

Social Movements In India And India's Role In The World War I

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Abstract

The reasons for the outbreak of World War were many but interests for most of the countries differ. But different powers joined the war precisely to safeguard their existing colonies. However, Indians supported the war with the flawed belief that Great Britain would repay India's loyalty with gratitude and enable India to take a long step forward on the road to self-rule. Having made huge sacrifices and demonstrated military valour equal to that of European soldiers, Indians widely expected a transition to self-government, but as the war continued the economic and political climate in the country deteriorated and finally all the expectation was dashed by further extension of martial law at the end of the conflict. In reaction to such a situation, the social movements took a new shape which I shall take as the main core of this paper. Thus, the primary objective of the paper is to enquire into the rise of the nationalist feelings and expanding the social base of the nationalist movement during and after the World War I.

Keywords: *World War I, Social Movement, National movement, Non-violence, Home Rule, Independence.*

Introduction

Social movements are forms of collective actions that emerge in response to situations of inequality, oppression and/or unmet social, political, economic or cultural demands. They comprise 'an organised set of constituents pursuing a common political agenda of change over time' (Batliwala 2012:3). Notable examples are the movement to end the transatlantic slave trade that had begun in the 16th century, movements of organized industrial workers beginning in the 19th century and movements to gain women's suffrage emerging in the late 19th century. The 20th century was framed by movements for national liberation from European colonial rule in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Pacific and against dictatorships in Latin America, in which women played varied but significant roles. How a social movement is perceived and classified is always a matter of interpretation. It differs from one section to another. For instance, the revolt of 1857 was a 'mutiny' or 'rebellion' for British colonial rulers and the same was 'the first war of independence' for the Indian nationalists. A mutiny is an act of defiance against legitimate authority i.e., the British rule. On the other, a struggle for independence is a challenge to the very legitimacy of the British rule. This shows how people attach different meanings to social movements. The main emphasis of this paper concentrates on the collective action that emerged against the British

rule in India and the paper argues that the national based character of the movement that emerged in India after 1920s was the outcome of the World War I.

Social Movements in India against the British Hegemony

The establishment of the British power in India was a prolonged process of piecemeal conquest and consolidation and colonization of the economy and society. This process produced discontent, resentment and resistance at every stage. This popular resistance took three broad forms: civil rebellions, tribal uprisings and peasant movements. The series of social movements (civil rebellions), which run like a thread through the first 100 years of British rule, were often led by deposed Rajas and Nawabs or their descendents, uprooted and impoverished Zaminders, landlords and poligars (landed military magnates in south India) and ex-retainers and officials of the conquered Indian States. The backbone of the rebellions, their mass base and the striking power came from the rack- rented peasants, ruined artisans and demobilized soldiers.

These sudden, localized revolts often took place because of local grievances although for short periods they acquired a broad sweep, involving armed bands of a few hundred to several thousands. The major cause of all these civil rebellions taken as a whole was the rapid changes the British introduced in the economy, administration and land revenue system. The tribal people, spread over a large part of India organized hundreds of militant outbreaks and insurrections during the 19th century. The Revolt of 1857 was the most dramatic instance of traditional India's struggle against foreign rule. But it was not sudden occurrence. It was the culmination of a century long tradition of fierce popular resistance to the British domination. These uprising were marked by immense courage and sacrifice on their part and brutal suppression and veritable butchery on the part of the rulers.

The pre-nationalist resistance to colonial rule failed to understand the twin phenomena of colonialism and the nation in the making. In fact these phenomena were not visible, or available to be grasped, on the surface. They had to be grasped through hard analysis. This analysis and political consciousness based on it were then taken to the people by intellectuals who played a significant role in intensifying the inherent, instinctive, and nascent the anti colonial consciousness of the masses. However, the resistant movement against the colonial rule reached its maturity under the banner of the Indian National Congress which was formed in 1885. But the first phase of the working of the Indian National Congress failed to achieve its national character in mobilizing the people for the cause of the country. However, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian National Congress could mobilize the mass people especially after the World War I. The purpose of the movement initially, was to destroy the two basic constituents of colonial hegemony or the belief system through which the British secured the acquiescence of the Indian people in their rule.

