
UNIT 9 NATIONALIST POLITICS

DURING THE WAR PERIOD*

Structure

- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 Impact of the War on India
- 9.3 Home Rule Movement
- 9.4 Lucknow Pact
- 9.5 Summary
- 9.6 Exercises

9.1 INTRODUCTION

The First World War broke out in 1914 and it continued till 1918. India being part of the British Empire automatically got involved in the war without any consent of its citizens. The war had its impact not only on socio-economic life of Indians but also on their political life. It would be interesting to learn about the major trends in Indian nationalist politics during the period of the First World War. We will first explain in this Unit the impact of the war on India and the response of Indians. Then we will discuss the initiatives taken by nationalist leaders to press for 'Home Rule'. You will also learn how during the course of the war the Muslim League and the divergent groups among the nationalists joined hands to put forward the demands for self-government for India. The signing of the Lucknow Pact in 1916 further strengthened the unity between Hindus and Muslims. Demands for more self-governing rights were raised by nationalists during the war period. This period in nationalist politics paved the ground for a more broad-based movement against the British.

9.2 IMPACT OF THE WAR ON INDIA

When the First World War broke out in 1914, there was a growing demand for self-government in spite of the divisive trends within the leadership of the Congress. Many had reservations about supporting the British in the war which was not in India's interest, but there were also people within India who believed that the cause of Indian independence would be served by helping the British government in its war efforts. The British government deployed huge number of Indian troops on various war fronts and many were killed and seriously injured in the battle. Apart from the loss of life India had to bear huge war debt. The bulk of revenue from India was extracted in the form of land revenue, salt tax and other taxes. During the war taxes were increased and for the first time a super-tax was imposed in 1917. As B.R. Tomlinson has calculated, 'The burden of taxation (excluding land revenue) per head of population rose from just over Rs. 1.5 in 1914-15 to just under Rs. 2.5 in 1918-19. The Government of India incurred over Rs. 105 crores worth of new net permanent debt during the war years, and over Rs. 108 crores' worth of net floating debt. Its annual expenditure on interest

payments which ran at around Rs. 1.8 crores from 1914-17, increased to Rs. 10.9 crores in 1917-18 and to Rs. 12.2 crores in 1918-19’.

The burden of taxation as shown above because of the war affected mostly the common people. It was the rise in prices of food commodities due to taxes and the export of food to feed the army men which greatly aggravated the sufferings of people in India. This was also the period which witnessed crop failures in various parts of India. Not only did the poor peasants and the workers suffered during the war period but many peasant proprietors also lost the ownership of lands to non-cultivating classes who made profit out of speculative business during the war. The big industrial houses gained with the growth of industries during the war, but the working class suffered because of price hike and declining real wages. The consequent outcome was the strike by workers in different parts of India. So when one looks at the immediate consequences of the war on economic life of Indian people generally the picture that emerges is one of discontent and disillusionment. Apart from the economic hardships, forceful recruitment of Indians in the army and their sufferings in the war front agitated the minds of Indians against the British government. However there is also a perception that the upper gentry and the urban middle classes in India supported the British war efforts hoping more concessions from the British in sharing of power in India after the war. In the opinion of historian Hugh Tinker:

‘The outbreak of war in 1914 had witnessed an extraordinary demonstration of loyalty and solidarity from all sections of the peoples of India. It might have been expected that princes and peasants would rally to the Raj in the hour of crisis, but the urban middle classes also competed in efforts to support the British cause, and only a fringe element of revolutionaries tried to exploit the possibility of Britain’s difficulties to overthrow the Imperial power. Yet by the middle years of the war a mood of disillusionment had set in.’

It is not true to observe that there was an ‘extraordinary demonstration of loyalty and solidarity’ from all sections of Indians to the British government in its war efforts but there was a definite thinking among a section of the Indian nationalist leaders that support to the British war effort would help them in achieving self-government. Nationalist leaders failed to realise at that stage that the warring nations were fighting basically to protect their colonial empires not for the interest of the colonised people. What is important to take note is that the war in general created discontent among Indians and provided the Indian nationalist leadership opportunity to reformulate its strategy to fight for self-government. The war period also witnessed the rise in revolutionary movements to overthrow the British government. Another important development was the rise of the Home Rule movement.

