Preface

I have tried in these essays to probe some aspects of the twin phenomena of colonialism and nationalism which have dominated the history of modern India. The essays are in the nature of explorations, the first hesitant efforts and the initial sketches for more detailed studies of these two important themes. They do not pretend to give definitive or exhaustive answers. If they succeed in making the reader feel that the questions raised are significant and the approach indicated fruitful, my purpose in bringing them together would have been amply served. The essays are also based on the conviction that the study of social and economic changes, political developments, and intellectual endeavours make sense only when they are seen together, in mutual interrelationships. The close connection between politics, economics, and ideology, between state structure, government policy and economic goals, between a movement, its social base, its objectives, its ideas, and its leadership is nowhere more clear or more fruitfully studied than in the case of colonialism and nationalism.

The need for a fresh approach also arises because much of the writing on both themes has been dominated for the last nearly 150 years by the colonial school of historiography. It has not made much difference that many of the writers have been Indians. A minor strand did develop in opposition to this school so far as the study of nationalism was concerned,
but it was either dominated by the simple glorification of the national leadership or it confined itself to the study of the political ideas and activities of the major leaders of the movement. The social character of the movement, its origins and stages of development, the nature of social support and popular participation, the tactics and strategies evolved or used, and even its real intellectual history were not properly studied. There have been, of course, exceptions; for example, the works of A.R. Desai, R. Palme Dutt, and several economists during the 1920s and 1930s. But it is only in the last few years that several Indian, Soviet and Japanese scholars have started asking a different set of questions. Much new and useful writing has also come from British and American scholars. Unfortunately, most of it is marred by the tendency to ignore the reality of colonialism and hence also to seriously misinterpret the national movement.

Urgency has been given to the study of colonialism by the need to initiate developmental processes in ex-colonial countries, to choose from many available strategies of development, and hence to study the roots and causes of their backwardness. Very often the obstacles to development in these countries are seen as remnants of their pre-capitalist, pre-colonial or traditional backwardness. Even when these obstacles are seen in a “historical perspective” an understanding of the role of colonialism is drained out. Moreover the post-Second World War period has in both historical and economic writing generated a new school of apologetics of colonialism. Some of these writers have portrayed colonialism as an effort at modernization which failed because of the weight of the past, traditional backwardness. (The second essay ‘Reinterpretation of Nineteenth Century Indian Economic History’ examines the views of one of these writers, Morris D. Morris.) Similarly, others have seen the colonial period as a period of transition to modernity.

Undoubtedly, India did undergo a fundamental transformation during the colonial period. And it is precisely for this reason that the initial conditions from which it started the development process after political freedom were not those of its pre-colonial past: they were, in fact, the creation of the colonial period. Any meaningful development strategy has,
therefore, to be based on a fuller understanding of the mechanism of colonialism as it actually operated in India and on the policy of shattering and replacing this mechanism. The first essay, 'Colonialism and Modernization*', makes a plea for the study of colonialism as a distinct structure and of the process of the evolution of this structure through its different stages, and suggests that this approach provides a more fruitful framework for the study of modern Indian history. Scholars are just beginning the long effort in this direction. Consequently, the intellectual resources do not yet exist to understand this structure fully and to trace the multifarious channels and ties—the veins and arteries—through which this structure is articulated. There is, however, little doubt that colonial interests, policies, the state and its institutions, culture and society, ideas and ideologies, and personalities are to be seen as functioning within the parameters of the colonial structure, which is itself to be defined by their interrelationships as a whole.

The nature of British colonialism and colonial policies in India and the desirable definitions and strategies of economic growth came under intense discussion by the early nationalists and the imperialist writers and administrators during the second half of the nineteenth century. The third essay, 'British and Indian Ideas on Indian Economic Development, 1858-1905', brings out the fact that the transformation of India into a classic colony occurred under the banner of modernization, economic development, and transplantation of capitalism in industry and agriculture with the aid of foreign capital when found necessary. The nationalist writers made a sharp critique of the contemporary colonial theories of development and took the first steps towards an overall view of colonialism. Clearly the nationalist critique was a giant step forward and would have made possible a more scientific analysis of colonialism and economic development if it had been built upon. Equally clearly, it is no longer adequate. It has to be transcended, though not by going back to the colonial historiography or economics.

*Presidential address delivered to the thirty-second session of the Modern Indian History Section of the Indian History Congress, December 1970. The error on page 1 is regretted. Publisher.
In the fourth essay, ‘Elements of Continuity and Change in the Early Nationalist Activity’, I have discussed the basic continuities in the Indian national movement and, in particular, its strategy of Pressure-Compromise-Pressure (P-C-P) and a prolonged stage-by-stage evolution. The social character of the movement during its different stages is also examined.

One of the important features of Indian social development which demarcates it from the development of the other colonial countries is the rise and growth of an independent capitalist class which did not develop as a comprador or subordinate ally of British capital. This was to have important consequences for the national movement. On the one hand, it brought the movement, especially after 1918, the support of this powerful class; on the other, it strengthened the conservative sections of the nationalist leadership and contributed to the complete domination of the P-C-P strategy or the non-revolutionary path of anti-imperialist struggle. The role of the capitalist class vis-a-vis imperialism and the national movement is discussed in the essays on ‘The Indian Capitalist Class and Imperialism before 1947’ and ‘Jawaharlal Nehru and the Capitalist Class, 1936’. The latter essay also brings out the successful effort of the leadership of this class to contain the left-wing challenge within the nationalist leadership on the question of the basic strategy of the movement. The basic anti-imperialism of the national movement and the freedom from direct foreign control of the capitalist class was to have an important impact on the post-1947 social development in general and the official policy towards imperialism in particular. This aspect is discussed rather sketchily in ‘Modern India and Imperialism’.

While a proper social or class analysis of the national movement has yet to be made there has existed a tendency since its beginnings to follow a short cut and to see it as a conspiracy of the “middle classes” or “elites” to use nationalism to serve their own narrow purposes. Dufferin, the Viceroy of India from 1884-1889, was one of the first to start this hare and may be considered as its godfather. His assertions in this respect have been examined in ‘Lord Dufferin and the Character of the Indian Nationalist Leadership’. In ‘The Ideological Development of the Revolutionary Terrorists in Northern India in the 1920s’, ‘Lenin and the National Liberation Movements’, and
partly ‘Jawaharlal Nehru and the Capitalist Class, 1936’, I have discussed the development of some of the alternative ideologies and paths of national struggle which did not fructify in the specific historical situation.

A major failure of the nationalist movement during the 20th century lay in its unsuccessful struggle against the disruptive communal forces despite its own secular outlook. The essay on the ‘Indian National Movement and the Communal Problem’ discusses some of the reasons for this failure.

One of the major problems faced by the nationalist leadership before 1947 was that of the integration of the peasantry into the nation and the national movement. The manner in which this task was attempted is examined in ‘Peasantry and National Integration in Contemporary India’. The essay also discusses the problems posed before the organizers of peasant movements by the high degree of differentiation within the peasantry after 1947.

Two book reviews have also been included: Pradhan and Bhagwat’s biography of Tilak to clarify certain aspects of Tilak’s political role which are otherwise widely misunderstood, and that of Barrington Moore’s Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy as a comment on the failure of even well-intentioned social scientists to grasp the historical significance of the role of colonialism in the social and political development of India, China, and other colonies and semi-colonies.

Through the years I have been helped by many friends and students with whom these essays were discussed at their various stages, and above all by Romila Thapar, Mohit Sen, Randhir Singh and Harbans Mukhia who went through all the first drafts and made useful suggestions.

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