

10th – The Nationalist Movement in Indo China I



Vietnam gained formal independence in 1945, before India, but it took another three decades of fighting before the Republic of Vietnam was formed. Nationalism in Indo-China developed in a colonial context. The knitting together of a modern Vietnamese nation that brought the different communities together was in part the result of colonisation but, as importantly, it was shaped by the struggle against colonial domination.

Formation of French Indo China: Indo-China region comprises of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. People lived in these areas under the shadow of Chinese empire. Like the English and the Dutch, the French wanted to spread their colony in Asia. After defeating China in 1860, France occupied Vietnam and Cambodia. Vietnam was also linked by the route called Maritime Silk Route that brought in goods, people and exchange of ideas.

Other networks of trade connected it to the hinterlands (rural areas) where non-Vietnamese people such as the Khmer Cambodians lived, France again defeated China in Franco-Chinese War in 1883-85 and occupied Tonkin and Anaam. In 1887, French Indo-China was formed. Later, France occupied Thailand and Laos and established a strong large empire in Asia.

Colonial Domination and Resistance: The colonisation of Vietnam by the French brought the people of the country into conflict with the colonisers. The most visible form of French control was military and economic domination. But the French also tried to reshape the culture of the Vietnamese.

Nationalism in Vietnam emerged through the efforts of different sections of society to fight against the French domination. French troops landed in Vietnam in 1858 and by the mid- 1880s, they had established their control over the Northern region. In the following decades, the French sought to consolidate their position and nationalist resistance developed in French Indo-China region. People in Vietnam began their own suffering.

Necessity of Colonies for French: Colonies were considered essential to supply natural resources and other essential goods. Like other Western nations, France thought that it is their duty to bring the benefits of civilisation to backward people. Various developmental tasks done by French in Vietnam are discussed below:

- The French build canals and drained lands in the Mekong delta of Vietnam. It increased agricultural production.
- The vast system of irrigation works (canals and earthworks) were built mainly with forced labour, increased rice production. It allowed the export of rice to the international market.
- The area under rice cultivation went up from 2,74,000 hectares in 1873 to 1.1 million hectares in 1900 and 2.2 million in 1930.
- Vietnam exported, two-thirds of its rice production. By 1931, it had become the third largest exporter of rice in the world.
- The French authority started improvement in infrastructural projects to help transport goods for trade, move military garrisons and control the entire region.
- Construction of trans-Indo-China rail network that would link with the Northern and Southern parts of Vietnam and China was begun. Finally, link with Yunan in China was completed by 1910.



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- The second link was also built, linking Vietnam to Siam (the old name of Thailand) via Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh.

By the 1920s, to ensure higher levels of profit, French businessmen were pressurising the government in Vietnam to develop the infrastructure.

Development of Colonies: The main purpose of the colony was to serve the mother country. Thus, economies of the colonies needed to be developed.

An eminent writer, Paul Bernard gave his own views regarding the economy of Vietnam. He suggested that

- The economy of Vietnam should be developed because the colonial powers like France wanted to make the profit from its colonies.
- If the economy of the colonies were developed, then the standard of living of the people would develop, as a result, the demand of commodities would be increased, which assured more profit for the colonial power.
- Several barriers to economic growth like high population levels, low agricultural productivity and extensive indebtedness amongst the peasants should be removed.
- To reduce the rural poverty and increase agricultural productivity, it was necessary to carry out land reforms as the Japanese had done in the 1890s. Industrialisation was essential to boost up the economy. This would create more job opportunities.

The Colonial Economy in Vietnam: The French did very little to industrialise the economy of Vietnam. All available raw materials of Vietnam like rice, rubber and coal were exported to France at a very low price. Rice cultivation and rubber plantation in Vietnam were mostly owned by the French elite.

Rail and port facilities were set-up to service this sector. Vietnamese indentured labour was largely used in rubber plantation from mid-19th century.

The Dilemma of Colonial Education: French colonisation was driven by the idea of a civilizing mission. The French believed that they were bringing modern civilisation to the Vietnamese. As the civilisation advanced in Europe, it was their duty to introduce the modern ideas for the colony even if this meant destroying local cultures, religions and traditions.

Education was important for employment in the colonial civil service and for other, high status white-collar jobs while introducing the modern education system in Vietnam, the French authorities were themselves in dilemma.

The colonial power needed an educated local labour force but education might create problems. Educated Vietnamese might raise questions about the French authority. Moreover, colonists began believing that they might lose their jobs as teachers, shopkeepers, policemen, etc to the educated Vietnamese.

