



Naoroji and the Idea of “Swaraj” Podcast Transcript

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Professor Patel talks about how Naoroji developed the idea of *swaraj* during his 50-year political and nationalist career, which included groundbreaking economic research on Indian poverty, engagement with emancipatory movements around the world, and becoming the first-ever Asian elected to British Parliament.

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

Ira Pundeer: Hello and welcome to this episode of the India in Focus podcast. I am Ira Pundeer, the Communications Manager at Harvard’s Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute. We are joined today by Dinyar Patel. Patel is the Assistant Professor in the Department of History at the SP Jain Institute of Management and Research. He teaches courses in modern South Asia, the Indian Nationalist Movement and the British empire. In 2015, he received his PhD in History from Harvard, his biography of Dadabhai Naoroji ‘Naoroji: Pioneer of Indian Nationalism’ was published by Harvard University Press in May 2020. He has received two Fulbright fellowships and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities for his research. Dinyar Patel, welcome to this podcast.

Dinyar Patel: Thank you very much Ira for having me here.

Ira Pundeer: In your recent book ‘Naoroji: Pioneer of Indian Nationalism,’ you have talked about Naoroji as the key figure in the Indian Nationalist Movement during the 19th and 20th century. A key figure in shaping the global thinking of colonialism and the impact of the development of the global capitalist economy and the global South. For those who haven’t read the book, could you expand on how Naoroji developed the idea of *swaraj* during his political career?

Dinyar Patel: Sure, *swaraj* was the idea that was really associated with Naoroji for a very long time. Both he and Tilak were two of the people who really popularized the idea and for Naoroji, it grew out of an economic understanding of why India was so poor. Naoroji is perhaps most famous for his drain theory, the idea that British colonialism was directly causing the impoverishment of India. And according to Naoroji’s drain theory, even though he studied economics at an academic level, he was always interested in practical political solutions to problems. According to Naoroji’s drain theory, the drain can be stopped or reduced in proportion to how much control Indians had over their own government and country. So, under full colonial rule, you had a drain, but as you approached something like self-government or *swaraj*, the drain stopped and eventually would dry up once you had *swaraj*. In that case, both ideas were very interconnected, the idea of a drain and the idea of *swaraj* and by around the 1880s about maybe halfway through his political career, he realizes that self-government is the thing that India needed to strive for that was the only way that India could escape the cycle of worsening poverty.

Ira Pundeer: So, you've mentioned that Naoroji's idea of swaraj evolved from contact with European liberalism and socialism and at the same time it had a significant influence on the growth of global anti-colonialism and antiracism, could you talk about his influences behind the shaping of his ideas?

Dinyar Patel: Absolutely. So, for me at least this was the most interesting part of his career. The people who he was in communication with, both people whom he borrowed ideas from and people who he influenced. So, since Dadabhai Naoroji lived for so long in London, where he both was a businessman and eventually a politician, he was in contact with some of the leading thinkers in the West at that time or he read at least what they were writing. So, when he was formulating his ideas of the drain of wealth or ideas for political rights for India or eventually things like swaraj, he was borrowing ideas from people like John Stuart Mill for example, his ideas on political economy specifically and the role of capital in an economy and at the same time his ideas might have had an influence on people like Karl Marx for example. So, one of Naoroji's very good friends and colleague was a man called Henry Hyndman and Hyndman was the first individual to set up a socialist political party in Great Britain. He was in his own right an important figure in socialism in Great Britain and he was also very, very interested in India and colonial misrule in India.

And, through Hyndman, Naoroji's ideas of drain of wealth probably found their way to Karl Marx. We know that in 1881, he wrote a letter, Marx wrote a letter to one of his colleagues in Russia talking about the drain. So, the idea had a pretty long intellectual history and through socialist contacts, that was how the drain was built into ideas of anti-colonialism that were not just limited to India, that had throughout the rest of the colonized world.

Ira Pundeer: So how would you place Naoroji's thoughts vis a vis capitalism? Was he an anti-capitalist or was he a proponent of independent capitalist development?

