**Historiography**

Over the years, historians have differed significantly in their analysis of the Indian nationalist movement that took place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From the Cambridge school of thought to the subaltern histories devised by historians such as Ranajit Guha, interpretations regarding nationalist sentiment in India are both numerous and diverse. This paper seeks to explore these interpretations through an analysis of the historiographical trends surrounding Indian nationalism. Through an examination of the similarities and differences that exist within modern scholarship, the reader is afforded an opportunity to better understand and discover the ideological divisions that permeate this field of history today.

**The Cambridge School**

In the years following Indian independence, multiple interpretations developed in regard to the intricacies of India’s nationalist movement. One particular school of thought that emerged can be seen with the Cambridge school. Cambridge scholars – known for their cynical approach toward the issue of Indian nationalism – offer a view that tends to reject accounts focusing on the supposedly idealistic and patriotic motives of nationalist development (Sarkar, 6). As historians Douglas Peers and Nandini Gooptu point out, early Cambridge scholars chose to focus their attention, instead, on “an alternative to the standard, eulogistic, and often starry-eyed…nationalist narrative” by questioning the personal motives and desires of Indian political leaders (including individuals such as Gandhi) (Sarkar, 6). Consequently, interpretations within this school of thought tend to present the nationalist movement as an elite-driven event that developed from the selfish desires of its political leadership (Sarkar, 6).

The implication that “selfish” motivations drove nationalism in India is important to consider, as it helps elucidate another aspect of the Cambridge school; particularly, their view that nationalist sentiment was both disjointed and fragmented in India. Because scholars (such as John Gallagher and Gordon Johnson) argue that the nationalist movement reflected the personal desires of politicians, Cambridge historians assert that the movement was neither unified nor cohesive in its overall development since politicians were constantly engaged in competition amongst themselves for both power and authority (Spodek, 695). According to these scholars, this sense of competition was driven primarily by local and regional rivalries that stemmed from British rule. Following “the external pressures of two world wars and an international economic depression,” historians such as Anil Seal argue that the “devolution” of British power encouraged Indians to play a more active role in politics (Spodek, 691). Rather than seeking independence or a greater “share of power at the national level,” however, Cambridge scholars argue that the nationalist movement “reflected local problems and contests for power rather than opposition to British rule” as villages and provinces devolved into factional strife against one another. Through the combination of local interests and a search for political allies, Cambridge historians (such as Seal and Lewis Namier) have argued that “national organizations” developed as provincial leaders used “exalted rhetoric” to gain support from the masses (Spodek, 691). While these historians acknowledge that calls for “the expulsion of the British” did eventually occur, they posit that these sentiments remained secondary to local interests and did not reflect an “ideological” basis for the nationalist movement to draw upon (Spodek, 691-692).

**Subaltern School**

Following the contributions of the Cambridge school, another group of historians dealing with the nationalist movement involved the subaltern field of history. This group of historians –with their focus on lower-class individuals of Indian society – offered a direct challenge to the elite-driven model proposed by Cambridge scholars; arguing that a level of separation existed between elites and the masses of India. Because of this separation, historian Ranajit Guha proclaims that no sense of cohesion existed in the nationalist movement as subaltern classes maintained values and beliefs that diverged significantly from the elites and bourgeoisie of their society (Guha and Spivak, 41). Guha argues that this difference “derived from the conditions of exploitation to which the subaltern classes were subjected” to in the past (Guha and Spivak, 41). This is important to consider, he argues, since “the experience of exploitation and labour endowed this politics [subaltern] with many idioms, norms, and values which put it in a category apart from elite politics (Guha and Spivak, 41).

Guha also points out that elite and subaltern mobilization schemes were wholly different as well; with elites “more legalistic and constitutionalist” in their movements, while subalterns maintained a “more violent” and “spontaneous” stance in their reactions to political developments (Guha and Spivak, 40-41). Regardless of these differences, however, Guha maintains that elites often tried to integrate the lower-classes of Indian society into their struggle against the British; a clear “trademark” of subaltern history and its “focus on the dialectic between political mobilization by the leadership [of a society] and autonomous popular initiatives" (Sarkar, 8). Yet, Guha points out that “the braiding together of the two strands of elite and subaltern politics led invariably to explosive situations,” thus, “indicating that the masses mobilized by the elite to fight for their own objectives managed to break away from their control” (Guha and Spivak, 42). To a certain degree, this sentiment reflects elements of the Cambridge school since Guha makes it clear that elites (politicians) attempted to direct the masses for their own particular (selfish) wishes. Due to the absence of an effective leadership or the ability to control the masses, however, Guha argues that the nationalist effort was “far too fragmented to form effectively into anything like a national liberation movement” (Guha and Spivak, 42-43). Because of this inherent fragmentation, historians Peers and Gooptu posit that subaltern accounts of India – such as Guha’s analysis – often fail to “explore nationalism as a category” and, in turn, examine it as a series of “popular movements” (Sarkar, 9).

