A Prelude to Gandhian Era : The Home Rule Movement

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During the days of World War I when the Indian soldiers were shedding their blood in the side of Britain ostensibly for the cause of saving democracy, some nationalist leaders of India decided to demand the same for India from Britain. Eventually, they started an agitation against the political slavery of their countrymen. This agitation, known as "Home Rule Movement" thus served as a bold prelude to still bolder political movements in the coming days.

The mastermind behind this movement was an independent minded Irish lady, Mrs. Annie Besant in addition to the famous nationalist leader Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak.

Mrs. Annie Besant was born in 1847 (in Britain), but she came to India in 1893 as a member of Theosophical Society having its headquarters at Madras. She very much loved the Indians. She also embraced Hinduism and devoted herself for the cause of social and educational upliftment of the Indian people. Later she joined politics in 1914 with a mission to serve as "an Indian tomtom waking up all the sleepers so that they may awake and work for their motherland".

She was in England from 1908 to 1914 and was very much impressed by the movement for "Home Rule" by the Irish people against the English. While in England she set up a Home Rule League and convened its first meeting in Queen's Hall, London.

On her return to India in 1914, she propagated for the same movement' and in no time, won the support of leaders like Jinnah and Lala Lajpat Rai. For the sake of propagating her views, she also started periodicals with the titles 'Common weal' and 'New India' which formed the backbone of the Home Rule Movement.

The goal of Home Rule movement as so often stressed by Mrs. Annie Besant and repeated by other leaders like Lalaji and Tilak was to have a sort of self-rule on the Irish lines. As Mrs Annie Besant said, "In political reforms, we aim at building up of the complete self-government from village councils through district and Municipal Boards and provincial Legislative Assemblies to a National Parliament, equal in its powers to the legislative bodies of self-Governing colonies .... '" In the telling words of Lokamanya Tilak, "Home rule means only having the management of their home in their own hands. It is a means of changing the visible Government, while maintaining the invisible government as it is. A very simple definition of Home Rule which even a peasant would understand is that I should be in my own country what an Englishman is in England".

That being so, what was the need to start another organization or movement apart from the Congress? After the Home Rule League was established, Tilak explained the question in a leading article in the "Marhatta". ''It was generally recognized that the time had positively come for an organization to be started for educating public opinion and agitating for Home Rule throughout the country. The Congress was a body, which would naturally possess the greatest authority for undertaking such a work with responsibility. But the Congress, as it is generally, is too unwieldy to be easily moved to prepare a scheme for self-government and actively work for its practical success. The spadework has got to be done by someone. It can afford to wait no longer". And this 'some one' of Tilakji's conception was the Home Rule League designed to do the required 'spade work'. Tilak also clarified this point when he 'said, "The League may be regarded as a pioneer movement and is not intended in any sense to be an exhaustive movement."

Initially, the Home Rule Movement could not make noticeable headway until a great figure like Tilak joined it. The Irish lady failed to impress the Bombay Congress of 1915 with her programme and outlook in this regard. A great moderate leader like Surendra Nath Banerjee defeated the proposals of Mrs. Besant by saying that an Organisation like that of the Home Rule League, "would serve to overlap and perhaps weaken the Congress." Situation however underwent a transformation when a great national leader like Tilak supported the move and Lala Lajpat Rai also fell in line.

Establishment of Home Rule League:

On the eve the Bombay Congress Session (December, 1915) a Conference of Nationalists was held in Poona to discuss the desirability of establishing a Home Rule League. Tilak had written a series of articles in the "Kesari" expounding the utility of an organization of this nature. Earlier, the attempt of Mrs.Besant in this regard was frustrated by the moderate Congress leadership as described above. But these Nationalists who were still out of Congress were not bound by the opinion of the Congress leaders and they endorsed the plan for establishing such an organization.

Thus, following the favourable recommendations of the Poona conference, the Home Rule League was formally established on April 28,1916 at Belgaum with the object of, "attaining self-govt. within the British Empire by all constitutional means and to educate and organize, public opinion in the country towards the attainment of the same".

Though he was the moving spirit behind the formation of the League, Tilak did not become an office bearer. Joseph Baptista, who had taken a leading part in its organization, was elected its President and N.C.Kelkar, Secretary. Among the Committee members were G.S. Khaparde, Dr.B.S.Moonje, R.P. Karandikar and D.V.Belvi.

Parallel League of Mrs. Besant :

In September 1916 Mrs. Annie Besant too started a parallel Home Rule League in Madras. However, both the organizations had common aims and worked in close correspondence.

