CHAPTER-1

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE CAMBRIDGE SCHOOL

The study of the Indian Nationalism and Freedom Struggle on sound-footing commenced only after India attained its independence. In the pre-independence era, attempts were of course made to write the history of Indian Nationalism and Freedom Struggle by the spokesmen and the propagandists of the political parties, rather than by any professional historian. When such efforts of writing the history of Indian National Movement were being made by the party spokesmen and the propagandists, the then British writers generally denied the existence of anything called Indian Nationalism or at the best, half-heartedly admitted that there was some political awakening and that it only resulted from or was the consequence of the British rule in India. Most of these writers went a step further by arguing that the removal of the British rule would banish the so-called Indian unity and Nationalism.

The School of James Mill tried to apply Utilitarian Doctrines to India. For James Mill, Indian civilization was a decadent one and its inherent weakness could be seen in the fact that it always succumbed to the outside invasions. Second School of thought led by Sir William Jones, J.D.Cunningham, Wilkins, Monro, Malcolm and Elphinstone took a more favourable view of the Indian society and desired to depict the political scenario and the nature of the Indian society with a sympathetic understanding of the Indian institutions. According to Elphinstone, there are at least ten civilizations in India and any historical reconstruction of India should take into account the differences in cultural and emotional patterns of the inhabitants of different regions. Unlike James Mill, Elphinstone had a first hand knowledge of India of his times. Thirdly,
Evangelicals like Grant and Shore backed by the missionaries attempted to justify British rule in India as an event that was divinely conceived and pre-ordained for redeeming a condemned humanity and they attempted to change Indian society through conversion and education. Fourthly, scholars like Alfred Lyall, Henry Maine and William Hunter viewed British rule as the inter-action of the Western and Eastern forces and showed a keen interest in the study of the Indian institutions and the society. Fifthly, there were modern scholars such as P.E. Roberts, T.G.P. Spear, professor C.H. Philips, professor Holden Furber, professor Ballhatchet and many others who adopted Ranke's technique of writing history through very critical and careful studies of the societies and to present the information in as objective a manner as possible. In general, there were only a few Britishers like Mrs Annie Besant, Sir William Wedderburn, Ramsay Macdonald, William Digby, Sir Henry Cotton etc., who rose to the high stature by examining Indian issue in the light of the highest currents of British thought and who were eager to reform Indian society by following the dictum of Comet that history offers a limitless scope for the reorganisation of the lives of the people on a sound basis. Some of these writers, surprisingly never visited India to draw a true picture of India. British imperial thinking until almost coming of the First World War was dominated by the concept of two empires. Most of the conservatives and the liberals shared the belief that the oriental communities are incapable of self-government. That the Indian empire was artificial and could not last long-for a vast population could not be held down indefinitely by relays of Englishmen-was widely felt or feared, but no body seemed to know how it would end.

In the post-independence era, the Indian Government as well as the Indian scholars got interested in the study of Indian Nationalism and Freedom Movement and this became one of the most favoured and well-researched themes of modern India. Most of the scholars interpreted Indian Nationalism and Freedom Movement in the
context of Congress-oriented perspective. Other element playing parts in the Indian National Movement like militant groups and subaltern groups did not receive any attention and credit. For example, the edited work on Indian Nationalism by Ranjit Guha entitled, The small voice of History, subaltern studies ix (Oxford University Press, 1996) has been a great deal more reflexive, recognising at once the extraordinary difficulty of recovering and representing “Truth” or ‘Authentic voice’. In addition to that, they were all anti-British and thus minimised the British contribution and highlighted only the exploitative nature of the British policies. S. N. Sen’s Eighteen Fifty Seven (New York, 1957) and Tara Chand’s History of Freedom Movement in India (New Delhi, 1983) are the noteworthy examples of Congress-oriented approach. The approach followed by these historians of India too blamed the British in the name of Indian Nationalism. The works of the Marxist historians criticize the British on the one hand and justify the Indian Nationalism on the other. The Marxist historians, however, have failed to offer a viable alternative to the previous existing historiography, being usually too general and some time rather mechanistic in its use of class analysis. This aspect of Marxist historiography is clearly reflected in R.P. Dutt’s work entitled, India Today (Manisha Granthalya Calcutta, 1979).

The emergence of the Cambridge historiography is in response to debunking of the British rule in India by the Indian historians. The founder of the School T.G.P. Spear began to organise the re-interpretation of the Indian history and scholarly meeting the challenge posed by the Indian historians. Interestingly, as the major role was played by the Indian National Congress in the Indian Freedom struggle and then inherited the British power in India after 1947, the Cambridge School first of all took up the Congress and its activity in the pre-1947 phase. This newly created Cambridge School attempted to defend the British rule and cut to size the Congress-oriented historiography. The historians like Percival Spear, Anil Seal, John Andrew Gallagher, Gordon Johnson, Judith
Brown, C. J. Baker accused the Indian National Congress by calling it an organisation of elites and power-seekers. Writers like Anil Seal, Judith Brown and Gordon Johnson denied any fundamental changes (such as English education and legislative franchise) brought about by the British rule. These institutional changes affected only the institutional balance between different groups in traditional Indian society. The Cambridge School in recent years has sought to revive interest in constitutional processes of the 1930's—which progress of research on broader political and social movements had made into a rather unfashionable subject by suggesting a direct causal link between the British policies and the ups and downs of the National Movement. In addition to that, the Cambridge School historiography has struck a new note; it has focused attention on minutiae of politics in the provinces, in the districts and even in the localities, the diversity and peculiarities of individual administrative units— with emphasis on faction—have received great attention. Bruce T. McCully in his work entitled, English Education and the origin of the Indian Nationalism (New York, 1940) brings forth his viewpoint on the Cambridge School that this School, not only denies the existence of colonial exploitation, under development and the central contradiction but it also denies any intelligent or active role to the mass of workers, peasants, lower middle-class and women in the anti-imperialist struggle. Undoubtedly, the new trend has added a new dimension to the historical studies. However, these new studies ignore the growth of an all-India level ideology and emergence of a broad all-India level anti-imperial front.

No research work has yet been carried out to evaluate the historiography of the Cambridge School on Indian Nationalism. A fresh inquiry would enable to analyse the historiography of the Cambridge School on Indian Nationalism in the changed trend of various approaches. This is due to the fact that men of the preceding generations lived in a different world with striking dissimilar sets of values
and problems. Hence the need to study the topic in totality becomes justified. The study analyses the topic by finding out explanations to the following points.

1. The basis of the Indian National Movement from the Cambridge School's point of view.

2. The basic points of conceptualization on which there is a general agreement among the Cambridge School historians.

3. The various approaches followed by the Cambridge School historians.

4. The work of the Cambridge School of historians vis-a-vis the relevance of the Indian critics on their [Cambridge ] works.

5. Ideological differences between the Cambridge School historians and the Indian historians.

6. The communitarian interests originating from the growing competitiveness in socio-economic sphere, clashed with the national interests.

7. Causes for the conflicting aspirations of the educated youths.

8. Whether the Western educated Indians wanted power and position in the administration or they be regarded as political actors in the process of integration and diversification.

9. The impact of the failure of the agriculture production to keep pace with the rapid increase in population during later half of the Nineteenth and the first half of the Twentieth centuries.

10. The factor responsible for the impoverishment of the traditional strongholds of cottage and household industry and consequently giving rise to the conditions of scarcity and hardships.

11. The relevance of the theory of Patron-Client relationship.