

---

## UNIT 23 THE CAMBRIDGE SCHOOL

---

### Structure

- 23.1 Introduction
- 23.2 The Background
- 23.3 The Emergence of the Cambridge School
- 23.4 The Major Works of the Cambridge School
- 23.5 Features of the Cambridge Interpretation
- 23.6 The Scepticism of the Cambridge School
- 23.7 The End of the Cambridge School
- 23.8 Evaluation
- 23.9 Summary
- 23.10 Exercises

---

### 23.1 INTRODUCTION

---

The ‘Cambridge School’ is the name given to a group of historians in Cambridge who reinterpreted Indian politics in the age of nationalism. They did not think that there was any fundamental contradiction between imperialism and nationalism. In their opinion, local interests and factional rivalries were prominent features of the history of Indian nationalism. If Indian nationalism emerged despite such localised rivalries, this happened because the British authorities simultaneously centralised the government and introduced representation in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Government intrusion in local concerns forced local politicians to turn to the centre. Paradoxically, Indian nationalism was the product of the government impulse. Central to this interpretation of Indian nationalism was the centrality of power. The thesis was set out in a collection of essays by Cambridge historians which was entitled *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics, 1870 to 1940*. The collection was edited by John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal, and was published by the Cambridge University Press in 1973 both as an issue of the Cambridge journal entitled *Modern Asian Studies* and as an independent publication. Critics accused the authors of debunking Indian nationalism and the group was dubbed ‘The Cambridge School’, or simply referred to as ‘Cambridge’. A hot controversy followed in the wake of the publication, and Marxist and liberal historians in India sharply criticised the thesis. However, ‘The Cambridge School’ undoubtedly made an impact on Indian historiography.

---

### 23.2 THE BACKGROUND

---

Earlier, two historiographical schools had emerged in course of the 1960s. One favoured the Marxist view and the other advanced the elite theory of the West. It was out of the latter camp that the Cambridge School emerged in 1973. To understand the tenets of Cambridge requires knowledge of the earlier debates in the 1960s. The debate involved the Cambridge School in due course.

Briefly, the debate centred around three questions. First of all, what is the innermost spring of the mechanics of modern politics in British India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Was it economics that drove politics or was it the institutional

opportunity offered by English education, political representation, and other institutional innovations of the British? The Marxists inclined towards the first answer, the elite theorists preferred the second answer. The second question concerns the most decisive territorial unit in which political change in the subcontinent was to be studied – was it the nation as a whole, or was it the region? The Marxists analysed the problem against the national canvas, but the elite theorists claimed that the region was the true locus of political change in British India. Thirdly, the debaters differed about the nature of the social group on which they should focus. Should they focus upon class and class conflict, or upon the English-educated elite and the conflict between various castes and communities competing for the rewards of English education and political representation? Predictably, the Marxist historians looked at class, and the elite theorists concentrated on caste, community and the western-educated elite.

Since the Cambridge School emerged out of the elite theory and branched off from it, the interpretation offered by the elite theorists is relevant in this context. Historians from a number of Western universities, especially from Canberra, Sussex and Cambridge, offered this interpretation in reaction to Marxist historiography in India and the Soviet Union. Three influential works emphasizing the role of the English-educated elite in Indian politics came out in quick succession: D. A. Low (ed.), *Soundings in Modern South Asian History* (London, 1968); J.H. Broomfield, *Elite conflict in a Plural Society. Twentieth Century Bengal* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968); and Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism : Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1968). The interpretation had three points to make against the Marxists. First of all, the main motive force behind modern politics, including nationalist politics, was not economic change, but on the contrary the institutional innovations introduced by the British. Anil Seal emphasised the institutional opportunities offered by English education, especially the new jobs available in the subordinate civil service and the modern professions of law, western medicine, journalism and teaching. John Broomfield for his part dwelt on the institutional opportunities offered to a growing band of politicians by the new constitutional structure of elections and representatives in the changing system of government. Secondly, the interpretation focused upon the region, as against the nation, and upon the traditional cultures in each region; it was against the backdrop of the region that the elite theorists traced the course of political change set off by the institutional changes. Thirdly, the interpretation focused, not upon class and class conflict, but upon the formation of an English-educated elite, and upon the rivalries within each region between contending castes and communities for securing the opportunities offered by English education and legislative representation.

