
UNIT 14 RESISTANCE WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE COUNCILS*

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14.1 INTRODUCTION

The period after the withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement and the beginning of the civil disobedience can be best understood through the activities of the Swaraj Party. The importance of the Swaraj Party is that it introduced a new strand of political activity within the nationalist movement, that of council entry. It extended the area of the nationalist movement to the heart of legislative politics and the constitutional arena. Later, in the 1930s, this became a fairly dominant strand within Congress politics, when in 1937 Congress contested elections and formed governments in seven provinces.

The period between the two agitations is very important. During this period the national movement was carried on and sustained, not by direct agitation against the British, but through the activities of the Swaraj Party and Gandhi's constructive programme. It is important to recognise that whereas the nature of the activities of the national movement underwent a change during this period, it did not imply a break or a discontinuation in the basic trajectory of the national movement. In this Unit, we will discuss this period (1922-29), will focus on the context in which the Swaraj Party was born, and also talk about the nature of the constructive programme initiated by Gandhi. Towards the end, the Unit will also introduce to you the Nehru Report as the direct extension of the activities of the Swaraj Party and the controversies that revolved around it.

14.2 BACKGROUND

Swarajism may be understood as a 'political experiment' within the long life of the national movement. The essence of this experiment was that the national movement, in order to be successful, must reach out to all arenas of political life and activity. In other words, it meant extending the national movement to the

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legislative bodies also. Colonial rule was to be questioned and challenged inside the Legislatures. Motilal Nehru and Chittaranjan Das were the main protagonists of this idea. They gave it a concrete shape by forming a Swaraj Party within Congress in 1923. There was a background and a context to the birth of the idea of Swarajism.

The impetus to the Swarajist politics was provided by the nature of the Government of India Act of 1919 and the withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement in 1922. Let us briefly look at the two.

The end of the First World War had raised great hopes and expectations among Indians of getting important constitutional benefits from the British. All such hopes turned into bitter disappointment with the promulgation of the GOI Act of 1919. It was believed that in some ways the Act of 1919 was even more retrograde than the Act of 1909. The main disappointment of the Indians pertained to the fact that a substantial proportion of seats in the legislative bodies, both at the centre and in the provinces, were to be filled by non-elected members nominated by the government. Out of a total of 145 members, as many as 40 were to be nominated by the government. This reduced the power of the elected members quite significantly. Under the Act of 1919, first elections were to be held in 1920. Under the non-cooperation movement, boycott (of titles, educational institutions of the government, law courts and the legislatures) was one of the weapons of the movement. It was in these circumstances that C.R. Das, prominent Congress leader from Bengal, argued that instead of boycotting the legislatures, Congressmen should contest elections, enter the Assemblies and oppose British government from there. The proposal was rejected by the All India Congress Committee (AICC). This was the beginning of the idea of Swarajism.

The non-cooperation movement was suddenly brought to a halt in May 1922 following the violence at Chauri Chaura. Almost immediately after the withdrawal of the movement, Gandhi was arrested and sentenced to six years imprisonment. At this point the national movement was at a crossroad and there were two important questions confronting the Congress leadership:

- Should the non-cooperation movement be resumed again or not?
- What should be the Congress stand on the 1923 elections to the legislatures?

To get a sense of the mood of the people on these questions, the AICC constituted an enquiry committee in June 1922. The committee consisted of Hakim Ajmal Khan, Vitthalbhai Patel, Motilal Nehru, Srinivas Aiyangar, M.A. Ansari and C. Rajagopalachari. The committee toured the country and submitted its report. All the members unanimously agreed that the country was not ready for a round of non-cooperation. On the question of council-entry, however, there was a difference of opinion. Ajmal Khan, Vitthalbhai Patel and Motilal Nehru were in favour of council entry by Congressmen and the remaining members were against it.

In months to come, this minor division within the committee acquired large proportions and it looked as if this question might split the entire Congress organisation. The advocates of council entry came to be identified as pro-changers and the opponents were called no-changers. Rajendra Prasad and Vallabhbhai Patel were the other important no-changers. Since the AICC was unable to come to a conclusion on this issue, the final decision was left for the annual session of the Congress to be held at Gaya in December 1922. Chittaranjan Das was the president of the Congress at this time.