9.3 HOME RULE MOVEMENT

The nationalist movement in India faced a major challenge with the split of the Indian National Congress into two distinct groups – ‘Moderates’ and ‘Extremists’ and the formation of the All India Muslim League in the first decade of the twentieth century. Many nationalist leaders saw an opportunity with the outbreak of the First World War to bring the divergent interest groups together to make serious efforts for achieving self-government. The voice of extremism within

the Congress got weakened in the absence of leaders like Aurobindo Ghose, Bipin Chandra Pal and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. When Tilak was released from jail in 1914 he was of the opinion that without the support of the Congress it would be difficult to organise and sustain an effective movement against the British. But moderate leaders like Pherozeshah Mehta were not inclined to allow the extremists back into the Congress. Even then there was a growing feeling within the Congress that the moderate-extremist antagonism was irrelevant in the present context when a united opposition to the British might help in attaining self-government. In this backdrop one needs to look at the developments in Madras under the leadership of Annie Besant and in Maharashtra under the leadership of Tilak to launch the movement demanding Home Rule for India.

Annie Besant was the President of the Theosophical Society which had its headquarters in Madras. She became a theosophist after coming under the influence of Madame Blavatsky of Theosophical Society. She now settled in India. By joining the Congress in 1914 she moved from educational and socio-religious activity to the arena of politics. She had planned to persuade the Congress leaders for re-entry of the extremists in the Congress and to launch an agitation to compel the British government to concede the demand for Home Rule. Meanwhile Tilak after his release from jail in 1914 realised the need of developing a broad based political movement in place of his earlier policy of extremism. Tilak found an opportunity in the line of thinking of Annie Besant to build a base for political activity but at the same time he was careful in keeping an independent political base for himself. Therefore although he supported Besant's decision of forming a Home Rule League he announced his plan to form a separate Home Rule League for the Marathi-speaking parts of India. Annie Besant's Home Rule League was based at Madras and its reach was all India. In 1917 membership of the two leagues reached 60,000.

Through newspapers and pamphlets both in English and vernacular languages the Home Rule Leagues wanted to educate people first for an organised political movement at an all India level to pressurise the British to concede the demand for Home Rule. As editor of the "New India" newspaper Besant was critical of the colonial government and advocated that in place of piecemeal reforms Indians must be united in demanding self-government or Home Rule. Attempts were made to create a strong public opinion for Home Rule. This in a way also paved the ground for mass politics at a later stage in the national movement. It is said that numerically there was much greater participation of people and more visible enthusiasm and emotion compared to the early Congress agitation. Membership in both the organisations gradually increased and their growing strength was felt by the British government. In Bombay the government tried to impose ban on Tilak on the ground that Home Rule demand was seditious and the Madras government debarred Besant from entering Bombay Presidency and the Central Provinces and Berar. In 1917 Besant was interned by the Madras government and both the Congress and the Muslim League strongly protested the arrest of Besant. She was released later on in the same year. The government repression helped the Home Rule movement in gaining popularity. Besant was elected the President of the Indian National Congress at its annual session held at Calcutta in 1917.

The Speech Given by Annie Besant as the Congress President in 1917 [Excerpts]

For the first time in Congress history, you have chosen as your President one who, when your choice was made, was under the heavy ban of Government displeasure, and who lay interned as a person dangerous to public safety. While I was humiliated, you crowned me with honour; while I was slandered, you believed in my integrity and good faith; while I was crushed under the heel of bureaucratic power, you acclaimed me as your leader; while I was silenced and unable to defend myself, you defended me, and won for me release. I was proud to serve in lowliest fashion, but you lifted me up and placed me before the world as your chosen representative. I have no words with which to thank you, no eloquence with which to repay my debt. My deeds must speak for me, for words are too poor. I turn your gift into service to the Motherland; I consecrate my life anew to her in worship by action. All that I have and am, I lay on the Altar of the Mother, and together we shall cry, more by service than by words: VANDE MATARAM.

Why India Demands Home Rule

India demands Home Rule for two reasons, one essential and vital, the other less important but necessary: Firstly, because Freedom is the birthright of every Nation; secondly, because her most important interests are now made subservient to the interests of the British Empire without her consent, and her resources are not utilised for her greatest needs. It is enough only to mention the money spent on her Army, not for local defence but for Imperial purposes, as compared with that spent on primary education.