---

### 23.3 THE EMERGENCE OF THE CAMBRIDGE SCHOOL

---

Anil Seal, whose thesis at Cambridge was supervised by John Gallagher and which was subsequently published under the title *Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (1968), subscribed to these views in his thesis. So did the first generation of Anil Seal's students, especially Judith Brown, the author of *Gandhi's Rise to Power* (Cambridge, 1972). In their view, the English-educated nationalist elite was originally the high caste minority of Bengal, Bombay and Madras, and the politics of the backward castes and regions was also a minority's protest against this English-educated nationalism. Subsequently, however, John Gallagher, Anil Seal and yet another batch of their students radically modified their stand, and the Cambridge School was the product of the modified standpoint.

John Gallagher, together with Ronald Robinson, had earlier written a book entitled *Africa and the Victorians* (1961), which had made a critical impact on imperial studies in the early 1960s. Briefly, Gallagher and Robinson had argued that imperialism was not the

product of the new economic forces in Europe, but was induced by the political collapse caused by indigenous processes in Africa and Asia. Imperialism was compelled to move into the political vacuum created by the internal conflicts in native societies. Anil Seal, as a brilliant young pupil of Gallagher, had also dwelt on the political rivalries within Indian society in his explanation of the emergence of modern politics in India, focusing especially upon caste and the competition for English education among various regions, communities and castes. In the early 1970s, a new batch of research students gathered around John Gallagher, Anil Seal and Gordon Johnson (the editor of *Modern Asian Studies* and an earlier student of Anil Seal with a thesis on Maharashtra politics to his credit, a thesis very similar to those of Anil Seal and Judith Brown). This was the Cambridge School, and it distinguished itself from the earlier elite theory version by formulating new answers to the questions posed in the ongoing debate. However, they still subscribed to the view that nationalism was basically a play for power.

In the new version, the dynamic factor behind modern politics was no longer English education and its opportunities, nor of course any broad economic change under colonial rule. On the contrary, the dynamic factor was the increasing centralisation of government in the subcontinent and the growing element of representation within its structure. This implied the increasingly great presence of government in the countryside and the integration of the periphery to the centre through the new mechanism of legislative representation. Government impulse fostered modern politics in British India, and created the space for national politics in the country. Secondly, the locality was now projected as the real base of politics instead of the region or the nation. The 'real' interests involved in politics were local interests, not a mythical national interest, or even a regional-cultural interest. Local interests sought to pass themselves off as the cultural interest of the region or the national interest of the whole country. Thirdly, the operating unit in politics was identified, not as caste or community, not to speak of class, but as the faction based on the patron-client linkage in the locality. The patron-client network was a pragmatic alliance cutting across classes, castes and communities. The patrons in whose interest the networks were formed were local magnates, either town notables or rural-local bosses, depending upon the locality. The local notables were now projected as more influential than the English-educated professional men who constituted the educated elite. The dynamic factor that pulled the local networks of patronage into national politics was the increased presence of government in the locality and the increasing presence of the representative element in the government.

---

## 23.4 THE MAJOR WORKS OF THE CAMBRIDGE SCHOOL

---

The origins of the Cambridge School may be traced back to Robinson and Gallagher's *Africa and the Victorians* and Seal's *Emergence of Indian Nationalism* in the 1960s, but the Cambridge School announced itself only in the 1970s with *Locality, Province and Nation*. The tenets of the Cambridge School were set forth in a number of works, among which may be mentioned John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal (eds.), *Locality, Province and Nation* (1973); Gordon Johnson, *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism: Bombay and the Indian National Congress 1890 to 1905* (1973); C.A. Bayly, *The Local Roots of Indian Politics: Allahabad 1880–1920* (1975); D.A. Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: Madras Presidency 1870–1920* (1976); C.J. Baker, *The Politics of South India 1920–1937* (1976); B..R. Tomlinson, *The Indian National Congress and the Raj 1929–1942* (1976); and C. J. Baker, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal (eds.), *Power, Profit and Politics* (1981). The first and the last were collections of essays by members of the Cambridge School; the rest were Cambridge and Oxford Theses supervised by Anil Seal and John Gallagher.