At the Gaya session of the Congress the real differences between the two groups came to the fore. The pro-changers wanted Congressmen to contest elections, enter the legislative bodies and put up stiff resistance to the British inside the legislatures. The no-changers, on the other hand, believed that council entry would dilute the spirit of non-cooperation and amount to cooperation with the British. Instead of council entry they suggested that the national movement should be advanced by carrying on Gandhi's constructive programme. Constructive programme consisted of promoting Hindu-Muslim unity, Khadi and a social campaign against untouchability. Both the groups campaigned for their respective course of action. The final decision was left for the general session of the Congress. The general Congressmen voted for the no-changers. They got 1740 votes as against 890 for the pro-changers. The verdict of the Congress was overwhelmingly against council entry. Since this decision was against the thinking of president C.R. Das, he resigned from Congress presidentship.

The pro-changers were defeated but not demoralised. They realised that a fairly large section of Congressmen was in favour of council entry. Therefore immediately after the Gaya Congress, they convened a meeting of their supporters and decided to form a new party within the Congress. They gave it the name of Congress Khilafat Swaraj Party. C.R. Das was the president and Motilal Nehru the general secretary of the new party.

The formation of a new group within the Congress created an atmosphere of mutual suspicion. The possibility of a split within Congress became quite imminent. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the new president of the Congress, tried to bring about unity between the two groups but did not succeed. In early 1924, the British government released Gandhi on account of his deteriorating health. Gandhi was initially completely opposed to the pro-changers and he refused to treat council-entry as part of the Congress programme of non-cooperation. Gradually however, a compromise was worked out between Gandhi and Chittaranjan Das at the Belgaum session of the Congress in 1924. Under the new agreement, the Congress leadership agreed to treat 'Swarajism' as the official part of the Congress programme. A split in the Congress was thus averted.

14.3 ESSENCE OF SWARAJISM

The naming of the Swaraj Party (Congress Khilafat Swaraj Party) was done with a great deal of thought. At the time of its formation, many people within the Congress had misgivings about the party. They considered it as anti-Congress and pro-British. The first task of the party after its formation was to remove these misunderstandings. They had full agreement with Congress-Khilafat alliance and they also did not project their party as an alternative to Congress. Rather they emphasised the Congress connection by considering their Swarajist experiment to be a part of Congress programme. Probably the earliest justification for the existence of Swaraj Party was provided by Motilal Nehru in a statement. He argued that, under changed circumstances, the boycott of legislatures had become obsolete and, therefore, the policy of boycott should be changed. The statement, signed by Motilal Nehru, Ajmal Khan and Vithalbai Patel, said:

'Times have now changed. Circumstances have altered. The period of struggle is indefinitely prolonged. Measures affecting the daily life of the people are being enacted in the legislature year after year. Fresh taxation and huge liabilities are

being imposed with the help and in the name of the so-called representatives of the people, and *nolens volens* [willingly or unwillingly] the people will have to submit to them. Under these circumstances it is a question for consideration how far the hold of the Congress over the masses can remain unaffected. Suppose the Congress persists in the boycott of the councils in its present form, and it is found that a greater percentage of voters record their votes on the occasion, our claim would be discredited. We are inclined to believe that the policy of abstention has lost its charm, and it is likely that a greater percentage of voters will vote at the ensuing elections. In that event, the success gained at the last elections will be a thing of the past and the whole movement will be adversely affected.’ (Quoted in D.G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, Vol. 2, 1951, New Delhi, p. 113).

