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**Dadabhai Naoroji and the Evolution of the  
Demand for Swaraj**

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## Dadabhai Naoroji and the Evolution of the Demand for Swaraj<sup>1</sup>

Dinyar Patel\*

At the 1906 Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress, Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917) famously called for *swaraj* or self-government for India. This was definitely not the first time the demand had been made—either by Naoroji or other nationalists, especially as the *swadeshi* movement transformed Indian politics—but it probably was the most prominent and publicized demand, till date. In this brief paper, I trace the evolution of Naoroji’s call for swaraj, following the development of his political thought. While Naoroji began publicly speaking about self-government in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, elements of swaraj are conspicuously noticeable in much of his earlier writing, both private and published. I believe that we can trace such elements as far back as the 1860s, when Naoroji first began articulating his drain theory. As such, I outline four distinct phases in Naoroji’s career which culminated in his public declarations that swaraj was the only political option for India.<sup>2</sup> Naoroji had no monopoly on the demand

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Professor Mahesh Rangarajan for inviting me to deliver an earlier version of this paper at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library on 16 July 2012. I also thank Benjamin Siegel and Mou Banerjee for their comments on a draft of this paper presented in October 2012 at the Harvard University South Asia Workshop. While researching in India, I have benefited greatly from the support and guidance of S.R. Mehrotra, without whom my experience in the archives would have been far less rich. I must also thank Mushirul Hasan, director of the National Archives of India, the staff at the National Archives, and the staff of the NMML for their generous support.

<sup>2</sup> Partha Chatterjee’s *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) has served as inspiration for my analysis of Naoroji’s nationalist trajectory. Naoroji’s own life and career both dovetail and conflict with Chatterjee’s three specific “moments”.

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for swaraj—it had been enunciated by other nationalist leaders, and they had arrived at this demand from different philosophical trajectories. But, given Naoroji’s significance to the nationalist movement, and the towering role that he played in the Congress, it is important to understand just how the so-called “Grand Old Man of India” conceptualized self-government, and what philosophies and ideas he drew upon. This is a story, as we will see, that involved interaction with princely states in India, British liberals, European socialists, and an international network of anti-imperialists.

By researching Naoroji’s political career, I am attempting to refocus attention on a figure that has been surprisingly neglected<sup>3</sup> and regularly misunderstood in scholarly literature. The last comprehensive work on Naoroji was written in 1939 by Rustom Masani, an individual who knew his subject personally.<sup>4</sup> Since then, a handful of scholars have addressed Naoroji’s drain theory,<sup>5</sup> his political work in London and brief parliamentary career,<sup>6</sup> and his position within the Parsi community;<sup>7</sup> otherwise, he has been referred to in standard accounts of early Indian

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, two of my previous dissertation fellowship applications have been rejected partly because reviewers did not believe that scholarly literature on Naoroji was so thin; they asked me to search harder.

<sup>4</sup> Rustom Masani, *Dadabhai Naoroji: The Grand Old Man of India* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1939).

<sup>5</sup> B.N. Ganguli, *Dadabhai Naoroji and the Drain Theory* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1965); Savak J. Katrak, *Imperialism Viewed from Below: A Study of the Political and Economic Ideas of Dadabhai Naoroji*, (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Government, Harvard University, 1972) Manu Goswami, *Producing India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Schnerer, *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Antoinette Burton, “Tongues Untied: Lord Salisbury’s ‘Black Man’ and the Boundaries of Imperial Democracy”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, July 2000; Julie Codell, “Decentering and Doubling Imperial Cosmopolitan Discourse in the British Press: Dadabhai Naoroji and M.M. Bhowanaggee”, *Media History*, 2009; Sukanya Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Citizens: Indians in the Late-Victorian Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Eckehard Kulke, *The Parsees in India* (Munich: Verlag, 1974); John Hinnells, *Zoroastrians in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Jesse Palsetia, *The Parsis of India: Preservation of Identity in Bombay City* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

nationalism. Yet, even in such accounts, such as Anil Seal's *Emergence of Indian Nationalism* or John McLane's *Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress*, Naoroji plays a surprisingly small and oftentimes timid role.<sup>8</sup> Part of this neglect and mischaracterization can be explained by the relatively dim view of early nationalism and the Congress moderates that was common amongst political radicals by the early 1900s and a broader nationalist mainstream by the Gandhian era. Indeed, as an acknowledged leader of the moderate camp, Naoroji in his lifetime faced stern criticism by individuals such as Shyamji Krishnavarma, who found him far too soft on the British. Mohandas K. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* opens with the consideration of such criticism of the Grand Old Man.<sup>9</sup> But another reason for scholarly neglect is that Naoroji's personal papers are both forbiddingly vast and extremely difficult to work with due to their disorganization and variable state of decay. Quite simply, few scholars have attempted to consult a significant breadth of these papers.<sup>10</sup>

Having now consulted around 10,000 of the 30,000 documents that survive in the Naoroji Papers, in addition to other related materials, I am able to present Dadabhai Naoroji as someone much more complex and, occasionally, more radical in his political beliefs than has been commonly assumed.<sup>11</sup> Naoroji, it is true, regularly declared his loyalty to the British empire and spoke of the "blessings" that British rule had brought to India. His version of swaraj was specifically under "British paramountcy"; in other words, he sought dominion or commonwealth

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<sup>8</sup> A major exception is S.R. Mehrotra's *The Emergence of the Indian National Congress* (Delhi: Vikas, 1977).

<sup>9</sup> Anthony J. Parel, ed., *Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1997), pp. 13-14.