These books may have differed in their tone and emphasis to some extent, but they shared a number of common features. Collectively, they constituted the Cambridge School. Some Cambridge theses, which Anil Seal supervised at around the same time, did not share the same features. For instance, Mushirul Husan's *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India 1916-1928* (1979), and Rajat Kanta Ray's *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal 1875-1927* (1984), did not share the emphasis on power play, but on the contrary dwelt on ideological and economic factors. Despite guidance by Anil Seal, they did not belong to the Cambridge School. What distinguished the historians of the Cambridge School was their focus upon the search for power by individuals and factions. They pushed their inquiries down from the nation (viewed as a whole by the Marxists) and the region (regarded separately by the elite theorists) to the locality; and in the locality, their attention focused, not upon social groups such as classes or castes, but on 'connexions' straddling these social categories. Their analysis concentrated on the slow bonding together of these local factions and connections into an all-India political structure by the increasing intrusion of the power at the centre into the affairs of the periphery.

The gradual centralisation of the government, matched as it was by the growth of a representative element within the centralised structure, pulled local politics outwards, into politics with a national focus. Nationalism, in this view, was disguised collaboration with imperialism.

---

### 23.5 FEATURES OF THE CAMBRIDGE INTERPRETATION

---

The Cambridge interpretation began with the locality, and with the 'connexions' in each locality. In C.A. Bayly's analysis of mid-nineteenth century politics in Allahabad town, local politics consisted of 'a series of loose consortia of patrons each with their clientela to satisfy'. The town was dominated by commercial magnates who locally enjoyed the status of *rais* or notable. He found it useful 'to describe the various groups in clientage to the commercial *raises* as connexions'. A bunching of economic functions around the magnates gave the connexions a cross-caste, cross-community aspect. Later the same 'connexions' became the operative units in nationalist politics in Allahabad.

In his study of Bombay politics, Gordon Johnson concurred with this. The most obvious characteristic of every Indian politician was that each politician acted for many diverse interests at all levels of Indian society, 'and in doing so cut across horizontal ties of class, caste, region and religion.'

Anil Seal put the same point forcefully in the introductory article on 'Imperialism and nationalism in India' in *Locality, Province and Nation*. Politics was originally a local affair and there it was a race for influence, status and resources. In this race, patrons would regiment their clients 'into factions which jockeyed for position.' So these were not partnerships between the same sorts of fellows. They were rather associations of big-wigs and their followers. In other words, the factions were 'vertical alliances, not horizontal alliances.' The local rivalries were seldom marked by the alliance of landlord with landlord, educated with educated, Muslim with Muslim, and Brahman with Brahman. More frequently, Hindus worked with Muslims, Brahmans were hand-in-glove with non-Brahmans.

According to the Cambridge interpretation, the roots of politics lay in the localities – the district, the municipality, the village. There the town notables and the rural-local bosses enjoyed the power to distribute resources without any interference by the seemingly impotent imperial government. But things began to change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Motivated, according to David Washbrook, by 'the need to improve, to gather more wealth, to do more good', the imperial authorities carried out bureaucratic and

constitutional reforms which forced more and more local politicians to turn their attention from the local centres of power to the government at the centre. This was John Gallagher's 'Government impulse' and it altered the working of Indian politics. 'That is not to say', he cautioned, 'that Indian politics had been tidied up into parties with programmes, tailored to fit the needs of coherent social groups. The main elements were still the links between patrons and clients, the connections in localities and the shifting alliances between factions; these continued to cut across the spurious unities which now seemed to have emerged. Nevertheless, there had been an important change; more localities had to be bonded together, and they had to be related to the politics of larger arenas. The lessons of these electoral systems followed the logic of administrative change' (John Gallagher, 'Congress in Decline: Bengal 1930 to 1939', in *Locality, Province and Nation*).

Anil Seal, in his introduction to *Locality, Province and Nation*, had the same thing to say. As a centralised and increasingly representative government emerged, 'it was no longer enough for Indians to secure political benefits in the localities alone.' The increasing power to be bargained for at the centres for government necessitated the creation of provincial and then all India politics. Village, district and small town politics 'continued unabated in the undergrowth', but political associations, such as the Madras Native Association or the Indian National Congress, deployed a different grammar of politics in the provinces and at the centre. 'For the formal structure of government provided the framework of politics, and it was only by operating within it that Indians could share and determine the distribution of power and patronage' (Anil Seal, 'Imperialism and Nationalism', in *Locality, Province and Nation*).

