UNIT 7 MILITANT NATIONALISM:
INTRODUCTION

Structure

7.0 Objectives
7.1 What is Militant Nationalism?
7.2 The Elements of Nationalism
7.3 Distinctive Characteristics of Militant Nationalism: The Liberal Nationalist and the Militant Nationalist Methods of Action Against the Foreign Ruler
7.4 Militant Nationalism and Terrorist Revolutionary Anarchism
7.5 Militant Nationalism: A Highly Emotional, Religious Feeling
7.6 The Mission of the Nation: Swami Vivekananda and Swami Dayananda Saraswati
7.7 Religious Faith behind Militant Nationalism: Manly and Assertive Religion
7.8 The Bhagavad Gita
7.9 The Relation between Means and Ends: Comparison of Militant Nationalism and Gandhian Views
7.10 Inspiration from Italy
7.11 The Religion of Nationalism
7.12 The Partition of Bengal
7.13 Influence of Militant Nationalism and its Contemporary Significance
7.14 Let Us Sum Up
7.15 Some Useful Books
7.16 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

7.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit concerns itself with the Militant Nationalist phase of the Indian National Movement. After going through this unit you should be able to:

- Discuss the main features of Militant Nationalism.
- Compare it with Revolutionary Anarchism and other such trends.
- Describe its utility in the context of Indian Nationalist struggle.

7.1 WHAT IS MILITANT NATIONALISM?

The main objective of this unit is to acquaint you with the general characteristics of Militant Nationalism. The militant nationalist brought about a departure in the national movement by adopting more radical methods of agitation than those followed by the earlier moderates. The prominent leaders of this phase of the national movement were Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Aurobindo Ghosh, Bipan Chandra Pal and the Late Lajpat Rai. Militant nationalism represented a distinct phase in the anti-colonial struggle. It introduced new methods of political agitation, involved popular symbols for mobilisation and thus tried to broaden the movement.

Militant Nationalism, as stated above, was a phase of Nationalism in India. It had all the features of Nationalism, besides certain distinctive features of its own. Let us take note of these general and specific features in turn.

7.2 THE ELEMENTS OF NATIONALISM

The essential elements of a Nation are territory, population and a sovereign state. For the growth of a nation the population must have certain characteristics which give it unity and separateness. These are a common language, a common race, a common religion and a common cultural tradition. Though none of these characteristics are completely present in every nation, they are generally present in a
Militant Nationalism

large degree. A nation may not have a single language. There may be many
languages within it but it may still have a sense of national unity. There may be a
common literary tradition though the languages may be many. It is the same with
race, religion and cultural tradition. There can be differences in all these respects
within a broadly unified society.

Common historical and cultural traditions can unite people very firmly. The sense of
nationality is generally promoted by the memory of a people's shared experience of the
past. This memory of the past is rekindled when a country is subjected to foreign rule and
exploitation. A foreign rule always adversely affects the culture of a subject people. An
important aspect of the anti-colonial movements is to recover the self-respect of the
people and retrade indigenous culture. History confirms the truth that subjection to
foreign rule, misgovernment and exploitation is the most powerful factor in creating the
sense of nationalism.

Despite all these constitutive elements, nationalism is an abstraction. It is ultimately
a state of mind of a group of people. The factors mentioned above help in its
formation but above all it remains a psychological phenomenon.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
   ii) Check your answer with that at the end.

1) What do your understand by Militant Nationalism?

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7.3 DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF MILITANT NATIONALISM

With the background provided in the previous section, we can proceed to note the
special characteristics of militant nationalism. The adjective 'militant' gives a fair idea
of its distinctive nature. While nationalism is itself a very strong feeling and
sentiment, militant nationalism is an even more vehement, assertive and aggressive
feeling.

There can be two ways of winning freedom for a subject country. One is to impress
upon the rulers that freedom is the birthright of the people and should be granted to
them gracefully. This presumes that the alien rulers are open to reason and will quit
of their own accord without being forced to do so by the subjects.

The other way is to attack the rulers and the government and bring their domination
to an end, as it is futile to expect that colonial rulers will listen to reason and agree
to surrender the gains and advantages of an empire.