Subaltern Studies emerged around 1982 as a series of journal articles published by Oxford University Press in India.  A group of Indian scholars trained in the west wanted to reclaim their history.  Its main goal was to retake history for the underclasses, for the voices that had not been heard previous.  Scholars of the subaltern hoped to break away from histories of the elites and the Eurocentric bias of current imperial history.  In the main, the wrote against the "Cambridge School" which seemed to uphold the colonial legacy—i.e. it was elite-centered.  Instead, they focused on subaltern in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture.  They espoused the idea that there may have been political dominance, but that this was not hegemonic.  The primary leader was Ranajit Guha who had written works on peasant uprisings in India.  Another of the leading scholars of subaltern studies is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.  She draws on a number of theoretical positions in her analysis of Indian history: deconstruction, marxism, feminism. She was highly critical of current histories of India that were told from the vantage point of the colonizers and presented a story of the colony via the British adminstrators (Young, 159).  What she and other historians (including Ranajit Guha) wanted was to reclaim their history, to give voice to the subjected peoples.  Any other history merely reconstructs imperialist hegemony and does not give voice to the people—those who resisted, those who supported, those who experienced colonial incursion.  According to the Subaltern Studies group, this history is designed to be a "contribution made by people on their own, that it, independently of the élite" (quoted in Young 160).  They did this by establishing a journal out of Oxford, Delhi and Australia and called it Subaltern Studies to write a history against the grain and restore history to the subordinated.  In other words, to give the common people back their agency.

**Interpretation of Historian Bipan Chandra**

Finally, in addition to the interpretations presented by the Cambridge and subaltern schools, historian Bipan Chandra also offers a unique perspective of Indian nationalism that serves as a middle-ground to both schools of thought. In his analysis, Chandra challenges Guha’s assertion that the Indian nationalist movement was divided internally, and argues that ideology played a central role in the movement’s development. Consequently, Chandra’s acceptance of “ideology” also forms a direct challenge to the Cambridge school which argued that Indian nationalism seemed more of “a ramshackle, occasional, and reactive coming-together of local factions,” rather than a cohesive movement (Sarkar, 9).

Although Chandra accepts that differences existed within society that challenged the movement’s solidarity (particularly in its inchoate phases), he argues that Gandhi’s success in later years was a direct result of “ideological preparation” that occurred in the early years of India’s struggle for independence (Chandra, 23). While diverging segments of the nationalist struggle certainly existed (i.e. moderates and extremists, elites and subaltern classes), Chandra points out that the Indian National Congress helped to alleviate these differences in that it served as a “symbol…of the anti-imperialist or national liberation struggle” and functioned as a rallying (and unifying) point for each of the diverging segments of society; thus, keeping nationalist spirit alive within India (Chandra, 11). As Chandra states, the Congress led a movement “in which millions upon millions of both sexes and all classes, castes, religions and regions…participated” (Chandra, 13). Through the Congress, Chandra argues that the nationalist leadership was able to “gradually” develop “a political strategy for the movement…geared to weakening and destroying colonial hegemony over the Indian people” (Chandra, 13).

From Dadabhai Naoroji to Gandhi, Chandra argues that the nationalist leadership devised political strategies that were based on (and reflected) British responses to their actions. As he states, strategies were “developed gradually over time” as the leadership was “constantly experimenting and changing to suit the circumstances and the level the movement had reached” (Chandra, 15). Chandra argues that all of this was made possible when Indians (of all social classes) realized that “the essence of colonialism lay in the subordination of the Indian economy…to the needs of the British economy and society” (Chandra, 20). This, in turn, led to the development of a widespread “anti-colonial ideology” that flourished in India as a result of the “highly flexible tactics” devised by the central leadership of the nationalist movement (Chandra, 22). While the subaltern and Cambridge schools point out that inherent differences and divisiveness permeated (and perhaps weakened) the nationalist struggle, Chandra argues that the notion of a “common struggle” formed an ideological backbone to the movement that helped forge local, ethnic, and religious differences into a comprehensive struggle (Chandra, 25). Consequently, Chandra’s interpretation also serves to reject the Cambridge school’s focus (and belief) that conflict was an enduring characteristic “between the central and provincial leaderships” of India (Spodek, 694).

**Conclusion**

In closing, clear similarities and differences exist between historians and their interpretations regarding the Indian nationalist movement. Understanding these differences is essential for understanding the diverse historiographical trends that surround the field of Indian history in the modern era. Only through an exposure to these various interpretations and accounts can one actively engage with the diverse literature available. While historians may never agree on the details surrounding the nationalist movement in India, their interpretations of the past offer unique approaches to the field that should not be ignored.