



IJMIRD 2014; 1(7): 482-487
www.allsubjectjournal.com
Received: 07-010-2014
Accepted: 09-011-2014
e-ISSN: 2349-4182
p-ISSN: 2349-5979

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Economic nationalism and its role in shaping India's freedom struggle: A critical analysis of policies and Ideologies (1885-1947)

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the role of economic nationalism in India's struggle for independence from 1885 to 1947. It explores how economic nationalism became an essential component of the broader nationalist movement, with the aim of achieving economic self-sufficiency and resisting British colonial exploitation. The study delves into key movements, such as the Swadeshi Movement, which promoted the boycott of British goods and the revival of indigenous industries, as well as the Gandhian philosophy of self-reliance through the promotion of khadi and rural development. Economic nationalism, in this context, was not only a political resistance but also a call for social and economic justice, particularly for marginalized groups such as peasants, lower castes, and minorities. The paper examines the policies and ideologies that underpinned this movement, including land reforms, the abolition of the zamindari system, and efforts for fairer land revenue systems. Furthermore, it addresses how economic nationalism intertwined with the fight for social equity, advocating for the upliftment of the marginalized. The legacy of these economic nationalist ideas continued to influence post-independence India's economic policies, laying the groundwork for a self-reliant, socially just, and equitable national economy. The paper highlights the lasting impact of economic nationalism on India's modern economic trajectory.

Keywords: Economic Nationalism, Swadeshi Movement, Colonial Exploitation, Social Justice and Land Reforms

Introduction

Economic nationalism emerged as a powerful ideological tool during India's struggle for independence. It was perceived as a path to achieving economic self-sufficiency, challenging colonial exploitation, and promoting national unity. Scholars such as Sam Pryke (2012) ^[1] argue that economic nationalism encompasses both a theoretical framework and practical applications that aim at fostering national economic development while resisting foreign domination. This paper delves into the critical analysis of economic nationalism from its theoretical roots to its real-world implementation in India, especially during the colonial period.

Theoretical Foundations of Economic Nationalism

Economic nationalism is often defined as the belief in protecting and developing the national economy through state intervention, strategic control of resources, and prioritization of national industries over foreign ones. As discussed by Rodrik (1995) ^[4], economic nationalism is a reaction against the perceived negative effects of globalization, such as economic dependence and loss of sovereignty. In India, this ideology gained prominence as the colonial state systematically deindustrialized the economy and siphoned resources for the benefit of the British Empire. As a response, nationalist leaders sought to use economic policy as a tool for independence, aiming to restore India's economic sovereignty.

Economic Nationalism and Indian Nationalism: In the context of Indian nationalism, economic nationalism was seen as a necessary complement to political independence. Chandra *et al.* (1988) ^[2] point out that India's fight for independence was not just political but also economic. Colonial policies were designed to benefit the British economy, leading to India's economic subjugation. The Swadeshi Movement, which emerged in the early 20th century, was a direct manifestation of economic nationalism. This movement advocated the use of Indian-made goods and the boycott of foreign products, particularly British goods, as a means of resisting colonial economic control.

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The Swadeshi Movement

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The Swadeshi Movement

The Swadeshi Movement (1905) stands out as a key example of economic nationalism in India's struggle for independence. Ganguly (2002) ^[3] explains that the Swadeshi Movement was not only a reaction to British policies but also an assertion of Indian economic rights. By promoting indigenous industries, the movement sought to create a self-sufficient economy and reduce India's reliance on British imports. This economic strategy was also seen as a form of resistance against British exploitation of India's resources. The Swadeshi Movement's impact was multifaceted, involving political, social, and economic dimensions, and set the stage for subsequent nationalist campaigns.

Gandhi's Economic Nationalism

Mahatma Gandhi's approach to economic nationalism was rooted in his philosophy of self-reliance (Swadeshi). Gandhi believed that true independence could only be achieved by reviving India's traditional industries, particularly hand-spinning and weaving, which symbolized self-sufficiency. Sahai (1992) ^[9] underscores that Gandhi's economic

nationalism was intrinsically linked to his vision of rural development and the empowerment of the masses. By promoting cottage industries, Gandhi sought to dismantle the colonial economic structure that favoured large industrial enterprises at the cost of India's rural populace.

