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Sem-2

Paper: Nationalism in India

**Lesson: Marxist Approach to Study Nationalism
in India**

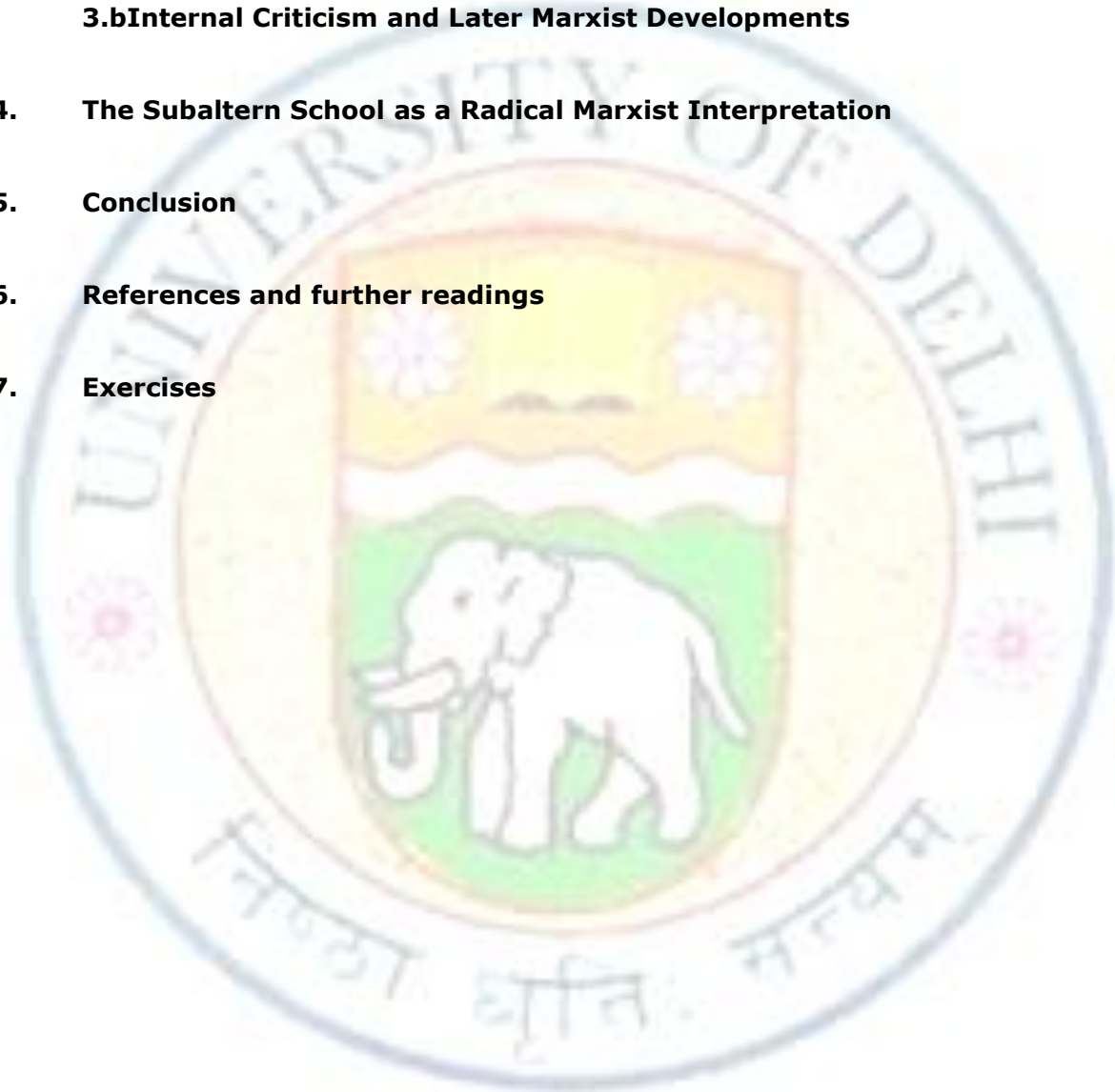
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Marxist Approach to Study Nationalism in India

1. Introduction

The movement for independence of India is one of the biggest mass movements in the history of the world. It saw the participation of wide sections of people under the leadership of the Indian National Congress. While the beginning of the Indian national movement is variously traced, a major consensus being the consideration of the revolt of 1857 as the first collective moment, the movement was given its mass appeal and national character under the leadership of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.