Source: Annie Besant, *The Case For India*, at www.fullbooks.com

The Speech by Tilak at Nasik in 1917, at the first anniversary of the forming of the Home Rule League

I am young in spirit though old in body. I do not wish to lose this privilege of youth. Whatever I am going to speak today is eternally young. The body might grow old, decrepit and it might perish, but the soul is immortal. Similarly, if there might be an apparent lull in our home rule activities, the freedom of the spirit behind it is eternal and indestructible, and it will secure liberty for us. Freedom is my birthright. So long as it is awake within me, I am not old. No weapon can cut this spirit, no fire can burn it, no water can wet it, no wind can dry it. We ask for home rule and we must get it. The science which ends in home rule is the science of politics and not the one which ends in slavery. The science of politics is the 'veda' of the country. You have a soul and I only want to awaken it. I want to tear off the blind that has been let down by ignorant, conniving and selfish people. The science of politics consists of two parts. The first is divine and the second is demonic. The slavery of a nation constitutes the latter. There cannot be a moral justification for the demonic part of the science of politics. A nation which might justify this, is guilty of sin in the sight of God. Some people do and some do not have the courage to declare what is harmful for them. Political and religious teaching consists in giving the knowledge of this principle.

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Religious and political teachings are not separate, though they appear to be so on account of foreign rule. All philosophies are included in the science of politics.

Who does not know the meaning of home rule? Who does not want it? Would you like it if I enter your house and take possession of your kitchen? I must have the right to manage the affairs in my own house. We are told we are not fit for home rule. A century has passed and the British Rule has not made us fit for home rule; now we will make our own efforts and make ourselves fit for it. To offer irrelevant excuses, to hold out any temptations and to make other offers will be putting a stigma on English policy. England is trying to protect the small state of Belgium with India's help; how can it then say that we should not have home rule? Those who find fault with us are avaricious people. But there are people who find fault even with the all-merciful God. We must work hard to save the soul of our nation without caring for anything. The good of our country consists in guarding this birthright. The Congress has passed this home rule resolution. In practical politics some futile objections are raised to oppose our desire for *swaraj*. Illiteracy of the bulk of our people is one of such objections; but to my mind it ought not to be allowed to stand in our way. It would be sufficient for us even if the illiterate in our country have only a vague conception of *swaraj*, just as it all goes well with them if they simply have a hazy idea about God. Those who can efficiently manage their own affairs may be illiterate; but they are not idiots. They are as intelligent as any other educated man and if they could understand their immediate concerns they would not find any difficulty in grasping the principle of *swaraj*. If illiteracy is not a disqualification in civil law there is no reason why it should not be so in nature's law also. Even the illiterate are our brethren; they have the same rights and are actuated by the same aspirations. It is, therefore, our bounden duty to awaken the masses. Circumstances have changed, and are favourable. The voice has gone forth 'Now or Never'. Rectitude and constitutional agitation is alone what is expected of you. Turn not back, and confidently leave the ultimate issue to the benevolence of the Almighty.

Source: Ravindra Kumar (ed.), *Selected Documents of Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak*, Vol.3.

Although the Home Rule movement had support mainly among the middle classes yet it succeeded in reaching those areas where national politics till then could not reach. Both Tilak and Besant were of the opinion that broadening the base of nationalist support was essential along with unity among various groups of nationalists, otherwise the British would play one faction against other and refuse reforms. In the government perception the Home Rule movement was an attempt for the first time of a united, organised, and militant all India opposition to the British rule. The Home Rule agitation was definitely a departure from the earlier politics of the Congress although it might not have carried the characteristics of militant nationalism. It was alleged that the Home Rule agitation tried to excite racial feeling and encourage animosity against the British government. Analysing the government policy towards the movement launched by Annie Besant, historian Peter Robb has shown that government opinion was divided between repression and concession to tackle the movement under Besant and Tilak. While the Home Rule movement was considered as seditious by a section within the local

government, at the same time some within the government were also worried of the popular support because of repressive measures adopted by the government. After careful consideration of the situation the Secretary of State, Edwin Montagu, announced to move further towards self-government and the proposed scheme of Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms was published in 1918. This action on the part of the government created division within the Congress regarding response towards the reforms. Besant argued at a special session of the Congress in September 1918 that the proposal of reforms should be amended making provision for complete provincial autonomy in five years. But both Besant and Tilak failed to make much inroads in the Congress politics and the national politics took a new turn after 1918. Commenting on the achievement and legacy of the Home Rule Movement it has been said that 'it created a generation of ardent nationalists who formed the backbone of the national movement in the coming years when, under the leadership of the Mahatma, it entered its truly mass phase. The Home Rule Leagues also created organisational links between town and country which were to prove invaluable in later years. And further, by popularising the idea of Home Rule or self-government, and making it a commonplace thing, it generated a widespread pro-nationalist atmosphere in the country'. (Bipan Chandra and others, (eds.), *India's Struggle for Independence*). Sumit Sarkar has also observed that the real importance of the Home Rule agitation was its extension to new areas, groups and a new generation.

