

Chapter - II

GANDHI ON CONTEMPORARY INDIAN POLITICS

Introduction :

Mahatma Gandhi wrote ' Hind Swaraj ' in 1908 to put forward his alternative blueprint of political reforms. He called it Indian Home Rule. In a word of explanation, Gandhi wrote that it was an answer to the Indian school of violence and its prototype in South Africa. He thought that the book, " teaches the gospel of love in place of that of hate and replaces violence with self sacrifice. It pits soul force against brute force."¹ He further clarified that, " it is a faithful record of conversations I had with workers, one of whom was an avowed anarchist."²

Political Background :

The years 1908-1909, were the years of great turbulence in India, because 1908 witnessed the great Swadeshi movement. Earlier the year 1907, saw a split in the ranks of the Congress. In 1908, Lokmanya Tilak and Aurobindo, were sent to jail, and Lala Lajpat Rai was deported. The extremists were ruthlessly suppressed,

1) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj, p. 15.

2) Ibid., p. 17.

and the moderates were not in a position to activate the Congress party. The revolutionary terrorists became active and they openly advocated the path of violence and assassination. Gandhi thus wanted to furnish an alternative set of political methods to win 'Swaraj.'

In the opening chapters of 'Hind Swaraj' Gandhi discussed the problems faced by India and expressed his opinion on them. At that period of time, there were three different streams in Indian politics and they were represented by (i) Moderates (ii) Extremists (iii) Revolutionary terrorists. Their ideologies and political tactics form the background of Gandhi's political ideas in 'Hind Swaraj'.

The origin of the Indian National Congress can be traced to the nature of British rule in India, characterized by exploitation, highhandedness and bureaucratic rule. Gandhi is appreciative of the role played by the Indian National Congress in spearheading the Indian National Movement and says, "the Congress brought together Indians from different parts of India, and enthused us with the idea of nationality ... The Congress has always insisted that the nation should control revenue and expenditure. It has always desired self government after the Canadian model. Whether we can get it or not, whether we desire it or not, and whether there

is not something more desirable are different questions. All I have to show is that the Congress gave us a foretaste of Home Rule".³

The early years of the Congress were dominated by stalwarts like Pherozishah Mehta, Dadabhai Naoroji, S. N. Banerjee, G. K. Gokhale, Lala Lajpat Rai, B. G. Tilak and many others. With its popularity increasing over the years, it could claim to speak for a major portion of the intelligentsia of the country. It was only later that over the years, both Tilak and Gandhi were able to transform it into a mass movement.

a) The Moderates :

The moderates in the Congress were guided by the following principles :

1) Belief in gradual reforms : Moderates believed in peaceful reforms. Early moderates such as Dadabhai Naoroji, G. K. Gokhale and M. G. Ranade all believed in the British sense of justice and were convinced that British rule in India was an act of divine dispensation.

2) Faith in constitutional Agitation : Moderates firmly believed in approaching the issue of freedom from a constitutional stand point. Prayers, petitions and representation characterised the moderate outlook. This method was criticised by Tilak and other Extremists as ' Political mendicancy.'

3) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 22.

3) Faith in British sense of justice and fair play :

Moderates had an abiding faith in the British sense of justice and fairplay and believed that the English people, as lovers of liberty would not hesitate to liberate India, once she was ready and fit for self-government. Thus the attempt of moderates was to win the sympathy and support of the British government.

The moderates constantly faced criticism from the Extremists who wanted them to use more militant political methods. In ' Hind Swaraj ' Gandhi tried to evaluate the role of the moderates and extremists in Indian politics. According to Gandhi those who criticise the Congress as an instrument for perpetuating British Rule are not justified because he explains, " Had not the Grand Old Man of India, prepared the soil, our young men could not have even spoken about Home Rule."⁴ He further explains " Professor Gokhale in order to prepare the nation embraced poverty and gave twenty years of his life. Even now, he is living in poverty."⁵

Gandhi agrees and sympathises with the moderate sentiments, for he believes that impatience will not be useful to the task of attaining freedom for India. He reminds us, " Remember the old

4) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 18.