Spread of Home Rule Movement :

Immediately after the formation of the League, Tilak launched a massive membership-enrolment drive and established its branches in Bombay, Karnataka and central provinces. However Tilak's work was mainly confined to Bombay and

Central provinces, But Annie Besant toured the length and breadth of India and established branches at various places. She almost electrified the Indians by her passionate speeches. In south India, a large number of women too joined this movement. Thus, by the untiring efforts of Tilak and Besant, a new consciousness dawned and 'Home Rule' became a 'Mantra' for the people.

The Home Rule League was firmly established by the time the Lucknow Congress was held in the last week of December 1916 marking a watershed in the history of that organization. In the picturesque words of its president, Ambica Charan Majumdar, "if the united Congress was buried in the debris of the old French garden at Surat, it was reborn in the Kaiser Bagh of Lucknow, the garden of the gorgeous King Wajid Ali Shah."

In 1915, two important moderate leaders, Gopal Krishna Gokhle and Feroj Shah Mehta passed away and with their demise, a long-standing effort of Annie Besant to take back the nationalist leaders like Tilak into Congress became successful. At Lucknow session, the Constitution of the Congress was amended so as to clear the way for the home-coming of militant nationalists like Tilak who were expelled from the party in Surat Session (1907) because of ideological differences. A still more welcome development of this session was the concord established between the Congress and the Muslim League, which held its session at Lucknow simultaneously with that of the Congress. An understanding and agreement for, carrying on joint action against the British Govt. was arrived at which later on became known as 'Lucknow Pact' in the history.

In the meanwhile, Tilak was served with notice and finally held guilty by the District Magistrate, Poona for his speeches on Home Rule. The Magistrate held that "Tilak wanted to disaffect his audience against the government." But, on appeal, the Bombay High Court quashed the interpretation of the Magistrate in November 1916. Thus Tilak's acquittal gave a further fillip to the Home Rule Movement.

However, the unity established at Lucknow and the upsurge of nationalist fervour were viewed with alarm by the Government. Hence in February, 1917, the Punjab Government served an order under the Defence of India Act prohibiting Tilak's entry into that province. In June, Mrs. Besant and her two colleagues- Wadia and Arundale were interned by the order of Lord Pentand, the then Governor of Madras. But the arrest of Mrs. Besant contributed to her popularity and gave strength to this movement as her internment was widely resented. Meanwhile, in a secret circular issued to local Government, the Government of India indicated the policy to be perused in regard to Home Rule agitation. But the Government's policy of persecution only helped to intensify the Movement.

Giving a picture of the intensity of the Home Rule movement in a confidential report to the Secretary of State for India, the Viceroy Lord Chelmsford wrote: "Tilak, Mrs.Besant and others are fomenting with great vigour the agitation for immediate Home Rule and in the absence of any definite announcement by the Government of India as to the policy in the matter, it is attracting many of those who are known to have held less advanced views. The agitation is having a mischievous effect on public feeling throughout the country……."

The Home Rule agitation thus virtually forced the Viceroy to urge for an early declaration regarding the constitutional changes proposed

after the war. It was in response to this appeal that Edwin Montague, the then Secretary of State for India, made his historic announcement in Parliament on August 20, 1917. He declared, ''the Policy of His Majesty's Govt. is that of the increasing association of Indians in every branch of administration and the gradual development of self governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of responsible Government in India as an integral part of the British Empire". This declaration ultimately led to' the enactment of Government of India Act, 1919 introducing 'Dyarchy' .

Besides, branches of Home Rule League were also set up abroad in various places like London, New York and Sanfransisco in order to propagate the justifiability of the demands of Indians. Mrs. Besant become the Congress President.

Mrs. Besant becomes the Congress President:

Mrs. Annie Besant who was arrested in June 1917 was subsequently freed by the British Government in view of the mounting national resentment. It was a time when the popularity of her personality and the Home Rule movement was at its zenith. Hence at Calcutta Session of the Congress (1917) she was elected as the President. This event marked the culmination of the Home Rule movement.

This movement remains memorable for its two great contributions. First, it brought about unity in the ranks of the Congress. Mrs. Besant took much of the moderates and something of the extremists and fused them in such a way that the two wings of the Congress came closer. Thus she could undo what had happened in Surat in 1907. Secondly, it went a long way in changing the character of the Congress. It virtually forced the Congress to take apprenticeship in methods of 'demand' and 'agitation' abandoning its earlier methods of 'petition' and 'prayer'.

This change was very much appreciated by Lala Lajpat Rai when he said, "India of 1917 was different from India of 1907. In 1907, we were fighting for crumbs. In 1917, we no longer pray for concessions but are demanding rights".

After 1917, as Gandhiji took more and more active part in politics infusing greater tenacity and vigour in the activities of the Congress, the force and vigour of Home Rule Movement which was from the beginning contemplated to be a "pioneer movement" to do the 'spade work', got dissipitated and ultimately lost its identity in the Non-cooperation Movement of 1921.

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