

The First World War and Indian Nationalism, The Home Rule Movement

With the rise of extremism and revolutionary movements, the British Government adopted a two-edged policy. On the one hand, it tried to suppress the national movement and for that purpose, pursued repressive policy against the Extremists and the revolutionaries and also tried to divide the Indians by several means, particularly, by encouraging Muslim communalism. On the other hand, it tried to satisfy the Moderates and adopted the policy of gradual reforms which resulted in the passing of the Indian Council Act of 1909. But it failed to satisfy even the Moderates. Besides the founding of the Muslim League in 1906 and the insertion of the Communal Electorate System in the Act of 1909 discredited the Government in the eyes of the Indians of every shade of opinion.

In 1914 the first world war broke out in Europe and that also broke the lull in Indian politics. The Moderates and even Gandhiji who had become a member of the Congress fully supported the Indian Government with money by collecting funds for it and recruiting Indians as soldiers in the

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army. They believed that probably they would be able to get something substantial for India after the war. The Moderates, therefore, held high hopes from Britain concerning reforms in India after the war. But the Extremists held no such belief. Those, differing the view of the Moderates, made efforts to mobilise the national movement outside the fold of the Congress. That resulted in the formation of two Home Rule Leagues in 1916, though both worked in complete cooperation with each other and very soon merged themselves into one League.

The leaders of the League meant to keep up the spirit of Indian nationalism and therefore, pleaded for Home Rule. That was also one of the reasons of the growing popularity of the Home Rule Movement. The movement kept burning the flame of nationalism and drew a large number of liberal leaders to its side. But, the Government could not tolerate the activities of the Home Rule League particularly during the course of the war. On 15th June 1917 the M...

sentenced Mrs. Besant and two of the associates, Mr. C. S. Arundale and B. P. Wadia to home imprisonment. The Government expected that its repressive measures would breakup the movement. But the reverse happened. Protest meetings were held against the imprisonment of Mrs. Besant; Muslim leaders like M. A. Jinnah also joined the Home Rule League, the Congress sent protest letter to the Government and even suggestion of Satyagraha emanated from its platform.

The British Government, therefore, chose to compromise and Montagu's Declaration was announced in the House of Commons on August 20, 1917. The Government withdrew the house imprisonment order of Mrs. Besant who was already elected as the president of the Congress at its Calcutta session in 1917. In Dec. 1918 Tilka was elected as its President but he had to leave for London for a legal case and could not return for some months while Mrs. Besant finally went over to the side of the Moderates and accepted the schemes of reforms. Thus, the Home Rule League lost its leadership and became a closed chapter of Indian Independence Movement.