

The Resurrection :: ::  
:: :: of the Congress

BY

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## The Resurrection of the Congress

THE Indian National Congress came into being thirty-five years ago, mainly at the instance of sympathetic and broadminded officials who were anxious that the leaders of Indian public opinion should have a common platform which might serve as a safety-valve for the pent-up grievances of the people. Col. Allan Octavian Hume, George Yule, Sir William Wedderburn, and Sir Henry Cotton were regarded by the Indian Politicians of an earlier day as names to be conjured with in official India. And no one, endowed with any sense of justice, can overlook the generous assistance which these official benefactors of the Congress rendered to the Indian cause according to their best lights. As its

signifies, the Indian National congress was originally intended to be, and has justified the reputation of being, a deliberative assembly commissioned to deal with issues that affect the well-being of the country as a whole, irrespective of provincial insularities or communal discriminations. From its inception it has been a Palladium of national sentiments and ideals, a forum where political nationality received a corporate expression and a sense of unity was cemented by the growing consciousness of common rights or disabilities.

English has till recently been the medium in which the entire transactions of the Congress have been conducted. From the first the Congress had the benediction not only of the progressive Hindus, but of such notable Moslem leaders as the late Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Mr. Badruddin Tyabji, Dr. Suhrawardy, the Nawab of Mahmudabad, Mr. Mazher-ul-Haq, Mr. Jinnah, and others. Granted, that on point of numbers and in directive and political ability the Hindus have been somewhat in the ascendant during the initial years; there has been nothing in the consti-

tution or programme of the Congress that did not seek to foster the legitimate interests of the Moslems, or failed to enlist the loyalty of their educated leaders. .

The All-India Muslim League, which to-day stands closely identified with the Indian National Congress in unity of ideal and is an institution wielding considerable authority, was launched by His Highness the Aga Khan and his colleagues in 1907, who were persuaded by the Government to believe that Congress was forcing the pace in political matters, and that, unless the interests of the Muhammadans were specially safeguarded by their inaugurating a rival institution to the Congress, and by isolating themselves from its sinister influences, the community might be swamped and subordinated. The political sagacity of the Muhammadans soon discovered the futility of such backdoor methods, and the values of recognizing the governing consideration of public life, viz., that the interests of the separate communities are quite safe in the custody of the Nation, provided the development of the National life proceeds on sane and progressive lines.

We have said above that the Congress has been a national institution, that its activities have been directed towards securing better representation for and development of the interests of all communities, yet it suffered under this grievous handicap that at first the inspiration and guidance came from officials and for some time it did not emancipate itself from them. As a necessary corollary it had the misfortune of having the patronage of its benefactors bestowed upon it. But still, through fair weather and foul, it did its pioneer work splendidly: the wrecking of Lord Ripon's liberal reforms through bitter Anglo-Indian opposition laid the foundations of a consolidated Indian opposition to an accurate administration preserving racial ascendancy by means of legislative discriminations. Lord Curzon's attempts to challenge its credentials and the appropriateness of constitutional agitation on the part of an Eastern people, receiving the full benefits of a benevolent despotism, only served to fan the flame. But during no crisis of its chequered history did it ever degenerate into a Hindu National Congress or stand for the exclusive

monopoly of control by Hindu leaders, as its Anglo-Indian critics would have us believe.

With the assumption by the British Crown of the Sovereignty of India in 1859, the chief responsibility devolving on the Indian Government consisted in making amends for the ruinous depredations of the East India Company, of whose policy Lord Morley of Blackburn writes:—

“Plunder in three forms, and diverted into three channels, was the very *raison d'être* of the power of the company. First, the proprietors of East India Stock clamoured for dividends. Secondly, the State insisted on an annual payment of £400,000 as the price of the privileges which the company enjoyed. Thirdly, the Public servants went out penniless, intending to return, and actually returning, with immense fortunes. . . . If the reader desires to convince himself further of that mass of fraud, peculation, collusion, in all their complex involutions, which then constituted the Government of India, let him turn to the

