

# Programmes and Achievements of the Early Nationalists

## Early Nationalists

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National movements in Indian history can be divided into three phases:

- The Early Nationalist Phase (1885–1905)
- The Assertive Phase (1905–1918)
- The Gandhian Era (1919–1947)

### Early Nationalists

The Indian National Congress from its inception in 1885 to 1905 was dominated by the early nationalists. These early nationalists were eminent personalities. They were lawyers, barristers, teachers and officials. Because many of them were educated in England, they believed in the British sense of justice and fair play. They were however ignorant of the actual conditions of people in India. Some early nationalists were W. C. Bonnerjee, Rashbehari Ghosh, Surendranath Banerjee, R. C. Dutt, Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Justice Ranade, P. R. Naidu, Ananda Charlu, Madan Mohan Malviya and A. O. Hume.

### Beliefs of the Early Nationalists

- The early nationalists had faith in the British sense of justice and fair play.
- They believed that the British would grant 'Home Rule' to Indians.
- They believed that the British rule had positively influenced Indian society by banning sati, female infanticide and by raising the minimum marriageable age of girls and boys.
- They believed in agitating through constitutional and peaceful methods like writing petitions.

## Demands of the Early Nationalists

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The demands of the early nationalists were

### Constitutional Reforms

- Abolition of India Council
- The moderates demanded control over the public purse and raised the slogan, 'No taxation without representation'.
- Adequate representation of Indians in the Executive Council of the Viceroy and the Governors.
- By the beginning of the twentieth century, they demanded 'Swarajya' or self-government within the British Empire like the status given to Canada and Australia.

### Economic Reforms

- To decrease land revenues and protect peasants against the unjust demands and atrocities of the zamindars.
- To reduce expenditures on the army and to spend the saved money on welfare of the people.
- To enquire into the reason behind recurrent famines and growing poverty of the people.
- To develop and provide banking, irrigational, health and medical facilities to the people.
- To protect the interests of Indian industries by imposing heavy trade duties on imported goods.
- To abolish the salt tax and duties on sugar.

## Administrative Demands

- To hold the Indian Civil Service Examinations in England and India simultaneously.
- To completely separate executive and judicial wings of the government. This demand was made to protect Indians from the arbitrary acts of the police and the bureaucracy.
- To increase the powers of the local municipal bodies and to do away with excessive official control over municipal bodies.
- To repeal or annul the Arms and Licence Acts.
- To spread primary education among the Indian masses.

## Defence of Civil Rights

- To do away with the restrictions imposed by the British government on the freedom of speech and press in India.
- To abolish the Preventive Detention Act and restore civil liberties in India.
- To allow Indians to assemble and to form associations.

## Methods Followed by the Early Nationalists

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The early nationalists or the moderates followed constitutional agitational methods to put forward their demands. The methods adopted by the moderates had two objectives:

**First Set of Methods:** Their first objective was to spread education among the masses in India. They followed the following methods to achieve these aims:

- They held meetings and gave speeches for pressing their demands.
- They criticised the policies of the government through the press.
- Memorandums and petitions were sent by them to government officials and the British Parliament.

**Second Set of Methods:** The second objective of the early nationalists was to influence the British government and its policies. This was done in the following ways:

- They followed the three P's—Petitions, Prayers and Protests. This was done by sending petitions and request letters to protest against the unjust policies of the government.
- A British Committee of the Indian National Congress was established at London in 1889 which published a weekly journal, India, to present India's case before the British public.
- Indian leaders to Britain were sent on deputation to Britain for achieving their aims. For example, Dadabhai Naoroji spent a major part of his life to create awareness among the British people and parliamentarians about the plight of the Indians.

## Achievements and Criticisms of the Early Nationalists

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### Achievements of the Early Nationalists

- They created national awakening among the people regarding the fact that they all belong to one common country.
- They popularised and trained the people in the ideals of democracy, civil liberties, secularism and nationalism.
- One of the greatest achievements of the early nationalists was that they exposed the true nature of economic exploitation of India by the British government. Dadabhai Naoroji contended that the British government was responsible for draining the wealth of India.