5) Ibid., p. 19.

proverb, that the tree does not grow in one day."⁶ Gandhi in ' Hind Swaraj ' does not endorse the views and sentiments of the reader who lashes out at the Father of the Nation, a foremost moderate leader, innocently believing in the British sense of justice and fairplay. To this Gandhi retorts sharply and says, " ... it must be a matter of shame for us, that you should speak about that great man in terms of disrespect. Just look at his work. He has dedicated his life to the service of India. We have learned what we know from him. It was the respected Dadabhai who taught us that the English had sucked our life blood. What does it matter that today his trust is still in the English nation ... Is it a mark of wisdom not to kick away the very step from which we have risen higher. The removal of a step, from a staircase brings down the whole of it."⁷ Gandhi thus accepts Dadabhai Naoroji as the author of Indian nationalism.

G. K. Gokhale his political guru is held in disrespect by some people who feel that the moderates are very compromising in their attitude, and they inherently believe that such compromise will not lead them very far. In fact, the moderates appeal to Gandhi, because of their basic beliefs, and simple faith in the

6) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 19.

7) Ibid., p. 19.

inherent goodness of all mankind, a philosophy that pulls at his heartstrings. He gently, chides the impatient reader in ' Hind Swaraj ' and says, " We believe that those who are discontented with the slowness of their parents and are angry because the parents would not run with their children, are considered disrespectful to their parents. Professor Gokhale occupies the place of a parent. What does it matter if he cannot run with us."⁸

Gandhi wholeheartedly appreciates the wisdom and worth of the older generation in the Congress. The moderates according to Gandhi espoused a philosophy dear to their hearts, ready to sacrifice their all for these principles. Constitutional agitation reforms and boycott of British goods were the hallmarks of the moderate approach to the complex issue of freedom for India.

The all important principle of relations between means and ends occupies a significant place in the moderate political philosophy. He thinks that it is this approach which alone will yield successful results, for a pure and spiritual end, namely the attainment of ' Swaraj '.

8] Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 20.

The similarity of views leading to an element of identification, positively drew Gandhi to the moderates sympathising with their outlook on agitation along constitutional lines and arousing the finer instincts in their opponents, through love and a change of heart. Love for the enemy, co-operation and harmony of approach is the climax of an agitation moving towards the sanguine goal of 'Swaraj'.

Gandhi feels that the moderate philosophy is one which reflects a duality of approach to the issue of independence. On the one hand there is a unanimity regarding the role of the British and an abiding faith in the British sense of fairness and justice - a belief that British rule in India is an act of divine dispensation and beneficial to India. On the issue of wresting power from the British, they insist on constitutional agitation coupled with boycott of British goods and social reforms to achieve the objective of 'Swaraj'. It is here that one discovers an emphasis on the relation between means and ends. It is rightly said, "The moderates - Dadabhai, Ranade and Gokhale believe that the right means were necessary to secure right ends. Therefore they believed in spiritualization of politics. They did not believe in principle of ends justified means and did not approve of politics deprived of morality."⁹

9) Chousalkar A.S. : Indian Idea of Political Resistance, p. 21.

b) His Criticism of the Extremists :

The Congress, which in its early years was under the influence of the moderates believed in agitation for reforms along constitutional lines. It was however realized that prayers and petitions did not have the desired impact on the British government. Hence their approach was questioned by the younger and firey elements of the Congress, labelled as the Extremists. The causes responsible for the growth of extremist movement in India were as follows :

1) Government was indifferent to the demands of the Congress : The apathy of the government to just demands by the moderate leaders, led many youngmen to seriously question the efficacy of purely constitutional methods for the attainment of Swaraj. [The
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2) Hindu Revivalism : It was observed that some leaders of the Indian National Congress were impressed by Western civilization and wanted the Indians to imbibe the best of the West. But leaders like Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bipin Chandra Pal and others highlighted ancient Indian culture, rich in heritage. They felt that a revival of Hindum was an answer to the issue of 'Swaraj'.

3) Discontentment due to the attitude of the government during famines and plagues : The inhuman administration of the British government during the famine of 1897 aroused the ire of

the people. The operations carried out by the government during the plague embittered the people.

4) Repressive policies followed by the government : An alien government is more often than not irresponsible to the demands of the natives and have little respect for their sentiments. Under the Viceroyalty of Lord Curzon harsh and repressive policies were adopted by the government which only served to fan the fires of nationalism.

