

First World War and Nationalist Response

In the First World War (1914-1919), Britain allied with France, Russia, USA, Italy and Japan against Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey. This period saw the maturing of Indian nationalism. The nationalist response to British participation in the First World War was three-fold:

- (i) the Moderates supported the empire in the war as a matter of duty;
- (ii) the Extremists, including Tilak (who was released in June 1914), supported the war efforts in the mistaken belief that Britain would repay India's loyalty with gratitude in the form of self-government; and
- (iii) the revolutionaries decided to utilise the opportunity to wage a war on British rule and liberate the country.

The Indian supporters of British war efforts failed to see that the imperialist powers were fighting to safeguard their own colonies and markets.

The revolutionary activity was carried out through the Ghadr Party in North America, Berlin Committee in Europe and some scattered mutinies by Indian soldiers, such as the one in Singapore. In India, for revolutionaries striving for immediate complete independence, the War seemed a heaven-sent opportunity, draining India of troops (the number of

white soldiers went down at one point to only 15,000), and raising the possibility of financial and military help from Germany and Turkey—the enemies of Britain. (Details of revolutionary activities of this period have been covered in the previous chapter.)

Home Rule League Movement

The Home Rule Movement was the Indian response to the First World War in a less charged but a more effective way than the response of Indians living abroad which took the form of the romantic Ghadr adventure.

Two Indian Home Rule Leagues were organised on the lines of the Irish Home Rule Leagues and they represented the emergence of a new trend of aggressive politics. Annie Besant and Tilak were the pioneers of this new trend.

■ Factors Leading to the Movement

Some of the factors leading to the formation of the Home Rule Movement were as follows.

- (i) A section of the nationalists felt that popular pressure was required to attain concessions from the government.
- (ii) The Moderates were disillusioned with the Morley-Minto reforms.
- (iii) People were feeling the burden of wartime miseries caused by high taxation and a rise in prices, and were ready to participate in any aggressive movement of protest.
- (iv) The war, being fought among the major imperialist powers of the day and backed by naked propaganda against each other, exposed the myth of white superiority.
- (v) Tilak was ready to assume leadership after his release in June 1914, and had made conciliatory gestures—to the government reassuring it of his loyalty and to the Moderates that he wanted, like the Irish Home Rulers, a reform of the administration and not an overthrow of the government. He also admitted that the acts of violence had

only served to retard the pace of political progress in India. He urged all Indians to assist the British government in its hour of crisis.

(vi) Annie Besant, the Irish theosophist based in India since 1896, had decided to enlarge the sphere of her activities to include the building of a movement for home rule on the lines of the Irish Home Rule Leagues.

■ The Leagues

Both Tilak and Besant realised that the sanction of a Moderate-dominated Congress as well as full cooperation of the Extremists was essential for the movement to succeed. Having failed at the 1914 session of the Congress to reach a Moderate-Extremist rapprochement, Tilak and Besant decided to revive political activity on their own.

By early 1915, Annie Besant had launched a campaign to demand self-government for India after the war on the lines of white colonies. She campaigned through her newspapers, *New India* and *Commonweal*, and through public meetings and conferences. At the annual session of the Congress in 1915, the efforts of Tilak and Besant met with some success. It was decided that the Extremists be admitted to the Congress. Although Besant failed to get the Congress to approve her scheme of Home Rule Leagues, the Congress did commit itself to a programme of educative propaganda and to a revival of local-level Congress committees. Not willing to wait for too long, Besant laid the condition that if the Congress did not implement its commitments, she would be free to set up her own league—which she finally had to, as there was no response from the Congress.

Tilak and Besant set up their separate leagues to avoid any friction.

Tilak's League

Tilak set up his Home Rule League in April 1916 and it was restricted to Maharashtra (excluding Bombay city), Karnataka, Central Provinces and Berar. It had six branches and the

demands included swarajya, formation of linguistic states and education in the vernacular.

Besant's League

Annie Besant set up her league in September 1916 in Madras and covered the rest of India (including Bombay city). It had 200 branches, was loosely organised as compared to Tilak's League and had George Arundale as the organising secretary. Besides Arundale, the main work was done by B.W. Wadia and C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar.

■ The Home Rule League Programme

The League campaign aimed to convey to the common man the message of home rule as self-government. It carried a much wider appeal than the earlier mobilisations had and also attracted the hitherto 'politically backward' regions of Gujarat and Sindh. The aim was to be achieved by promoting political education and discussion through public meetings, organising libraries and reading rooms containing books on national politics, holding conferences, organising classes for students on politics, carrying out propaganda through newspapers, pamphlets, posters, illustrated post-cards, plays, religious songs, etc., collecting funds, organising social work, and participating in local government activities. The Russian Revolution of 1917 proved to be an added advantage for the Home Rule campaign.