Ninth Report (of the Select Committee of the House of Commons), or to the correspondence of Lord Cornwallis, who, first as Governor-General of India immediately after Pitt's Reform, and then as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland during the rebellion, was destined to see in the West and the East how vile the nature of his countrymen could become. . . . The whole produce of the country (i.e., India), so far as the company is concerned, is not exchanged in the course of barter, but is taken away without any return or payment whatsoever, to the value of £12,000,000.\*

It was the memory of these exactions that drew from Burke, while impeaching Warren Hastings, that outburst of righteous indignation immortalized in the words: "The cries of India were given to seas and winds to be blown about, in every breaking up of the monsoon over a remote and unhearing ocean," and as he proceeded to indict the Governor-General who sold English troops to assist in

\* (Vide John Morley's "Edmund Burke" pp. 202, 8, 12).

the extermination of the brave Rohillas with whom Hastings was at peace, in the sack of their villages and murder of their women and children, Burke condemned, in scathing accents, "the merciless hand that tore the cloth from the loom or wrested the scanty portion of rice and salt from the peasant of Bengal, or wrung from him the very opium in which he forgot his oppressions and his oppressors."

When the Indian National Congress commenced its career, plunder came to an end, but exploitation under forms of law had been in progress. The more obvious forms of corruption and injustice were brushed aside with the return of a settled form of Government, responsible in theory at least to the British House of Commons. But even previously Lord William Bentinck was not only encouraged by advanced Indian opinion to introduce social reform, but was prevailed upon by Lord Macaulay to introduce western education, with English as the medium of instruction. The growth of Western education in course of time not only assisted the people to challenge racial ascendancy and privilege, but was the means of turning out an educated proletariat,



an infinitesimal proportion of whom could find scope for usefulness as the destruction of Indian commerce, seaborne trade and cottage industries restricted the avenues of employment. But English education unified the articulate sections of the people and made them the spear-head of an agitation, the exponents of a conflict of ideals between the despotic rulers and a freedom-loving people.

It is noteworthy that the Congress which met at Calcutta in 1886, passed the following resolution: "That this Congress views with grave apprehension the increasing poverty of vast numbers of the population of India, and desires to record its fixed conviction that the introduction of representative institutions will prove one of the most important practical steps towards the amelioration of the condition of the people."

Among the contributory factors that made the inauguration of the Indian National Congress possible was the initiation of an educational policy, under the inspiration of Lord Macaulay who held the portfolio of education in the Government of Lord William Bentinck. We cast no aspersions on Macaulay's states-



manship when we point out that universities, schools and colleges, were promoted by the Government in obedience to the need for securing a host of educated clerks and subordinates, without whose assistance the Governmental machinery could not be run at all. The universities were turning out in the early 'eighties' and 'nineties' an unbroken succession of graduates, whose mental Pabulum was the text books of Burke and Macaulay, the physics of Newton, and the metaphysics of Locke. Stimulated by English ideas of liberty, justice, and representative institutions; saturated with the doctrines of British publicists who took an active share in moulding political institutions at home; held spellbound by the glowing promise of Liberalism which was to illuminate the world and emancipate mankind by the discovery of new ideals, the earlier Congress men found in the utterances of John Bright, Fawcett, Cobden, Mill, and Morley, the master-key to the solution of all political difficulties and the secret of success for social redemption.