The first may be described as the liberal or moderate method and the second as the
militant method. Liberals or moderates may well be aware of the evils of foreign
rule, but they do not consider it a total or unmitigated evil. The evils can be
removed by gradual stages by convincing the rulers through representations and
petitions and the normal process of argument. The benefits of a modern and civilised
government ought not to be lost through impatience over temporary and curable
complaints. The moderates regarded the British connection as part of a divine plan
for the advance of India into the modern age.

The militant nationalists' attitude was entirely different. To them, the alien
government was a total evil. It was the cause of political, economic, cultural and
spiritual ruin of the country. The foreign ruler could never be trusted to vacate the
country that he has gained by conquest. Persuasion, therefore, was futile; more
forceful methods must be used and the moderates, according to them, were lacking in will and a sense of urgency. The difference between the moderates and the militant nationalist was radical, according to Lala Lajpat Rai. It was not one of speed, nor of method, but of fundamental principles. He pronounced that India would never evolve into a self-governing state, if it were to follow the methods of the moderates. He also said that unless the Congress took steps to change its nature and adopt direct methods of political action, some other movement might start with this object. The result would then be that the Congress would sink into insignificance. It was prophetic of him indeed to have said this in 1905, two years before the stormy session of the Congress at Surat in 1907.

7.4 MILITANT NATIONALISM AND TERRORIST REVOLUTIONARY ANARCHISM

We may note that though militant nationalism differed radically from liberal nationalism, it must be distinguished from revolutionary and terrorist anarchism. Political murder and assassination were not approved by the militant nationalists, though the extremists drew their inspiration from the creed of the militant nationalists. The connection between the two was at the most, indirect. The militant nationalists were able to understand the extremists with greater sympathy. The extremists were, according to them misguided and reckless but it was all due to the harsh and repressive policies of the government. It was a natural reaction on the part of the sensitive minds of the younger generation. B.C. Pal went to the extent of saying that what ultimately prevails in politics is force rather than right and therefore, one must not fail to use force when it is necessary. But like Tilak and Sri Aurobindo, he came to regard these methods as obsolete and inapplicable under Indian conditions, especially under the changed conditions towards the end of the first decade of the present century. These methods were bound to be ineffective, as the government had gained immensely in its power to crush extremist action. In Lala Lajpat Rai's words, "Violence for political purposes by unarmed people is madness. To talk of violent methods is also in my judgement criminal folly.... It will be nothing short of madness to rely on violence or even think of it under the present conditions of life in India."

7.5 MILITANT NATIONALISM: A HIGHLY EMOTIONAL, RELIGIOUS FEELING

In militant nationalism, each one of the factors of nationalism named earlier—territory, population, religion, race, etc. acquire an added emotional emphasis. For example, the territory of a nation is much more than geographical entity. It is a sacred land. The motherland is considered as greater than heaven. It is a divinity in physical form and the embodiment of its philosophy of life and dharma. The mountains and rivers of the country are also more than physical objects. They are objects of worship. Sri Aurobindo wrote, "Whereas others regard the country as an inert mass and know it in terms of plains, fields, mountains and rivers, I look upon the country as the mother; I worship and adore her as the mother." Lajpat Rai in his letter to Ramsay Macdonald made this point even more explicit:

"To the Indian, or India is the land of the Gods — the Deva-Bhumi of his forefathers. It is the land of knowledge, of faith, of beatitude — the Gian-Bhumi, the Dharma-Bhumi and the Punya-Bhumi of the ancient Aryas. It is the land of the Vedas and of the heroes — the Veda-Bhumi and the Vir-Bhumi of his ancestors. You may call it foolish, impractical, sentimental and unprogressive; but there it is — a mighty of life, into which no foreigner can penetrate."

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
   ii) Check your answer with that given at the end.

1) How does militant nationalism compare with Revolutionary and anarchism?
Militant Nationalism

7.6 THE MISSION OF THE NATION: SWAMI VIVEKANANDA AND SWAMI DAYANANDA SARASWATI

Every nation state believes, at least implicitly, that it is distinct from other nations and has a mission to carry out. Militant nationalism believes this more openly and emphatically. It holds that the people of a nation should become a free and sovereign nation state in order to live according to its own spirit and genius and contribute to the progress of mankind. India and the East, as compared with the West, have according to this view, a pronouncedly religious and spiritual character. National freedom and independence are necessary, as Sri Aurobindo said, because India has first of all to live for herself and then to live for the world. He wrote, “God has set apart India as the eternal fountain-head of holy spirituality, and he will never suffer that fountain to run dry.” “India is the ‘guru’ of the human soul in its profounder maladies, she is destined once more to new-mould the life of the world and to restore the peace of the human spirit.”