Dinyar Patel: So again, his overriding concern was the poverty of India. So, if capitalism worked in a way that was truly fair in a way that both India and Britain or any other country with which India traded had a free and equal relationship, then he was fine with that. But he ultimately realized that under colonialism such freedom or equality was inherently impossible, right. I mean the British would talk about free trade but that didn't mean anything because India was already grossly handicapped by the structure of colonialism. In this sense it's quite similar to Rana Dey's ideas that, you know Rana Dey talked about how classical economic principles did not really apply to India and its colonial situation. So, in this sense Naoroji was definitely a supporter of maybe not protectionism per se but policies which had an overriding concern for the welfare of India. To give you one example, when Jamshetji Tata is looking for capital to raise for his various ventures including steel works and such, he's thinking of going to London to raise capital and Naoroji says no, you should really raise it from Indian sources or else again you'll be ensnared in this colonial relationship. And again, as time goes on, you see can see that Naoroji develops very critical views of capitalism, that is capitalism as it exists, he talked about kind of inimical relationship between capital and labor, he was supportive of labor and union movements in great Britain and he wanted to see some sort of structure where the state intervened in order to remedy the excesses of capitalism.

Ira Pundeer: Can you address the influence of Naoroji on Mahatma Gandhi?

Dinyar Patel: Sure. So, we don't know precisely when Naoroji and Gandhi first meet one another. There's a chance they met one another when Gandhi was a student in London in the late 1880s and the early 1890s and surely, they attended the same functions. We don't know precise how well they knew one another at that point in time, but in 1894 Gandhi sends his first letter to Naoroji and he says "I am in South Africa now, I am leading a campaign for the rights of Indians against oppressive policies that the white minority

and Nadal was imposing on Indians. Can you help me as a father would guide a son?" And, so from that point onward, Naoroji really emerges as someone who popularizes Gandhi's activities in South Africa to a wider audience in London as well as in India. Naoroji kind of becomes a communications node for amplifying Gandhi's ideas and eventually, again, Naoroji emerges for Gandhi as a nationalist role model. Even though the two met one another very briefly, it's clear from Gandhi's writings that the example that Naoroji set as a nationalist leader who persisted in spite of terrible odds was very inspirational to Gandhi during his struggle in South Africa. He says in his paper *Indian Opinion*, in one column, Naoroji's career is an example to those of us in South Africa who've been struggling and have faced so many failures but we realize like just as Naoroji's career there are some silver linings to all the trouble that we have had to go through.

Ira Pundeer: You know Naoroji demanded swaraj in the congress session of 1906. Does that make him a radical politician along the lines of Bal Gangadhar Tilak or was he still a moderate, where would you place him?

Dinyar Patel: Yeah, so, I would place him, at least this is what I've argued on the book, Naoroji was somewhere in the middle between the moderate and the extremist camp. He certainly was not like Tilak, Tilak had much more advanced views in terms of the methods in which to achieve political ends and whereas Tilak and Naoroji shared the same idea of what those ends should be, by the end of Naoroji's career swaraj, and not necessarily swaraj in any sort of imperial context such as colonial self government, Naoroji could not accept all of the tactics that Tilak was willing to countenance. Strikes, boycotts, things that could strike one as being anti-constitutional or against certain tactics that the moderates have used. So, he really occupies an unusual position in his last few years. The moderates think that he's too extremist and the extremists think that he's too moderate, but his 1906 speech in the Calcutta Congress, where he served as the president and this was the last, really major political speech that Naoroji gives. It marks the end of his career, really kind of hands the baton over to the extremists, the moderates are not terribly happy at what Naoroji says at the Congress in terms of his support for swaraj, his support for the swadeshi movement, his support for what was going on in Bengal at this point of time after the partition of Bengal and really momentum is given to the extremist and this is something that people like Tilak recognized that even though Naoroji might be too moderate for many of the extremists in many of the tactics he is advocating, ultimately, he is on the same page with them in terms of the end political goal and he's given stimulus to them to take them open forward and evolve the ideas beyond what the moderate camp has pledged itself towards.