All through the 19th century, the early nationalists were mainly concerned with criticism of the policy of the government on the one hand and demands for reforms on the other. In this connection, it must be remembered that the early nationalist did not plan to

expel the British from India. All that they wanted was to transform British rule to something very near to national rule. However, they felt that the time had not come for the people to challenge the foreign ruler directly. The only demand from the congress platform in 1905 by Gopal Krishna Gokhale was the claim for self government (*Swarajya*) within the British Empire.

The World War I and the Freedom Struggle

The World War I lasted from 1914 to 1918. Britain, France, Japan and Russia etc were on one side and known as the Allied powers. Opposing to them were Germany, Austria, Turkey, Italy and Hungary etc called the Axis Powers. The chief cause of this war was the policy of imperialist to acquire more and more colonies, which led to conflict among various imperialist powers. India then a colony of the British was forced into the war to safeguard British interest. The nationalist leaders opposed the British decision to force Indian soldiers in this war without assessing public opinion. But the Moderates supported the government in the hope they would grant India Swaraj soon as the war ended.

India made a huge contribution to Britain's war effort. In this respect, mention may be made that the real contribution made by Indian soldiers during the World War I on behalf of the Allied forces. Among them, almost 1.5 million Muslims, Sikhs and Hindu men from regions such as the Punjab, U.P, Maharastra, Tamilnadu and Bihar volunteered in the Indian Expeditionary Force. However, of these men around 50,000 died, 65,000 were wounded and 10,000 were reported missing, while 98 Indian Army nurses were killed. The country also supplied 1, 70,000 animals, 3.7 million tons of supplies Jute for sandbags and a large loan (the equivalent of about 2billion) to the British government. Having made huge sacrifices and military valour equal to that of European soldiers, Indians widely expected a transition to Self government.

Mass Movements and Its impact in the Aftermath of World War I

The World War I was fought among the nations of Europe to get colonial monopoly. During war time, the British Government made an appeal to the Indian leaders to join hands with them in their time of crisis. The Indians supported the War with the mistaken belief that Great Britain would repay India's loyalty with gratitude and enable India to take a long step forward on the road to self-rule. In fact, there was some political payback for this support that in August 1917 Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, announced that British policy in India was now aimed at "increasing association of Indians in every branch of the administration, and the gradual development of self-governing institutions, with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as integral part of the British Empire". Despite the statement of Montagu, the move towards self-government was slow to take off the ground in India. Unfortunately, the steps taken by the British government during the World War I created unrest among the Indian people. This was because the British government had taken a huge loan during war time which they had to repay. They increased rent from the land, i.e. lagan. They forcefully recruited Indians in the British Army. They increased the price of necessary goods and imposed taxes on personal and professional

income. As a result, they had to face protest from the Indian society. Farmers and workers of Champaran, Bardoli, Kheda and Ahmedabad actively protested against the exploitative policies of British government. Lakhs of students left schools and colleges. Hundreds of lawyers gave up their practice. Women also significantly contributed in this movement and their participation became wider with the emergence of Gandhi. The boycott of foreign cloth became a mass movement, with thousands of bonfires of foreign cloth lighting the Indian sky. As a result, the nationalist feeling against the British grew stronger. In 1915-16, two Home Rule Leagues were started in India. One of them was led by Lokmanya Tilak¹ and the other by Annie Beasant². They demanded Swaraj and the Government let loose repression. The Home Rule Movement made both Annie Besant and Tilak not only popular but also great heroes among the masses. Tilak was called 'Lokmanya' (respected by the people); Annie Besant was made the President of the Congress Session held at Calcutta in 1917. In short, we can say that the Home Rule Movement gave a great momentum to the National Movement of India.

The pressure of the World War I and the Home Rule Movements forced the British to give some concessions to the Indians. August Declaration³ of 1917 by the secretary of state for India promised development of self-governing institutions. In 1916, both Moderates and Extremists were reunited at Lucknow Congress session. The pact which took place between the Congress and Muslim League roused to a great hope and aspirations in the country. Removal of Caliph's powers angered the Muslims. Muslim League turned hostile towards the British and turned to Congress and signed the Lucknow Pact⁴ in 1916.