Sri Aurobindo spoke of Hindu religion as ‘Sanatana Dharma’, Sanatana meaning eternal and Dharma meaning that which holds together and unites society in the universal sense. It is more than a creed and a religion. These have a restricted meaning and can unite people together, but also divide them from other peoples. Sanatana Dharma is eternal as well as universal and transcends national distinctions and differences of creed. India is its home and it is India’s mission to uphold it and convey it to the world. B.C. Pal expressed the meaning of Sanatana Dharma in similar terms. “The ideal (of Nationalism) is that of humanity in God, of God in humanity, the ancient ideal of Sanatana Dharma, but applied as it has never been applied before to the problem of politics and the work of national revival. To realise that ideal, to impart it to the world is the mission of India.”

7.7 RELIGIOUS FAITH BEHIND MILITANT NATIONALISM: MANLY AND ASSERTIVE RELIGION

The militant nationalists established close relation between tradition and national consciousness. They appealed to glory and greatness of the Indians’ past. They were inspired by the teachings of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, in which service to fellow human beings was identified with service to God. The elimination of ignorance and poverty, the extension of freedom and equality to women, universal understanding and tolerance of different religions as different roads leading to the same goal, love of country and love of mankind, were emphasised as essential elements in the creation of modern India. Vivekananda inspired people to follow a virile and manly religion. He exhorted to people to accept this world as real and not look upon it as a ‘Maya’ or illusion. According to him, the true aim of religion was the liberation of man and the promotion of the freedom of the spirit. He also vehemently condemned the physical and moral backwardness of the country. He said, “What we want is vigour in the blood, strength in the nerves, iron muscles and nerves of steel.” “First of all our young men must be strong.” “Your will be nearer to Heaven through football than through a study of the Gita. You will understand the Gita better with your biceps, your muscles, a little stronger.”

Dayananda Saraswati’s teachings also had a similar impact. He advocated that for the creation of a more manly and energetic nation, it was necessary to return to the faith of the Vedas. If the spirit and energy of the past could be restored, the
attainment of freedom for the country would be easy and certain. It will be noted that Dayanand's message was; on the face of it, a call for the revival of the past but in the context of the time, it was a call for the positive assertion of the ancient spirit. This could be the only road to the attainment of freedom for the country. As B.C. Pal has written in his 'My Life and Times', "...it cannot be denied that the movement of Dayananda Saraswati, as organised in the Arya Samaj, has contributed more than the rational movement of the Raja's (Ram Mohan Roy's) Brahmo Samaj to the development of a new national consciousness in the modern Hindu, particularly in the Punjab...This was really the beginning of that religious and social revival among Hindus of India to which we owe so largely the birth of our present national consciousness."

**7.8 THE BHAGAVAD GITA**

Militant nationalists were also profoundly influenced by the *Bhagavadgita*. They drew from it the lesson of duty. The performance of duty was to be selfless and free from egoism. Personal considerations and sentiments of love, attachment, dislike or hatred must be set aside. Our duty is to be performed as an offering to God without expecting fruit or reward in return. Krishna's call to Arjuna was that he should fight the enemy, whoever the enemy may be. His arrows may hit and kill his own relations and teachers, but he must do his duty and fight.

In this connection, B.G. Tilak's interpretation of the Gita needs special mention. He derived a philosophy of 'activism' which essentially implied the carrying out of one's duty with devotion instead of abandoning it out of laziness and sloth. In the context of British domination over India, this meant performing the duty of overthrowing the foreign government and the conquest of freedom for the country.

Both militant nationalism and revolutionaries had special reverence for the *Bhagavadgita*. The Maharashtrian revolutionary, Damodar Hari Chapekar, carried with him a copy of the Gita even when he was to be hanged. Sri Aurobindo has narrated how undertrials in the Alipore Bomb Case were reading Gita in the Court room, totally oblivious of the court proceedings or the noise and disturbance around them.