- Their political and economic programmes established the truth that India should be ruled in the interests of the Indians.
- Because of the efforts of the early nationalists, the following reforms were passed:
  - The Public Service Commission was appointed in 1886.
  - A resolution was passed in the House of Commons for holding the Indian Civil Service Examinations in India and London.
  - The passing of the Indian Council Act of 1892.

## Criticisms of the Early Nationalists

- The early nationalists have been criticised for using petitions and prayers to the government as a method of agitation. It has been contended that such methods could have never resulted in the independence of the country.
- They failed to realise that the interests of the British and the Indians clashed with one another and that Britain was using the resources of India to increase its wealth and prosperity.
- They failed in drawing the masses into a national movement. They were only able to influence a section of urban educated Indians.

## Attitude of the Government towards the Congress

- In the early years of its formation, the British looked upon the Congress with favour, so much so that the first session of the Congress was attended by a few government officials.
- Lord Dufferin wanted the Congress to devote itself to social rather than political affairs. As the Congress became politically active, the government began to criticise it.
- In 1890, government officials were forbidden to attend its meetings.
- To reduce the effectiveness of the Congress, the government followed the 'policy of divide and rule' by encouraging Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Raja Shiv Prasad of Benares to start an anti-Congress movement.

## Prominent Early Nationalists

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### Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917)

- He is commonly known as 'Grand Old Man of India'. He was born in a Parsi family. After teaching at Elphinstone College in Mumbai, he went to England.
- He returned to Mumbai in 1869 and was elected to the Mumbai Municipal Corporation and Town Council. He also started a magazine called Dharma Marg Darshak.
- He started movements against the Vernacular Press Act and the suppression of peasants by the zamindars.
- His contributions were the following:
  - While staying in England, he was regarded as an unofficial ambassador of India fighting for the rights and cause of the countrymen.
  - He brought important matters related to India to the notice of the House of Commons. The House of Commons passed the resolution of holding the Indian Civil Service Examinations in India and England simultaneously largely because of his efforts.
  - He took an active part in the foundation of the Indian National Congress. The four resolutions of self-government, boycott, swadeshi and national education were passed by the Congress under his presidency.



Dadabhai Naoroji

- He did a pioneering work in exposing the root causes of the economic ills of India. He compiled a book titled *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* in which he explained how Indian wealth was drained to England.

### **Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866–1915)**

- He was born at Kolhapur and was a professor of history and economics at Fergusson College in Pune.
- He was influenced by the political philosophy of Justice M. G. Ranade. He joined the Deccan Educational Society founded by Ranade and went to England on behalf of the Society to propagate India's views before the Welby Commission.
- He became one of the most popular Indian leaders of the Indian National Congress. His contributions were the following:
  - He criticised the government for incurring huge expenditure over the army, imposing taxes over cotton and for racially discriminating against the Indians in appointment to high posts.
  - He played a significant role in the passing of the Minto Morley Reforms of 1909.
  - He tried his best to influence upon the British statesmen in London not to partition Bengal.
  - His untiring efforts led to a reduction in toll tax.
  - He asked the government to reduce land revenues in India.



Gopal Krishna Gokhale

### **Surendranath Banerjee (1848–1925)**

- He was a nationalist leader, journalist and dedicated educationist.
- After he qualified for the Civil Service Examination, he worked as a magistrate in Assam but was dismissed because he opposed the policy of racial discrimination followed by the British.
- In 1921, he was appointed as minister of self-government and health by the Governor of Bengal. His contributions were
  - He founded the Indian Association in 1876 to oppose the unjust policies of the British. The aim of this association was to educate the people and to arouse the political consciousness and unity among the Indians.
  - He convened the Indian National Conference in 1883 at Kolkata to create an all India political organisation. This organisation later merged with the Indian National Congress in 1886.
  - He edited a newspaper, Bengalee, which was an important medium for mobilising public opinion.
  - He started agitations against the Licence Act, Arms Act and Vernacular Press Act. Surendranath Banerjee is popularly known as the Father of Indian Nationalism.



Surendranath Banerjee