In the World War I, Britain and its allied groups won the war. During the War, Muslims supported the government with an understanding that the sacred places of Ottoman Empire would be in the hands of Khalifa. But after the War, a new treaty was imposed on the Turkish Sultan and Ottoman Empire was divided. This angered the Muslims who took it as an insult to the Khalifa. Shoukat Ali and Mohammad Ali started the Khilafat Movement

¹Tilak preached Home rule through his newspapers -The Kesari and the Mahratha.

²In 1914 Mrs Annie Beasant also joined the Congress & united the Moderates and the Extremists. She started a Home Rule League near Adyar (Chennai) in 1916 inspired by the Home Rule Movement, in Ireland. Annie Besant addressed the country through her reports in her newspapers — New India and Commonwealth.

³ The Declaration promised

- Increasing association of Indians in every branch of administration.
- The gradual development of self-governing institutions, for example in local bodies, provincial councils, etc.
- Progressive realisation of responsible government in India.
- Provinces were to be the areas where transfer of power was to be made Central Government responsible to British Parliament through the secretary of state.
- India to remain integral part of the British Empire

⁴ The Council of the Secretary of State for India shall be abolished and he shall have same position as he does in self-governing colonies (like Canada). One-half of the members of the Governor-General's Executive Council shall be Indians elected by the elected members of the Imperial Legislative Council. The Imperial Legislative Council shall have 150 members; 4/5th members shall be elected, but 1/3rd of these shall be Muslims elected on the principle of separate electorates. Except in military and foreign affairs the Imperial Legislative Council shall have full control on the Government of India. 4/5th members of the Provincial Legislative Councils shall be directly elected by the people, but the Muslim members shall be elected by separate Muslim electorates. The Provincial Legislative Council shall have full control over the Provincial Government. No Legislative Council shall proceed with a Bill or Resolution if 3/4th members of any community are opposed to it on the ground that it adversely affects its interests. Executive officers in India shall have no judicial powers. The Judiciary in every province shall be placed under the highest court of the province.

against the British government. After the end of the World War I, the British government also passed another Act known as the Rowlatt Act. The Act authorized the British government to arrest and imprison any person without trial in a court of law. It also banned Indians from keeping any type of weapon. This angered the Sikhs, who kept a *kripan* (a type of small sword) with them as part of their religion. The Indians considered this Act as an insult to them. On 13th April, 1919 on the occasion of Baisakhi fair at Jallianwalla Bagh (Amritsar), people had gathered for peaceful protest against this Act. Suddenly, a British officer, General Dyer, entered into the park with his troops and ordered them to open fire on the crowd with their machine guns. This was done without any warning to the people. The Jallianwalla Bagh gates were closed and the people - men, women and children could not escape to safety. Within a few minutes about a thousand persons were killed. The massacre aroused the fury of the Indian people. Showing his anger and pain, the famous philosopher-poet Rabindra Nath Tagore returned his Knighthood to the British government.

Simultaneously, the work done by the Home rule movement infused confidence and determination among the people. In order to pacify the Indians, the Montague-Chelmsford Reform came in 1919. It introduced Dyarchy - which was a kind of double government in the provinces. The provisional government was to be divided into two parts - one to be responsible to the Indian Electorate through the Legislature, and other to the Governor. The report also laid stress on the Indianization of the services. However, the 1918, Montague-Chelmsford Reforms failed to please the nationalists, in spite of constitutional concessions.

Conclusion

The above study reveals that the differences which were prevalent between the Moderate and the Extremist as well as between the Congress and the League came to an end during the period of War, which has marked as the beginning of the nationalist movements irrespective of religion, Caste, class, colour and gender against the British rule. And as a result, Gandhi could launch his satyagraha with the support of all sections of the society in 1920. Though it failed to achieve its immediate goal, but succeeded in setting up of a platform for future movements. This paper may throw some light on the issue of what the Indian National Congress once adopted the policy of prayer and petition (changes through constitutional means) in the first phase after its formation while waiting for the right time for a nation-wide movement, has reached its maturity only after the war period because during this period nationalism has reached to the heart of all sections of the Indians.

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