The Home Rule agitation was later joined by Motilal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, Bhulabhai Desai, Chittaranjan Das, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Tej Bahadur Sapru and Lala Lajpat Rai. Some of these leaders became heads of local branches. Many of the Moderate Congressmen who were disillusioned with Congress inactivity, and some members of Gokhale's Servants of India Society also joined the agitation. However, Anglo-Indians, most of the Muslims and non-brahmins from the South did not join as they felt Home Rule would mean rule of the Hindu majority, and that too mainly by the high caste.

■ Government Attitude

The government came down with severe repression, especially in Madras where the students were prohibited from attending political meetings. A case was instituted against Tilak which was, however, rescinded by the high court. Tilak was barred from entering the Punjab and Delhi. In June 1917, Annie Besant and her associates, B.P. Wadia and George Arundale, were arrested. This invited nationwide protest. In a dramatic gesture, Sir S. Subramaniya Aiyar renounced his knighthood while Tilak advocated a programme of passive resistance. The repression only served to harden the attitude of the agitators and strengthen their resolve to resist the government. Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, commented that “Shiva ...cut his wife into fifty-two pieces only to discover that he had fifty-two wives. This is what happens to the Government of India when it interns Mrs Besant.” Annie Besant was released in September 1917.

■ Why the Agitation Faded Out by 1919

The Home Rule agitation proved to be short-lived. By 1919, it had petered out. The reasons for the decline were as follows.

- (i) There was a lack of effective organisation.
- (ii) Communal riots were witnessed during 1917-18.
- (iii) The Moderates who had joined the Congress after Annie Besant's arrest were pacified by talk of reforms (contained in Montagu's statement of August 1917 which held self-government as the long-term goal of the British rule in India) and Besant's release.
- (iv) Talk of passive resistance by the Extremists kept the Moderates away from activity from September 1918 onwards.
- (v) The Montagu-Chelmsford reforms which became known in July 1918 further divided the nationalist ranks.
- (vi) Tilak had to go abroad (September 1918) in connection with a case while Annie Besant vacillated over her response to the reforms and the techniques of passive

resistance. With Besant unable to give a positive lead and Tilak away in England, the movement was left leaderless.

■ Positive Gains

The Home Rule Leagues and the associated activities had some positive effects and contributed to the fresh direction that the freedom struggle was to take in the coming years.

(i) The movement shifted the emphasis from the educated elite to the masses and permanently deflected the movement from the course mapped by the Moderates.

(ii) It created an organisational link between the town and the country, which was to prove crucial in later years when the national movement entered its mass phase in a true sense.

(iii) It created a generation of ardent nationalists.

(iv) It prepared the masses for politics of the Gandhian style.

(v) The August 1917 declaration of Montagu and the Montford reforms were influenced by the Home Rule agitation.

(vi) The efforts of Tilak and Annie Besant towards the Moderate-Extremist reunion at Lucknow (1916) revived the Congress as an effective instrument of Indian nationalism.

(vii) The home rule movement lent a new dimension and a sense of urgency to the national movement.

Lucknow Session of the Indian National Congress (1916)

■ Readmission of Extremists to Congress

The Lucknow session of the Indian National Congress, presided over by a Moderate, Ambika Charan Majumdar, finally readmitted the Extremists led by Tilak to the Congress fold. Various factors facilitated this reunion:

(i) Old controversies had become meaningless now.

(ii) Both the Moderates and the Extremists realised that the split had led to political inactivity.

(iii) Annie Besant and Tilak had made vigorous efforts for the reunion. To allay Moderate suspicions, Tilak had declared that he supported a reform of administration and not an overthrow of the government. He also denounced acts of violence.

(iv) The death of two Moderates, Gokhale and Pherozshah Mehta, who had led the Moderate opposition to the Extremists, facilitated the reunion.

■ Lucknow Pact between Congress and Muslim League

Another significant development to take place at Lucknow was the coming together of the Muslim League and the Congress and the presentation of common demands by them to the government. This happened at a time when the Muslim League, now dominated by the younger militant nationalists, was coming closer to the Congress objectives and turning increasingly anti-imperialist.

Why the Change in the League's Altitude

There were many reasons for the shift in the League's position:

(i) Britain's refusal to help Turkey (ruled by the Khalifa who claimed religio-political leadership of all Muslims) in its wars in the Balkans (1912-13) and with Italy (during 1911) had angered the Muslims.

(ii) Annulment of partition of Bengal in 1911 had annoyed those sections of the Muslims who had supported the partition.

(iii) The refusal of the British government in India to set up a university at Aligarh with powers to affiliate colleges all over India also alienated some Muslims.

(iv) The younger League members were turning to bolder nationalist politics and were trying to outgrow the limited political outlook of the Aligarh school. The Calcutta session of the Muslim League (1912) had committed the

League to “working with other groups for a system of self-government suited to India, provided it did not come in conflict with its basic objective of protection of interests of the Indian Muslims”. Thus, the goal of self-government similar to that of the Congress brought both sides closer.