It may be apposite to point out that for these early converts to liberalism the criterion

of political efficiency and the condition precedent of true political reform was an unwavering, almost pathetic faith in British Justice. Among the early notables figure such protagonists of Indian reform as Surendranath Banerjee, Raja Rampal Singh, Pundit Madan Mohan Malaviya, all of whom looked upon eventual self-government as a boon which was in consonance with British traditions and implicit in the formulæ of British Government. In the cloud of witnesses which the Congress produced were brilliant exponents of Congress Liberalism of the mental calibre of Sir Pherozeshah Mehta, Dadabhai Naoroji, and last but not least, Gopalakrishna Gokhale, whose watchword of "responsible association with the administration" was the mainspring of his political activities, and symptomatic of the limitations of his political vision. Certain reforms were earnestly demanded from year to year, and decade to decade, and incorporated in pious resolutions submitted to a large body of delegates having no mandate from their constituencies, and carrying the resolutions without a single dissentient vote. The reforms asked for included a progressive retrenchment

of military expenditure, the rescinding of the forward policy initiated by Lord Lytton, the severing of magisterial functions from executive control, primary education for the masses, provision of better facilities for peasants and agricultural labourers, the lightening of the burden of excessive taxation, and the introduction of elective element in the provincial and imperial legislative councils. It is no disparagement of the splendid struggles of these pioneer reformers to point out that it never occurred to them that only in an atmosphere of freedom which liberates the constructive energies of the people and summons their vital resources for the reconstruction of their national life, even such sectional reforms as they advocated could be effected. The period of high intellectual excitement was inevitably succeeded by disillusionment and depression. When the leaders of public opinion decided to take their evangel to the masses and awaken in them political consciousness, and educate them to a sense of their responsibilities, they found their way barred by a series of preventive enactments already on the statute book, which made the consolidation of public opinion

well-nigh impossible and visited with severe penalties the extensive agitation essential for the arousing of self-respect among the inarticulate masses. The Civil Service as a body have been hostile from the very beginning to an institution which, with its limitations, has been the instrument for instilling in the minds of Indians principles and policies calculated to foster the exercise of critical faculties and awaken a demoralized people from machanical obedience to authority.

The dynamic conception of control over Government, the budget and administration of the finances, with the approval and under the direction of the chosen representatives of the people did not inspire the deliberations of the Congress till 1907, when mainly through the influence of Mr. Arabindo Ghose, the Nationalist party strengthened their demand for complete independence. The government, who had so far treated the Congress as a harmless institution indulging in an annual carnival of political harangues, saw in the building up of public opinion, in the growing audacity of the Nationalist press, the inauguration of the Council of national education, and

the increasing unpopularity of the moderates with their motto of "responsible association with the government," the stormy petrol of a significant revolution in ideas. Mr. Arabindo Ghose's proposal to give up the old attitude of polical mendicancy, to encourage the education of the villagers and towns-people alike in political ideas, hitherto regarded as the exclusive monopoly of the intelligentsia, the conducting of a ceaseless and well-organized propaganda, to make the village communities the nuclei of the district conferences, to insist on the delegates' election which alone could invest them with a representative character; all these combined with a high political idealism and eloquent advocacy of practical Nationalism based on the ideals of the Bhagavat-Gita, might have changed the Congress into a nursery of national ideals, and made it a formidable challenge to bureaucratic authority, but for the temporary defeat of the Nationalist Party.

The Government were not slow to face these awkward developments, with the unearthing of the old, and the forging of new weapons in their armoury of drastic repression, for it was

not a mere coincidence which sent Mr. Gokhale, the leader of the Moderates into the open arms of the Nationalists, who adopted resolutions advocating wholesale boycott of British manufactures, asked for the immediate annulment of the partition of Bengal, and adopted Swarajya as the goal of the political endeavour. The Government, aided and abetted by Liberal politicians at home, raised the alarm of "Rally the moderates." It may not be out of place to analyse the deeper implications of this official battle-cry. The essence of all representative government is the working faith that the will of the majority shall prevail, that in response to the demands of public opinion, the representatives of the majority shall wield authority for the benefit of the whole nation, as the trustees and guardians of their interests. The traditions and interests of the Anglo-Indian Government have made them the inveterate opponents of the views of the articulate majority, and the allies of a small and interested faction whose creed is to follow the path of least resistance; to play for Governmental favours, and yet to give to their public efforts the semblance of reality by

exploiting liberal catchwords. These individuals masquerade in India under the dignified title of "Moderates."