Both Motilal Nehru and C.R. Das believed that ‘Swarajism’ was an effective way in which the constitutional credibility of British imperialism could be eroded. Through the Acts of 1909 and 1919 the British had tried to assert the constitutional basis of their rule. They had also claimed (through their declaration of self-rule in 1917) that they were gradually preparing Indians for democracy and self-government. The Swarajism, as conceived by the leaders of the Swaraj Party, was an attempted rebuttal of these British claims. They believed that by entering the legislatures they can make the constitutional experiment of the British null and void. C.R. Das made this point clear in a statement: “We have so far boycotted the Councils from the outside...It should now be the duty of Congress to successfully boycott Councils from the inside.” He believed that the introduction of democracy as claimed by the Act of 1919 was a mere camouflage. The real power remained with the British bureaucracy. But this power of the bureaucracy could be effectively opposed only from within. Das emphasized the practical aspects of the Swarajist politics thus:

‘We will assert our basic rights in the Councils and the Assembly. For the acceptance and the protection of those rights we will demand a Constitution. It is quite probable that the British government will not agree to it. Then all the Swarajists will non-cooperate with the government bureaucracy. We will oppose every government Bill. We will not allow the budget to be passed. We will stall every proposal of the government. Thus we will defeat every Bill proposed by the government.’

Some Congressmen accused Swarajists of practising negative and obstructionist politics. Replying to this charge, Das said: “We are surrounded by British bureaucracy from all sides. Under these circumstances it is not possible to build anything new without destroying something. But we should not forget that whereas we are destroying something, our aim is to build something new.” It should thus be clear that Swarajism was not conceptualized as an alternative to mainstream Congress politics. Rather it was intended to enrich the Congress politics by adding a new dimension to it.

14.4 SWARAJISTS AT THE POLLS

Elections were held under the GOI Act in 1920, 1923 and 1926. The 1920 elections were unanimously boycotted by Congress as part of the official programme of boycott. Swaraj Party contested the elections in 1923 and 1926. The 1923 elections were held almost immediately after the formation of the Party and it

did not have enough time to prepare for them. The elections were scheduled to be held in November 1923 and it was not before October that Party was able to start its preparations for the elections. The election offices were opened in the provinces and districts. Volunteers were mobilised. The lists of candidates were prepared. Financial resources had to be mobilised. The literature, booklets and pamphlets for the election campaign were prepared. The manifesto of the party was released in October. It declared Swaraj as the ultimate aim of the Party. Making of their own Constitution by the Indians was projected as the major objective towards the fulfillment of the aim of Swaraj Party. It was made clear that a Constitution for India could only be made keeping in mind the specificity of Indian conditions. Therefore an alien government sitting in England was not competent to make a Constitution for India, suitable for Indian conditions. Swaraj Party demanded in its manifesto that the Indian people should have the right to frame their own Constitution. It was highlighted that the act of Constitution making will eventually take India to Swaraj.

The demand of making one's own Constitution was both novel and important. This indeed was a new idea introduced in the nationalist politics. The British had ruled India with help of certain Acts passed by the British parliament from time to time. The moderate nationalist leadership used to generally demand better laws or an improvement in the existing ones. But it did not question the 'right' of the British government to make laws for India. **By asserting their right to make their own Constitution, the Swarajists added a new dimension to nationalist politics.** The politics of council entry was not to be an end in itself, but only the first step. Eventually this was to culminate in full fledged constitutionalism, i.e., Constitution making by Indians themselves. In the years to come, particularly in the 1930s, the demand for a Constituent Assembly became a central demand of the national movement and Jawaharlal Nehru integrated it into the Congress programme. In this way, Swarajism went beyond the moderate politics and provided the connecting bridge between the constitutional politics practised by the moderates and Jawaharlal Nehru's demand for a Constituent Assembly. The manifesto also made clear the meaning of council entry. The Swarajists were instructed not to accept any office in the councils and the Assembly. The membership of the party was confined only to Congressmen. The members of the party were instructed to behave as Congressmen in the legislatures and uphold the dignity and prestige of Congress.

It is important to recognise that this was the first time the nationalist leaders were going to participate in the elections. They did not have any experience of electoral politics. For an effective management of the election activities leaders like C.R. Das (for Bengal, Central provinces and Madras presidency), Motilal Nehru (for United Provinces) and Vithalbhai Patel (for Bombay Presidency) took it upon themselves to organise the elections both in the provinces and at the centre. On the whole Swaraj Party spent about Rs. 25 thousand in UP and around 30 thousand in Bengal. On an average the amount of Rs. five hundred was considered necessary for one constituency. Even by the standards of those days this was not a very big amount.

