
CHAPTER - III
PROGRESS OF INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS
FROM 1895 TO 1914

Tilak and Social Reform.

Several movements grew up in India which advocated social change and transformation. Tilak has elaborated his philosophy of social change in various articles contributed to 'Kesari'. He was basically opposed to social reform due to his conservative disposition. During 1898-99, Tilak visited Ceylon and Burmah and in those countries, he found a far greater degree of social freedom than in India, but still those areas were politically very backward. By the examples, Tilak tried to reveal the inadequacy of the logic which believed in the inevitable precedence of social reform to political progress and emancipation. Tilak seriously and tenaciously clung to his conviction that the acquisition of more and more political right was the supreme necessity for India. Political right was primary and was utterly and absolutely important. Social questions could be taken up after political rights have been guaranteed. He often ridiculed the reformers as the agents of western culture.

The Age of Consent Act, 1891.

Towards the close of 1890, the public debate on the Age of Consent Bill acquired enormous magnitude. An appeal was made by fiftyfive lady doctors practising in India to the Viceroy to prohibit under penal law the consummation of marriages with girls under fourteen. Two thousand Indian women of Bombay submitted a memorial to Queen Victoria, seeking her intervention in support of the Bill.¹

Malabari and the Select Committee during Dufferin's Viceroyalty, in the council, the opposition to the Bill was led by Sir Romesh Chunder Mitter, one of the two Hindu (and four Indian) members. But he was suitably answered by the other Hindu member Krishnaji Lakshman Nulkar and the Bill was passed on March 19, 1891.²

Some of the proposals of Malabari were as follows:

- 1) Enforcement of marital relations by a husband over his young wife below twelve years of age was to be an offence under law;
- 2) The wife was to be given the right to cancel the marriage performed in infancy, if after becoming a major, she so liked;
- 3) Legal proceedings by a wife for the restitution of rights over her first husband's property even after her remarriage.

It is clear that these were far-reaching proposals. Soon it became known that the Government of India was contemplating an amendment to Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code and raise the age of consent (consummation of marriage) from ten years to twelve years. Ranade, Agarkar, Gokhale and the members of the Deccan Education Society, in general, were favourable to such a Bill. Tilak was the leader of the orthodox school which was opposed to it. We have considered the foundation of Tilak's attitude to social reform. Tilak did not succeed in getting the bill rejected, still he emerged as

a great leader of opposition to the Government and to the group of social reformers.

Gokhale and Tilak.

One of the first and surely one of the most illustrious of the many subsequent 'life-workers' enrolled by the Society was Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866-1915), who joined as such in 1885, having just completed his own university education and never had a Guru a more apt pupil than Ranade in Gokhale. He eventually became from 1892 to 1902, Principal of the College, but all the tremendous work he put in for his Education Society was but a tithe of the general public work he did. Unfortunately, there developed in the bosom of the Society a discord, which at times seemed seriously to menace its very existence. Agarkar was most keenly interested in all questions of social reform as was Ranade.³ Tilak and Gokhale rather tended towards politics. But whilst Gokhale's heart ever beat for the cause of sound reform and remained true to Ranade's lead, Tilak soon suffered a complete revulsion in this respect. For him, politics always came first and as soon as he discovered that social reform was 'unpopular', he quickly decided to throw it overboard, provided he could enlist the religious fervours of the orthodox for his political plans. In this, Tilak took the line which Dayanand had taken before and Mrs. Besant was to take after him. In 1888, it came to a first open break; the 'Kesari' and 'Maharatta' which hitherto under Agarkar, had served the cause of social reform,

were now passed on to Tilak, whilst Agarkar founded a new organ of his own, the 'Sudharak', an Anglo-Marathi paper, of which Gokhale became the English editor. But things went from bad to worse and the crisis came over the Age of Consent Bill of 1890, which naturally had been wholeheartedly worked for by Ranade, Agarkar and Gokhale and the members of the Deccan Education Society in general; Tilak placed himself openly at the head of the orthodox opposition to this measure on the plea that it was intolerable that a foreign Government should force such a piece of legislation upon a subject people. This filled the cup of the Reformers to overflowing and in 1890, Tilak had to leave the Deccan Education Society. On the other hand, the battle over the Sarvajanic Sabha, which had become Poona's political club, and of which Gokhale had been Secretary for eight years, fell to the Tilakites in 1896. Gokhale and the reformers were squeezed out of it and thereupon founded a political club of their own, the Deccan Sabha, of which Gokhale, for the first five years of its existence, became the Secretary.