Gandhi leading salt *satyagraha*, a moment in the struggle for India's independence. Source: www.wikipedia.org

The Indian national movement has been studied widely from many different perspectives. As students of social science we are aware that what we read as history depends a lot on who writes it. Thus we have apologists of colonial rule in India who interpret the Indian freedom struggle as a product of the needs of various elite groups of India to stage a 'mock battle', when in reality there was no basic contradiction between interests of Indian people and colonial rulers. The nationalist writers see it as a movement of the Indian people which emerged and strengthened as a result of growing awareness among people about the essentially exploitative character of colonialism. Similarly, we have a Marxist interpretation of the Indian national movement too, coming from a particular world view of Marxist ideas about economic class contradictions and perceptions of history.

The subject matter of this unit is how the Indian national movement is interpreted by Marxist historiographers of India. But before going to the specific understanding of

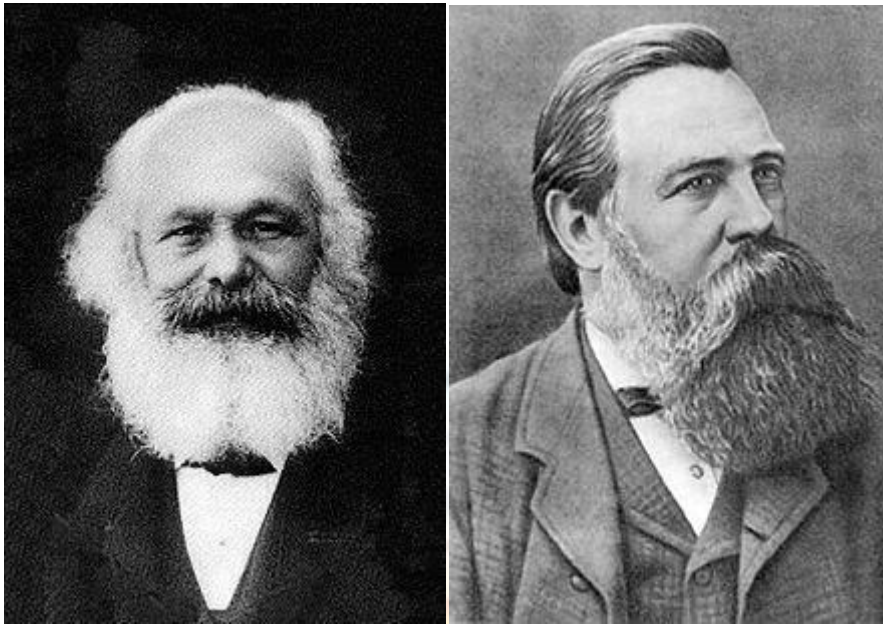
Indian nationalism by Marxists, we shall briefly attempt to understand the relation of classical Marxist thought to the idea of nationalism. In the next section, we would discuss some major contributions to the Marxist historiography of Indian national movement

2. Marxism and Nationalism

Marxism as a theoretical framework of studying societies emphasises on the material relations of production and describes various historical epochs in terms of its major contradictions based on the relations of production, called the class contradictions. Thus, within Marxist thought, the prime identity of a person is his or her class identity. As the hopes of Marx and Engels were fixed on class struggle, they did not put much emphasis on the issue of nationalism which proposes to unite people across class divisions, and blunts class consciousness.

But they could not totally ignore the historical events of the time, and interpreted various nationalist movements within Europe. While recognizing the fact that nationalist movements are mostly organized by bourgeois classes, they argued that it is a necessary step in the path towards communism, as bourgeois nationalism is the harbinger of capitalism in feudal societies.

