual legacy endures as a cornerstone of India's democratic ethos.

Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose: He was the epitome of India's firebrand patriotism and intense nationalism. He believed in political action rather than in theorising his

ideologies. He was an intellectual, great political leader, an Indian civil servant who resigned from his services and joined the freedom struggle. He said, "Give me blood, I will give you freedom". He began life as a 'spiritual idealist', but he shifted to 'political realism'. He was a critic of Gandhian political ideas and techniques, as he was a politician and not a moralist or a philosopher. He formed the 'Azad Hind Fauj' (Indian National Army) and became the leader and commander of the forces for the independence of the country. Subhash Chandra Bose will be permanently remembered as a dynamic and enigmatic figure in the history of India. His life and legacy continue to inspire generations of Indians who value courage, sacrifices and an uncompromising stand for justice.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel: India's journey towards independence from British colonial rule was marked by many struggles and challenges. One of the most daunting tasks was the unification of 567 princely states. The 'Ironman of India', an indomitable freedom fighter, a dedicated administrator, a devout patriot and a loyal son of the nation, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel will always be remembered in the annals of India for his great work of political and territorial consolidation of the country. He strengthened the claims of 'Indians to India', by saying, "when India was highly cultured and civilised, Britain was in a primitive age." Patel was a realist in politics, a man of action. He was a Gandhian, but not a blind follower of Ahimsa. He had a lasting impact on India's federal structure and territorial integrity, which have been instrumental in maintaining nation's unity and stability over the years.

India's freedom was not won on the streets; it was won in minds. For creating independent traditions of political thought in India, there was a need for thorough knowledge of the advances in philosophy and social sciences. The aforementioned leaders and their perspectives give us insights into the depth and diversity of the vision of the Indian National Movement. India's independence was won through a mosaic of efforts—Gandhi's non-violence, Nehru's diplomacy, Patel's pragmatism, and Bose's militancy. This gives us a template for drawing a civilizational perspective to understand the freedom struggle and also to evaluate the meanings inherent in the usage of the neologism of civilisation-state. India's civilisation too has traversed across time, space and borders and can serve as an important tool to project India's power across the world.

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