**7.9 THE RELATION BETWEEN MEANS AND ENDS: COMPARISON OF MILITANT NATIONALISM AND GANDHIAN VIEWS**

The above discussion underlines an important point about militant nationalism's conception about the relationship between means and ends. Two views are possible on this question: (1) Any means may be used to achieve a desirable end; for example, the freedom of the country and (2) The means must be ethically right; that is, as good as the end; if not, the end itself loses its value. The first view is that of the militant nationalist. The second is the Gandhian view. The militant nationalist was concerned with the best and the quickest means of achieving the end. He would not be inclined to waste time in moral debate for fear that the end itself many be lost. As Lajpat Rai said, "We must do what is best, practical and possible under the circumstances." This attitude may be described as 'Ethical Relativism', in contrast to 'Ethical Absolutism,' of which Gandhi may be taken as the perfect example.

**7.10 INSPIRATION FROM ITALY**

Militant nationalism also drew inspiration from the history of the unification of Italy and from the movement for the freedom of Italy from Austrian domination. Bipin Chandra Pal has narrated how Surendranath Banerji's lecture on the life and work of Mazzini fired the youth of Bengal with patriotism and led them to follow the example of the youth of Italy. "We commenced," he writes, "to read the writings of Mazzini and the history of the Young Italy movement. Here we saw also the earlier
Militant Nationalism

organisations for Italian freedom, particularly those of the Carbonari, with which Mazzini had himself associated at the beginning of his patriotic career. The secret organisations which grew up in Bengal owed their inspiration to the Carbonari of Italy. The methods were violent and anarchistic. Their patriotism and heroism were of the highest order but as time was to show, they were both out of date and futile in a vast country like India, where conditions were unfavourable for their use. They were also found to be unnecessary and morally unacceptable.

Reference may be made in this context to Lala Jajpat Rai who was also similarly inspired by the Italian example. He wrote, “Twenty five years ago when I was a young man I was very fond of Mazzini, the great Italian patriot, and his writings for a number of years. I was in a way obsessed by the desire to read everything written by or relating to him that was to be found in the English language...Mazzini’s life and his writings have left an almost ineffable impression on my mind.” (1918)

Lajpat Rai also wrote biographies of Mazzini and Garibaldi in Urdu and these contributed substantially towards the awakening of nationalist feeling in the Punjab. The influence of these writings was so powerful that the Punjab government felt alarmed and sought to take action in the matter, though it could not do so just then on account of legal difficulties.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
   ii) Check your answer with that at the end.

1) Briefly discuss the influence of Italian Revolutionaries on Militant Nationalism.

7.11 THE RELIGION OF NATIONALISM

We have already referred to the distinctive outlook of the militant nationalists on nationalism. They attached an especially emotional meaning to the nation. The nation was not just a geographical term but a psychological and spiritual concept as well. The militant nationalists were inspired by the vision of the nation as the sacred home of the Divine Mother. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was looked upon as a rishi or seer because he gave the country the inspiring sacred formula, the mantra of Vande Mataram—'I bow to the Mother'. In this mantra was combined love of divinity as well as love of the country. The country itself was transformed into a deity.

7.12 THE PARTITION OF BENGAL

The Partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in year 1905 stirred up nationalist sentiments and patriotic protests all over the country and particularly in Bengal, in the areas partitioned as well as in the original areas of the province. It was seen as a deliberate act of the government to divide the Hindus and the Muslims and to check, if not defeat, the growing nationalist feeling in the country. October 16, 1905 — the day partition was effected was observed as a day of mourning all over Bengal. As Surendranath Banerjee said,“We felt that we had been insulted, humiliated and tricked. We felt that the whole of our future was at stake, and that it was a deliberate blow aimed at the growing solidarity and self-consciousness of the Bengali-speaking population...The Partition would be fatal to our political progress and to that close union between the Hindus and the Mohammedans upon which the prospects of Indian advancement so largely depended.”
Though the partition was revoked in 1911, it left long lasting consequences. The protest against the government was violent and fierce. It was the prelude to the outburst of revolutionary activity and political extremism. Manufacture and the use of the bomb, murder and assassination of Britishers and their accomplices and political suspects became common weapons of political protest. Though these were not unconnected with militant nationalism, they far excelled militant nationalism in recklessness and violence. The patriotism of the extremists was evident even to those who disagreed with them, but their methods were horrifying and, on the face of it, no different form murder and assassination.

