

HOME RULE LEAGUES FROM 1915 TO 1917- A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract: This study reveals the Home Rule Movement started by Annie Besant and how she established Home Rule Leagues in various places in and around Tamilnadu in 1916. The demand for Home Rule and the challenge it offered to British rule were presented not only to Western-educated Indians but also to mass groups.

I. INTRODUCTION

The First World War was a time of great change in the Indian national movement. During this period it became more aggressive and more truly 'national' than ever before: it grew more critical of the British and more peremptory in its demands upon them, and at the same time it drew new regions into nationalist activity and linked them together under a more genuinely all-India leadership. All these developments foreshadowed and prepared the way for Gandhi's rise to leadership of the national movement in 1919. These changes did not result inevitably, or even directly, from the war itself, but from the agitation launched by Annie Besant and Bal Gangadhar Tilak in 1915 and their formation of the Home Rule Leagues in 1916. This paper aims to describe how these two leaders took control of the Indian National Congress and committed it to the agitation which they had initiated on a nation-wide scale; how they drew increasing numbers into it and how, despite their failure to retain the leadership, they helped to mould this movement and set it on the path that it was to follow for the next thirty years.

The national movement at the outbreak of war in August 1914. At that time, it was weakened by disagreements over goals and methods, by British repression, by the political inactivity of many regions and by the inadequate co-ordination of those regions which were active. The affairs of the congress were dominated by the Moderates¹.

The moderates epitomized by such men as Pherozeshah Mehta, Gokhale and Surendranath Banerjee, they wished to promote social reform, and looked forward to India's development into a secular, liberal democracy. They welcomed British rule for having provided India with these goals, and for introducing the public order, the Western style of education the beginnings of representative government, which alone, they believed, made advance to these goals possible. Their ultimate aim was self-government, but they wanted in the meantime to work with the British to change Indian society sufficiently for self-government to be gradually introduced.

The extremists, on the other hand, were closely associated with the Hindu revival movement, and were pledged to uphold indigenous traditions and values². Their goals were defined in more emotional, and hence vaguer, terms than those of the moderates, but they clearly contemplated the preservation or restoration of the interest of the traditionally-dominant castes from which most of them came. They argued that Indian nationalists should make their first objective the expulsion of the British from the motherland, and this, they believed, could best be accomplished by the use of sanctions: a few advocated bomb-throwing and other acts of terrorism, and all supported 'passive resistance' – the boycott of British goods and institutions and the refusal to pay taxes.

II .The Impact of National Movement in Some Regions

The national movement was hardly more active in the Madras Presidency, which embraced the Tamil-, Telugu-, and Malayalam- speaking regions of British India and part of the Kannada-speaking region. Despite sporadic activity in the mofussils, politics were mainly confined to Madras city, and with the expulsion of the Extremists from the Congress in 1907, the Moderates were confirmed in control of the Madras Mahajana Sabha (which was practically identical with the Provincial Congress Committee. In fact there were only three regions in the whole of British India which had traditions of nationalist political activity in 1914: Bengal, Punjab and Maharashtra. These three regions had, however, failed to co-ordinate their activities and had developed virtually distinct styles of politics. In Bengal, political activity was practically confined to the three upper castes of Hindus, known as the bhadralok ('the respectable people'), traditionally professional men and landowners. Many of them, both moderates and Extremists, participated in the agitation against the Partition of Bengal from 1906 to 1911.

In Punjab the Hindu money-lending castes had largely succeeded in monopolizing educational and professional, as well as business, opportunities under the British³. By the turn of the century, they were seeding to woo the Hindu peasants away from their Muslim counterparts and to turn them against the British, by appealing through the Arya Samaj to their sense of Hindu identity and Hindu greatness.

Maharashtra consisted of two areas: the Marathi-speaking areas of the British provinces of Bombay and the Central Provinces and Berar (Maharashtra proper), and the Kannada-speaking areas of Bombay (the Karnatak). In both areas the professional and political elite consisted of Maharashtrian Brahmins and the pattern of nationalist political development was similar, so that for the purpose of this chapter they formed one region. Its nerve centre was Poona, the headquarters of the Chitpavan Brahmins, who had ruled the region before the coming of the British and who continued to dominate its life- in education, in the professions, in the administration, in national politics, and in social status generally. Tilak, a Chitpavan, turned a wide range of Maharashtrians against the British by exploiting their economic grievances and their fears that the British threatened their traditional beliefs.