Tilak's whole mental attitude and the methods employed by him only become understandable on the suggestion that he, who posed as such a pervertedly orthodox Hindu, was really at heart an Agnostic, who considered religion merely as a means of firing the masses with enthusiasm for his own cause, which was, first and last, political. Ethics was subordinated to patriotism. On a famous occasion in 1897, Gokhale, then absent in England and acting on information contained in letters received, had accused

the military in Poona of having behaved outrageously in carrying out anti-plague measures. This accusation, when challenged to substantiate it, he found his informants unable to prove at all and as an honourable man, Gokhale, in the form of an open apology to Lord Sandhurst and the Army, thereupon made a public retraction of his former attack. Tilak stigmatized such conduct as that of a traitor, who had been bought by the enemies of his country and brushed aside as utterly irrelevant the question, whether in fact, the original allegations had been true or false. Tilak similarly started the popular movement against cow-killing, because it was popular and would plainly serve as a convenient stick wherewith to beat 'the beef eating alien', but the readiness with which he is credited to selling to Moslem butchers cows which had been presented to him by Hindu devotees does not betray an intrinsic love and veneration for the cow on his part. Again, he reorganised, or one might almost say, invented the Ganapati Festival, such as it is kept now-a-days in Maharashtra, and turned it into an occasion for much political ribaldry and obscenity even. Religion, thus deliberately abused and degraded to become a means to a secular end, has, as one who knows his India thoroughly, puts it, made the central thing in Hinduism to become a Sangathan rather than Sannyasa and subordinated everything to what Dr. Moonje calls 'toning up Hindu muscles'. To this intent, Tilak's fertile brain in 1895, conceived of yet another movement, the Shivaji Cult, instituting a national festival on the birth-anniversary of the great hero of Maharashtra. Funds were raised for erecting a memorial to Shivaji in Poona and to this day, a great

meeting place for nationalist assemblies in Poona is Shivaji Mandir".⁴

The 'Indian Spectator' always stood for complete separation between the Congress and the Conference when in 1895, the Indian National Congress refused the use of its pandal to the National Social Conference, it welcomed the emancipation of the Conference, as an independent movement, standing on its own legs and speaking in terms of earnestness. It thought that the energetic co-operation of alls true friends of reform.⁵

The 'Indian Spectator' was of the opinion that the Congress plus the Conference was a movement representing real light and leading representing men, who sought elevation all round, and who were as courageous in fronting the opposition of the rulers to the advance of popular liberty and autonomy as in facing the opposition of the conservative mass to the advance of free thought and liberty of conscience in social matters. It predicted that divorced from the Conference, the Congress would become a body of men who were anxious to gain, if they could, but who had no intention of making a sacrifice. The roots were in the social evil. The very fact, Malabari believed, of the subjection of the Indian people to invader after invader indicated that they were incapable of governing themselves, that there was something radically wrong in the organization of their society that made them fall an easy prey to anarchy and chaos and to subjection of foreigners. Before any pretention could be reasonably put forth for new political privileges, the inherent defect must be traced and rooted out.⁶

Between the Congress and the Conference, relations were never as close after 1895 as they had been before, despite the proforma agreement to hold annual sessions at the same place. Extremist politicians, who had a large public following by the turn of the century in most of the provinces, continued to regard the Social Conference as an instrument to extend British influence and to ridicule the backsliding of the Conference followers. Reformers persisted in their view^o that social progress, however defined, must undertake any political advance. Thus, at the close of the century, the outcome of the social versus political reform controversy appeared to be a partial disengagement of the two movements, as they were represented by the Social Conference and the Congress. The Tilak-led extremist group in the Congress refuted social reform, partly atleast, because it was a liability to any movement seeking mass support. Some reformers, on the other hand, urged a break with Congress and a more strenuous assertion that social progress should be the pre-dominant nationalist activity.

In the Thirteenth session of the Congress in 1897 at Amraoti, Mr. Sankaran Nair, the President of this session, said about social and religious reforms that,

Great as is the necessity of British Rule for the political emancipation of our country, even greater is the necessity for social and religious reforms.