Use of French as Modern Language: The elites in Vietnam were powerfully influenced by Chinese culture. To consolidate their power, the French had to counter this Chinese influence, So, they systematically removed the traditional educational system and established French schools for the Vietnamese. Chinese, the language used by the elites of Vietnam had to be replaced. There were two different opinions about which language should be accepted: French or Vietnamese

1. Supporters of French Some policy-makers emphasised the need to use the French language as the medium of instruction. By learning this language, they thought, that Vietnamese would be introduced to the culture and civilisation of



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France. This would help to create an Asiatic France solidly tied to European France. The educated people in Vietnam would respect French sentiments and ideals, see the superiority of French culture and work for the French.

2. Supporters of Vietnamese There were other group of thinkers who opposed to French being the only medium of instruction. They suggested that Vietnamese be taught in lower classes and French in the higher classes. The Vietnamese who could learn French and acquired French culture were to be rewarded with French citizenship.

French Education Policy of Failing Students: Only the Vietnamese elite could enroll in the school and a very few among them passed school leaving examination due to the deliberate policy of failing students by the French authority. This policy of failing students applied, particularly in the final year, so that they could not qualify for the better paid jobs. Usually, as many as two-thirds of the students failed. School books glorified the French and their rule but criticised the Vietnamese as primitive and backward who were nothing, but 'skilled copyists'. School children were told that only French rule could ensure peace in Vietnam.

In 1907, the Tonkin Free School was started to provide a Western style education to the Vietnamese, which included classes in science, hygiene and French.

The school's approach was to look modern. It was not enough to learn science and Western ideas, but also to look modern. The school also encouraged the adoption of Western styles like short haircut, modern dress code, etc. For the Vietnamese, this meant a major setback to their own identity, as they traditionally kept long hair.

Resistance in Schools: Teachers and students of Vietnam did not blindly follow the French dictates. Teachers sometimes modified the text and criticised what was stated. There was open opposition and on the other hand, there was also a silent resistance.

Students Agitation: An incident of Saigon Native Girls School in 1926, created much agitation amongst the Vietnamese. A Vietnamese student sitting in one of the front seats was asked to vacate it for her fellow French student. But as the girl refused to do so, the principal expelled her. When other angry students protested, they too were expelled. This incident led to a further spread of agitation and protests among students. Seeing the situation getting out of control, the government ordered the school authority to take all the students back. This incident hurt the nationalist feelings of the Vietnamese.

Students' Reaction to Colonial Policies: Students' agitation brought, them into conflict with the French as well as the traditional elite, Students fought against the colonial government's efforts to prevent the Vietnamese from qualifying for white-collar jobs. By the 1920s, students were forming various political parties, like, Young Annam and publishing nationalist journals like the Annamese Student. Schools thus became an important place for political and cultural battles. The French tried to strengthen their rule in Vietnam through the control of education. They tried to change the values, norms and perceptions of the people to make them believe in the superiority of French civilisation and the inferiority of the Vietnamese. The battle against French colonial education became the part of the larger battle against colonialism and for independence.

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Hygiene, disease and everyday resistance: Education was not the only sphere of everyday life of Vietnamese in which political battles against colonialism were fought. There were many other institutions in which the colonised people expressed their anger and frustration against the colonisers.

Plague Strikes Hanoi: To create a modern Vietnam, the French authority decided to rebuild a part of Hanoi with modern architecture. But the beautiful part of Hanoi was struck by bubonic plague in 1903. The French part of Hanoi had wide avenues and a well-laid-out sewer system. The other native part of the city was not provided with any modern facilities; as a result, the refuse from the old city overflowed the whole area during rains or floods.

The large sewer system in the modern part of the city became the ideal and protected breeding grounds for the rats. There was a widespread plague, which threatened the very lives of the French. The sewers also served as a great transport system, allowing the rats to move around the city without any problem and rats began to enter the well-maintained homes of the French through the sewage pipes.

The Rat Hunt: In order to check this menace, the French authority started the Rat Hunt Scheme in 1902. The French hired Vietnamese workers and paid them for each rat they were caught. As many as 20,000 rats were caught in a single day (30th May). Rat hunting became a profitable business for the natives. Ultimately, the French were forced to stop the programme. It did not prevent the bubonic plague, which swept through the area in 1903 and in subsequent years. The rat menace marked the limits of French power and restricted their 'Civilising Mission'.