Furthermore, in those regions which had hitherto taken little part in the nationalist movement there were groups which, given leadership, might be drawn into it. In the U.P. and Bihar there were professional men, generally Kayasthas, Kahsmiri Brahmins and Muslims, who had been traditionally associated with service in the Mughal administration. They had taken up the opportunities for education offered by the British, and had found their way into the service of the landlords or the British administration, and had thus identified themselves with the status quo⁴. They had no intrinsic interest in the maintenance of the status quo, however, and if they could be imbued with nationalist feeling or brought to see that in an independent India they might wield power, they could be mobilized by the national movement. In the Madras Presidency Congress was inactive but drew a membership of some 400 from the Western-educated, professional and business classes (amongst whom the Tamil Brahmins predominated); many of them felt as restive as did Bhupendranath Basu in Bengal. Again, the younger generation of Gujarati industrialists, commercial and professional men would be able to mobilize their caste men -fellows and the dominant peasant groups. If once a leader arose who could draw them into the national movement and in sind the small Hindu Amil minority, traditionally with administration, had taken to English education and to the professions and might be mobilised as a nationalist elite in

the area: indeed.early in 1915 some young men from this community were engaged in forming associations for the discussion of political issues. In 1914 leaders emerged who succeeded in mobilizing these groups and reviving and reshaping the Congress, for in that year Tilak was released from jail and Mrs. Annie Besant joined the National Congress⁵.

III. Annie Besant and Indian National Movement

From 1914 to 1917 the pace was set for the Indian national movement by Annie Besant. Already sixty-six in 1914, she was an unusually vigorous woman with a commanding personality and magnetic presence. She had developed her oratorical and journalistic skills in England as a proponent, in turn, of Free Thought, Radicalism, Fabianism and Theosophy. She found much that was persuasive and admirable in Hindu metaphysics, and came to India in 1893 to join the work of the Theosophical Society. Until 1907 her headquarters were in Benaras. Then, having been made World President of the Theosophical Society, she moved to Adyar, a suburb of Madras. Although she spoke no Indian language fluently enough to use it publicly, she contributed substantially to the Hindu revival by lecturing, by writing by founding schools, and by translating Hindu sacred texts into English. Most of her work was among the Western-educated, especially among groups which had become detached from their traditions or had experienced no religious revival of their own – including the Kayasthas, the Kashmiri Brahmins and Muslims of the United Provinces and Bihar, the Tamil Brahmins of the Madras Presidency, the Gujarat in Bombay and the Amils of Sind – many of those very groups, in fact, which might become the political elite in hitherto inactive regions.

IV Goals of Annie Besant

Of Annie Besant's aims in entering Indian politics, probably the most fundamental was the fostering of Indo-British friendship: she firmly believed that educated Indians were ready to govern their country, but above all she wanted to win a substantial advance toward self-government for India because she believed that this would draw Britain and India together. She wished to woo young Indians away from violence, and from passive resistance which she saw as likely to pass over into violence, since she believed that such methods would embitter relations between the two countries⁶. She had denounced Tilak's earlier advocacy of passive resistance, but she now aimed to bring him and the extremists back into Congress. It seems she was convinced that Tilak had really undergone a change of heart on the question of passive resistance; more important, however, she hoped by thus turning Congress into a 'united front' of nationalists of all shades of belief, to restrain the extremists and the young men who had come into politics since 1907, while at the same time instilling new life into the moderates. There is no doubt that her entry into Congress was also prompted by some awareness of the realities of the Indian national movement, and by personal ambition: as a newcomer to Indian politics, she sought the cachet of authority in the only organization which might presume to represent educated India, and she hoped ultimately to acquire the leadership of this united Congress and to march at its head to self-government.