In the present circumstances of India, inhabited as it is by followers of various religions, sects, classes, very often with antagonistic interests, any Government which is not strictly secular and absolutely

*impartial, must be disastrous to the best interests of the country. To break down the isolation of the Hindu religion to remove the barriers which now prevent free social intercourse and unity of action, to extend the blessings of education to the lower classes, to improve the position of women to one of equality to men, we require the continuance of a strictly secular government in thorough sympathy with liberal thought and progress.*⁷

The impatient social reformers were constantly harping on the tune that the movements for social and political reform must be completely separate. Thus, on January 9, 1898, a Social Reformer wrote to the 'Indian Spectator' about the Social Conference of 1897, that,

The social movement should be separated from the political and that the time has now come when social reformers should not remain content with having the Conference as an humble appendage of the Congress, meeting by permission and favour and rather indulged in as a necessary evil or a necessity as it ought to be regarded atleast by those who believe that without a thorough social regeneration, our projects of political amelioration are sure to prove but an empty dream. The two movements should have separate times and places of meetings and should have different workers. At any rate, this would secure division of labour and that will mean more thorough work. It was also incongruous to do any real work in connection with social reform under the present arrangements, which take away the first energies for the Congress and leave only one day for the deliberations of the Conference. So much work is compressed into one day's proceeding that it is

*impossible to do justice to any of the subjects. The assembly becomes a mere registering and confirming body - often doing so blinding and without the strong faith that deliberate convictions after reasoning begets ... matters should be so far improved as to give to the Conference as much time, eclat and first importance as is given to her more catching and dazzling but not more productive sister - the Congress.*⁸

Western Influence on Indian Social and Religious Progress.

In 1897, Mr. Sankaran Nair said in his Presidential address that the customs, institutions, beliefs, practices of one community are denounced by others as unreasonable and destructive. of true faith. Some of our reformers, hopeless of any internal reform are building up a new social system and accordingly, have adopted an attitude so antagonistic to the popular religion that they are regarded as seceders from Hindusim. Others again have formed themselves into sects each claiming to be orthodox and denying to others the merit of adherence to the true Hindu religion. We have also preachers in our midst who, while deprecating any revolt or open defiance, urge the purification of the Hindu faith. The gulf between Hinduism and other religions has been considered impossible. But attempts are being made with some success to re-admit converts into Hindusim. Steps are being taken in some places to mitigate the rancour of religious hostility between Hindus and Mohammedans. Some of the lower castes resent the galling yoke of caste so bitterly that they seek refuge in Mohammedanism or Christianity. The original

four castes had multiplied into a number that must appear to every man unreasonable and absurd. There seems to be a general desire to break down the barriers between these numerous castes. Knowledge is accessible to all. The Vedas and other Holy Books are now common property. Equality in knowledge must eventually lead to the practical removal, if not the entire destruction of the great barriers that now divide the various classes. Again, you are aware of the attempts that are being made to restore our women to the position which competent authorities maintain they occupied in ancient India. We want in brief, to eliminate, if necessary, from our system all that stands in the way of progress. We desire to absorb and assimilate into our own, what appears good to us in western civilization. This is impossible under a Government which would uphold a particular social system or a particular form of religion to the exclusion of others as some of the ancient Governments of India did. To break down the isolation of the Hindu religion, to remove the barriers which now prevent free social intercourse and unity of action, to extend the blessing of education to the lower classes, to improve the position of women to one of equality to men, we require the continuance of a strictly secular government in thorough sympathy with the liberal thought and progress.⁹

In the Congress session of 1898 at Madras, Mr.N. Subba Rao Pantulu, Chairman, Reception Committee, uttered some words about social reformers in his welcome address,

The Congress is to us the only platform where persons of all creeds and races may meet together to

*discuss important political and politico-social questions that concern them all. It is the one field wherein we can all learn how to do unselfish work and rise above the common level of everyday life. What is this Congress after all but another name for Progress? Once you are an advocate of the ideals of the Congress, you cannot but advocate progress in all directions. None of us can ignore, for instance, the problem of social reform. We may differ as to methods, but everyone who has the aims of the Congress at heart must be working for justice, freedom and purity in social matters as well.*¹⁰

In the Third Volume of the Encyclopaedia of the Indian National Congress, there are no references about the social reform questions discussed in the Fifteenth Session of Congress held at Lucknow in 1899.

In the Session of Congress held at Lahore in 1900, no reference was made to the social reforms.

In the Session of Congress held at Calcutta in 1901, Maharaja Jagadindra Nath Roy, Chairman of the Reception Committee, said about the social reforms in his welcome address that,

Talking of the conspicuous and famous men who have passed away, we cannot but pay tribute of honour to the memory of one, who, though not of you, was always with you - I mean, the late Mr. Justice Ranade. He was one of the greatest men modern India has produced - one so great by his intellectual eminence and by his deep seated and farsighted patriotism that I know of no

other man of his age, who was in the same rank with him.