Marx and Engels, however, did not presume that the historically progressive nature of capitalism in relation to feudalism would automatically justify support for every national movement. Rather, they emphasised the need to politically assess the national movements in each context, to decide whether they are worthy of support or not. Thus, Marx and Engels opposed the national movement of the Slavic people, of the Serbs, Croats and Czechs, during the 1848 revolutions of Europe, arguing that these forces were counter-revolutionary for a communistic social change.



Karl Marx (left) (1818-1883), was a German philosopher, economist, sociologist, historian, journalist, and revolutionary socialist. Marx's work in economics laid the basis for the current understanding of labour and its relation to capital, and has influenced much of subsequent economic thought. **Friedrich Engels** (right) (1820- 1895), was a German social scientist, author, political theorist, philosopher, and father of Marxist theory, alongside Karl Marx. Source: www.wikipedia.org

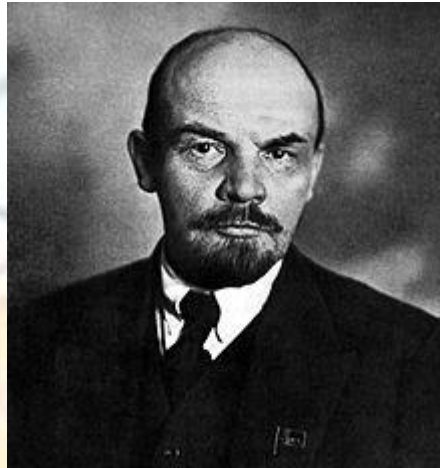
Further, their support to the nationalist movements, wherever existed, was on a strategic ground rather than on any intrinsic value that they thought to be existing in national mobilizations. Rather they believed that with the expansion of capitalism, both in Europe and around the world, the significance of nation-states and movements for national independence would be lessened. The real eradication of national oppression, according to Marx and Engels, is possible not through nationalism, but only through socialism.

In this context, the writings of Karl Marx on the 'Asiatic mode of production', and his view that despite its coercive nature, a progressive role was played by colonial rule to help India break out of its age-old stagnant village societies is crucial (Thorner 1966).

Both Marx and Engels, however, at a later stage talk about the important role played by bourgeois nationalist revolutions to bring in democratic freedoms, where a socialist revolution was not yet possible.

To deal with the national question, Soviet communist Vladimir Lenin said that we need to make a clear distinction between two periods of capitalism. The first period is a period of waning feudalism and absolutism when bourgeois democratic society and

state institutions are formed. According to Lenin, during this period, the national movements are mass movements that draw all classes of the population into politics. The second period is more complex. In the second period, the capitalist state is fully formed, and is characterized by long-established constitutional regimes. This phase is also characterized by a high level of antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeois classes.



Vladimir Lenin (1870 –1924) was a
Russian communist revolutionary, politician and political theorist.
Source: www.wikipedia.org

According to Lenin, to take a decision on whether to lend support to a nationalist movement or not, the second period poses more difficult challenges for a Marxist. He points out certain important questions that one must try to seek answers to, before taking any course of action. Firstly, there is a need to see whether the people asking for nationality rights are really oppressed. Secondly, we need to ask whether a consciousness of being a nation has been formed among those who are oppressed. The existence of such a consciousness shows the actual existence of a nation. Thirdly, and most importantly, socialists must ask whether the support to such a nationalist movement would advance the interests of the working class. While asking this question, Lenin pointed out, that the leadership of a nationalist movement is invariably bourgeois at the beginning; but such oppressed bourgeois leadership, working for their own minority interest, also do have a general democratic content directed against oppression. He suggested that the *unconditional* support of the Marxists towards nationalist movements is only for this specific democratic content.

He, however, argues that any interest a working class person might have in supporting a bourgeois-led nationalist movement, lies in the fact that a successful national struggle makes the class conflict between the bourgeois and the proletariat

clearer, by removing an external enemy common to both. From the Leninist point of view, thus, a nationalist movement should be supported only when it leads to an alliance of proletariats against the bourgeoisie, and not be supported if it effectively divides up the working classes.

Stalin suggested that any alliance between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat should be made with enough care, so that the proletarians and the peasants do not end up being the subordinate partners of the alliance.



Joseph Stalin or **Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin** (1878 – 1953), was the [leader of the Soviet Union](#) from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953.