V. Techniques

These aims could be achieved, she believed, by agitation. Here she had in mind the campaigns waged by British radicals during the nineteenth century – the campaigns for the abolition of slavery, the repeal of the Corn Laws, and for Irish Home Rule, not to mention those she had helped to lead herself in the 1807s and '80s in the company of

Bradlaugh and the Fabians. Monster meetings would be held, supplemented by newspaper campaigns and pamphlets; then (as Bradlaugh had taught her) if the Government tried to silence the agitation, more publicity could be sought by appealing to the courts. Local committees would be established to relay these demands to the country at large, and to obtain widespread support for them. Such agitation would move Britain to grant self-government: 'British politicians', she asserted, 'judge the value of claims by the energy of those who put them forward. Towards the end of 1914 Annie Besant set to work to stir at the moderate leaders of the Congress into activity⁷. The 'younger generation', she declared, 'is growing impatient while the Congress marks time', and she urged the moderates to establish and (where they already existed) to revive District and Taluq Congress Committees which ought to hold frequent meetings to 'educate public opinion' and 'proclaim the pinion of educated India' to the Government. At the same time she backed Tilak's request that he and his fellow-extremists should be readmitted to Congress. Mehta and his moderate and his Moderate colleagues in Bombay city opposed both these suggestions, for not only were they averse to sharing the leadership of Congress with Annie Besant and Tilak, but they were convinced that if Tilak were readmitted he would try to convert Congress to passive resistance against the British, and that this would result in British oppression.

VI. Work of Tilak and Besant

In 1915 both Tilak and Besant decided to set up political organizations of their own: generally they do not appear to have co-ordinated their plans closely, but they had probably discussed the advisability of establishing such organisations when they met in December 1914, and they maintained irregular contacts through messengers. As early as February 1915 Tilak threatened to set up a 'separate League' if Mehta and the Bombay moderates persisted in refusing to readmit him to Congress, and in May he convened a 'Provincial Conference' of his followers at Poona where it was decided to form an agency to 'enlighten the villagers regarding the objects and work of the Congress'. It was not until August and September, however, that local associations were established in a number of Maharashtrian towns, and even then they insisted on the need to reunify Congress rather than to expand agitation. All of this supports the conclusion that, while Tilak wanted to bring pressure to bear upon the more reactionary moderates to readmit him to Congress by threatening to supplant the Congress with his associations, he hoped nevertheless to convince the bulk of the Moderates of his reasonableness and fitness for readmission. The limited scope of his associations, in terms both of area and activities, also reflected Tilak's lack of any elaborate programme at this stage, particularly by comparison with Annie Besant. Indeed, he was finally prompted to carry out his threat to establish his own 'agency' by the desire to stake out a claim to Maharashtra as his sphere of influence, since she was already planning to establish an organization on her own on an India-wide basis. By July Besant had decided to set up a Home Rule League⁸. To this she expected to attract the 'younger and more vigorous workers' and through them to amplify the agitation she had begun. At the same time, she believed that the formation of the League would persuade the Bombay moderates not only to readmit Tilak but also to allow her to organize agitation under the aegis of Congress. It was hardly surprising that Besant was less cautious than Tilak: she was not personally acquainted with the difficulties of political leadership in India, and she had yet to feel the full weight of British repression. In addition, she was more familiar with the British radical movements, the lessons of which she and Tilak were planning to apply, and furthermore she had numerous potential political followers scattered widely throughout India as the result of her Theosophical work.

VII. Home Rule League of Besant

On 25 September 1915, she announced her decision to start the Home Rule League. This marked a turning-point in the history of the Indian national movement. With regard to the goal of the movement, her announcement envisaged much more rapid progress to self-government than had generally been demanded hitherto: the League's 'only object', she said, would be 'Home Rule for India'. In its simplicity, this provided an excellent rallying cry, although in its comprehensiveness lay the danger that it would arouse expectations among younger and more impetuous Indians such as she would not be able to satisfy. To support the demand for reforms, she proposed to focus attention on India's 'growing poverty', for which she blamed the British, and thus incited Indian animosity still further against them. And she foreshadowed the establishment of network of branches of the League to carrying this agitation throughout the country. Nevertheless, she tried to avoid alienating the moderates completely. The Home Rule League would only be set up, she said, in consultation with Congressmen and members of the Muslim League, and to this end she arranged to hold a Conference in Bombay at the end of 1915 concurrently with the annual Congress session. Furthermore, she and Tilak agreed that, in order to mollify the Bombay Moderates, he and the Extremists would not attend this Conference. She felt quite safe in committing the future of the League to a Conference at which moderates predominated, since she had obtained promises of support from a number of them, including Banerjea in Bengal and Malaviya in the United Provinces.