9.4 LUCKNOW PACT

The first decade of the twentieth century was marked by the Swadeshi and boycott movement following the partition of Bengal, split of the Congress into two clear ideological groups, formation of the Muslim League and growth of radicalism as a means to achieve freedom. Popular discontent was growing against the British but at the same time there was lack of unity and organised united effort to challenge the British rule. The outbreak of the First World War compelled the British government to seek cooperation of Indian people for the British war efforts and politically conscious Indians found it an opportunity to press for demand for self-government. The overriding concern among various groups of Indian nationalists in the course of the First World War was to make unity of effort in opposition to the British rule. In this context the Lucknow Pact is considered as a major move towards solidarity between Hindus and Muslims.

The foundation of All India Muslim League in 1906 primarily to protect the interests of the Muslims by showing allegiance to the Muslims brought in open the difference between the Congress and the followers of the Muslim League. The British government on its part, by providing separate electorates to Muslims through the Reforms Act of 1909, further encouraged the divisive sentiment of the advocates of Muslim separatism. Leadership of the Muslim League was in the hands of the landed aristocracy. However situation began to change in the second decade of the twentieth century with certain developments in India as well as outside India. The repartition of Bengal in 1911 and the involvement of Britain in war against the Ottoman Empire in 1914 gave the feeling to many Muslims that they can no longer rely on the British government. In the war between Italy and Turkey in 1911 neutrality of Britain and the massacre of Muslims in Persia by Russia created a feeling among Muslims that Islam was in danger and the European powers were in league to dismember Turkey. Muslim

press in India helped in publicising this 'Islam in danger' fear and many Muslims resolved to sacrifice their lives to defend Islam if required. This development helped in creating a situation where nationalist oriented Muslims within the Muslim League worked towards rapprochement between the Congress and the League. A young group comprising of lawyers, journalists and others coming from small zamindari background felt the need to join hands with the Congress in the movement against the colonial rule. In Lucknow this group was known as the 'young party' and Wazir Hasan who represented the young Muslims succeeded in getting control over the Muslim League. He tried to bring the aims of the League closer in line with those of the Congress. The draft reforms scheme of the Muslim League prepared under the leadership of the younger group of Muslims had lot of similarities with the Congress except the demand for separate representation. The Congress also resolved, in spite of differences within, to move towards rapprochement with the League. The Congress agreed to respect the separate Muslim interest and to accept the separate electorates for Muslims. Both the Congress and the League were in an accommodating mood to have a workable political consensus. Members of both the Congress and the League met in Bombay in 1915 and the idea of a national government was supported. This was followed by a meeting of both the organisations at Lucknow in 1916 and in this meeting both agreed to a common joint demands and the agreement reached between them is known as the Lucknow Pact. Demand for self-government was declared as the immediate goal and the Congress agreed to accept the demand for separate electorates for Muslims. According to the Lucknow Pact Muslims were conceded separate electorates in seven states in which they were in a minority and got half of the elected seats in the Punjab and one third of the elected seats in the central legislature.

There were however critics among Muslims as well as Hindus opposing the Congress-League alliance. The Muslim landed classes and their allies whose interests were protected by the British were apprehensive of the growing nationalist feelings among Muslims and considered the alliance between the Congress and the League as threat to their existence. Urdu newspapers like the *Al-Bashir*, the *Aligarh Institute Gazette*, *Al-Mizan*, etc. started a vilification campaign. In a rebuttal to such campaign Jinnah wrote in an editorial in the *Times of India*,

'Surely the Mahomedans who have shown the greatest self-restraint and control throughout these grave and momentous crises may be trusted to formulate their demands along with their Hindu leaders. Can there be a better opportunity than this that the Congress and the League should meet in one place and confer together as to the future of India?'

On the other hand, the Hindu Sabhas which came up in certain provinces denounced the seat sharing arrangement proposed by the Congress-League scheme. Particularly in UP where Muslims were allowed 30 per cent of seats in the council although numerically they constituted only 14 per cent of the population in the province there were angry protests. Despite the opposition, the Lucknow Pact ushered in cooperation between the Congress and the League and provided a stronger platform to launch united campaign against the British. Leaders belonging to different religious faith started visiting temples and mosques showing the virtues of communal harmony. J.C. Smith, the Collector and magistrate of Azamgarh in UP which witnessed communal rioting earlier, wrote

in 1917, 'The district of Azamgarh is to be congratulated on the fact that the Dasehra and Muharram ceremonies passed off without disturbances of any kind. For more three years past the government have been anxious regarding this matter and it is highly creditable to the people that at so critical a period there has been no sign of hostility between the different communities.'