The problem, the solution of which he made his life's work, is the one paramount problem of modern India, viz. what is the result, and is likely to be, the outcome of the contact of the West with the East, and how best to assimilate the forces of European civilization at work amidst us, having in view our future national well-being. After Ram Mohan Roy, he was the only one amongst our countrymen who realised the whole problem in all its universality and comprehensiveness. He knew the problem was not only political and economic but also social and religious. He applied his master-mind to the study of all the present day problems of our country and there is not a subject he handled which does not bear the indelible mark of his originality of thought, which is not illuminated by the clearness of his vision, and which is not elevated by the purity and fervour of his patriotism. It is for the future to prove whether the solutions he offered us are true or false; but the greatness of his work cannot be called into question even by those who happen, by their temperament and mental constitution, to hold opinions different to those of his. He was not one of those of Indian thinkers, who, by a natural national instinct, retired into ivory tower of their own thought, in order not to be defiled by the contact of ordinary humanity. He, like Ram Mohan Roy, was a friend, philosopher and guide to his fellow mortals in the truest sense of those words. If he had had a little more boldness, a little more fire in his composition - in a word, if he had had a more vigorous personality, Ranade would have left as deep an impression on our society as Raja Ram Mohan Roy.¹¹

In the Congress Session of 1902 held at Ahmedabad,

no references were made to social reforms.

In the Congress Session of 1903, Mr. Bradlaugh, supporter of Congress, said for all Congressmen,

*There is no Indian nation, there can be no Indian National Congress, there is no Indian people, there are only two hundred millions of diverse races and diverse creeds. The lesson I read here is that this Congress movement is an educational movement, hammering up on the anvil of millions of men's brains until it welds into one common whole, men whose desire for political and social reforms is greater than all distinctions of race and creed.*¹²

Mr. Surendranath Bannerjee said,

*It is no exaggeration to say that our Universities are the seed plots upon which and around which have grown up the National Congress, the Social Conference, indeed every movement, social, moral and political, which has marked the activities of the present generation.*¹³

Sir M.E. Grant Duff, who as Governor of Madras, did not establish a high reputation for a liberal and systematic treatment of the Indians, said that the main object of the Indian Government must be to get for the country the best possible administration at the cheapest rate. To that object, all minor considerations such as those of race and colour, must be subordinated upon the principle of economical administration of giving just recognition to the claims of the children of the soil and of utilizing the best means available for probing the social evils, and of finding out the true remedies

for their removal, the appointment of Indians to high administrative offices is a matter of paramount obligation of the ruling power, which has been recognised in solemn form in the gracious proclamation issued by Her Late Majesty the Queen Empress.¹⁴

In the 20th Session of Congress held in 1904 at Bombay, President Mr. Henry Cotton said in his presidential address about the growth of a national spirit,

What is the great political problem that was before you? What is the real meaning of the movement which has brought you together today and animated your thoughts and action? It is the consciousness that your Organization is a national one and that you are working together in the formation of a national movement with common sentiments of interest and patriotism. The different races, the numberless castes, classes and creeds of India are welded together in your ranks. This is primarily the result of education, the inestimable boon, which in accordance with a noble and liberal policy, England has extended to India. It is education and education on English methods and on the lines of western civilization that has served to unite the varying forces among the Indian populations. The English language is the channel through which you are now able to meet on a common platform, and to give expression to your common interests and aspirations. At the same time, the railways, the steamships, the post office and the telegraph have played their part in closing the gap that used to keep the different provinces of India as under. I rejoice to see that this great movement is fully recognised by your countrymen. It advances by leaps and bounds. The unmistakable yearning for nationa-

lity finds its utterance through a newspaper press, which has now become a potent factor in your politics. I have watched the growth of this Press, rising, in little more than one generation, from struggling, obscure, and fulfill efforts, into an organ of great power, criticising the measures of Government with remarkable independence and vigour and continually checking the abuses of executive authority. I am not blind to its imperfections, but it is impossible not to admire the ability and patriotism with which it is conducted. The unanimity of this Press is as marked as the increases of its influence. The whole of its influence is in the direction of nationalisation. A single note is struck. In every large town in India, newspapers are now published, identical in their spirit and in their common object, all aiming and converging at the formation of a single political ideal.¹⁵

Above paragraph indicates that Congress body is only thinking about political progress and not about social.