Ira Pundeer: And what would you say about the influence of Naoroji on Subhash Chandra Bose in the later goals of nationalism in India?

Dinyar Patel: Well, to tell you the truth, I don't know much about Netaji Bose. Obviously, for someone of Bose's generation, since Bose was considered the younger god of the next generation of nationalist leaders, even to people like Gandhi, Naoroji was someone who, again, they would have not been familiar with personally but the example that Naoroji had given of someone who was a pioneering nationalist leader, someone who was concerned about the poverty and the economic condition of India would have had definite resonance. As to specific influences in such that Bose took from Naoroji's career, I am a little unsure about that, I need to study Bose's career a bit more before commenting on that.

Ira Pundeer: Fair enough. So, how do we interpret terms like nationalism in swaraj in today's India, where some of those terms are being appropriated to imply a certain form of extremism. So, with regard to Naoroji, what do you think about his ideas and how they have been implied in today's popular culture?

Dinyar Patel: Nationalism has always had a kind of a double meaning in India, right. We can talk about nationalism in terms and terms of what's going on today, in terms of the Hindu nationalism propounded by this government and we can talk about the nationalism that people like Naoroji or Gandhi and Nehru and everyone else in that generation propounded. And even though the same word is employed, the two ideas could not be more radically different. The nationalism of anti-colonial and independence movements was always very embracing of all aspects of India's diversity. Of course, there were failures in terms of outreach to lower castes and then of course outreach too Muslims but it was never really explicitly inimical to those interest of people who composed different aspects of Indian society, whereas today's nationalism of course is. So, the Indian nationalism of the earlier era was always quite outward looking, very liberal, very willing to change and revise stances based on different conclusions they draw from lessons they've learned overtime. So, it's very different from the anti-intellectualism, the firm mindedness of today's brand of nationalists, the close mindedness of today amongst so-called nationalists is completely antithetical to the very open-minded attitudes of people like Naoroji or Gandhi had.

And lastly, I'll say that people like Gandhi, Naoroji, Nehru, others, you know, VK Krishna Menon, Lala Lajpat Rai, etc. would go on and on. All of these people knew that Indian nationalism was much more than just being about India. It was about emancipatory movements around the world, whether those movements were anti-colonial struggles, anti-racist struggles, in terms of what African Americans had to deal with in America during the Jim Crow era. It was about movements of people, such as you know, people involved with the Labor Party in Great Britain or socialist movements in Great Britain, the Irish nationalists.

There were all these kinds of common international linkages that were created, again strikingly different with today's kind of assertive and inward-looking nationalism that really sees India's kind of this great bulwark of culture that doesn't necessarily has to learn something from the outside world.

Ira Pundeer: We know quite a bit about Naoroji as the political figure during the four to five decades of his life, from the time that he became a British parliamentarian to the time he declared the call for swaraj in 1906. But, can you talk a little bit about his early years, where he grew up and how was his upbringing, we would like to know a little bit about that.

Dinyar Patel: Sure. So, the one, this is the most difficult part of Naoroji's life to research because a lot of the sources just don't exist. So, in many ways that was one of the most interesting parts of the project for me. It was exciting to piece together pieces of a jigsaw puzzle when a lot of the pieces don't exist anymore. But, one thing is very clear, one reason why Naoroji was so concerned about poverty during his life was because he grew up in relatively impoverished circumstances.

He was born in Bombay, but his parents were from rural Gujarat, areas around Navsari and Dharampur in Southern Gujarat and these areas had experienced a bad famine just before Naoroji was born. So, there's a good chance his parents migrated in the first place to Bombay to escape the famine like conditions. And he grew up, again, in relative impoverishment, his father died at a relatively young age, so there were severe economic handicaps in his own life. But the one thing that really rescues his trajectory, rescues his political prospects for life at this point of time was access to free education.