The Congress-League alliance inspired younger Muslims to join the Congress-led nationalist movement and many of them were in the forefront of the nationalist agitations. What is important to note that during the period of the First World War national movement in India succeeded in bringing the divergent opinions and groups within India to put a united challenge to the British government. The Home Rule movement which gave momentum to national movement got further strength with the unity between the Congress and the League after the Lucknow Pact. In this context responding to the criticism leveling against the Congress for acceding to the demands of the League Tilak said,

'It has been said, gentlemen, by some that we Hindus have yielded too much to our Mohammedan brethren. I am sure I represent the sense of the Hindu community all over India when I say that we could not have yielded too much....When we have to fight against a third party, it is a very important thing that we stand on this platform united, united in race, united in religion, as regard all different shades of political creed'.

The historians have various opinions regarding the impact of the Lucknow Pact. Hugh F. Owen in an article has made the following observation:

'...The Pact did provide a basis for this new cooperation by removing one very important area of public dissension between Congressmen, Hindus and others, and the Muslim League. Members of both organisations – those who believed in a secular state, Hindus in the United Provinces and the other Hindu-majority provinces, and Muslims in the United Provinces, Bengal and the Panjab – had agreed to make sacrifices in varying degrees, for the sake of cooperation for nationalist goals, and so had helped to create an atmosphere of mutual trust in which Hindus and Muslims could combine in the Rowlatt and the Khilafat agitations...The Pact constituted a statesmanlike attempt by most of the leading Indian politicians of the day to grapple with a problem involving the fears of a large number of Muslims, as well as various Indians' views of the very nature of the India they wished to build. It was an attempt marked by willingness on the part of the participants to compromise and even to sacrifice their interests or principles in the short run for the sake of working in a united fashion for the larger goal of self-government.' (Hugh F. Owen, *Negotiating the Lucknow Pact, The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 31, No. 3, May, 1972*).

Mushirul Hasan agrees that the Pact marked the beginning of co-operation on major political and constitutional issues between the Congress and the League. However he makes the point that:

'By negotiating the Lucknow Pact on the questionable terms of communal representation, the Congress legitimised what were later derided as "separatist" and "communal" demands. By allowing itself to be dictated by narrow regional and sectarian causes, the Congress created a space within which such concerns had to be accommodated even at the risk of destroying the democratic and secular

structures it was striving to build. Instead of curbing divisive tendencies through a concerted ideological campaign, the Congress settled for hastily concluded agreements for immediate political benefits.’ (Mushirul Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India, 1885-1930*).

In the assessment of Francis Robinson after the Lucknow Pact the Muslim League was overshadowed by the All India Khilafat organisation and Hindus began to play a much bigger part in Muslim affairs and Muslims began to play a greater part in the affairs of the Congress.

One may agree or disagree with these observations, but keeping in view the polarisation in Indian politics following the foundation of the Muslim League the Congress move in joining hands with the League definitely strengthened the anti-British political movement. If the central focus of the national movement was to strive for self-government then strategically negotiation with the Muslim League even accepting its demand for separate electorate helped in promoting the desired unity between the Hindus and the Muslims. The Pact aimed at removing the fears about majority domination from the minds of Muslims. At the same time it is felt that submission to the League’s separatist agenda was a move without thinking of its future consequences. The pressure of united stand taken by the Congress and the Muslim League was felt by the British and to tame the rising wave of nationalist challenge the British government announced a fresh round of reform measures promising gradual development of self-governing institutions.

9.5 SUMMARY

In this Unit we began our discussion with the impact of the First World War on India. Being part of the British Empire India’s manpower as well as material resources were used by the British in the war efforts. Economic hardship that majority of Indians had to face because of the war created discontent among common people and the leadership of the national movement found an opportunity to press for self-government in exchange of India’s support in the hour of British need. B. G. Tilak and Annie Besant through their respective organisational and support base decided to launch Home Rule Leagues in support of the demand for self-government. The Home Rule movement succeeded in broadening the mass base of the Congress movement. This was also the time when the Congress and the Muslim League felt the need to join hands on certain common demands for a united opposition to the British rule. All these developments in national politics during the war period definitely prepared the ground for a more broad based movement and also succeeded in getting some new concessions in the form of the Reforms Act of 1919.

9.6 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the impact of the First World War on India.
- 2) Write a note on the Home Rule Leagues.
- 3) What was the Lucknow Pact? Discuss its significance.