<sup>10</sup> For more information on the history of the Naoroji Papers, see S.R. Mehrotra, "The Dadabhai Naoroji Papers", *Indian Archives*, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Arguing that Naoroji's politics was radical is a controversial proposition. While I, in no way claim Naoroji's adherence or attraction to the radical tradition of Tilak or the revolutionary tradition of Savarkar and Krishnavarma (indeed, Naoroji was fiercely critical of the latter), it is quite obvious that his politics was considered uncomfortably radical by the Indian National Congress establishment, his moderate party peers, and many British friends by the early 1900s.

status within the empire.<sup>12</sup> But at the same time, he qualified his pro-British statements with round condemnation of how India and the empire were administered in reality; he questioned how Indians could remain “loyal” in the face of such gross injustice. In both cases, Naoroji’s language was far stronger than those of moderate Indian nationalists or many British anti-imperialists. His private correspondence, furthermore, can oftentimes reveal an even more radical and progressive individual. To the extent that he actually believed in the preservation of the empire, Naoroji appeared to limit its scope to broad commercial, cultural, and educational partnerships rather than the bondage of colonialism; where India was at full equality with Britain and domains such as Canada and Australia. In the four stages of his nationalist thought, therefore, I have drawn attention to Naoroji’s steady evolution of a concept of universal rights, and his positioning of Indian political reform with various other progressive causes. Naoroji’s adherence to such a concept helps explain, in part, why he found common cause with British trade unionists, religious non-conformists, pro-suffragists and a variety of other individuals who further influenced and refined his political thought.

### **I: Advocating Reform, Theorizing the Drain**

Dadabhai Naoroji was born in Bombay, in the neighborhood of Khadak, on 4 September 1825 to a priestly Parsi family.<sup>13</sup> He was, from the beginning, a reformer and a critic. Several early nationalists

<sup>12</sup> It must be remembered that the Congress only called for *purna swaraj* in 1929.

<sup>13</sup> The question of where Naoroji was born is indicative of the poor state of existing research on the Grand Old Man. Several biographies posit that he was born in Navsari and at least one suggests Mandvi in Kutch. In fact, as Naoroji stated many times in interviews and articles, he was born in Khadak, a locality in the Mandvi area of Bombay—hundreds of miles away from either Navsari or Mandvi city. Navsari, however, has been commonly mistaken as being Naoroji’s hometown. There is a house in Navsari that is known as the “Naoroji birthplace” (most likely an ancestral family house) and even Mohandas K. Gandhi, while passing through the town in 1921, got his facts slightly wrong. “This is the birth-place of the late Dadabhai Naoroji”, he told a Navsari audience on 21 April 1921. “I visited his house. For me, it is a place of pilgrimage” (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 23, p. 74).

approached the issue of Indian political reform only after serious involvement in social and religious reform within their communities. Naoroji serves as an excellent example of this phenomenon. In the early 1850s, Naoroji established a reputation as a crusading young reformer in Bombay Parsi society. He helped establish and edit the newspaper *Rast Gofar*, which railed against the dominance of conservative *sethias* on the Bombay Parsi Panchayet, the community's apex governing body, and played a leading role in the Rahanumae Mazdayasnan Sabha, an organization that attempted to rid Zoroastrianism of so-called "foreign accretions", dispense of certain rituals and customs labeled as backward, and return the religion to its supposed simplicity.<sup>14</sup> Naoroji was an especially significant figure in what was then a very controversial plank in the Parsi reform movement: promotion of women's freedoms and rights, especially the right to education. Both Masani's biography and some of the earliest surviving correspondence in the Naoroji Papers attest to this.<sup>15</sup> As such, some of the biggest battles that Naoroji waged in the early 1850s was convincing Parsi fathers to send their daughters to school or promoting the concept that men and women could eat their meals together at the same table.

In all of these activities—the rationalization of Zoroastrian religious doctrine and ritual, reform of the Panchayet, and the promotion of women's rights—we can detect the strong influence of his education at the Elphinstone Institution, which was, at the time, western India's premier place of learning. His liberal, English-language education here no doubt infused him with ideas of rights, freedoms, and liberties, and he received strong encouragement in his reformist campaigns from his British professors and teachers, some of whom turned out to be lifelong friends and correspondents. Naoroji's steadfast belief in the justness and magnanimity of the British people—something that he stubbornly hung onto in spite of the many opportunities afforded to him throughout his lifetime to discard this notion—also stemmed from these formative years in Elphinstone and the support he received in his reform campaigns

<sup>14</sup> See *Rahnuma-e Majdisna Sabha* (Bombay: Mumbai Daftar, 1861) in Gujarati.

<sup>15</sup> Masani, pp. 44-47; Erskine Perry to Naoroji, 6 May 1854, Dadabhai Naoroji Papers, New Delhi: National Archives of India, 6 May, 1854.

from British administrators such as Erskine Perry, at the time the chief justice of the Bombay Supreme Court (predecessor to the High Court). A study of Naoroji's time at the institution, where he was both a distinguished pupil and a professor of mathematics and natural science, becoming the first-ever Indian appointed to a professorial position—would provide for a fascinating glimpse into the making of one of India's premier liberal voices. Unfortunately, it is nearly impossible to undertake. There is almost no relevant surviving correspondence in the Naoroji Papers and the scanty, weathered records of Elphinstone College provide hardly any insight into Naoroji's formative early years.<sup>16</sup> What is abundantly evident, however, is that Naoroji left Elphinstone convinced that Western education was, as he often repeated, the “greatest blessing” that the British had given India, and throughout his life he remained firmly committed to expanding the scope of education in India and supporting those Indians who sought advanced educational opportunities in the United Kingdom.<sup>17</sup>