Mao, as a practitioner of Stalinist ideason nationalism, recommended that any alliance between the two classes should be result of specific historical conjunctures and should not be used as unalterable formulas in each and every context.



Mao Zedong (1893 – 1976), was a Chinese Communist revolutionary and the founding father of the People's Republic of China, which he governed as Chairman of the Communist Party of China from its establishment in 1949 until his death. His Marxist-Leninist theories, military strategies and political policies are collectively known as Maoism or Mao Zedong Thought.

3. Marxist Historiography of Indian Nationalism

3.1 Early works

The conventional Marxist writers on nationalism in India include scholars like Rajni Palme Dutt, VI Pavlov and AR Desai. The writings of the conventional Marxist school analysed the class character of the Indian national movement in terms of the economic developments of the colonial period, such as rise of industrial capitalism and development of a market society. According to this scholarship, the bourgeois leadership of the movement fought to shape the movement to suit their own interests at the cost of the interests of the masses.

Looking at colonial rule in India from a classical Marxist perspective, Rajani Palme Dutta, in his book *India Today* (1949) described it as both 'destructive' and 'regenerative' , while acknowledging that the 'regenerative' role played by colonialism was very limited. Discussing the Indian national movement in this context, he traced it only from the last quarter of the 19th century. Commenting on the 1857 revolt, which many others considered as the first war of India's independence, Dutt said that it was not a moment of nationalist movement and was merely a revolt of the old conservative and feudal forces and dethroned rulers.

The Indian National Congress, which Dutt recognized as the premiere organization of the Indian national movement, was brought into existence according to Dutt, as a 'safety valve', through British official initiative. He mentions the role played by Hume in bringing about this organization, so that a full-scale insurgency against the British rule could be prevented.

Though under pressure from populist nationalist forces the movement had to go beyond its subservient nature, the history of its origin haunted it through the whole period of the national movement, making it dual-natured. Dutt does a class analysis of the movement and shows how the pull from two opposite directions shaped the trajectory of the movement.



Rajani Palme Dutt (1896–1974), was a leading journalist and theoretician in the Communist Party of Great Britain. Source: www.wikipedia.org

The first phase of the nationalist movement, Dutt argues, is represented by the big bourgeoisie, which, according to him include, the progressive elements among the landowners, the new industrial bourgeoisie and the well-to-do intellectual elements. In the second phase, preceding the First World War, the urban petty bourgeoisie made its presence and aspirations felt. The third phase started after the First World War, when the Indian masses - both peasantry and the industrial working class - joined the movement. During this phase, as the newly entrant masses became too militant, the bourgeois leadership called off the Non-Cooperation Movement, proving the dual-character of the movement. The Civil Disobedience movement too, Dutta argues, was suddenly and mysteriously called off when it was reaching its height in 1932.

Thus Dutt shows that, throughout the national movement, as a result of its dual nature, two distinct strands ran parallelly: first, the strand of 'cooperation' with imperialism against the 'menace' of mass participation, and second, the leadership of the masses.

Rajani Palme Dutt's was the most influential work on the conventional Marxist historiography of the Indian national movement, and all subsequent works in the tradition were at least to some extent influenced by this work.

Another important work in this tradition is the *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, first published in 1948 by AR Desai. Desai discusses five developmental phases of the Indian national movement, and identifies the particular class base of the movement in each of these periods. He identifies the first phase as marked by a narrow social base of modern Western educated intelligentsia. The second phase was marked by the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885, and this phase spanned till 1905. This phase saw the emergence of an Indian educated middle class and merchant class as a result of expansion of modern education and development of Indian and international trade. This phase also saw the Indianisation of services and association of the Indians with the administrative machinery of the state.

The third phase identified by Desai between 1905 and 1918 was a period of militancy and inclusion of the lower-middle classes. The fourth phase from 1918 till the end of the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1934 was a period of great expansion, leading to the inclusion of the Indian masses. The leadership of the movement, according to Desai, however, remained in the hands of those who were under strong influence of Indian capitalist classes. The fourth phase also saw the rise of some socialist and communist groups, with pro-people agendas.