Birth of Extremist Party :

A cumulative effect of the above resulted in the leadership of Tilak and Lajpat Rai in the year 1904. The Extremists believed that ' Swaraj ' was the inherent, and inalienable right of every Indian and would ultimately be achieved not as a result of the grace and benovelence of the British but would have to be fought for. Extremists were opposed to the moderate approach for piecemeal reforms and felt that once India became politically independent, she could inaugurate a new era of peace, progress and prosperity. Action was the key word, for the Extremists who had little faith in the approach of the moderates, which, if continued to be used, would achieve little result and the ideal of ' Swaraj ' would remain an ideal. Tilak, the leader of the Extremist movement was convinced that ends justified means as against the moderates belief that means should justify ends.

Criticism of Extremists :

Gandhi did not accept the basic position of the extremists, hence his criticism of the extremists is blunt and forthright. Though Gandhi was away in South Africa he keenly followed the national movement which was gaining momentum in India. He realized that an element of frustration and dissatisfaction was growing with the efforts of leaders who were not gaining the desired effect. According to Gandhi, the solution to any crisis should not be rooted in violence or terrorism, for these are but temporary measures which achieve temporary results if at all. Violence only breeds violence according to Gandhi and its effects can more often than not be degrading and demoralizing. The strength of a movement waging a struggle against injustice, lies not in the strength of its arms, but in its spiritual force.

Gandhi was thus faced with two brands of schools, engaged in the task of wresting power from unwilling hands. Erik, /k Erikson says, " Tilak & had already succeeded in creating and popul- d arizing a militant Hindu brand of nationalism, thus creating a basis for an extremist faction within the Congress party, and winning the popular title of Lokamanya - " One revered by the people". Gopal Krishan Gokhale in turn, had become the principal spokesman for the moderate position of constitutional reforms and was respected in England as well as at home."¹⁰

10) Erikson E.H. - Gandhi Truth - The Origin of Militant Non-Violence., p. 180.

Gandhi's criticism of the extremists is muted, though he did not like their methods, neither did he approve of the division of the Congress at Surat but held that they would not remain divided for a long time.

His Criticism of Revolutionary Terrorists :

Alongside the growth of the Extremists, grew a group of individuals armed with the ideology of terrorism, and believed in violence as a means to attain ' Swaraj '. It was observed that " The terrorist associations attacked both the officials of government and their countrymen. Within four months, in the cold weather of 1907-08, the lieutenant-governor's train was derailed (a former district magistrate of Dacca was shot at and wounded, and two Englishwomen were killed by a bomb thrown into their carriage. About the same time began a series of political dacoities. These two movements, centering respectively at Poona and Calcutta formed the most active branches, both characterised by the union of political and religious excitement."¹¹ This group became active after the partition of Bengal and murders, assassinations and terrorism became the order of the day. Thus a very thin evil of difference was seen between the action of extremists and the ideology of terrorists. Some times both finding a union of ideas in surging towards a common end.

11) J. Allan, Sir T. Wolseley, H.H. Dodwell & V.D. Mahajan,
The Cambridge Shorter History of India., p. 871.

Though Gandhi admired the enthusiasm and love of the extremists, he felt that their zeal was misguided and misplaced and opined that patriotic fervour could find a fuller expression, if they adopted the method of peace and non-violence. He says, " Their bravery impressed me, but I felt that violence was no remedy for India's ills, and that her civilization required the use of a different and higher weapon for self protection." ¹²

The reader who is apparently modelled along the lines of the Extremists especially the revolutionary terrorists, suggests, that Indians should indulge in assassination and strike terror in the hearts of Englishmen to regain their land. To which Gandhi replies, " You want to make the holy land of India unholy. Do you not tremble to think of freeing India by assassination ? What we need to do is to sacrifice ourselves. It is a cowardly thought that of killing others. Whom do you suppose to free by assassination ? ... Those who believe that India has gained by Dhangra's act and other similar acts in India make a serious mistake. Dhangra was a patriot but his love was blind! He gave his body in a wrong way, its ultimate result can only be mischievous." ¹³

12) Gandhi M. K., - Hind Swaraj., p. 15.

13) Ibid., p. 62.