It is difficult to say precisely when Naoroji broadened his focus beyond the narrow world of Parsi social and religious reform to instead, devote the bulk of his time toward Indian political matters. Hardly any of Naoroji's papers from before 1870 still exist, and we are left with a handful of primary and secondary sources for clues. I believe that, while the seeds of this transformation were sowed in Bombay, this

<sup>16</sup> Published reports of the Bombay Board of Education yield some insight into Naoroji's tenure as a student and a professor, remarking on his prowess in political economy and mathematics and, in later years, featuring sample algebra examinations that he gave to his pupils. Naheed F. Ahmad's work also highlights the importance of the Elphinstone Institute and College in molding Naoroji's fellow members of “Young Bombay”. See N.F. Ahmad “The Elphinstone College, Bombay, 1827-1890: A Case Study in 19<sup>th</sup> Century English Education”, in Mushirul Hasan, ed., *Knowledge, Power, & Politics: Educational Institutions in India* (New Delhi: Lotus, 1998), pp. 289-429.

<sup>17</sup> By 1900, an embittered Naoroji complained to the secretary of state for India, Lord George Hamilton, that access to western education was “this one blessed act of the British” amongst a heap of broken promises. Naoroji to Hamilton, in “Correspondence with Mr. Dadabhai Naoroji regarding the eligibility of natives of India for appointments made by the S of S in England to [1] the Educational Department [2] the Police Department [3] the Public Works Department from Cooper's Hill”, India Office Records, London: British Library, 12 October, 1900, (hereafter referred to as IOR).



critical turn took place not in India but in England.<sup>18</sup> In 1855, when he was not yet 30 years old, Naoroji joined some members of the Cama family of Bombay—prominent Parsi traders who had been involved in opium<sup>19</sup> and cotton—in opening up the first Indian business in Great Britain. Naoroji’s first foray into business appears to have been spectacularly unsuccessful and he resigned from the Camas’ firm in 1858. But it was here in London and Liverpool that he came face-to-face with many of the consequences of British imperialism: the yawning gap between development in India and England, the British textile manufacturing industry, the opium trade, and the fortunes reaped by a select few upon India’s poverty. It was also here that Naoroji joined the currents of British political and social life, taking an interest in Liberal politics and realizing the sheer level of ignorance amongst the British public on Indian political and economic subjects.

During the 1860s, when he divided his time between India and England and continued his career as a businessman in the cotton trade,

<sup>18</sup> This turn certainly occurred by 1859. While residing in Liverpool that year, Naoroji made his formal entrance into the world of Indian political affairs when he took up the case of Rustamji Hirjibhai Wadia, a candidate for the Indian civil service who found himself unceremoniously disqualified from consideration due to a sudden change in the age limit set for Indians. Masani, p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> The Parsis were, of course, major players in the opium trade. See Amar Farooqi, *Opium City: The Making of Early Victorian Bombay* (Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2005) and Madhavi Thampi and Shalini Saxena, *China and the Making of Bombay* (Mumbai: K.R. Cama Oriental Institute, 2009). Naoroji abhorred the opium trade and took pains to distance himself from the Camas’ continued involvement in it. According to a speech that he delivered in London in 1886, he joined the Cama business only on the condition that “I should have nothing to do with opium”. Naoroji’s condemnation of the opium trade became a powerful part of his drain theory. In the same speech, Naoroji quoted from a letter he wrote in 1880 to the secretary of state for India: “this Christian, highly civilized, and humane England forces a ‘heathen’ and ‘barbarous’ Power to take this ‘poison,’ and tempts a vast human race to use it, and to degenerate and demoralize themselves with this ‘poison!’ And why? Because India cannot fill up the remorseless drain; so China must be dragged in to make it up, even though it be by being poisoned”. See “India and the Opium Question” in A.M. Zaidi, ed., *The Grand Little Man of India: Dadabhai Naoroji, Speeches & Writings*, vol. 1 (Delhi: S. Chand & CO., 1984), pp. 191-92.

Naoroji emerged as a premier spokesman of Indian affairs. In 1866, for example, he offered a stinging rebuke to the president of the London Ethnological Society, John Crawfurd—who had lectured on the moral, intellectual, and cultural inferiority of the “Asiatics” in comparison to Europeans—by employing an array of expert opinions on the civilizational achievements of Indians, Persians, and Chinese.<sup>20</sup> This was one of Naoroji’s earliest uses of a technique that Christopher Bayly has described as “counter-preaching”: responding to racist or derogatory notions of India or “the East” by pointing out the many flaws in western society.<sup>21</sup> This technique equalized the westerner’s supposed moral high ground and it proved effective for Naoroji as he began, in the 1860s, to formulate his *drain theory*.

I believe the drain theory to be the first phase in the evolution of Naoroji’s political thought as well as an important precursor to his demand for swaraj. In addition to being an economic critique of imperialism, it exposed a fundamental moral wrong in British rule. The theory, premised on the belief that British imperialism was directly responsible for Indian poverty, was not Naoroji’s alone, although he popularized it to a far greater extent than his intellectual predecessors.<sup>22</sup> In scholarly examination of the drain theory, much emphasis is put on the role of British commerce and industry in depleting India of its capital, raw produce, and resources. While Naoroji was not blind to this, he put particular emphasis on the role of the government of India in bleeding the country: Indian revenue was being used on imperial military campaigns and to shore up British domestic finances. In particular, he found fault with the government’s reliance on British civil servants, whose salaries came from the pockets of Indian taxpayers but were

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<sup>20</sup> See “The European and Asiatic Races” in Chunilal Lallubhai Parekh, ed., *Speeches, Addresses and Writings (On Indian Politics) of the Hon’ble Dadabhai Naoroji* (Bombay: Caxton Printing Works, 1887). Also see my analysis of Naoroji’s lecture in my unpublished paper, “Naoroji and the Parsi Zoroastrian Reform Movement; An Analysis of Four Papers Delivered in Great Britain”, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 8-9.