The fifth phase from 1934 to 1939, was marked by a growing disenchantment with the Gandhian ideology within the Congress, and the rise of the socialist group inside the party. It also saw the simultaneous rise of various movements of depressed classes, peasants, workers and linguistic groups as well as communalism outside the Congress. The All India Kishan Sabha was one such organization, which formulated as its objective a socialist state in India. These developments, according to Desai, exerted some pressure on the Congress as a result of which Congress included in its programme a charter of fundamental rights guaranteeing civil liberties and alleviatory economic measures to the workers and peasants. But despite such developments, the mainstream of the Congress and the national movement, Desai held, continued to be dominated by those who represented the interests of the dominant classes, in the

subsequent periods. So Desai argues that the basic character of the Indian national movement throughout its career, remained bourgeoisie.

3.2 Internal criticism and later Marxist developments:

The conventional Marxist historiography of the national movement of India, which followed a narrow class approach and economic determinism, was criticised by some later set of historians like SN Mukherjee, Sumit Sarkar and Bipan Chandra.

SN Mukherjee argued that Indian nationalism was a complex process with multiple layers and meanings, and cannot be understood by a reductionist class analysis. He pointed out the importance of caste as a crucial factor along with that of class, and showed that traditional languages of politics was simultaneously used with the modern ones, in organizing the national movement of India. (Bandyopadhyay 2004)

Sumit Sarkar, another Marxist who is critical of Dutt's paradigm discussed above, termed it as a simplistic version of Marxian class-approach, in his book *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908* (1973). While Dutt talked about the dominance of 'big bourgeoisie' in the moderate phase and the dominance of 'urban petty bourgeoisie' in the extremist phase of the national movement, Sarkar showed that a clear class distinction between the two phases is difficult to establish, and was clearly non-existent at the leadership level. He further suggests that Dutt's form of Marxist interpretation has the defect of "assuming too direct or crude an economic motivation for political action and ideals" (Sarkar 1973, 1978).

In contrast Sarkar brings into fore the Gramscian categories of 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectuals to explain the leadership of the national movement in India. According to Gramsci, the famous Italian Marxist activist and thinker, the 'organic' intellectuals are those who are in direct link with the people who they lead, as they themselves directly participate in the production process. A 'traditional' intellectual is, on the other hand, not directly connected either to the production process or the people who they lead, but become leaders of certain classes by ideologically taking up the responsibility of those classes. Sarkar showed that the Indian nationalist leaders were 'traditional' intellectuals rather than 'organic' intellectuals, and despite coming mostly from the traditional learned classes, totally unconnected from the post 1850s commercial or industrial bourgeoisie in the country, were able to lead the bourgeoisie ideologically. These 'traditional' intellectuals, despite not having the bourgeois social background personally, helped push the capitalist development of the country.



Antonio Gramsci (1891 – 1937) was an Italian writer, politician, political theorist, philosopher, sociologist, and linguist.

In his later book *Modern India* (1983), Sarkar warned against indiscriminate use of analytical tools of Marxism such as 'class' and 'class consciousness', and suggested that they should be used more "skilfully and flexibly". He further recognizes various internal tensions existing within the Indian national movement, between two levels of anti-imperialist struggle: elite and populist. He argued that we need to look at the complex interactions between these two levels, to be able to understand the complexities of the national movement in India.

Bipan Chandra advanced a slightly different critique of the conventional Marxist interpretations, basically given by RP Dutt and AR Desai. We can classify Bipan Chandra's reading of the Indian national movement into two different epistemological phases.

Initially, in his book *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India* (1979), Chandra criticized the narrow way in which the nationalist leaders were called bourgeois in an instrumentalist sense, that they followed the commands of the capitalists. There is no doubt that the overall social and economic outlook of the nationalist leaders was 'basically capitalist', but their advocacy of capitalism was not based on any narrow personal interest, and was derived from the belief of the nationalists that capitalist industrialization is the only way to regenerate the country economically. Thus,

according to Chandra, the nationalist saw advancement of capitalism as a national interest and not as a class interest.