Since the Surat split of 1907, when the Nationalists came to grips with the Moderates, and lost the Congress platform while retaining their hold on the hearts of the people, the Congress distinguished itself by its masterly inactivity. Its constitution excluded those who would fain strike for full liberty. With the help of the Government, the Moderates came into their own, with Mr. Gokhale as their field-marshal. After prolonged legal proceedings, as the result of which Arabindo Ghose was acquitted of all complicity in crime, he sought asylum in Chandernagore. Bal Gangadhar Tilak was transported to Mandalay for six years for "lack of affection" to the Bombay Government, presided over by Sir George Clarke. Lajpat Rai was deported previously to the above happenings for what Lord Morley later characterised as "his silly rhodomontade." Bepin Chandra Pal, whose Philosophy of Indian Nationalism electrified the popular imagination, and prepared the soil for Non-co-operation, whose rationale of



passive resistance required the practical genius of a Mahatma Gandhi to be translated into action, sought the more salubrious climate of London before the official sledgehammer could fall. One Nationalist paper after another was suppressed. 'Bande Matram,' 'Karmayogin,' and others were all placed under the harrow. Sir Herbert Risley's fertile imagination seized on the unique opportunity offered by Sir S. P. Sinha's position as Law Member of the Viceroy's Council to rush through a Press Act, which placed the Indian Press entirely in the iron grip of an irresponsible executive. In theory designed to restrain the incendiarism of a section of the press, and providing sufficient "safeguards," according to Sir S. P. Sinha—now Lord Sinha—it has during the whole time it has defiled the Indian Statute Book, consistently aimed its blows at the independent expression of opinion and judgment which is the rudimentary function of a responsible press, bringing within its comprehensive provisions such organs as the *Mahratta*, *New India*, and the *Bombay Chronicle*, among others.

Right from its installation in 1885, through



out almost its whole course of evolution, the Indian National Congress has been supplicating for reforms, the grant of which implies and presupposes control over the Budget, fiscal and financial administration, and indeed control over the Government. Its requests for retrenchment in expenditure have been replied with flying budgets, till to-day the military expenditure stands a little lower than £60,000,000. Only a few months ago, Mr. Montagu announced the following increases in the pay of the various Imperial Services, in the British House of Commons, in reply to a question by Mr. Lunn :—

|                                                                           |            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Indian Civil Service ... ..                                               | £360,000   |
| Indian Police Service ... ..                                              | £130,000   |
| Indian Educational Service ... ..                                         | £100,000   |
| British Officers of the Indian Army and<br>British troops in India ... .. | £1,700,000 |
| Indian Medical Service ... ..                                             | £250,000   |
|                                                                           | <hr/>      |
|                                                                           | £2,540,000 |
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The "Forward Policy," so ably and vigorously denounced by the National Congress,

has settled itself, so far as the North-West frontier is concerned, under the pressure of world events, rather than by a sane and intelligent lead by the Government of India. Far from curbing its military ambitions and hastening the liberation of the country committed to their "trust," the military clique in India has only quite recently, as the recommendations of the Esher Committee amply illustrate, sought a definite alliance with the Imperial General Staff at Whitehall to make India the base of military operations against the Near and Middle East, accounts for which were "to be submitted *pro forma* to the Government of India," in direct contravention of a statutory provision that expenses for any campaign conducted beyond the territorial limits of British India were not, save under national emergencies or with the sanction of both Houses of Parliament, to be met out of Indian revenues.

The oft-repeated request for the separation of magisterial jurisdiction from Executive control had not only been flouted by the authorities, but as the Congress evidence relating to the atrocities of martial law in the Punjab

demonstrates, the evils implicit in a ramshackle system of police administration, were accentuated into revolting forms of cruelty the moment the proclamation of martial law removed the ordinary restraints which civil law provides.

The complete bankruptcy of the ideals pursued by the Congress was demonstrated when Sir S. P. Sinha, shortly before his nomination to the Imperial War Conference, formulated, in his capacity as President of the Indian National Congress in 1915, what may be called the bureaucratic conception of self-government. According to this view Indian freedom is a distant ideal, a far-off goal not within the region of practical politics.