<sup>22</sup> See J.V. Naik, “Forerunners of Dadabhai Naoroji’s Drain Theory”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24 November 2001, pp. 4428-32.



ultimately spent abroad in England when the civil servants returned home. In other words, such revenue was not recycled back into the Indian economy, contributing to India's rapid impoverishment. Therefore, as Naoroji frequently pointed out, India was "bleeding", a situation that Naoroji proclaimed as "evil" as well as being "un-British".<sup>23</sup>

It is no mistake, therefore, that Naoroji took a very early role in demanding the increased Indianization of the civil services. After all, the political corollary to the drain theory is that, if more Indians were employed in the government, and if more Indians were in control of policy, less capital would be drained away from India, and more of it would be invested back into the country. This would be more economically just and, therefore, promote *political* justice under the Raj. Thus, from the 1860s onward, Naoroji established a strong inverse relationship between the wealth and welfare of India and a foreign-dominated government. It was a powerful critique of imperialism. We have evidence for this in some of the few surviving letters from this period. Naoroji's correspondence in the 1870s with Erskine Perry, then a member of the India Council in London, consists of polarized debate over the efficacy of the British Indian administration, with Naoroji taking a pronounced "pessimist view" and both men agreeing that the Indianization of the civil services was a necessary step.<sup>24</sup>

## **II: Engagement with Princely States**

Naoroji now drew one more important conclusion from the drain theory: if a foreign-dominated administration was economically disadvantageous, then India's numerous princely states—which enjoyed a degree of autonomy from British control—should be more prosperous

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<sup>23</sup> Speaking to a British audience in Walthamstow in suburban London in 1900, Naoroji cleverly played on Anglo-French enmity to explain why this drain was so pernicious. "Suppose a body of Frenchmen were your rulers, and that out of the hundred million pounds of taxes they took ten to twenty million pounds each year; you would then be said to be bleeding. The nation would then be losing a portion of its life. How is India bled? I supposed your own case with Frenchmen as your rulers. We Indians are governed by you". *Poverty and UnBritish Rule in India*, (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1901), p. 644.

<sup>24</sup> For example, See Perry to Naoroji, DNP, 19 April 1879.

and, hopefully, better run. Consequently, Naoroji developed a strong interest in princely states, particularly those in Gujarat and Kathiawar—from the 1860s onward. Academic literature has mostly failed to acknowledge the role that princely states played in early nationalism: in the late 1800s, Indian leaders gave a central role to such states in their campaigns for broader social and political reform. Naoroji evaluated administrative practices in native states and compared them with British India, also becoming an outspoken critic of the British Indian government's attempts to either annex certain states or greatly diminish the powers of their rulers.<sup>25</sup> Around 1869, Naoroji toured Kathiawar and met many of its princes, including the rulers of Gondal and Kutch, who became his lifelong supporters. In the princely states, he sensed an opportunity to test out his theory of their relative wealth and also realized that these domains could become important political laboratories for Indian administration. Lastly, but very importantly, he realized that the princes had vast fortunes and could become financial patrons for various Indian political campaigns. Thus, we arrive at the second stage in the development of Naoroji's conception of swaraj: his engagement with princely India. Naoroji became an avid supporter of princely states' interests and also advised on matters of governance. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, Naoroji acted as a political agent in London for many princes and spoke on their behalf in disputes with the British Indian government. As a result, he caught the eye of the *gaikwad* of Baroda, Mulharrao, who in 1872 offered the *diwanship* of his state to Naoroji. After consulting with friends both in India and England, Naoroji accepted the *gaikwad*'s offer and arrived in Baroda in late 1873.<sup>26</sup>

In order to spearhead economic and political reform in the state, Naoroji appointed some of the brightest stars of Bombay—Kazi

<sup>25</sup> In 1868, for example, he petitioned the India Office not to devolve certain administrative responsibilities in Kutch upon the *bhayads*, a group of local *zamindars*. Naoroji's argument was that only strong, autonomous princely states could set in motion political and administrative reforms that would benefit the people. See Naoroji's "Memo" in "Kutch: Relations of the Rao with his Bhyad", IOR. Naoroji was also a very close friend of Evans Bell, a major in the British Indian army, who wrote prolifically against the policy of annexation, particularly with regard to Mysore.

<sup>26</sup> See Naoroji to Perry, DNP, 6 December 1873.

Shahabudin, Bal Mangesh Wagle, and Hormusji Wadya—to his administration.<sup>27</sup> He even sought out Mahadev Govind Ranade, who ultimately declined in order to not jeopardize his judicial career.<sup>28</sup> Naoroji tried to import much of the liberal leadership of Bombay to a domain where they could exercise real power. According to Wadya, Naoroji spoke in very lofty terms about their mission in Baroda: he referred to their administration as “the cause”.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, Naoroji could not have picked a worse time to come to the state. As diwan, he was caught between a maharaja tainted by charges of corruption (British authorities appointed a committee in late 1873 to investigate various grievances of the gaikwad’s subjects) and an intransigent British resident, Robert Phayre, who, for months, refused to officially recognize Naoroji’s new position at the darbar. Phayre’s alarmist appraisal of Naoroji, documented in Residency records, is significant as it points toward growing Anglo-Indian anxiety about the rising class of articulate Indian critics of the Raj. Referring to Naoroji’s connections to the East India Association of London, which Naoroji helped establish in 1866 as a debating society and political lobby for Indian affairs, Phayre described the new diwan as a “political adventurer” who was committing significant “mischief” within princely India.<sup>30</sup> The two individuals had a stormy relationship in Baroda culminating in accusations that eventually reached Parliament.<sup>31</sup> The Bombay government, meanwhile, removed

<sup>27</sup> Kazi Shahabudin was a fellow member of the East India Association and had previously been the diwan of Kutch; Naoroji appointed him as chief of the revenue department. Bal Mangesh Wagle had been one of Naoroji’s students at the Elphinstone Institution; now, he was assigned by his old professor as chief justice. Hormusji Wadya was a young barrister who had attended University College in London; he became chief magistrate and Naoroji’s personal assistant. Masani, p. 146.