In the 1923 elections, the party performed well but well below its own expectations. The following table gives us an idea of performance of Swaraj Party at the polls:

Assembly and Councils	Total Elected Seats	Seats won by Swaraj Party
Central Legislative Assembly	105	42
Madras Council	98	14
Bombay Council	86	23
Bengal Council	111	47
UP Council	101	31
Central Provinces Council	54	40
Punjab Council	71	12
Bihar and Orissa Council	73	12
Assam Council	39	13

The party acquired a majority in CP and emerged as the largest single party in the Central Assembly, Bombay and Bengal. In UP it registered an impressive presence but in other places the performance of the party was generally disappointing. On the whole the party won 234 seats (42 at the centre and 192 in the provinces). Given the lack of time for preparations this was an impressive performance. At many places the party had not been able to find a suitable candidate. In Bombay for instance the party was able to field only 24 candidates (at 86 constituencies) and won 23. In Bihar and Orissa it fielded only 13 candidates and won 12. Likewise, from UP the party fielded only 33 candidates and won 31.

It was thus from 1923 that the Swaraj Party began its politics in the legislatures. The years from 1923 to 1936 were the high point in Swarajist politics of council entry. It gave a concrete shape to the politics of opposition in the councils. The party also scored some crucial victories, both real and psychological, against the government. What did the party do in the Assembly and in the legislative councils?

14.5 SWARAJISTS IN THE ASSEMBLY AND IN THE COUNCILS

Motilal Nehru became the leader of opposition in the Central Legislative Assembly. At the very outset he tried to obtain support for the Swarajist agenda from among the other Indian members in the Assembly. The Assembly consisted of members nominated by the government, elected supporters of the government, Liberals and the independent members, not from any party. From among this lot Motilal Nehru tried to mobilise the Liberals and the independents. He did it by portraying swaraj not as the demand of his party but as a national demand of all Indian members. He declared at the floor of the Assembly: "We have different styles of functioning. But otherwise the differences among the Swarajists, Liberals and the independents are not very real." Such a perspective enabled him to create a large united front in the Assembly against the government. He was able to successfully reach out to Liberal leaders like Tej Bahadur Sapru, and liberal communal leaders like Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Madan Mohan Malaviya.

At the time of the convening of the first session of the Assembly, Mahatma Gandhi was in jail. The first task of the Swaraj Party in the Assembly was to give a notice to the government for Gandhi's release. The proposal was almost certain to receive support from other Indian members. Therefore, sensing the mood of the Assembly, the government released Gandhi the day the proposal was to be tabled. This was the first victory of the Swaraj Party in the Assembly. In February 1924, a resolution was moved by a non-Swarajist member, demanding a Royal Commission for a revision of the GOI Act 1919 so as to secure for India the status of a Dominion within the British Empire. Motilal Nehru moved an amendment proposing that the new Constitution should be framed by a representative Round Table Conference and approved by the Indian Legislative Assembly. The amendment was opposed by the government benches but it got overwhelming support from the elected members. This was the first and perhaps the most spectacular victory of the Swaraj Party in the Assembly.

In 1926, Swaraj Party moved a proposal for the release of political prisoners. During the non-cooperation movement many political leaders had been arrested. Some had been imprisoned without any trial. Many revolutionaries had also been exiled from the country. The party therefore put forward the demand for the release of political prisoners and the repatriation of the exiled leaders. But this demand did not receive the support of other Indian members of the Assembly and was defeated. Throughout the period (1923-26) Swaraj Party opposed the government budget and other government proposals. However, this process of non-cooperation in the Assembly could not continue for very long after 1926. Therefore, the party as a whole decided to stage a 'walk out' of the Assembly.

Before the 'walk out' Motilal Nehru gave a historic speech on the floor of the Assembly. He said: "We know that in the present state of the country, rent as it is by communal discord and dissensions, civil disobedience, our only possible weapon is not available to us at present. But we know also that it is equally unavailing to us to remain in this Legislature and in the other Legislatures of the country any longer. We go out to-day not with the object of overthrowing this mighty Empire. We know we cannot do so even if we wished it. We go out in all humility with the confession of our failure to achieve our objective in this house on our lips." (K.M. Panikkar and A. Pershad (ed.), *The Voice of Freedom: Selected Speeches of Pandit Motilal Nehru*, Bombay, 1961, p. 290.)