According to C. J. Baker, local bosses, so long left on their own to strike local bargains of power, found it necessary to match the new administrative and representative structure of the British Raj with a national political structure built upon organisations with broader constituencies, such as the Justice Party in Madras, the Hindu Mahasabha, The All India Muslim League and the Indian National Congress. Ascribing 'spurious political change' to administrative logic, the Cambridge School denies any sudden transformation of elite clubs into mass movements on the advent of Gandhi. In their view, successive doses of constitutional reform were the medicine which revitalized the otherwise languishing all India politics in each phase: the Montford reforms precipitated the Non-Cooperation movement, the Simon Commission provoked the Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Cripps Mission brought on the Quit India Movement. Whenever government proposed any reform at the centre which would affect the distribution of patronage in the locality, the politicians found it necessary to be active in the new national arena of politics. As Gordon Johnson puts it, 'There is no simple chronological growth of nationalism in India: nationalist activity booms and slumps in phase with the national activity of the government.'

---

## 23.6 THE SCEPTICISM OF THE CAMBRIDGE SCHOOL

---

What *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume V, Historiography* (1999) has identified as the 'Cambridge School' questioning 'the nationalist pretensions of the Congress movement' is marked above all by its sceptical tone towards Indian Nationalism. Behind the scepticism lay an assumption about politics in general. Politics is about the individual's search for power, patronage and resources. It is not a reflection of social sentiment or economic position, but a separate arena of activity which possesses its own laws. Disputing the assumption that class, communities or castes supplied the basis for political organisation, D.A. Washbrook claimed that in the pursuit of power some men would do anything to obtain their goal. Power is wanted for its own sake. The basic concern of the politicians is power, office and place rather than a wish to

transform society, particularly in a society like that of the Madras Presidency where wealth was concentrated in a few hands and where no important person wanted to change this scheme of things. In order to establish power, politicians needed the support of various interests, classes and communities. Merchants, landlords, lawyers, Brahmans, untouchables, Hindus, Muslims, in fact all kinds of people were perfectly prepared to work with one another to obtain the common goal – power. The pure scepticism of this view allows little room for any fundamental social and economic conflicts of a general character. Above all, the Cambridge School denies any deep-seated contradiction between imperial rule and its native subjects.

Imperialism did not really control the vast and diverse subcontinent, and its subjects, who were concerned for the most part with local issues, did not really oppose it. As Anil Seal had earlier pronounced in *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, Indians competed with one another, and collaborated with their British rulers. He now went further and observed in the introduction to *Locality, Province and Nation* that it was no longer credible to write about a nationalist movement grounded in common aims, led by men with similar backgrounds, and recruited from widening groups with compatible interests. That movement seemed to him a ramshackle coalition throughout its long career. 'Its unity seems a figment. Its power appears as hollow as that of the imperial authority it was supposedly challenging. Its history was the rivalry between Indian and Indian, its relationship with imperialism that of the mutual clinging of two unsteady men of straw. Consequently, it now seems impossible to organize modern Indian history around the old notions of imperialism and nationalism' (Anil Seal, 'Imperialism and Nationalism', *Locality, Province and Nation*).

This is a sceptical view of Indian nationalism in particular and of politics in general. The Cambridge School follows a purely political approach to the study of Indian politics, setting aside the inputs of economics or sociology. In this approach, the individual behaves in politics, as does the man in the market. One seeks power, the other seeks profit and both are guided by self-interest.