<sup>28</sup> Baroda darbar *yad* of 22 January 1874, in “Baroda Administration Report for 1873-74,” IOR.

<sup>29</sup> Masani, p. 148.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Phayre to Charles Gonne, in “Confidential Letters. Administration Report for 1872-73,” IOR, 29 April, 1873.

<sup>31</sup> See the various parliamentary papers or “blue books” published in relation to the Baroda Commission of 1875. Also see Naoroji’s rebuttal, which he failed to get presented before Parliament, “A Statement in Reply to Remarks in the Baroda Blue Books of 1875, Concerning Dadabhai Naoroji and His Colleagues” (Bombay, 1875).

Phayre from his position by late 1874, but not before an attempt had been made—supposedly by Malharrao Gaikwad, who was thereafter removed from the throne as well—to poison him with drops of arsenic put in his morning glass of pomelo juice.<sup>32</sup>

Baroda was, therefore, an obstacle as well as an important step for Naoroji in the development of his political thought and practice. While he succeeded in overhauling much of the state's judicial and financial machinery, he ultimately tendered his resignation by the end of 1874, returning to Bombay. His aborted term as diwan, however, did not much dim Naoroji's long-term interest and involvement in princely state affairs. He remained in close contact with them for the remainder of his political career: the Naoroji Papers includes correspondence with the maharajas and officials of big states such as Indore, Mysore, Travancore, and Hyderabad as well as smaller principalities such as Chamba, Dharampur, and Akalkot. Naoroji enjoyed excellent relations with Mulharrao's successor, Sayajirao. Significantly, many of his colleagues—such as Hormusji Wadya and Kazi Shahabudin—remained involved in the governance of princely states. Wadya, who was also one of Naoroji's protégés, established his own career as a barrister in Kathiawad and an important intermediary between Naoroji and the Kathiawad princes. His views on princely states, expressed in a letter to Naoroji written in 1894, could easily stand in for those of his mentor: "there is no cause better calculated to secure India's national regeneration in her present circumstances than the ensured wellbeing and independent progress of our Native States."<sup>33</sup>

### **III: Before Parliament and the British Public**

For the remainder of the 1870s and the early 1880s, Naoroji plunged into local politics in Bombay, serving on the Bombay Municipal Corporation and engaging with local self-government proposals brought

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<sup>32</sup> See Ian Copland's article, which contextualizes these incidents within a longer period of crisis in Baroda. "The Baroda Crisis of 1873-77: A Study in Governmental Rivalry", *Modern Asian Studies*, 1968, pp. 97-123.

<sup>33</sup> DNP, 3 November 1894.



up during Lord Ripon's tenure as viceroy.<sup>34</sup> In the spring of 1886, however, he returned to London with a new ambition: to run for the British Parliament.<sup>35</sup> The third stage in the evolution of Naoroji's political thought focuses specifically on the imperial metropole. Having established an effective critique of imperialism, and having tried his own hand at administration in a princely state, Naoroji now attempted to directly influence British colonial policy—both through Parliament and by building up a wide pro-India coalition amongst the British public. During his previous periods of residence in the United Kingdom, Naoroji had taken on the mantle of a representative on behalf of Indian interests and make use of institutions such as the East India Association to bring together political elites connected with Indian affairs. His objective in the 1880s was much more ambitious: to bring Indian demands directly to the British electorate and thereby make India a mainstream political issue in the United Kingdom. The road to Indian political reform, Naoroji believed, went through Westminster as well as Whitehall. Political reform, as Naoroji defined it at this stage in his career, meant an Indian dominated civil service, the creation of representative institutions, stopping the drain of wealth from India, and some sort of mechanism of Indian representation in the imperial capital city. It was not a piecemeal programme of disparate reforms such as that advocated by many other liberal nationalists—it was a call for political empowerment.

It is important to note that, in the mid-1880s, Naoroji was extremely optimistic—and naively optimistic—about the ability to effect change in Indian policy by directly lobbying British electors and the general public. This is very apparent in the lengthy letters that he sent to his friend and political ally, William Wedderburn—who was then nearing retirement from the Bombay civil service—relaying his progress in securing the Liberal parliamentary ticket for Holborn in central London. “One thing becomes more and more evident, that if strenuous and continuous efforts were made to educate the English Public & Parliament

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<sup>34</sup> Masani remains the most valuable source for learning more on this phase of Naoroji's career; see ch. 15. I have yet to attempt accessing the archives of the erstwhile Bombay Municipal Corporation.