Policies and Ideologies of Economic Nationalism in the Indian Freedom Struggle

Economic nationalism in the context of the Indian Freedom Struggle played a pivotal role in shaping the course of political, social, and economic movements. The policies and ideologies associated with economic nationalism provided a strategic framework for resistance against British colonial rule, and for the quest to regain India's economic sovereignty. Below is a breakdown of key policies and ideologies linked to economic nationalism during this period:

The Swadeshi Movement (1905-1911)

The Swadeshi Movement, a key feature of Indian economic nationalism, was initiated as a direct response to the British colonial policies that economically exploited India. This movement aimed at boycotting British goods and promoting Indian-made products to reduce dependence on foreign imports. The following policies were central to this movement:

- **Boycott of British Goods:** The central tenet of the Swadeshi Movement was the boycott of British goods. This was a call for Indians to use domestic products, particularly cloth, and to reject the consumption of British goods, thus undermining the British economic control over India.
- **Promotion of Indigenous Industries:** The movement encouraged the establishment and growth of indigenous industries, particularly in textiles, to foster self-reliance. Indian nationalists believed that the economic dependency on Britain could only be broken through the development of local industries.
- **Cultural Revivalism:** The Swadeshi movement also advocated for a revival of Indian culture and craftsmanship, linking cultural pride with economic self-sufficiency.

Gandhian Economic Nationalism

Mahatma Gandhi's approach to economic nationalism was grounded in his philosophy of **self-reliance** (Swadeshi) and his belief in the power of rural India. Gandhi argued that true freedom could only be achieved if India became economically self-sufficient and distanced itself from British industrial domination. His economic policies emphasized:

Promotion of Khadi and Handloom Industry: Gandhi encouraged the use of khadi (homespun cloth) to challenge British textile imports. The promotion of handlooms symbolized his belief in self-reliance and empowerment for rural communities.

Non-Violent Protest (Satyagraha): Gandhi's strategy included non-cooperation with British economic policies, through methods like non-payment of taxes, the Salt March, and the promotion of self-sufficiency in everyday life.

Decentralized Economic Development: Gandhi believed that the key to India's progress lay in its villages, not its cities. His focus was on decentralizing industrialization, which was central to his vision of an equitable and sustainable economic future for India.

State Intervention and Protectionism

A significant aspect of economic nationalism was the call for greater state intervention in the economy. Leaders like Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru supported the idea of a strong government that would control key sectors of the economy. This approach included:

- **Import Substitution:** Advocates of economic nationalism in India, particularly after independence, promoted the idea of reducing reliance on foreign goods by developing indigenous industries. This was closely related to the policy of import substitution industrialization (ISI) that was later adopted in post-independence India.
- **Protectionist Trade Policies:** Economic nationalists advocated for protective tariffs to shield Indian industries from foreign competition, particularly British goods. This policy aimed at giving local industries the breathing space they needed to develop and flourish.
- **Industrialization and Infrastructure Development:** Leaders like Nehru promoted large-scale industrialization, arguing that industrial development was necessary for India to compete globally. This vision was materialized in the establishment of state-run industries and large public sector enterprises.

Colonial Economic Exploitation and Resistance

The economic policies of British colonial rule were designed to benefit Britain at the expense of India. Economic nationalists viewed the colonial policies as instruments of exploitation, such as:

- **Drain of Wealth:** Economic nationalists like Dadabhai Naoroji argued that India was being economically drained by British policies, which siphoned off wealth from India to Britain. Naoroji's concept of the "Drain of Wealth" emphasized the economic exploitation that led to poverty and underdevelopment in India.
- **De-industrialization of India:** British policies systematically de-industrialized India by discouraging traditional crafts and industries in favor of British manufactured goods. This led to widespread unemployment and economic stagnation, which economic nationalists sought to reverse.
- **Taxation and Resource Extraction:** Colonial policies imposed heavy taxes on agricultural and industrial production, while also extracting India's resources for the benefit of the British Empire. Nationalists demanded fairer tax policies and an end to the exploitation of Indian resources.