At the Conference itself, however, she found that the Bombay moderates had seduced many of these others from their support for her League. Although vexed at being thus out-manoeuvred, she abided by her promise to accept the views of the majority of the moderates, and suspended the formation of the League.

Besant launched her League proper. Tilak decided to forestall her in Maharashtra. As he had not attended the Conference in Bombay, he was not bound by her decision to suspend the formation of her League, and he established his Indian Home Rule League on 28 April 1916. This, in turn, provoked Mrs Besant and her Bombay supporters to increase activity. She addressed meetings of 5,000 in Poona at Tilak's invitation, and other meetings and Conferences in south India: and she and her supporters produced pamphlets in Madras, Bombay, the United Provinces and Sind. The failure of Congress to implement its resolution to undertake educative propaganda gave her the desired opportunity to launch her own All India Home Rule League. In mid-1916 her Theosophical and socialist colleagues in Britain formed an Auxiliary Home Rule League, and at the same time she appointed her loyal Theosophical follower, George Arundale, as Organising Secretary 'pro tem' for her League in India. It was formally inaugurated on 3 September 1916 with ten branches and 500 members⁹.

VIII. Tilak's Activities in Maharashtra and Karnataka and Government's Reaction

Tilak confined the operation of the Indian Home Rule League to Maharashtra and the Karnataka, where he had an assured following. He relied on trusted lieutenants to arrange his speech tours, to undertake similar tours themselves, to hold meetings in the temples and open spaces of their own towns, and to print newspapers and pamphlets. During its first year his League published six Marathi and two English pamphlets (of which 47,000 copies were sold) and one each in Gujarati and Kannada. Much of this work could have been done without formal organization, but the League served to pre-empt Maharashtra as Tilak's field of operation, leaving the rest of India to Annie Besant – an arrangement in which she concurred.

The British Government tried to gag Tilak's Home Rule agitation. In July 1916 bonds of Rs 40,000 were demanded from him on the ground that his speeches were seditious, and local officials took steps to warn people against supporting his movement. Tilak riposted by appealing to the courts, and in November obtained a ruling from the Bombay High Court that the demand for Home Rule was not seditious. Thereupon his League embarked on a recruiting drive. Offices were opened for each of the six branches, his supporters among the professional men in Bombay and other towns turned their rooms into recruiting centres, and his more devoted followers toured the mofussil. The League's annual subscription of one rupee per head was retained, but the entry fee of Rs two was dropped. From a membership of 1,000 in November 1916 the number rose to 147,000 in April 1917, and 32,000 early in 1918. In addition to recruiting new members, this campaign clearly carried the demand for Home Rule to many who did not actually join the League.

IX. Annie Besant and All-India Home Rule League

As for Besant's All-India Home Rule League, this initially had an executive council of seven office-bearers elected in September 1916 for three years by the thirty-four 'founding branches'. In practice the names she put forward were returned unopposed: she herself was confirmed as President and Arundale as Organising Secretary, while C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, an outstanding thirty-six-year-old lawyer, was installed as one of the General Secretaries and B.P. Wadia, a Parsi Theosophist, as Treasurer. The Council, however, held very few official meetings; in general its business was conducted informally by these four officials from Besant's headquarters at Adyar. Besant maintained communication informally through individuals, who were either active in a particular branch or in touch with a number of branches, and her headquarters transmitted instructions through such people, or through *New India*, in which from the beginning of 1916 Arundale edited a page of Home Rule news and advice. The membership of Besant's League grew more slowly than Tilak's, until she was involved in a dramatic clash with the Government in mid-1917. In March of that year it had only 7,000 members but by December 1917 it had grown to 27,000¹⁰.