<sup>35</sup> Some correspondence in the Naoroji Papers hints that Naoroji was considering a future parliamentary run from at least the early 1870s.

in our wants and just rights, they can be had”, he wrote in May 1886. “Some sacrifice and exertion on the part of India are needed. Our case is so clear and just that it does not fail to go home to the Englishman, as soon as it is clearly put before him in a way he can easily understand.”<sup>36</sup> Naoroji’s faith in the British people’s capacity for justice and righteousness was perhaps at its zenith at this point in time. In spite of how incredible such rosy optimism might sound to us today, Naoroji’s appraisals were not unusual. Lalmohan Ghosh had, after all, attempted a parliamentary run the year before, premised on the same grounds of bringing Indian affairs before public and Parliament. Numerous other prominent Indians, including W.C. Bonnerjee and R.C. Dutt, also attempted or considered running for Parliament. Significantly, however, other political leaders were less convinced about the efficacy of this strategy for political reform. Wedderburn was one such skeptic. “[F]or the most part we regret your determination to remain in England”, he told Naoroji in September 1886, arguing that it was much more important to undertake political organization in India itself, especially given the recent launch of the Indian National Congress.<sup>37</sup>

In spite of losing his campaign in Holborn in 1886,<sup>38</sup> Naoroji succeeded in the late 1880s and early 1890s in building up an impressive body of support for India amongst the political elite, middle class and, increasingly, the working class. In this sense, he was markedly and revolutionarily different from other Indian political leaders operating in England. Naoroji veered strongly to the political left and networked furiously. He reached out to radical Liberals, religious non-conformists,

<sup>36</sup> Naoroji to Wedderburn, DNP, 14 May 1886.

<sup>37</sup> Wedderburn to Naoroji, DNP, 13 September 1886.

<sup>38</sup> Naoroji himself realized that this campaign, staged in a very Conservative constituency and against a popular incumbent, was a “forlorn hope”. By waging this campaign, however, Naoroji hoped to boost his profile amongst the British public and within the Liberal party leadership. “However, success or failure, the Indian cause will be advanced a stage this election”, he wrote to Wedderburn. “The great difficulty I have to contend with, ‘we don’t know you, we cannot experiment at present,’ is the reply I get. This difficulty I must break through, and this contest will be the best means of doing so, especially it being in the heart of London.” Naoroji to Wedderburn, DNP, 25 June 1886.



trade unionists, working men's unions, socialists, early Labourites, Irish home rulers, and feminists. Correspondence with some of these individuals reveals that Naoroji struggled hard to link the notion of Indian political rights with concepts such as workers' rights, Irish self-rule, or women's suffrage. This was part of Naoroji's emerging philosophy of universal political rights, in which India had an important and special stake. As a result, we can find in the Naoroji Papers letters written by women activists<sup>39</sup> or factory workers who pledged their support for Indian political reform and an Indianized bureaucracy. One working man from Lancashire, James Blackshaw, wrote to Naoroji in 1898 that he was speaking about India at public meetings and that he believed that people in Lancashire now saw that Indian reform was in their interests, as well.<sup>40</sup> Naoroji also launched a wide and varied speaking programme across the United Kingdom, touring cities and industrial centers. All of this work paid off: in 1892, he was elected to the House of Commons from Central Finsbury in London. Shortly after his election, Naoroji received a letter from a Charles W. Barker, a political organizer amongst rural farmhands, who stated that "you may be sure that by no class of our countrymen is your return to Parliament a matter for greater congratulation than it is among our agricultural workers".<sup>41</sup> Agricultural workers might strike us today as remote a support base as possible for an Indian political reformer. However, this letter hints at Naoroji's popularity and recognition amongst an immensely wide breadth of individuals in the United Kingdom.

Dadabhai Naoroji, MP became a celebrated figure in India. Letters and telegrams of congratulation streamed in from across the country—Bengal, Kashmir, Madras, and the Deccan, as well as from Indian outposts abroad such as Guyana, Zanzibar, and Shanghai. I strongly believe that Naoroji was the first modern Indian political leader with national, rather than regional, appeal, and the shoals of congratulatory

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<sup>39</sup> Some such activists and pro-suffragists include Josephine Butler and Elizabeth Clarke Wolstenholme Elmy. Naoroji also might have known the founder of the Women's Social and Political Union, Emmeline Pankhurst.

<sup>40</sup> Blackshaw to Naoroji, DNP, 30 May 1898.

<sup>41</sup> Barker to Naoroji, DNP, 19 July 1892.

messages in 1892 help bear out this hypothesis.<sup>42</sup> Although Naoroji was based thousands of kilometers away from the subcontinent, he remained deeply involved in Indian political affairs. During the late 1880s and early 1890s, this meant shepherding the Congress.<sup>43</sup> Naoroji believed that one of the Congress' greatest tasks was aiding political work in London; to this extent, he played an influential role in the Congress' British Committee, established in 1889, where Wedderburn and Allan Octavian Hume also played an important role.<sup>44</sup> But at the same time, Naoroji also saw the Congress as a means for national political consolidation and a potential mass organization.<sup>45</sup> Writing to Allan Octavian Hume in December 1887, Naoroji called for "petitions signed by millions", a line that tells us that he foresaw the Congress as becoming something much more than an elite debating club.<sup>46</sup> He was particularly keen to make sure that the Congress became a representative body, calling for the recruitment of people of all classes and laying stress on the retention of Muslims within its fold. Additionally, S.R. Mehrotra has uncovered a detailed transcript of the first Congress revealing that Naoroji advocated something very close to self-rule at that 1885 meeting: the transfer of the "actual government of India" from Britain to India, under "the simple controlling power of the

<sup>42</sup> Another interesting phenomenon is the circulation of photographs, printed paintings, and images of Naoroji. Within just the Parsi community, for example, these photographs appear to have been a regular fixture in family albums from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But these portraits and pictures had a much wider circulation: I encountered framed portrait of Naoroji in an old non-Parsi house in Chennai, for example. A letter from an R.K. Tarachand also indicates that copies of Naoroji's horoscope were sold in the bazaars of Bombay for one anna each. Tarachand to Naoroji, DNP, 12 September 1903.