In the 21st Session of Congress in 1905 held at Banares, the event is a most remarkable one from more than one point of view. It shows that even the most orthodox city in India has not escaped modern influences, that the most orthodox community, if worked upon in a right, judicious and cautious spirit, is capable of being awakened into a useful activity, that even in the strogest citadel of Hindu conservatism the modern spirit has made branches through which the forces of progress will affect their entrance in due course of time, that even the conservative Hindu has begun to suspect the soundness of the social structure which has hitherto

sheltered him, and to feel, not intelligently perhaps, still more or less keenly, that there are certain wants and interests which he shares with the rest of his fellow countrymen and that worthy of his deepest reverence as are the tenets and the teachers whom he has hitherto followed the new doctrines also and the new teachers whom the circumstances of the new time have brought to the front hold out the promise of something that is really to his advantage, and are worthy of his regard. The learned Pandits of Benares, discussing at the meeting of the Social Conference such questions as sea-voyage, widow remarriage, evils of infant marriage, the social elevation of the lower classes, not only in the approved orthodox style but from the liberal point of view, the orthodox Hindus who are so often taunted with having nothing in their heads except the old-world theocratic notions, co-operating with English knowing men in their political reform exertions and lending enthusiastic support to liberal proposals, what could be a better, easier proof of the extent to which the influences of English education and English civilization have permeated Indian society, what a more flattering testimony as to the level of patriotism and sense of national self-respect to which the liberal and genuine policy of the British Government has raised the Indian people? This is a sign of the times the significance of which may be read by the fastest runner, and yet it must be confessed, regretfully, that to the common ruck of Anglo-Indian, all this is the work of the 'Bengali wire-puller' and the 'pestilent seditionist'. Still those who know Indian society, knew that no 'wire pulling' can induce a genuinely conservative Hindu

to show liberal tendencies where none exist and join hands with the party of social reform, and when he does so, one far from the road that leads to political liberalisms.¹⁶

In the Twentysecond Session of Congress held at Calcutta in 1906, Mr.Dadabhai Naoroji discussed the various problems of India in his Presidential address, among these problems, he said little about social reform, that is,

*the question of social reforms and industrial progress, each of them needs its own earnest body of workers. Each requires for it separate devoted attention. All threse three great purposes - political, social and industrial, must be set working side by side. The progress in each will have its influence on the others.*¹⁷

In the Third Volume of the Encyclopaedia of the Indian National Congress, there are no references about the social reform questions disucssed in the Twentythird Session of Congress held at Surat in 1907 as well as in the Twentyfourth Session held at Madras in 1908.

In the Twentyfifth Session of the Indian National Congress held at Lahore in 1909, Mr.Sunder Singh Bhatia of Punjab discussed on the resolutions of the Congress. Among them, he said,

We are far ahead of the several sister provinces in the matter of private enterprises in commerce and trade. Industrial progress, social reform and advance-

ment, political and historical importance of the province and our interests in public affairs, all these justify the position that we are entitled atleast to an equal share with some of the comparatively backward provinces.

There are no references about the social reform questions discussed in the Twentyfifth Session of the Congress held at Allahabad in 1910 in the Third Volume of the Encyclopaedia of the Indian National Congress.

In the Twentysixth Session of the Indian National Congress held at Calcutta in 1911, the subject of social reform was considered by Bhupendra Nath Basu, who was Chairman of Reception Committee gives some words for social reform in his welcome address under the heading of Oneness -

*Nationality is compounded of several elements of which a sense of Kindred is only one. The sense of common interest and the habit of forming a single political whole constitute another element. We, in Congress, meet every year, people from the north and the south, from the east and the west of the vast continent of India, to strengthen the forces which lie behind these elements, so that they develop and combine. In the past, the great religious reformers, whether of the north or the south, of the east or the west, have been the common heritage of India and today social and political reformers or whatever race and creed receive unsituated and unqualified appreciation from every part of India.*¹⁸

President Mr. Bishan Narayan Das said in his Presidential address about social development -

*Perfect religions and social freedom, it has given us unasked, and railways, telegraphs, post-office and a thousand other instruments and appliances are the means by which it has added to our material comfort and social advancement.*¹⁹

There are no references about the social reform questions discussed in the Congress Session held at Bankipur in 1912, in the Third Volume of the Encyclopaedia of the Indian National Congress.

In the Congress Session of 1913 held at Karachi, Mr. Nawab Syed Mohammed said in his presidential address, 'Primary education, I need not say is the remedy of remedies that will help the masses at present steeped in ignorance, superstition and lethargy, to get out of the slough of despondency and will teach them self-help by placing within their reach, through the medium of literature, the benefits that would secure from adopting modern methods and principles in their hereditary and time-hallowed occupation of agriculture and other small industries and that will surely mould in them a frame of mind that would co-operate with the Government in any measure that may be taken for public good, by removing the disposition to believe in the ascription of wrong motives and intentions to Government as regards their particular acts and measures. In short, primary education will give more food to the masses, reduce to an appreciable degree the acuteness of the economic problems, remove most of the social evils and conduce to the stability of the British Rule.'²⁰

No references about social matters in the Congress Session of 1914 held at Madras under the Presidentship of Bhupendranath Basu, was made.

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