Social and Economic Justice in Economic Nationalism

Economic nationalism during India's freedom struggle wasn't solely focused on economic self-sufficiency and industrial growth; it also sought to address the profound social

inequalities and injustices that were deeply embedded in Indian society under British colonial rule. Many economic nationalists recognized that true independence would not only be political but would also need to bring about social and economic justice, especially for marginalized groups such as peasants, lower castes, and minorities. This focus on social justice made economic nationalism a broad-based movement, as it sought not only to secure economic independence from Britain but also to create a more just and equitable society.

The main Policies Associated with Social and Economic Justice

Land Reforms and Agricultural Justice

Land reforms were central to the economic nationalist agenda in colonial India, particularly as a response to the exploitative nature of the zamindari system under British rule. The zamindari system, which involved absentee landlords collecting taxes from peasants, led to the exploitation of the rural population, with much of the wealth generated from agriculture flowing into the hands of a few wealthy landlords. The land revenue system, designed to extract the maximum revenue from the land, burdened farmers, leading to widespread poverty and indebtedness.

- **Abolition of the Zamindari System:** Economic nationalists saw the abolition of the zamindari system as essential to economic justice. The system not only enriched the British rulers but also led to the oppression of peasants. By redistributing land to the tillers and ensuring that farmers owned the land they worked on, economic nationalists hoped to empower the rural population.
- **Fairer Land Revenue Policies:** The British-imposed land revenue policies were harsh and placed a heavy burden on Indian peasants, often leading to famines and poverty. Economic nationalists demanded a reduction in these taxes and the introduction of fairer land revenue systems that would protect the interests of the peasantry. This would also involve land ceiling policies to prevent the concentration of land in the hands of a few wealthy individuals.
- **Promotion of Agricultural Cooperatives:** There was also an emphasis on promoting agricultural cooperatives, where farmers could come together to pool resources, share risks, and enhance their bargaining power. This approach was seen as a way to empower farmers, reduce exploitation by middlemen, and create a more equitable agricultural system.
- Land reforms were seen as critical to improving the economic conditions of the rural poor, ensuring that the benefits of independence would be spread more equally across society. The economic justice of land redistribution was meant to reduce inequality and provide a stronger foundation for an independent and self-reliant India.

Promotion of Social Equity

Economic nationalism during the independence struggle also had a strong social equity component. Many leaders realized that political independence could not be fully realized without addressing the social inequalities that plagued India. The fight for independence was not just about breaking free from

British rule, but also about ensuring that the benefits of independence would be equally distributed across all sections of Indian society, especially marginalized and disadvantaged communities.

- **Upliftment of Lower Castes:** The caste system had long been a major source of social inequality in India, with lower castes (Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes) subjected to systemic discrimination and exclusion. Leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar strongly advocated for the rights of lower castes and their social upliftment as an integral part of economic and political independence. Ambedkar, in particular, pushed for legal reforms and political representation to address caste-based oppression, and economic nationalism in this regard was closely tied to his fight for social justice.
- **Access to Education and Economic Opportunities:** Economic nationalists emphasized the need for education reforms to uplift marginalized communities. They believed that by promoting education, particularly for lower castes and women, the Indian population would be able to gain the skills and knowledge needed to contribute to the nation's economic development. Policies aimed at reducing educational inequalities were seen as critical to empowering these communities and ensuring their active participation in the economy.
- **Economic Benefits for Minorities and Marginalized Groups:** Economic nationalists recognized that true social equity would require the inclusion of marginalized groups in the economic mainstream. The movement for economic justice sought to ensure that the economic benefits of independence were not just concentrated in the hands of a few but were widely shared among the population, including religious minorities and tribal communities. Efforts to promote affirmative action and provide economic opportunities for these groups were seen as essential to creating a more equitable society.

Welfare State and Inclusive Growth

Another key aspect of economic nationalism was the vision for a welfare state that would ensure the social and economic well-being of all citizens, especially the poor and marginalized.

- **Universal Healthcare:** Economic nationalists supported policies aimed at improving public health, as they believed that a healthy population was critical to national development. Providing accessible and affordable healthcare to all sections of society, particularly the poor, was seen as a step towards social justice.
- **Labor Rights and Fair Wages:** Economic nationalism also called for better conditions for laborers and the protection of workers' rights. Nationalists demanded the abolition of exploitative labor practices and the establishment of fair wages, working hours, and safe working conditions. The fight for economic justice was intertwined with the broader fight for workers' rights, as improving the conditions of industrial workers and peasants was essential to building a strong and just nation.