<sup>43</sup> S.R. Mehrotra's comprehensive study is necessary to consult in order to contextualize Naoroji's career within the early Congress. *A History of the Indian National Congress*, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Vikas, 1995).

<sup>44</sup> For the most recent study of the British Committee, see Prabha Ravi Shankar, *The British Committee of the Indian National Congress, 1889-1921* (New Delhi: Promilla, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> S.R. Mehrotra informs me, for example, that he believes Naoroji fully supported Hume's mass vernacular pamphlet campaigns. *Personal correspondence*.

<sup>46</sup> Naoroji to Hume, DNP, 30 December 1887.



Secretary of State [of India], and of Parliament”.<sup>47</sup> This was an Indianized bureaucracy in its most extreme form. It is no mistake, therefore, that Naoroji concentrated his efforts in the House of Commons on establishing simultaneous civil service examinations in India and England, something that would pave the way toward the creation of such a bureaucracy.

#### **IV: Socialism, Anti-Imperialism, and Swaraj**

If the early 1890s was a period of giddy triumph for Naoroji and his nationalist colleagues, then 1895 came like a crash. Naoroji was defeated in the parliamentary elections of that year. At home in India, there was a widening gulf between moderates and radicals, especially in places like Poona. Famine, the plague, and the British Indian government’s highhanded response to the epidemic, soon added to the despair. On top of all these miseries, the new Conservative government in London took a much dimmer view about Indian political reform. The turn of the century was an extremely critical moment in Naoroji’s political career. Here unfolded the fourth and final stage in Naoroji’s political thought. Disappointed by his experience in Parliament, where India mustered very little interest amongst other MPs, and also disillusioned by policy reversals after 1895, Naoroji turned even further to the left. It was at this stage that he began publicly articulating self-government as India’s primary political objective, decisively moving beyond the scheme he had outlined at the 1885 Congress. Indians had to take control of their own political destiny.

If Naoroji could be described as adhering to the liberal political tradition in India—most recently explicated by Bayly—prior to 1895, then he became markedly different after his electoral defeat. Refusing to slow down in spite of being in his 70s, Naoroji began identifying more as a radically anti-imperialist socialist or labourite—and his thoughts on Indian self-government were ultimately influenced by the political left, as well. Naoroji already had a decades-long association with individuals in the United Kingdom whom Gregory Claeys has termed “imperial skeptics”: anti-imperialists as well as other individuals

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<sup>47</sup> Mehrotra, *A History of the Indian National Congress*, p. 26.

of various political persuasions who nevertheless saw deep moral, political, and economic wrongs in the imperial status quo.<sup>48</sup> Naoroji now stepped up associations with such individuals. Henry M. Hyndman, the so-called father of British socialism, was a major influence on Naoroji at this stage.<sup>49</sup> In 1897, he teamed up with Naoroji to launch a nationwide protest against the government's indifference to the Indian famine and plague. Hyndman prophesized violent revolution in India if political change did not happen. After 1895, we see Naoroji expressing precisely the same sentiments—imminent and violent catastrophe in India due to British misrule—even in his communications with Lord George Hamilton, the Conservative secretary of state for India, who saw Naoroji's statements as almost treasonous.<sup>50</sup>

Another of Naoroji's correspondents was George Freeman, an American journalist with the *New York Sun*. Freeman and Naoroji swapped views about American and British colonial exploits; additionally, Freeman introduced Naoroji to the growing band of American anti-imperialists, who, in light of the recent Spanish-American War, saw in Naoroji's writings about British India an implicit warning against American imperial expansion.<sup>51</sup> Through Freeman, Naoroji's writings even found their way to William Jennings Bryan, the progressive American leader.<sup>52</sup> In his collaboration with Hyndman, Freeman, and several others, Naoroji further broadened and internationalized his thought on universal rights, contextualizing British colonialism in India into a wider nexus of injustice that needed urgent redress. Significantly, it is in the 1890s and early 1900s that Naoroji became involved in campaigning for the rights of Indians in South Africa, passing on regular reports from a young Mohandas K. Gandhi to the Colonial and India offices.<sup>53</sup> While he eventually found Hyndman too revolutionary, and

<sup>48</sup> See Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British Critics of Empire, 1850-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>49</sup> There are approximately 70 letters from Hyndman in the Naoroji Papers and these constitute some of the most interesting items in the collection. Tragically, hardly any of Naoroji's letters to Hyndman survive.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Hamilton to Naoroji, 6 December 1900.

<sup>51</sup> Freeman to Naoroji, DNP, 15 December 1898.

<sup>52</sup> Freeman to Naoroji, DNP, 12 December 1898.

<sup>53</sup> "Correspondence with Mr. Naoroji Respecting the Position of Indians in Transvaal and Orange River", IOR, 1903.



while his correspondence with Freeman petered out by 1901, Naoroji remained deeply involved in socialist, labourite, and anti-imperialist causes. In 1904, he attended the International Socialist Congress in Amsterdam where, along with Hyndman, he spoke on the need for Indian self-government. As Naoroji made one last, desperate attempt to re-enter Parliament—through North Lambeth in 1906—he increasingly distanced himself from the Liberal party and sought out alliances with the nascent Labour party and Hyndman’s Social Democratic Federation.

