

ABSTRACT
THE INDIAN MUNICIPALITIES AND THE COURSE OF
EARLY INDIAN NATIONALISM

Marc Jason Gilbert
North Georgia College

Scholars have long maintained that one of the most visible consequences of British Rule in India was the rapid growth of the Indian urban professional and entrepreneurial elites. It is generally agreed that Indian nationalism was fueled by the frustration of these groups and by the British colonial practice of spreading Western education and economic opportunity, but denying their subject peoples access to their fruits: government employment and economic prosperity. However, contemporary British administrators judged such elites to be guided by self-interest, and scoffed at their claim to represent the political and economic interests of the Indian people as a whole. This assessment was shared in the 1970s by the so-called Cambridge School of Indian historiography. However, more recent revisionists maintain that, though distracted by local politics and personal ambition, early Indian nationalists were deeply impressed by the nobility of a nationalist vision of subordinating self, family and caste to the interests of an Indian Nation and that elite attitudes towards land alienation, landlords and peasants were more statesman-like and less selfish than their critics have alleged. An analysis of the course of the development of Bengal's municipal institutions indicates that Gandhi's dream of sacrificial urban elite participation in the creation of a more equitable society was anticipated by late nineteenth century Western-educated Bengali urban leaders, who met British charges of self-interest with altruistic action during the formative years of Indian nationalism.