The pattern of protest against the government continued also in the provincial councils. Given its majority status in CP, the protest was much more effective there. But the nature of Swarajist activities in all the provinces was very similar. Government proposals were opposed; no confidence motion against the government was placed on the floor; the government budget was criticized and opposed. And no office of any kind was accepted by the Swaraj Party members during the initial years.

As you are probably aware, the GOI Act of 1919 had introduced the scheme of Dyarchy. Under this scheme, the ministerial responsibilities were divided between reserved subjects (directly under the British) and the transferred subjects (brought under the control of the elected representatives). Land revenue administration, Police, judiciary, press, and irrigation were reserved subjects. Local self-government, medical administration, education and agriculture were brought under transferred subjects. When the Swaraj Party legislators were asked

(particularly in CP and Bengal where they had a sizable presence) to take over the transferred subjects, they refused. C.R. Das, the leader in the Bengal council, said: “All the members of the Swaraj Party are determined, not to run Dyarchy, but to end it.”

It can be said that the Swarajist activities constituted an important intervention in the nationalist politics of the times. But this type of politics had its own limitations. Motilal Nehru admitted in 1926 that the Swarajist politics had not been able to take the country forward towards Swaraj. Even within the Assembly the government was able to override the opposition of the Swaraj Party. The Viceroy could always use his special powers, granted by the Act of 1919, to have all the government proposals passed. The government proposals could thus become the ‘Act’ without needing the support of the majority of the house. Therefore the opposition by the Swaraj Party had no substantive value in the Assembly.

What were then the main accomplishments of the Swaraj Party?

14.6 MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE SWARAJ PARTY

It is clear that the Swarajist leaders had not been successful in changing the functioning of the Assembly and the councils. The British control over the legislatures remained unaltered. No major breakthrough occurred there. Yet there were some crucial ways in which the Swarajists were able to contribute to the growth of the national movement.

First, they were able to bring the diverse and disparate nationalist elements close to each other and on a common platform. Motilal Nehru had started believing in the 1920s that the different political forces in the country had begun crystallizing into supporters of imperialism and those of nationalism. *This* had become the major dividing line. It was therefore both possible and desirable to bring nationalists of all shades and colours together. This enabled him to politically reach out to Mohammad Ali Jinnah on the one hand, and Madan Mohan Malaviya and Lajpat Rai, on the other. The Swarajists tried to create a broadest possible alliance of the Indian members in the Assembly and the councils. However towards the latter part of the Assembly, not only cracks developed in this broad nationalist alliance, even the unity within the ranks of the Swarajists became difficult.

Second, The Swarajists activities did popularise the demand for Swaraj. This was an important achievement. The Swarajists did not get coopted into ‘colonial constitutionalism’, and their connections with the outside nationalist politics remained strong as ever. They were also able to influence public opinion. Their activities on the floor of the Assembly got a good coverage in the press. By this time, a large number of English newspapers had acquired pan-India coverage. The Swadeshi activities were reported in both the English and the other newspapers in Indian languages.

The accomplishments of the Swaraj Party can be better understood by comparing the two Assembly sessions. Because of the Congress boycott of the 1920 elections, there was hardly any nationalist presence in the Assembly and the government

faced no opposition there. By contrast, during 1923-26, all the government Bills faced stiff opposition. Five times the government was compelled to withdraw the Bill. Most of the government proposals were passed only by invoking the special powers of the Viceroy.

14.7 SWARAJISM AFTER 1926: DECLINE, DISINTEGRATION, MERGER

By the time the elections of 1926 were held, the political climate of the country had changed quite a bit. This was bound to affect the destiny of the Swaraj Party. The subsequent decline and disintegration was partly a result of this change. After the withdrawal of the Non-cooperation movement, the country went through a series of communal riots at an unprecedented level. UP alone experienced around 91 instances of communal violence during 1923-27. It was during this period that the politics of communalism began to enter Indian politics in a big way. Under these circumstances, the kind of working alliances that Swaraj Party had built up with leaders like Jinnah and Malaviya, became vulnerable and eventually broke down. This weakened the position of the party in the Assembly and in the councils.