Gandhi firmly believed that non-violence and peace which had been the eternal truths of our civilisation in the past were slowly being eroded and agitating masses had sacrificed these beautiful principles for the sake of a temporary and momentary Swaraj. He wanted to impress upon them the futility of their approach, which insisted on the use of violence, which according to Gandhi would do the greatest harm and would result in consigning the national movement into flames, and consequently into oblivion. He goes on to explain the importance of the relationship between means and ends, and says, " the means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree, and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree. I am not likely to obtain the result from the worship of God by laying prostrate before satan ... We reap exactly as we sow".¹⁴

After highlighting the importance of means, a factor which was not valued by the extremists and revolutionaries, Gandhi goes on to say, " If I want to deprive you of your watch, I shall certainly have to fight for it, if I want to buy your watch. I shall have to pay you for it and if I want a gift, I shall have to plead for it, and according to the means. I employ the watch is

14) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 64.



stolen property, my own property, or a donation. Thus we will see three different results from three different means will you say that means do not matter. ?"¹⁵

Gandhi accepted the fact that the national movement which had gained momentum since the cultural and political renaissance in the late 19th Century was evolving gradually but the path being adopted by the revolutionaries would only result in chaos and anarchy. He writes, ' ... but I only wish to show that fair means alone can provide fair results, and that at least in the majority of cases, if not indeed in all, the force of love and pity is infinitely greater than the force of arms. There is harm in the exercise of brute force, never in that of pity."¹⁶ The strength of a movement should therefore be galvanized through the use of love and peace. An opponent is not to be looked upon as an enemy, who had to be eliminated, but it essentially meant converting him and his attitude towards the issue of conflict.

While writing on moderates, extremists and revolutionary terrorists, Gandhi appreciates the work done by English gentlemen like Hume and William Wedderburn. He has very subtly criticised the extremists though he admired their devotion, patriotism and sacrifices. He is very harsh as far as the revolutionary terrorists

15) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 65.

16) Ibid., p. 67.

are concerned because they advocate the use of violence and guerilla warfare to drive the British out. Gandhi thinks that by following these methods we may not make anybody free, it is against our civilization.

In conclusion Gandhi while addressing the Extremists says, " I know that you want Home Rule for India. It is not to be had for your asking. Everyone will have to take it for himself. What others get for me is not Home Rule but foreign rule, therefore it would not be proper for you to say that you have obtained Home Rule if you have merely expelled the English I have already described the true nature of Home Rule. This you would never obtain by force of arms. Brute force is not natural to Indian soil. You will have, therefore to rely wholly on soul-force you must not consider that violence is necessary at any stage for reaching our goal."¹⁷

Gandhi in his address to the moderates says, " Mere petitioning is derogatory, we thereby confess inferiority. To say that British rule is indispensable, is almost a denial of the Godhead. We cannot say that anybody or anything is indispensable except God. Moreover common sense should tell us that, for the time being, the presence of the English in India is a necessity,

17) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 86.

is to make them conceited. If the English vacated India, bag and baggage, it must not be supposed that she would be widowed ... It is this so called protection which has unerved us. Such protection can only make the weak weaker. Unless we realize this, we cannot have Home Rule. I would paraphrase the thought of an English divine and say that anarchy under Home Rule were better than orderly foreign rule. Only, the meaning that the learned divine attached to Home Rule is different from Indian Home Rule according to my conception. We have to learn and teach others, that we do not want the tyranny of either English Rule or Indian Rule."¹⁸

Partition of Bengal :

While reviewing the work done by the earlier nationalists in Indian politics Gandhi discusses the problem of partition of Bengal. He thinks that because of the partition there was great political awakening in India and Indians began sharpening their political methods to resist the wrong policies of the government.

The last official act of Lord Curzon was the partition of Bengal. The move was justified on the grounds that it was necessary for administrative convenience and efficiency but the Indians were not to be deceived, and the object of this act was to divide and weaken the national movement was seen through. The

18) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p.p. 86-87.

partition thus was a devious ploy to stem the tide of nationalism but that was not to be, for this act of partition or division of Bengal, proved to be the first nail in the British coffin.