7.13 INFLUENCE OF MILITANT NATIONALISM AND ITS CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE

We have noted earlier the characteristics of militant nationalism and the circumstances which gave rise to it. Here we will trace briefly: (1) the influence of militant nationalism on the Indian National Congress and (2) its significance to contemporary politics.

Militant nationalism was a distinct epoch in the history of the freedom movement in our country. The background to militant nationalism was the character of the Indian National Congress at the beginning of this century. It was a political movement, which drew inspiration from the religious awakening at the end of the nineteenth century.

The Indian National Congress at the beginning, and for some years at the beginning of the present century, was dominated by the liberals and moderates. Their methods of petitioning and expressions of loyalty and trust in the British government roused the resentment of the younger generation of leaders and educated young men. They demanded that the Congress should come out openly against the rulers and act more decisively and quickly. The methods and programmes of the militant nationalists were as response to the demand.

The militant nationalists, though advocated a change from the methods of the moderates were not in favour of violence. This perspective was articulated by Sri Aurobindo in his *An Open Letter to My Country-men* in July 1909. Thus, "... the difficulties of our situation ask for bold yet wary walking. We must scrupulously observe the law while taking every advantage, both of the protection it gives and the latitude it still leaves for pushing forward our cause and our propaganda." The responsibility for political extremism, he argued, brought about was on the government. It was the brutality of the government which the violence and ruthlessness of the extremists. Let the government change its ways and there would be an end to such political madness. "With the stray assassinations which have troubled the country we have no concern, having once clearly and firmly dissociated ourselves from them, we need notice them no further. They are the rank and noxious fruit of a rank and noxious policy and until the authors of that policy turn from their errors, no human power can prevent the poison-tree from bearing according to its kind." Speaking in December 1920, Lajpat Rai stated, "I am one of those who believe that every nation has, when the occasion arises, the inherent right of armed rebellion against a repressive, autocratic government, but I do not believe that we have either the means or even the will for such an armed rebellion at the present time." The methods of violent confrontation with the rulers might have been successful had they been used when the government was unprepared and unwary. Lightning assaults on a country-wide scale in such a situation might have brought the government down. The government had now gained the upper hand and such methods were bound to fail. Lawful but resolute protest and the development of national strength by means of Swadeshi, self-help and national efficiency were the urgent need of the time. National education and a constructive programme of national development were now to be taken up.

The non-cooperation programme of the militant nationalists had come to be accepted by the Congress, though Gandhi was soon after to "prefix non-violent to non-cooperation," (Lajpat Rai) and make it a moral as well as a political
programme. Those of the militant nationalist school of thought were not enthusiastic about the moral side of Gandhi's programme and regarded it as unrealistic, impractical and politically unwise. They would not object to non-cooperation from a purely political point of view. In the prevailing circumstances, it was the only available method of confronting the government, and carrying on the fight for freedom. Their objection was that Gandhi had made it at the same time a moral programme too. It was, according to them, too much to expect all political workers as well as the common man to rise to the moral level which Gandhi demanded.

Lajpat Rai was severely critical of Gandhi's sudden decision to call off the Bardoli Satyagraha because of his moral indignation over the Chauri Chaura incident. This incident, in which some policemen were burnt to death by an angry mob angered Gandhi so much that he abruptly put a stop to the movement. Militant nationalists who were politically realistic were severely disappointed over this unexpected development. Their disappointment was shared by a large number of their countrymen also.

Though militant nationalism drew inspiration from religious awakening, militant nationalists disapproved of mixing up of religion and politics. The Dharma they advocated was a wider concept than any religion or creed. It was universal in scope though outwardly it appeared like Hindu religion. They were well aware that India is a land of many religions and that these religions should learn to understand each other and coexist as different roads leading to the same goal.

If, the militant nationalists were inspired by religion, how could they, at the same time object to mixing up of religion and politics? Were they not contradicting themselves particularly because some among them invoked religious symbols for political mobilisation?