There was also an increasing disillusionment with the party and its policies. Those who expected the party to bring about a political breakthrough through legislative methods were disappointed to see that the party's opposition to any proposal had not been able to prevent it from becoming an Act. The politics of opposition in Assembly had also begun to lose its novelty.

Yet another failure of some consequence was the rise of dissension and factionalism within the party itself. C.R. Das died in 1925 (at the age of 55) and many party members developed doubts regarding the efficacy of obstructionism in the legislatures. Some members began to advocate the alternative politics of 'Responsive Cooperation' in the legislatures. M.R. Jayakar and N.C. Kelkar were some of the major exponents of this policy. As a part of this policy many Swarajist members accepted office in the Legislatures. Vithalbhai Patel accepted the office of the president of the Central Assembly. All this was against the official and declared policy of the Swaraj Party.

As was expected, the position of the Swaraj Party declined at the time of the 1926 elections, compared to 1923. But what rendered the politics of legislative obstruction redundant was a sudden change in the political climate of the country. This change was brought about by the arrival of the 'all white' Simon Commission to assess the impact of the Act of 1919 and to make fresh proposals for India's constitutional advance.

14.8 SIMON COMMISSION: RETURN OF NON-COOPERATION

The Act of 1919 had stipulated that its functioning would be assessed after ten years. In September 1924, Motilal Nehru had proposed in the Assembly that this assessment should be done earlier. This proposal was passed in spite of government opposition. As a result, the British government announced in 1927 the setting up of an Indian Statutory Commission. The Commission consisted of

members of British parliament and was headed by John Simon. The mandate given to the Commission was to “enquire into the system of government, the growth of education and the development of representative institutions in British India.”. The decision to appoint the Simon Commission was generally received in Indian political circles with resentment and disapproval. The immediate cause for resentment was the non-inclusion of any Indian in the Commission. All the major political parties decided to oppose and boycott the Commission. This in a way also united the various strands within Congress and the political differences between no-changers and pro-changers disappeared. Motilal Nehru was to later declare regarding the Simon Commission: “While the Commission was a farce, its Report was even a greater farce.” He also decided in 1927 that the legislatures will now have to be opposed from the outside rather than inside. On the floor of the Assembly Lajpat Rai proposed a boycott of the Commission and Motilal Nehru supported it. He declared on the floor of the Assembly: “British parliament, British people and British government have no right to impose a Constitution on India against our wish.” Thus with the arrival of Simon Commission, the mainstream Congress politics regained its unity that had temporarily got side-tracked since 1922.

It was decided that the mere boycott of Simon Commission was not enough and that Indians should also create an alternative to the Report of the Commission. This implied creation of a draft of an Indian constitution by the Indian leaders. Therefore after the successful boycott of the Simon Commission, an all-parties conference was convened in February 1928 under the leadership of M.A. Ansari, an important Congress leader. The conference constituted a sub-committee to draft a Constitution for India. Making a Constitution for the country was one of the demands of Swaraj Party. Therefore Motilal Nehru was made the president of the sub-committee. Prominent liberal leader Tej Bahadur Sapru was another important member of the sub-committee. With this decision ended the separate political existence of Swaraj Party. The political life of Swaraj Party spanned a period between 1923 and 1928. It started with council entry and culminated in exercise of a Constitution making for India. In July 1928 the sub-committee presented a Constitution to the country that came to be known as Nehru Report.

Nehru Report needs to be recognised as one of the major political documents of the Indian nationalist movement. Its importance lay in the fact that it served as a precursor to the Indian Constitution that was made in 1950. The Indian Constitution borrowed many clauses and provisions from the Nehru Report. It was the first constitutional document prepared by the Indians for themselves. It also effectively demolished the British imperialist claim that Indians were incapable of constructive constitutional politics. The Nehru Report was predictably rejected by the British. Unfortunately it could not achieve any consensus among the Indian parties. By this time, the differences between Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha had become irreconcilable, and it was simply not possible to accommodate the demands of both within a single document. As a result the Nehru Report remained a mere paper document and not a powerful and vibrant constitutional alternative that it was expected to be. Its significance was more psychological than real. It however represented a high point in Swarajist politics. The Swarajist politics was inaugurated with the agenda of ‘council entry’. The council entry had distanced Swaraj Party from Congress party and even though their links were never broken, the Swaraj Party functioned as a kind of parallel to mainstream Congress politics. The politics of council entry logically

culminated in the politics of constitution-making and with this the distance between the two disappeared. The Swaraj Party therefore should be understood as an important political strand that emanated from within the Congress, ran parallel to it during 1923-28 and finally merged back into the parent body.