(v) Younger Muslims were infuriated by the government repression during the First World War. Maulana Azad’s *Al Hilal* and Mohammad Ali’s *Comrade* faced suppression while the leaders such as Ali brothers, Maulana Azad and Hasrat Mohani faced internment. This generated anti-imperialist sentiments among the ‘Young Party’.

The Nature of the Pact

The Lucknow Pact between the Congress and the Muslim League could be considered an important event in the course of the nationalistic struggle for freedom.

While the League agreed to present joint constitutional demands with the Congress to the government, the Congress accepted the Muslim League’s position on separate electorates which would continue till any one community demanded joint electorates. The Muslims were also granted a fixed proportion of seats in the legislatures at all-India and provincial levels. The joint demands were—

- Government should declare that it would confer self-government on Indians at an early date.
- The representative assemblies at the central as well as provincial level should be further expanded with an elected majority and more powers given to them.

View

After nearly ten years of painful separation and wanderings through the wilderness of misunderstanding and mazes of unpleasant controversies...both wings of Indian Nationalist Party have come to realise the fact that united they stand, but divided they fall.

A.C. Majumdar (president of the Lucknow session of the INC—1916)

- The term of the legislative council should be five years.
- The salaries of the Secretary of State for India should be paid by the British treasury and not drawn from Indian funds.
- Half the members of the viceroy's and provincial governors' executive councils should be Indians.

Critical Comments

Though half the executive was to be elected by the legislature, the executive as a whole was not to be responsible to the legislature. The legislature could not remove the elected half of the executive, but since important matters like the budget were dependent upon the approval of the legislature, a constitutional deadlock was most likely. This was the nature of executive-legislature relations that the Congress seemed to ask for in any scheme of post-war constitutional reforms. The Lucknow Pact demands were thus just a significantly expanded version of the Morley-Minto reforms.

While the effort of the Congress and the Muslim League to put up a united front was a far-sighted one, the acceptance of the principle of separate electorates by the Congress implied that the Congress and the League came together as separate political entities. This was a major landmark in the evolution of the two-nation theory by the Muslim League. Secondly, while the leaders of the two groups came together, efforts to bring together the masses from the two communities were not considered. However, the controversial decision to accept the principle of separate electorates represented a serious desire on the part of the Congress to allay minority fears of majority domination. Moreover, there was a large amount of enthusiasm generated among the people by this reunion. Even the government decided to placate the nationalists by declaring its intention to grant self-government to Indians in times to come, as contained in Montagu's August 1917 declaration.

Montagu's Statement of August 1917

The Secretary of State for India, Edwin Samuel Montagu, made a statement on August 20, 1917 in the British House of Commons in what has come to be known as the **August Declaration of 1917**. The statement said: "The government policy is of an increasing participation of Indians in every branch of administration and gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realisation of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire."

From now onwards, the demand by nationalists for self-government or home rule could not be termed as seditious since attainment of self-government for Indians now became a government policy, unlike Morley's statement in 1909 that the reforms were not intended to give self-government to India. Also, in the use of the term 'responsible government' was implied the condition that the rulers were to be answerable to the elected representatives, and not only to the imperial government in London. However, it was equally clear that the British had no intention of handing over power to predominantly elected legislatures with an Indian majority. So, in order that the executive be made responsible in some measure to the elected assemblies, whose size and the proportion of elected members in which was going to be increased in any case, the concept of 'dyarchy' was to be evolved.

■ Indian Objections

The objections of the Indian leaders to Montagu's statement were two-fold—

- (i) No specific time frame was given.
- (ii) The government alone was to decide the nature and the timing of advance towards a responsible government, and the Indians were resentful that the British would decide what was good and what was bad for Indians.

Summary

- **Home Rule League Movement**

Manifestation of a trend of aggressive politics in national movement; was pioneered by Tilak and Annie Besant on lines of a similar movement in Ireland.

- * **Factors Favouring the Movement**

1. Need being felt for popular pressure to attain concessions.
2. Disillusionment with Morley-Minto Reforms.
3. Wartime miseries—public ready to protest.
4. Tilak, Besant ready to assume leadership.

- * **Aim of the Movement** To convey to the common man the concept of Home Rule as self-government.

- * **Tilak's League**—Started in April 1916 and operated in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Central Provinces and Berar; had six branches.

- * **Besant's League**—Started in September 1916 and operated in rest of India; had 200 branches.

Later, the leagues were joined by others including Moderate Congressmen.

- * **Methods used** Organising discussions, reading rooms, propaganda through public meetings, newspapers, pamphlets, posters, etc.

- * **Positive Gains** Emphasis shifted to the masses permanently; organisational link established between town and country; prepared a generation of ardent nationalists, influenced Moderate-Extremist reunion at Lucknow (1916)

- **Lucknow Session of INC—1916**

Extremists were readmitted to Congress

Muslim League and Congress put up joint demands under Lucknow Pact.

Congress accepted the League's position on separate electorates.

- **Importance of Montagu's Statement** Attainment of self-government for Indians became a government policy.