Redistribution of Wealth and Resources

Economic nationalism sought to promote a just distribution of wealth. This included not just land reforms but also a broader call for the redistribution of resources to ensure that the benefits of economic growth were spread across society.

- **Wealth Taxation and Resource Redistribution:** Nationalists argued for progressive taxation policies that would ensure wealthier segments of society paid their fair share, and the funds would be used for the upliftment of the poor. Economic policies such as wealth taxes were seen as a way to reduce economic inequality and finance the social welfare programs that would improve the living standards of marginalized groups.
- **Rural Development and Urbanization:** Nationalists called for policies that would encourage rural development, including the building of infrastructure such as roads, schools, and hospitals. Additionally, they promoted policies to improve the conditions of urban working-class populations by providing affordable housing, healthcare, and employment opportunities.

Overall, the social and economic justice dimension of economic nationalism was critical to the vision of an independent and equitable India. By focusing on land reforms, promoting social equity for marginalized groups, and advocating for a welfare state, economic nationalism aimed not only at achieving political independence but also at creating a just society. This focus on social justice was not an afterthought but a central aspect of the broader nationalist movement, ensuring that the fruits of independence would be accessible to all citizens, particularly those who had been historically oppressed. Thus, economic nationalism in India was as much about social transformation as it was about economic self-sufficiency and industrial development.

Post-Colonial Economic Nationalism

After India gained independence in 1947, the concept of economic nationalism continued to play a pivotal role in shaping the country's economic policies. Economic nationalism in the post-colonial era was centered around the goal of achieving economic self-sufficiency, reducing dependence on foreign countries, and fostering national development. This approach was influenced by the desire to overcome the economic legacies of colonialism, where India's resources were systematically exploited for the benefit of the British Empire.

Post-Colonial Economic Nationalism

1. State-Led Industrialization and Planning

One of the key features of post-colonial economic nationalism was the state's direct involvement in the economy. The newly independent Indian government, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, adopted a strategy of state-led industrialization as the central driver of economic development. This was part of a broader strategy to reduce dependency on foreign countries and create a self-sufficient economy.

- **Five-Year Plans:** The government introduced the Five-Year Plans, inspired by the Soviet model of planned economy. The first Five-Year Plan (1951-1956) focused on agricultural development, while subsequent plans focused on industrialization. These plans aimed at

building infrastructure, establishing public sector enterprises, and promoting key industries such as steel, heavy engineering, and energy production.

- **Public Sector Enterprises:** The government took control of several key industries, including steel, coal, power, and telecommunications, through nationalization. The idea was that these industries would be strategically important for India's development and should be under state control to ensure that profits were reinvested into national growth.

2. Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI)

To reduce India's dependency on foreign goods and foster local industries, India adopted the Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) strategy. This involved promoting the production of goods domestically that were previously imported. The focus was on protecting domestic industries from foreign competition, especially from Western countries and the remnants of British influence.

- **Protectionist Policies:** The Indian government implemented high tariffs and import controls to shield local industries from foreign competition. This protectionist approach was intended to allow Indian industries to grow and become competitive on the global stage.
- **Promotion of Key Sectors:** The government focused on industries like textiles, chemicals, and consumer goods, aiming to reduce imports in these sectors. At the same time, heavy industries such as steel and cement were prioritized to build a foundation for a strong industrial economy.

3. Nationalization of Key Industries

Post-independence, the Indian government believed that the private sector was insufficient to drive national development, and therefore, nationalization was seen as a means of achieving greater control over the economy. The nationalization of key industries helped strengthen the state's role in managing the country's economic growth.

- **Banks and Financial Institutions:** In 1969, the Indian government nationalized 14 major commercial banks. This move was intended to increase the flow of credit to rural and underdeveloped areas and to ensure that banking services were directed towards the welfare of the population rather than private profits.
- **Coal and Oil Sectors:** Other critical sectors, such as coal, oil, and railways, were also nationalized to ensure that India had control over vital resources that could fuel its industrial and economic development.
- **Large-Scale Public Sector Enterprises:** Several public sector enterprises were established to promote heavy industry, infrastructure development, and self-reliance in critical sectors. Institutions like Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) and Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) were part of this strategy.