Religion and anti-colonialism: The earliest established religions in Vietnam were Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism and local practices. Confucius (551-479 BCE), a Chinese thinker preached about good conduct, practical wisdom, proper social relationships, respect for parents and obedience to elders. He said that the relationship between the ruler and the people was the same as that between children and parents.

Scholars Revolt: Christianity, introduced by French missionaries was intolerant to the Vietnamese religious practices and tried to change them. From the 18th century, many religious movements started against the spread of Catholicism. Such a movement was the Scholars Revolt in 1868. This revolt was led by officials at the imperial court angered by the spread of Catholicism and French power. They led a general uprising in Ngu An and Ha Tien provinces where over a thousand Catholics were killed. But the French crushed the movement and this uprising served to inspire other patriots to rise up against them.

Hoa Hao Movement: Hoa Hao is a religious syncretic tradition that combined Buddhism and local beliefs. It was founded in 1939 by Huynh Phu So. It spread in the fertile Mekong delta area. It claimed approximately 2 million followers throughout Vietnam, according to this religion, aid to poor was favoured over building Pagodas. According to Hoa Hao traditions, religious and social ceremonies must be simple and modest and were not to include offerings. Elaborate wedding or funeral customs were viewed as waste of money, which would be better spent helping the needy. Its followers were expected to attend communal services on first and fifth of each lunar month and on other Buddhist holidays. Huynh Phu So opposed the sale of child brides, gambling and use of alcohol and opium.

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Suppression of the Movement: French authority tried to suppress the movement inspired by Huynh Phu So. French authority declared him mad and put him in a mental asylum. Doctor who had to prove him insane became his follower. In 1941, the French doctors declared that he was sane. The French authority exiled him to Laos and sent many of his followers to concentration camps.

Religious Practice of Vietnamese: The majority of Vietnamese people claimed themselves as non-religious although they visit religious temples several times every year. According to a 1999 Census, most Vietnamese list themselves as having no religious affiliation. A 2002, Pew Research Centre Report claimed that 24% of population of Vietnam believed religion as 'very important'. One of the most universal and spiritual practices common to Vietnamese is ancestor veneration, a practice shared with Chinese and most Asian culture.

All Vietnamese regardless of formal religious affiliation have an altar in their home or business place where prayers were offered to their ancestors. These practices are done frequently during important traditional or religious celebrations. Belief in ghosts and spirits was common. French colonialism was resisted at many levels and in various forms. All nationalists had to decide how they could become 'modern'. In the late 19th century, resistance to French domination was very often led by Confucian scholar-activists.

Phan Boi Chau: One such nationalist was Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940) who formed the Revolutionary Society with Prince Cuong De as the head in 1903. His plan was to make use of the monarchy. Phan Boi Chau met the Chinese reformers Liang Qichao (1873-1929) in Yokohama in 1905. Phan's most influential book, The History of Loss of Vietnam was written under the strong influence and advice of Liang Qichao.

Phan Chu Trinh: Nationalist like, Phan Chu Trinh (1871-1926) was intensely hostile to the monarchy and opposed to the idea of resisting the French with the help of the court. His desire was to establish a democratic republic, influenced by the democratic ideals of the West, he did not want a wholesale rejection of Western civilisation.

Other Ways of Becoming Modern : Japan and China

Early Vietnamese nationalists had a close relationship with Japan and China. In the first decade of the 20th century, Go-East Movement became popular. Some Vietnamese students went to Japan to acquire modern education. They wanted to re-establish the Nguyen dynasty and for this, they appealed to the Japanese as fellow Asians. Japan had improved itself and resisted colonisation by the West. Vietnamese students established a branch of the Restoration Society in Tokyo, but after 1908, the Japanese Ministry of Interior suppressed them. In 1911, a republic was set up in China under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen. Inspired by these developments, Vietnamese students organised the Association for the Restoration of Vietnam (Viet-Nam Quan Phuc Hoi). Soon, a new anti-imperialist movement started in Vietnam.

The Communist Movement and Vietnamese Nationalism: Inspired by the European Communist Parties, in February 1930, Ho Chi Minh established Vietnamese Communist Party (Vietnam Cong San Dang), later renamed the Indo-Chinese Communist Party. In 1940, Japan occupied Vietnam, as part of its imperial drive to control South-East Asia. So, nationalists had to fight against the Japanese

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as well as the French. The League for the Independence of Vietnam (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh) known as Vietminh, fought the Japanese occupation and recaptured Hanoi in September 1945. Japan also surrendered in 1945. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was formed and Ho Chi Minh became Chairman.