In the formation of her league she drew largely on the loyalty of members of the Theosophical Society. Some Theosophists objected to her mixing of politics with Theosophy, but the more ardent believed that by launching the Home Rule League she was carrying out the behests of those who control the affairs of the world. Certainly her League was supported by many non-Theosophists in December 1917 its membership was five times that of the Indian Section of the Theosophical Society, and among those who were prominent in the affairs of the League were such non-Theosophists as Ramaswami Aiyar in Madras, Jawaharlal Nehru in Allahabad, Shankarlal Banker in Bombay, and B. Chakravarti and Jitendralal Bannerjee in Calcutta. Theosophists, nevertheless, often provided the initial impetus for the formation of branches of the League, and the strength of the League in each area generally reflected the local strength of the Theosophical Society. In the Madras Presidency, for example, it had more members and a more elaborate network of 'lodges' than anywhere else in India, and by September 1917 the All-India Home Rule League had 132 branches in that Presidency, which again was more than all those in the rest of India.

In Madras Presidency, moreover, the Theosophists who were officers of the League were legion: Manjeri Ramier, for example, was an office-bearer in the Calicut Theosophical Lodge and President of the Malabar branch of the All-India Home Rule League, and there were similar duplications of function at Vijayawada (Bezwada) in Andhra and at Madurai and Trichirappalli in Tamilnadu.

Arundale, the Organising Secretary of the All-India League, first concentrated on what Besant had called the 'educative' aspect of agitation: through his Home Rule page in *New India*, he advised branches on the sort of activities they should undertake. They should also print and circulate pamphlets; undertake constructive social work in their local area; participate in local government activities; collect funds, and hold public lectures and meetings. Most of the branches carried out at least some of these functions. Many opened reading rooms and held regular discussion groups for their members and students, notably in the larger towns and cities like Karachi, Bombay, Madurai and Madras. The discussion groups considered such problems as those of Indian Finance or Local Government – or aspects of Tagore's poetry – but the general drift of the discussions was always the desirability of Home Rule¹¹. By the time her League was founded in September 1916 Besant's Propaganda Fund had already sold over 300,000 copies of twenty-six English-language pamphlets, which discussed the machinery of government in India and rehearsed the arguments for self-government in India and rehearsed the arguments for self-government, and after the inauguration of the League the branches republished these pamphlets and published new ones in the Indian languages. Most branches held public meetings, too, and they could be relied on to do so whenever Besant and Tilak wished for a nation-wide protest on a particular issue.

Some moderates who had wished for greater nationalist activity but who wanted agitation to be controlled by Congress, set out to lend support to the Home Rule campaign. While the Servants of India Society refused to allow its members to join the Home Rule League, it encouraged them to support the demand for Home Rule through speech-making tours and the publication of pamphlets. In preparation for the 1916 Congress to be held at Lucknow (as usual at the end of the year), members of the Servants of India Society and other moderate Congressmen joined with members of the Home Rule League branches from the main cities of the United Provinces in touring surrounding towns and villages. Usually they went by train, stopping off at each town of any size along the way and addressing the members of the bar library. The library would generally have arranged a public meeting, attended by professional people, students, business people, and by agriculturists if it was a market day¹². The speakers' arguments (which were usually put in Hindi) were designed to appeal to a wide audience. They outlined European movements for national independence, extolled the glories of India in pre-British times and contrasted these with her current poverty and degradation.

For all that the Home Rule agitation was carried on with renewed vigour after the Lucknow Congress, both Tilak and Besant making triumphal tours and addressing meetings throughout northern, eastern and central India. Soon afterwards the demand for self-government was further stimulated by events outside India, notably the March Revolution in Russia and President Wilson's message to the United States Congress justifying the entry of the USA into the World War on the ground that it was thereby defending the liberties of small nations. The provincial Governments, seeing that they were being discredited by the agitation, now prevailed upon the Government of India to let them take steps to crush it.

The Governments of Bombay, Madras and the Central Provinces banned students from attending meetings, and in April and May 1917 the Governments of the Panjab, Bombay and Madras publicly deplored the agitation, in terms suggesting they might prohibit it. Besant's lieutenants responded with denunciations of the Government and with talk

of passively resisting any attempts to proscribe agitation. Besant echoed this in *New India*. Thereupon, in June 1917, the Government of Madras interned her, together with Arundale and Wadia.