It was apparent that some of the muslims were caught in the snare and though later seeing through the ploy rose like one man to ward off the evils of partition. A vigorous agitation started against the contemplated partition. Gandhi admits that the foundation of Home Rule was laid by the Congress, which was successful in igniting the passion for freedom, and in kindling the flames of patriotism, highlighting in the masses the need of the hour and instilling a sense of patriotic duty, which were some of the achievements of the Congress. Gandhi then goes on to say, " The real awakening took place after the partition of Bengal."¹⁹

Lord Curzon, the architect of the partition who mercilessly took the decision, turning a Nelson's eye to the pleas and prayers of hopeful masses, went ahead and tried to strike at the roots of growing Indian unity, little knowing that this was to take the form of a fatal blow, sounding the death-knell of the supremacy of British rule in India. An attempt to create a crack in the agitating masses was to result in a crack in the British empire. Gandhi says, " At the time of partition the people of Bengal reasoned with

19) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 23.

the people of Bengal reasoned with Lord Curzon, but in the pride of power he disregarded all their prayers. He took it for granted, that they would never take any effective steps. He used insulting language and in the teeth of all opposition and partitioned Bengal. That day may be considered to be the day of partition of the British Empire."²⁰

A moral act is always backed by courage, while an immoral one is backed by fear - it was the fear harboured by the British government, in the light of the growing strength of the Indian people, a current showing signs of sweeping away all that obstructed its flow. Gandhi rightly points out, " But the people were ready to resist the partition. At that time feelings ran high. Many leading Bengalis were ready to lose their all. They knew their power hence the conflagration. It is now well-nigh unquenchable, it is not necessary to quench it either. The partition will go. Bengal will be reunited, but the rift in the English barque will remain, it must daily widen. India awakened is not likely to fall asleep. The demand for the abrogation of the partition is tantamount to a demand for Home Rule."²¹

The Bengal issue revolutionized the Indian political scenario. What was once spoken of in hushed overtones was proclaimed fearlessly, the writing clearly on the wall - a sign of

20) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 23.

21) Ibid., p. 23.

warning, a direction showing the way to the British to enable them to retrace their steps, honourably and gracefully, lest they should be devoured and consumed in the flames of patriotism.

The Bengal partition, resulted in a duality of approach to the issue of independence. Boycott and Swadeshi caught the imagination of the people. While, those who were not very favourable to the idea of resistance along constitutional lines, favoured a hard line action - one that would bring the mighty empire on her knees - would subdue the violent tigress. They thus felt that India would win independence by right and 'Swaraj' would not be a result of a gift from the British.

Another important result of the partition according to Gandhi is, "The partition has not only made a rift in the English ship but has made it in ours also. Great events always produce great results. Our leaders are divided into two parties, the moderates and the Extremists. These may be considered as the slow party and the impatient party. Some call moderates the timid party and the Extremists the bold party."²²

The difference in approach - a duality of opinion to the important issue of Swaraj, factionalized Indian politics. It struck a hard blow to the ethos of a people united for centuries.

22) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 74.

A blow that led to confusion in Indian politics which India found hard to recover.

People were beginning to lose faith in the British sense of equality and sense of justice. Even the moderates who believed in the honest motives of the British were doubtful of British moves.

Introduction of Morely - Minto Reforms :

The introduction of Morely Minto reforms represented an attempt on the part of the government to meet the demands of the moderates who were a majority in the Congress. The reforms which aimed at increasing the association of Indians into the administration, aimed to counter the tide of Extremism in the Congress. The number of additional members was considerably raised in the imperial as well as the Provincial Councils. The functions of the Legislative Councils were also enlarged. In 1908, Mr. Gokhale described the reforms as " modifying the bureaucratic character of the government."²³ However one cannot altogether deny the utility of the reforms as it was aptly pointed out that the reforms " gave Indians much valuable training without which they would not have been able to make the best use of the legislatures as subsequently expanded and reformed under the Act of 1919. From a broad evolutionary point of view, the reforms were a necessary and useful stage in Indias advance towards self-government."²⁴

23) Aggarwala W. - National Movement and Constitutional Development of India., p. 67.

24) Ibid., p. 68.

Conclusion :

In this chapter the important role played by the Congress in fostering a feeling of nationalism among the masses, was briefly dealt with. It was observed that Gandhi was critical of the extremists and revolutionary terrorists who were bent upon using violence to win 'Swaraj'. Gandhi appreciated their patriotism and dedication but condemned their approach. In the same vein he appreciated the role of the Moderates but felt their absolute and undying faith in British rule as being indispensable would in fact mean almost a denial of Godhead. He thus calls upon both the groups in the Congress to unite their efforts towards the attainment of Swaraj. The effect of the partition of Bengal and Morely - Minto reforms was briefly surveyed. In the next chapter Gandhi's views on modern civilization will be analysed.

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