The free circulation of the War Aims of the Allies, the wide publicity given to President Wilson's "Fourteen Points," the focussing of public attention on ideas of National freedom and public right, the impulse given to political idealism by the Russian Revolution; all these combined to place Indian self-determination in the realm of live, political issues of the day. Mrs. Besant's Home Rule propaganda, the scheme of reforms drafted by the nineteen elected members of the Viceroy's Council,

the Hindu-Muhammadan concordat, as foreshadowed by the adoption of the Congress political ideals by the All-India Muslim League, the capture by the Nationalists of the Indian National Congress in 1917, the British Cabinet's declaration of August, 1917, pledging itself to self-government by stages, the cumulative effect of all these activities was to precipitate the abandonment of old ideals and excite the free play of the spirit of the new age in Indian public life, as evidenced by the resolutions adopted at the Congress of 1918.

The ably-conducted, highly organized propaganda of Mrs. Besant, from 1914-17, the strenuous Home Rule campaign conducted by Lokamanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak throughout Maharashtra, and carried into other provinces, the heroic efforts of Mahatma Gandhi to arouse self-reliance among the masses, and demand the reduction of taxes, to foster the universal consciousness of rights and duties, greatly stimulated political evolution in a country where despotism has engendered lassitude and servility. The courageous journalism of Mr. B. G. Horniman, editor of *The Bombay Chronicle*, who was deported to

England, without charge or trial, by the arbitrary fiat of the Government of Bombay, must be included with other efforts as a valuable contribution to the Indian cause.

But more potent in stiffening India's demand has been the *régime* of "frightfulness" which found its culmination in the Amritsar massacre and the six weeks' reign of lawlessness, and which was condoned by the mild censure passed on the malefactors concerned by the Home Government. The dismemberment of the Turkish Empire has also offended the spiritual fidelities of Moslems in India and elsewhere.

At the time of writing, the situation in India has become one of alarming gravity, because of the success of the Non-Co-operation Movement, for which both Hindus, Muhammadans and other communities are working with unparalleled unanimity. The Aligarh College, the citadel of progressive Islam, has been converted into a Muslim National University, with the indomitable Mr. Muhammad Ali as Principal, the Hindu University of Benares is about to fall into the hands of advancing Non-Co-operators. The elections to the Reformed

Councils have been rendered meaningless as an overwhelming majority of voters have refused to vote, in loyalty to the principle of Non-Co-operation.

Mr. Montagu's device of honouring individuals who have lost the confidence of the nation, and of reiterating the catchwords of his distinguished predecessor, "Rally the Moderates," by offering a handful of politicians without a following, lucrative employment, is as futile as it is short-sighted. What matters to-day is not a few appointments more or less, but the promotion of the vital interests of the nation as a whole, the transference of authority from the bureaucracy to the elected representatives of the people.

The phenomenal increase in the number of peasant delegates to the Congress, the better representation of the Industrial Workers, the solidarity of strikers, and their success in forcing better conditions from "unwilling employers," and lastly an intensive and extensive propaganda constitute the signs and symptoms of the coming storm.

Whether India will, of her own choice, prefer to remain in the British Commonwealth as a

free and sovereign state, or whether goaded by desperation, she may seek alliance with revolutionary forces in fundamental variance with the traditions and principles thereof, will largely depend on the swiftness of the decision to right her numerous wrongs and hasten the day of her deliverance on the basis of self-determination. India has decided for full freedom, here and now, and the "progressive realization of self-government" by slow stages, has neither meaning nor fascination for her. In the meanwhile, tremendous decisions will be made by the Indian National Congress before 1922 sets in. The adoption by the Congress in September of the policy of Non-Cooperation, the implied repudiation of the British connection in the revised articles of its faith, the likely paralysis of the various functions of Government—should make statesmen think furiously and act promptly.



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