This was the signal for a nation-wide outcry: the internments did not crush the agitation as the governments had hoped—quite the reverse. Prominent men, including Moderates, who had held aloof from her Home Rule League now joined it and its membership doubled, and even moderates who did not join the League, like Banerjee, Wacha and Sastri, condemned the Government's action. The younger men, especially in Bombay, sought guidance from Tilak and from Gandhi for a campaign of passive resistance, and from her place of internment Besant expressed her approval of passive resistance and wrote 'to think out methods, so as to adapt Passive Resistance to Indian Conditions'¹³.

At Gandhi's suggestion, her lieutenants in Bombay, led by Jamnadas Dwarkadas and Shankarlal Banker, collected the signatures of a thousand young men willing to break the internment orders by marching to her place of detention, and also set about collecting the signatures of a million peasants and workers on a Monster Petition for Home Rule. Of more lasting importance, they visited Gujarat repeatedly from this time onwards, addressing meetings in towns and village and encouraging the formation of branches of the All-India League.

A Head-on collision between the national movement and the British was only averted in August by the announcement by Edwin Montagu, Secretary of State for India, that an advance was to be made towards responsible government in India, and that he was to visit India at the end of the year, in company with the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, to discuss the views of Indians on how this should be done. In September, in a further attempt to lower the political temperature, he had Besant released.

X. Analysis

What then did the Home Rule Leagues achieve? Measured by their initial intention of obtaining Home Rule for India they failed. Nevertheless the British Government's promise of advance towards self-government could be traced very largely to the Home Rule agitation. On his appointment as Viceroy in 1916, Lord Chelmsford had recognised that the Moderates were being drawn into increasingly close alliance with the Home Rulers due to the Government's failure to make any favourable response to the demand for reforms, and at the end of the year, in an effort to reverse this trend, he and his Council had proposed to the home Government that the Indian membership of the legislatures should be increased. Austen Chamberlain, the then Secretary of State, had replied in March 1917 that 'the politicians of India have found out how to agitate', and that if any reforms were to be acceptable to those politicians and to prevent their proposals from receiving a large measure of support at home, such reforms would have to involve an increase not only in the Indian membership of the Councils but also in the 'authority and responsibility' of those members. It was Chamberlain who drafted the outline, the Montagu made announcement in August 1917¹⁴.

The demand for Home Rule and the challenge it offered to British rule were presented not only to Western-educated Indians but also to mass groups. The Leagues never claimed to have more than 60,000 members between them, and so were small compared with what came later under Gandhi. But, as we have seen, the number of members was not an entirely accurate indication of the effectiveness of the Leagues, since their activities reached many who were not members, and they provoked other organizations, notably the Servants of India Society, to similar action. Some of their activities involved only educated groups: establishing study circles for students; holding discussion and

debated upon aspects of government; setting up libraries and reading rooms; and delivering speeches to lawyers and other professional men in the course of tours arranged by branches of the League. But on these tours-in the United Provinces, Gujarat or Maharashtra, for example-many speakers addressed crowds in market places or in the open spaces before temples.

And meetings to protest against Government restrictions on Home Rule leaders, or say, against the conditions under which Indians were indentured to work overseas, drew much larger audiences than did the discussions and 'educative' lectures. In Bombay, for instance, the Home Rulers commandeered a large open space known as Shantaram's Chawl, near the areas inhabited by millworkers and government employees, for meetings attended by ten to twelve thousand. And on their speech tours Besant or Tilak drew comparable audiences, even in lesser towns¹⁵.

XI. Conclusion

The demand for Home Rule was simple and forceful, but it had the great disadvantage of being impossible to satisfy in the short run. By initially demanding the maximum, Annie Besant had limited her room for manoeuvre; any attempt to change her strategy in relation to the British exposed her to the charge of apostasy by her followers. By fostering agitation to the point where passive resistance was demanded and then repudiating this programme, she and Tilak finally succeeded in frustrating their followers, and in this way provided much of the head of steam which was to propel Gandhi's satyagraha campaign in 1919.

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