4. Self-Reliance and Indigenous Development

Economic nationalism in the post-colonial period was strongly aligned with the idea of self-reliance (Atmanirbhar

Bharat). This principle emphasized the importance of reducing India's dependence on foreign countries for both goods and technology.

- **Focus on Indigenous Technology and Innovation:** To build a self-sufficient economy, India prioritized the development of indigenous technology, such as the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the Atomic Energy Commission. These institutions were key to the country's growth and positioned India as a growing power in science and technology.
- **Agricultural Self-Sufficiency:** Agriculture was another key focus. The Green Revolution in the 1960s, which introduced high-yielding varieties of crops, irrigation techniques, and fertilizers, was aimed at making India self-sufficient in food production and reducing reliance on food imports.

Mixed Economy Model

India adopted a mixed economy model, where both the private and public sectors had significant roles in the economy. While the public sector took the lead in strategic and capital-intensive industries, the private sector was encouraged in areas that could contribute to consumer goods production and entrepreneurship.

Regulation of the Private Sector- Though private industries were allowed to operate; they were heavily regulated by the government. The Industrial Licensing Policy required companies to obtain licenses for production, and the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Act sought to prevent the rise of monopolies and protect the public interest.

Economic Nationalism in the Context of Globalization

Even though economic nationalism was central to India's post-independence economic policies, it faced challenges in the era of globalization. In the 1990s, India began to open up its economy in response to balance of payments crises and growing external pressure to liberalize. This period saw the relaxation of trade restrictions, reduction of tariffs, and the liberalization of foreign investment policies.

However, economic nationalism continued to influence India's policy direction, particularly in terms of protecting key sectors, such as agriculture, and ensuring that economic policies were designed with national interest in mind.

Legacy and Influence

Post-colonial economic nationalism laid the foundation for India's economic development in the first few decades after independence. While the policies of state-led industrialization, protectionism, and public sector dominance helped create a strong industrial base, they also led to inefficiencies, bureaucratic controls, and a lack of competition. The move towards economic liberalization in the 1990s marked a shift away from some aspects of economic nationalism, but the core principles of self-reliance and strategic control over vital resources remain central to India's economic identity today.

Overall, post-colonial economic nationalism in India was a reaction to the economic exploitation during the colonial era, and it provided a framework for achieving economic independence and national development. It involved state intervention, protectionist policies, and a focus on indigenous development, all of which were crucial in shaping India's early economic trajectory.

Conclusion

Overall these policies and ideologies associated with economic nationalism were deeply intertwined with the Indian freedom struggle. From the Swadeshi Movement's grassroots resistance to British economic policies to Gandhi's vision of self-reliance, economic nationalism shaped both the independence movement and post-independence economic policies. While economic nationalism faced challenges, particularly in achieving the full economic independence envisioned by its proponents, its legacy continues to influence India's economic policies even today. The fight for economic sovereignty was, and continues to be, an essential aspect of India's national identity and development trajectory.

Subhas Chandra Bose and Economic Nationalism

Bose, in his political philosophy, argued for a strong, industrialized India capable of resisting foreign powers through both military and economic means. His economic nationalism was characterized by the call for state-led industrialization and the establishment of a self-sustaining economy. Roy (2007) ^[11] notes that Bose's emphasis on building an indigenous industrial base and promoting scientific research was part of his broader vision to achieve economic and military independence.

Nehru and Industrialization

Jawaharlal Nehru, although a proponent of socialist economic policies, shared an economic nationalist perspective, particularly in his push for industrialization. Nehru's economic policies aimed at building India's infrastructure and public sector industries to reduce reliance on foreign countries. His industrial vision was aimed at creating a modern Indian economy that could stand independent of colonial influences. As Rodrik (1995) ^[4] suggests, Nehru's approach to economic nationalism was centered around large-scale state intervention and planning.

The Impact of Economic Nationalism on India's Economic Development

Economic nationalism in India had a significant impact on the country's economic development during the pre-independence era. Bagchi (1972) ^[5] examines the quantitative effects of nationalist policies, showing that while the movement did not achieve complete economic independence, it laid the foundations for post-independence economic policies. The emphasis on indigenous industries during the Swadeshi Movement created a foundation for later industrial development in independent India, albeit with the challenges of colonial economic legacies still in place.

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