In a decade's time, a new Act was passed by the British in 1935. This Act granted provincial autonomy and this time Congress as a whole decided to contest elections in the provinces. Congress scored a comprehensive victory in these elections and, after some debate, formed governments in seven out of the 11 provinces. So in a way the Swarajist programme was adopted by Congress as a whole in 1937. This was the ultimate victory of the Swaraj Party.

14.9 GANDHIAN CONSTRUCTIVE PROGRAMME

As was mentioned earlier in the Unit, the withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement resulted in a diversification in nationalist activities. Council entry was one of the strands that emanated from this vacuum created because of the withdrawal. At the other extreme was violent revolutionary activity and many young people in UP, Punjab and Bengal took to underground violence. Yet another form the movement evolved was that of constructive programme. This was a crucial component of Gandhian strategy of struggle against imperialism. It revolved around the promotion of Khadi, spinning, village industries, national education and Hindu-Muslim unity, struggle against untouchability and social uplift of the Harijans, and boycott of foreign cloth and liquor. Above all constructive work meant going to the villages and focusing on village reconstruction. Under this impulse many Ashrams opened up in villages and took up the work of spinning and Khadi.

The main importance of this type of work for the nationalist struggle was that it provided continuity to the struggle and it helped to link up different phases of agitations. It prepared people for the next round of agitation and prevented demoralisation and disillusionment among the participants in the struggle. Gandhi was fully aware that a prolonged phase of struggle could not be easily sustained by the masses. Masses did not have inexhaustible reserves of political energy to keep up the struggle. They needed to take a break from the agitation and yet remain involved in the movement. The constructive work fulfilled this great need.

Yet another merit of constructive work was that it helped take the movement to illiterate masses, who constituted Gandhi's "steel frame" as it were. It was above all through Gandhi's constructive work that the national movement entered the villages. The rural component of the national movement was consolidated either by the peasant movements or by Gandhian constructive work. The peasant movements could not be sustained for long for obvious reasons. But the constructive programme could be taken up at any point and sustained for long durations. The constructive programme also helped enlarge the social base of the movement. A large number of people, who had no inclination for organised modern politics, and were also reluctant to go jail, could easily take up constructive work in the villages. So in a way the constructive programme enabled a large number of people to participate in the national movement, without necessarily paying a social cost for it.

The above description however is not meant to suggest that Gandhi's constructive programme had only an instrumental value, that it was only an instrument in the struggle against imperialism. It was an important activity in itself. Spinning provided an additional source of income for landless agricultural workers, most of whom came from lower castes. In order to regulate constructive work, Gandhi formed the All India Spinners' Association whose purpose was to create rural employment by insisting on the city people to use hand spun cloth only. The spinners association soon reached over five thousand villages and provided employment to over four lakh spinners and carders and over twenty thousand weavers. Within ten years of its formation it succeeded in disbursing over two crore rupees in those villages.

Quite apart from its economic viability, the village reconstruction had a great moral significance for Gandhi. For him the real India lived in its villages, not in the cities. Fully aware that Indian villages and villagers lived in pathetic conditions, Gandhi suggested: "If India lives in the villages, let then there be at least one ideal village so that it may serve as a model to the whole of the country." Such a model of an ideal village actually existed in Gandhi's mind. In an interesting debate with Jawaharlal Nehru in 1945 on the future of independent India, Gandhi wrote: "The village of my dreams is still in my mind. After all every man lives in the world of his dreams. My ideal village will contain intelligent human beings. They will not live in dirt and darkness as animals. Men and women will be free and able to hold their own against anyone in the world. There will be neither plague, nor cholera, nor small-pox; no one will be idle, no one will wallow in luxury. Everyone will have to contribute his quota of manual labour." (Letter to Jawaharlal Nehru, 5 October 1945). And after India's villages were fully developed along the lines suggested by Gandhi, there will be "no dearth in them of men with high degree of skill and artistic talent. There will be village poets, village artists, village architects, linguists and research workers. In short, there will be nothing in life worth having which will not be had in the villages."