---

## 23.7 THE END OF THE CAMBRIDGE SCHOOL

---

John Gallagher, Vere Harmsworth Professor of Imperial and Naval History in Cambridge University, died, in 1980. In his memory the Cambridge group brought out a collection of essays: Christopher Baker, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal (eds.), *Power, Profit and Politics: Essays on Imperialism, Nationalism and Change in Twentieth Century Politics* (Cambridge 1981). Among other essays it included a joint article by Ayesha Jalal and Anil Seal entitled 'Alternative to Partition: Muslim Politics between the Wars', which stimulated rethinking about partition, and later led to a path breaking book by Ayesha Jalal entitled *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim league and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge, 1985), wherein she showed that a confederation with Muslim consent had been a very real possibility and an alternative to Partition. But *Power, Profit and Politics* was the last collective statement of the Cambridge School. After that the group ceased to exist and the individual authors went their individual ways. Under Anil Seal's supervision, Ayesha Jalal wrote *The Sole Spokesman*, and Joya Chatterji wrote *Bengal Divided; Hindu Communalism and Partition 1932-47* (Cambridge, 1994), but these were individuals works and not part of a collective.

Another collective, *Subaltern Studies*, claimed public attention in 1982. It was critical of the Cambridge School, but in some respects there was a similarity. The Subalternists, too, denied the importance of class division in politics, and they gave primacy to power relations rather than class relations. From the angle of power, they set apart the elite from the

subalterns, and accused the nationalist elite of collaboration with imperialism. They, too, went back to the locality in their search for the roots of subaltern politics. There was an echo of Cambridge here. All in all, the Cambridge School left a visible trail in Indian historiography.

---

## 23.8 EVALUATION

---

Historians in India, Marxist, liberal and subalternist, sharply criticised the Cambridge School's sceptical views. They accused the Cambridge historians of 'Namierism', recalling that the Oxford historian Lewis Namier, too, had reduced Parliamentary politics in England to pure self interest and power play. The various critical reviews in journals included a trenchant attack by Tapan Raychaudhuri in the *Historical Journal*, Vol. XXII, 1979, entitled 'Indian Nationalism as Animal Politics'. Summing up the criticism in *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Historiography* later on, Raychaudhuri conceded that it would not be quite fair to dismiss the Cambridge School as a sophisticated restatement of the old colonial view which saw Indian nationalism as nothing but a masquerade concealing a cynical quest for material gain. Since British rule in India undoubtedly rested on the collaboration of some and the indifference of many, the exploration of this side of Indian politics by the Cambridge School 'has certainly enriched understanding by the entire process.' Raychaudhuri, however, is still critical of the view that genuine opposition to imperialism was 'no more than collaboration by other means' or that nationalism was 'a mere make-believe in the Indian case.' In his view, the Cambridge interpretation takes no account of a pervasive feeling of humiliation, and the need for cultural self-assertion.

Looking back, it is possible to see that the Cambridge School provided historians of India with two useful insights, which they could not afford to ignore even if they were opposed to the over-all tone of the interpretation. In the first place, much politics was, and still is, by its nature local, and there, patron-client linkages cutting across caste, class and community were and still are an everyday truth. Secondly, in a diverse subcontinent where life was lived in so many localities, the tightening administrative-constitutional structure of the Raj did undoubtedly create a political space for central and national concerns which allowed the nationalist movement, psychical and ideological in its origin, to gain momentum. Needless to say, nationalism cannot exist without a national arena of politics, and one consequence of British imperialism in India was the creation of an all-India level in politics over and above the local and regional levels. Acute and sophisticated as the Cambridge interpretation of Indian nationalism is, it still, however, lacks the analytical framework for capturing the fleeting psychical dimension of community and nation.

---

## 23.9 SUMMARY

---

The Cambridge School of Historians believed that the Indian society during the colonial era was basically marked by horizontal and vertical divisions and that the Indian politics was characterised by factional rivalries among the local and regional bosses. Thus the fundamental contradiction under the colonial rule was not between imperialism and the Indian people, but between the Indians themselves. Moreover, according to these historians, the Indian nationalism was not the product of the struggle of the Indian people against colonial exploitation, but between the Indians for getting the benefits given to them by the British rulers. The leaders of the national movement were not inspired by great ideals but were after power and material benefits. Many historians have criticised this school of historiography on the grounds that it takes mind out of human behaviour and reduces nationalism to 'animal politics'.

---

## 23.10 EXERCISES

---

- 1) What do you understand by the 'Cambridge School'? Which historians are generally associated with it?
- 2) How did the Cambridge School emerge? Discuss the basic constituents of its interpretation of Indian history.