Naoroji’s conception of *swaraj*, on which he elaborated from 1903 onward, visibly drew upon the first three phases of his nationalist thought. This is perhaps most apparent in two letters that he wrote to the prime minister, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, in early 1906, explaining why self-government was “a matter of life and death to India”. Firstly, Naoroji cited the economic drain. British rule in India, Naoroji maintained, was “economically an unceasing foreign invasion”, and even a single day’s delay in the granting of responsible government meant “the crime and inhumanity of deliberately killing and starving a great people”. The drain, importantly, could only be stopped by deep reforms in civil service recruitment—here once more was the drain theory’s political corollary—and Naoroji now went beyond the standard position of simultaneous examinations and called for all exams to be held in India alone. From his radicalized position on the political left, Naoroji even suggested that immediate self-rule was necessary as a form of “reparation” for the evils of the drain sustained under the Raj, a sentiment remarkably prescient of modern-day debates over the political and economic accountability of formerly imperial states to their ex-colonies. Secondly, Naoroji relied upon the concepts of princely state autonomy in order to illustrate how self-government would benefit both India and the empire, with which India would maintain a loose affiliation. He cited Mysore, where the British had restored the Wodeyar dynasty to power in 1881, as an example of how a state in “distress and debt” became a “‘model’ and prosperous Indian State” under an Indianized bureaucracy and leadership. Similar to the case in Mysore, autonomy for India would mean better governance, more prosperity and—in a pitch to his audience—the elimination of a major cause of Indian grievances toward the British. Lastly, Naoroji asserted

his faith in a responsible British Parliament. He urged the immediate abolition of the Council of India, a “retrogressive and retarding official body” that had foiled many of Naoroji’s attempts at Indian reform that he pursued through the House of Commons. Any metropolitan control of Indian affairs would lie in Westminster rather than Whitehall. Naoroji concluded his second letter with his familiar appeal to the conscience of the “just” British people, although a strain of pessimism is apparent: “What a strange thing—a free, civilized people like the British holding another great people whose civilization dates thousands of years old, in a barbarous thralldom of destructive brute force, and causing their cruel death and destitution”.<sup>54</sup>

Naoroji’s public declarations of support for swaraj did not sit well with all leaders in the Congress. In 1903, he exchanged a series of letters with R.C. Dutt, imploring him to stop demanding incremental changes, such as the adjustment of land revenue rates, and instead demand self-government.<sup>55</sup> His opinions probably rattled more cautious nationalists such as Dinsha Wacha, who, years later, also took issue with Naoroji’s support of Annie Besant’s Home Rule League. But Naoroji’s declaration of support for self-government was incredibly significant for the future of Indian nationalism. Coming from such a prominent and senior nationalist, it provided the Congress with a clear objective beyond the realm of petitions and resolutions. It probably carried much more weight than similar enunciations from radical leaders such as Tilak. It also, albeit temporarily, papered over differences between the Congress’ moderate and radical factions: individuals of both persuasions looked up to him as a leader and appropriated him to their cause.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Naoroji to Henry Campbell-Bannerman, “1906” and 3 April 1906, DNP. The first letter, a draft document that I found in the Naoroji Papers, is simply marked “1906” though I imagine it was composed shortly after his electoral defeat in North Lambeth in January. I have not found final drafts of these letters within Campbell-Bannerman’s papers in London.

<sup>55</sup> See Naoroji’s letters to Dutt, *R.C. Dutt Papers*, New Delhi: National Archives of India, 3 and 5 July 1903.

<sup>56</sup> At a meeting in late September 1907, to mark Naoroji’s final departure from London back to Bombay, “Bande Mataram” was sung, something that the *Times of India* felt was “unwise”. “Mr. Dadabhai Naoroji: Postponement of Departure”, *Times of India*, 12 October 1907, p. 9.



## Conclusion

In concluding this paper, I will focus on two themes. First, as has been stated before, Naoroji's demand for swaraj was the product of over five decades of political activism, and elements of this demand—such as the need for economic justice and political representation, and the steady development of a philosophy of universal rights—can be traced all the way back to his earliest political activities. From first identifying the negative economic consequences of British colonial policy in India, Naoroji, in the last years of his life, developed a sweeping condemnation of imperialism that was influenced by liberal and socialist ideas of individual rights, universal suffrage, and government social responsibilities. A man who heaped praise on the British in his youth was, by the 1890s, making no hesitation in calling British policy in India “evil”. This leads us to the second point: unlike many other nationalists, Naoroji grew more radical as he aged. When Naoroji addressed the Calcutta Congress in 1906, reiterating his call for swaraj, he was 81 years old. Naoroji's was a career of constant evolution, and the four stages that I have outlined in this short paper merely skim the surface of the complex changes that occurred in his philosophies throughout his life. He was a unique individual in the sense that he grew more open to new ideas as he aged, rather than retreating into the safety of his own core convictions.<sup>57</sup>

It is tempting, therefore, to wonder what would happen if Naoroji had lived for a few more years to witness Gandhi's call for non-cooperation, something that caused a permanent split between Gandhi and the remaining band of nineteenth century liberals in the Congress. Would there have been a *fifth stage* in Naoroji's political thought and career? We have a conjecture offered by Gandhi himself. In his biography of Naoroji, Rustom Masani recalled a conversation he had with Gandhi in December 1931, while returning from London to Bombay after the Round Table Conference. “Don't you think”, Masani asked, “Dadabhai's policy, which the present generation ridicules as a mendicant policy, was the right one, considering the circumstances prevailing.” “Yes”, Gandhi replied. He then quickly added, “And I believe that if he were alive today he would follow the same policy that I have been pursuing for the last few years”.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup> I must thank S.R. Mehrotra for this observation.

<sup>58</sup> Masani, pp. 11-12.