In short then, the constructive programme was a multi-faceted phenomenon. It had a strategic, an economic and a moral dimension. It was an important component of Gandhi's strategy of struggle against imperialism in which phases of agitation alternated with phases of constructive programme and thus kept the movement going without any break. At the same time the work of Khadi also provided economic relief and sustenance to poor villagers. And finally it was also linked to Gandhi's vision of an ideal village life.

14.10 SUMMARY

This Unit tried to explain to you the political significance of Swaraj Party and its role in the national movement. The Swarajist experiment constituted a brief but important episode within nationalist politics. Its life-span occupied the period between two phases of agitational politics (1920-22 and 1930-34). The basic purpose of the Swarajist politics was to extend the national movement to the legislative arena. The idea was that the Swarajists should get into the councils and oppose the British rule from *within* the structures created by the British. The Swarajist leaders, Motilal Nehru and C.R. Das, realised the importance of legislative politics and, instead of boycotting it, brought it within the nationalist fold. Swaraj Party contested the elections twice, in 1923 and 1926, and performed the role of nationalist opposition in the councils and the Assembly.

A high point of Swarajist politics was to deny the British government any moral legitimacy to make laws for Indians, and to insist that only Indians could make a Constitution for themselves. As a corollary of this, all the major political parties got together under Congress leadership and prepared the draft of a Constitution for India. This came to be known as Nehru Report. Nehru Report can be justifiably seen as a precursor to the Constitution of independent India that was inaugurated in 1950.

With the making of the Nehru Report, the Swarajist activities came to an end. With the arrival of Simon Commission, the political climate suddenly changed in favour of agitational politics. With that the separate existence of Swaraj Party came to an end and the party merged into Congress. But it is important to remember that in the 1930s, the legislative politics became an important plank of Congress politics. In 1937 Congress contested elections to central and provincial assemblies and formed government in seven out of 11 provinces, under the GOI Act of 1935.

The Unit also focused on the essence of Gandhi's constructive programme. With the withdrawal of non-cooperation after mob violence at Chauri Chaura, the national movement got diverted into multiple channels. At one end was the politics of 'constitutional opposition' practiced by the Swarajists. At the other end were the violent revolutionary activities in Punjab, UP and Bengal. However a significant space in the nationalist spectrum was occupied by Gandhi's constructive programme. It consisted of promotion of Khadi, spinning, village industries, national education and Hindu-Muslim unity, struggle against untouchability and social uplift of the lower castes, and boycott of foreign cloth and liquor. With the constructive programme, the national movement made its big entry into India's villages. The significance of the constructive programme was three-fold. It was an important component of the strategy of the national movement, in which phases of agitational politics were alternated with those of constructive work. This gave the movement breathing space and allowed people to renew their energies. Apart from the strategic significance, the constructive programme had an economic dimension also. It provided an alternative source of employment to poor villagers who could substitute their incomes by taking to Khadi work. Under the leadership of All India Spinners Association (AISA), the Khadi programme reached nearly five thousand villages and improved the conditions of a large number of villagers. But for Gandhi, the significance of village reconstruction lay much deeper. Gandhi saw the programme as the key to the transformation of India's villages. For Gandhi the villages were the repository of a superior moral life and an effective answer to the distortions that had crept into human life as a result of excessive industrialisation. In other words village reconstruction was linked to Gandhi's vision of an ideal village life. An ideal village life was Gandhi's answer to a centralised, aggressive and coercive modernity. In this sense the significance of Gandhi's constructive programme went well beyond the anti-imperialist nationalist struggle.

14.11 EXERCISES

- 1) What was the background to the formation of Swaraj Party?
- 2) What was the essence of Swarajism as a political idea?
- 3) How did Swaraj Party contribute to the growth of the national movement?
- 4) What was the essence of Gandhi's constructive programme?

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