There, however, were other points in which this early work of Bipan Chandra resembled the works of Dutt and Desai. These similarities include, Chandra's assessment that the nationalist leadership adopted a 'peaceful' and 'bloodless' approach of struggle in the interest of the capitalist classes. A peaceful non-violent struggle ensured that the capitalist classes at no time has to face a situation that would put their interests in jeopardy, even temporarily. Further, Chandra too talked about a gap between the leaders and the masses of India, and that even when the masses were organized, that they never reached the decision-making positions of the leadership. Whenever they were mobilized, the political activity of the masses were strictly controlled from the top.

In the second phase of his writing on the national movement, as found in his later work written with four other scholars, *India's Struggle for Independence: 1857-1947* (1988), Chandra moved away drastically from both his earlier work as well as the works of Dutt and Desai. In what Bandyopadhyay (2004) calls a distinctly 'nationalist orientation', he along with his co-authors, argued that the Indian national movement was a popular movement of various classes. They commented that this movement was not exclusively controlled by the bourgeoisie. They identified two types of contradictions of interests in colonial India: the primary one is between the interests of the Indian people and the interests of the British rule. In the background of this primary contradiction, various internal contradictions remained which occupied positions of secondary importance in the context: such as, contradiction between the interests of various classes, castes and religious communities. According to Chandra, in the interest of resolving the primary contradiction, during the national movement the other secondary contradictions were compromised and all sections came together under the hegemony of a nationalist ideology. As a result the Indian national movement became a people's movement, though various secondary contradictions remained unresolved at this moment.

To explain the non-violent nature of the movement, now Chandra took recourse to the Gramscian category of 'war of position'. A 'war of position' is a prolonged struggle for the attainment of a goal, so that "reserves of counter-hegemony were built up over the years through progressive stages", on a "moral, political and ideological level. Chandra now suggested that the national movement was fought non-violently so that it can at the same time forge Indian people into a nation and undermine the colonial hegemony with a national counter-hegemony. Non-violence, Chandra and others

argued, was used as a tool to mobilize the masses as widely as possible, and thus to generate a successful counter-hegemony of the nation.

4. The Subaltern School as a Radical Marxist Interpretation

The subaltern school of Indian historiography is a more radical strand inspired by the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, and placed in the broader Left ideological arena. This school, being closely related to the Marxist school, and deriving from some common theoretical-intellectual tools, critiques both a nationalist interpretation and a conventional Marxist interpretation of the Indian national movement. The subaltern school claims that the study of Indian nationalism cannot be completed by looking only at the 'elite' streams of Indian nationalism, as done by most historiographies, including the nationalist and the Marxist. The subaltern historiographers suggest that the contribution made by the people on their own, independently of the elite leadership, which did not commonly find a place in the conventional historiographies, are important sources to understand the 'real' nationalism, in contrast to the 'hollow' nationalism of the elites. This school also pointed out the problems with focusing merely on class as an angle of analysis, and stressed the importance of other explanatory categories such as culture, mind and identity.

5. Conclusion

Like most other events of the social and political world, the interpretations of the Indian national movement are also not without contestations. In this unit, we studied just one way of looking at the freedom struggle of India. India being a plural society, and people's participation in the national movement influenced by their social-cultural and economic contexts, no matter which strand of the movement they were active in, no historiographical attempt to paint a complete and general picture of the national movement is ever completely successful. For a nuanced understanding of an event like the Indian national movement, we have to keep our minds open to acknowledge the interplay of various forms of struggle and resistance, with varied social backgrounds and differences in paths and particular goals, working at the same time, which come to be known as the Indian national movement.

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7. Exercises

- (i) Discuss the various phases of the Indian national movement as classified by R P Dutt and A R Desai.
- (ii) Discuss the ideas of Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao on the issue of nationalism. To what extent do you think the works of Indian Marxist writers on the nature of the national movement of India, were influenced by these ideas ?
- (iii) Discuss some of the later Marxist historiographical developments on the issue of nationalism in India. Elaborate on their critique of earlier strands of

Marxist interpretations as marked by a narrow class approach and economic determinism.

- (iv) Briefly discuss how the Marxist interpretation of Indian nationalism is different from the ideas of the subaltern school.