There was a unique experiment in free education in Bombay in the 1830s and 1840s, and Naoroji was enrolled in an English language school as a young child, where he did not have to pay any fees. And as he reflected later on in life, this was a formative experience for him, he realized that he had to give back something to society because ultimately the free education he received was paid by taxpayers, by ordinary Indians. So, it really wedded him to an idea that he needed to service life through some form of public

service. And the other thing I'll just talk about in terms of his activities as a youth was a commitment to an overarching reform. He saw Indian society around him and he kept on asking himself how could reforms be instituted that will help people get better educated, that would help people improve their economic status and to this end, he helped pioneer efforts such as female education in Bombay. He helped promote certain aspects of religious reform and he helped start a newspaper in 1851, the goal of which was to help spread education to those people who couldn't afford it or just did not have access to a school or a proper education.

Ira Pundeer: Could you tell us a bit about the method that you used for your research? What were the archival materials that you consulted during your research?

Dinyar Patel: Sure. So, the bulk of material from this book derives from research that I did with Naoroji's private papers, his collection of letters, which are in the National Archives in New Delhi. And this is a collection of about 30,000 documents and each document can be a few lines or it can be several pages. So, it's a vast amount of material and I spent about two years in the National Archives going through material here. It's really important, if anyone wants to undertake a good, historical investigation of research, it's really important to go right to the primary sources, right, to read the actual letters that were written or received by a particular individual.

This is also an extremely difficult task because you're wading through thousands and thousands of pages and for the first few months in any such project, you're kind of lost at sea, you're surrounded by stuff. There's too much information to process but if you give it time, things work out and you learn the rhythms of how the person in question dealt with communication, how his ideas or her ideas developed. So, I went through about half of the existing papers in the Naoroji collection and by the end of that duration, when I had gone through about 50,000 papers at least, it emerged very clearly in my mind how Naoroji's career developed.

So, you have to devote a lot of time to give a fair shake to any investigation of a historical figure.

Ira Pundeer: Knowing that Naoroji was one of the early figures in Indian Nationalism, why do you think, do you think there is a reason why he's really underwritten when it comes to Indian Nationalism. He's not written much about, so do you feel there is any reason behind it?

Dinyar Patel: Right. Yeah, I mean a good chunk of that explanation is due to the fact that the early nationalists in general are quite overshadowed of course by the later generation. They were very quickly eclipsed by Gandhi's generation in popular imagination, so even if you were in India in the 1920s or the 1930s, already attention has shifted to a new generation of nationalists, which is entirely expected. Another reason I think is a lot of what they wrote can strike us today as being a little strange. I mean ultimately, people like Naoroji or Rana Dey or Gokhale were still talking about some measure of loyalty to British rule. And obviously to those of us thinking from our perspective today that can seem odd for a nationalist leader, but to them, they were walking a very fine line. They were walking a tightrope between a draconian colonial government that could easily quash the Congress, so they had to express some measure of loyalty and they, at the same time, did believe that British rule did impart certain good things to India, a western education, impetus for social reform. So, there was a degree of genuineness in their belief. Ultimately, with time of course, that feeling of, that sense of the good that British colonialism did for India diminished amongst people like Naoroji but it was still there and that's an important thing that we need to consider.

The last reason which I think people like Naoroji have been forgotten is again because today they are not terribly politically useful. I mean Naoroji was a Parsi ultimately, he would not have a large constituency

today where his memory is intrinsically important to their identification. Parsis number only about 50 to 60 thousand in India today, whereas someone like Rana Dey or Gokhale would still have resonance amongst the Maharashtrian community and such. So, there are a few reasons why but, I think through the book what I really tried to emphasize is that in terms of the ideas that he bequeathed, it's really important for us to remember someone like Naoroji because he was right there at the beginning.

Ira Pundeer: Definitely. Dinyar, it was a pleasure to host you for this podcast and thank you for sharing your insight.

Dinyar Patel: Thank you very much, Ira. It was a pleasure as well.