The answers to these questions lay in their understanding of inter-communal relations and their conception of secularism. They hold that different religions and different communities must learn to coexist in a broadly unified nation under the unifying influence of Dharma or the universal moral law of life and society. Dharma in this sense is a cohesive force, above all religions and creeds, but opposed to none. Lajpat Rai described the unifying influence of Dharma very clearly with reference to the Hindu-Muslim problem. “The expression Hindu-Muslim unity is only symbolic. It is not exclusive, but inclusive. When we speak of Hindu-Muslim unity, we do not exclude the other religious communities like the Sikhs, the Christians, the Parsis, the Buddhists, the Jains from our conception of unity or from our idea of nationhood. The Indian nation, such as it is, or such as we intend to build neither is nor will be exclusively Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Christian. It will be each and all. This is my ideal of Swarajya. This is my goal of nationhood.”

While Hindu leaders might have extolled Sanatana Dharma as more than a religion or creed, others remained suspicious and sceptical. They saw it as only the religion of the majority, seeking political ascendancy over the other religious minorities. The political use of religious festivals in Maharashtra like the Ganapati festival was bound to create suspicion and fear especially in the Muslims. The Shivaji festival did so even more.

The British policy of giving representation for minorities on a communal religious basis was the beginning of separatism and its culmination in the partition of the country. The militant nationalists recognised the seriousness of the communal problem, but their approach to it was distinctive. They were of the view that religious diversity must be safeguarded while working for the unity of the country. But they were very firm that unity should be brought about through a spirit of understanding and give and take between the communities. They were totally opposed to a policy of concession and political bargaining. Concessions extended on political considerations would only strengthen the minority complex and make the minority communities more and more ambitious and aggressive. They were thus idealistic in their approach to the problem while being frank and realistic at the same time.

Check Your Progress 4

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

   ii) Check your answer with that given at the end.
7.14 LET US SUM UP

So, we can see that Indian nationalism underwent a fundamental change in 1905 and to some extent subsequently in 1919. Despite this change there are also elements of continuity. Though some scholars maintain a contrary opinion, one of the major changes that came with the emergence of the Extremists was a much more forceful articulation of the demand for complete independence as opposed to the Moderate emphasis on reforms, and some form of self-government under British rule.

Corresponding to this was the emphasis that the Extremists place on the role of the masses and mass struggle in the fight for independence. Whereas the Moderates had conceived of political activity as being confirmed to the 'educated classes', leaders like Tilak and B.C. Pal, on the other hand, and infinite faith in the power of the masses in action, in the capacity of the Indian people. They therefore, broke with the elitist conception of politics and took politics to the masses. Whereas the moderates assumed that the force of public opinion of the educated Indians and democratic British citizens would suffice, the extremists relied on mass political pressure. It has been suggested by some scholars that, in fact, what changed after 1905, in the nationalist movement was the nature of political pressure to be brought upon the colonial government, rather than the basic strategy. So from the method of petitions and appeals, the later nationalists shifted to processions, demonstrations etc. involving mass mobilizations. Along with this came the use of popular symbols for mobilisation including judicious use of religious symbols.

As can be seen from the above, the changing nature of the methods of political agitation was signal of the changing nature of the methods of the nationalist movement. It were the sections of the radical masses who were now fast becoming the mainstay of the national movement, as opposed to the elite. This, in fact, sums up the change marked by the militant nationalists advent onto the stage.

Despite these changes, however, we can say that the militant nationalist phase retained a continuity with early nationalism. This continuity was evident in the inability of militant nationalism to transcend the parameters defined by their predecessors — in terms of their strategies and approach to forms of political action. The moderates had laid down that the struggle for freedom was to be peaceful and bloodless. Political progress was to be based on order. According to Bipan Chandra, only some leaders deviated from it in theory, but in practice even they operated within the same framework. The pre-Gandhian militant nationalists did of course, drastically change the forms of struggle. The evolved a higher concept of the forms of struggle but were really unable to articulate a political framework that transcended mere agitation — a sin they accused the moderates of.

7.15 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

The Extremist Challenge. Amlesh Tripathi. Orient Longman.

History of the Freedom Movement in India. Vol. III-Tara Chand. Publications Division, Govt. of India.
Militant Nationalism

Life and Work of Lal, Bal and Pal.

Bipin Chandra Pal and India's Struggle for Swaraj. Haridas and Uma Mukherjee. (Calcutta).

India's Fight for Freedom. Haridas and Uma Mukherjee. (Calcutta).

Bipan Chandra — Nationalism and Colonialism.

7.16 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1
See Section 7.1

Check Your Progress 2
See Section 7.4

Check Your Progress 3
See Section 7.10

Check Your Progress 4
See Section 7.13