

CHAPTER – 4

A NEW WAVE: WAR AND THE MOVEMENT IN CONTAI (1914—1919)

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‘A New Wave’ refers both explicitly and implicitly to the changes gradually taking place in the colonial policy of the British rule in India in the years following the Revolt of 1857. The changes also clearly hint at the transformation of the Indian elite who had so long been devoutly loyal to the so-called utilitarian and benevolent British rule, but afterwards became aware of the mechanism of the economic exploitation and of the policy of benevolent domination. These people gradually realized that the outward beneficence of the British government was only a mask, and its administrative apparatus was its pro-active handmaid in the task of exploitation. As a result in this situation the government could not take pro-Indian development policies unless and until the Indians could assert their influence over it through any weighty association or associations. Herein was felt the necessity for the foundation of an all-India political organization. The stage for the formation of such an association was ready there as the nationalist newspapers and journals and a good number of nationalists had been continually unmasking the draining out of Indian

wealth, and exposing the ills and evils of colonial domination working all along for the interest of Britain alone. Therefore there was felt the dire necessity for the country to found an association which would fix its basic tasks and objectives, and put them forward to the government for their implementation. It was at this stage the all-India National Congress was founded holding the vision of a new age and a new life to the nation that was in the making.

With the foundation of the National Congress there opened a new chapter in the history of the imperial and nationalist policies and activities of the colonial India. Practically henceforth a new wave began to sweep over the country incessantly with new courses through different channels according to varying situations.

The attitude of the Government towards the Congress did never stick to any fixed point. It varied from time to time according to situations. W. C. Bonnerjee writes, Viceroy Dufferin suggested to A. O. Hume, a Retd. Civil Servant that if his proposed association consisting of Indian nationalists through their discussions of political matters could keep the Government informed of the public opinion this would perform 'the function which Her Majesty's Opposition did in England'.¹ In Dufferin's suggestion it was implied that an association of this kind might be allowed.

Some thirty years later Lala Lajpat Rai, an Extremist leader, on the basis of prevalent notions relating to the birth of the I.N.C. and particularly on the foundation of Bonnerji's statement made the theory that the Congress was 'the product of Dufferin's brain', and that it was so made as a safety-valve to serve the interest of the British rule in India. Later on following Rai's "safety-valve' theory R.P. Dutt, a veteran Marxist historian and many others asserted that the Congress was formed through direct Government initiative and guidance 'as an intended weapon for safeguarding British rule against the rising forces of popular unrest and anti-British feeling'.² But recent researches have shown it that the so-called safety-valve machination was only a myth as the Government did not then feel the necessity of having 'an intended weapon' to safeguard itself against impending mass risings as the *mohantas* forecast. On the contrary the British officialdom including the Viceroy himself read new messages in the birth of the Congress as it was conveying to them through its nationalist activities an ominous sense of foreboding. That is why the attitude of the Government towards the Congress became gradually hostile because of the continual attacks of the nationalists and also of the press in respect of the ills of the colonial rule as it was incessantly hammering in the anti-British feelings of the people exactly in a seditious manner.

Shortly before the birth of the Congress Dufferin wrote to the Secretary of State on August 7, 1885 that the Bengali *Babus* and the Maratha Brahmins had the intention of starting Irish type of revolutionary agitations in India. And shortly after the birth of the Congress the Viceroy in a letter to Reay, the Governor of Bombay wrote that the nationalist Press was generating 'a sincere conviction that we (the British) are all of us the enemies of mankind in general and of India in particular'. Dufferin's antipathy to the Congress is evident in his St. Andrews' Day Dinner Speech in which he suggested to the Nationalists that the Congress would do better if it took to social reform for the benefit of millions. Otherwise a happy despatch was better for the Congress in some way or other. In this connection he made the doughty declaration: "... we cannot allow the congress to continue to exist"³. In spite of this Dufferin had the idea that it would not be difficult for the Government to incorporate the leading nationalists of the Congress into 'the colonial political structure' where they would only let off their political steam. Therefore 'the bureaucracy could afford to pay no attention to them'⁴. But very soon the tables turned. Dufferin's idea of the Congress was totally changed. The nationalists transformed the Councils into very much like open universities for imparting political education to the people, and for criticizing and ventilating

government policies and administrative shortcomings. It was at this stage the government devised a number of measures to counter the growing nationalist movement. To weaken the Congress an attempt was made to start an anti-Congress movement within the Congress. The government fanned the communal rivalry of the Muslims towards their opposition to the cow protection movement started by the Orthodox Hindus. Besides the British authorities held before the Muslims that they would henceforth attain all the political privileges which were still unattained by them if they would not ally with the Congress. In spite of these machinations nationalism in Bengal was growing blatantly and gaining strength.

From the very beginning of his viceroyalty Lord Curzon was very much sensitive to the Congress-led national movement. It seemed to him that the national movement had become an acute political crisis which might be very much pernicious to the interest of the British rule. That is why it was felt that the prime necessity for the government was to weaken the Congress. From a deep study of the situation it became clear to the Viceroy that the Moderate-led Congress because of its inherent dissensions was nearing its fall. In this context Curzon declared (1900) "... one of my greatest ambitions while in India is to assist it to a peaceful demise"⁵. Again in 1903 he wrote to Lord Nor, the Governor of Madras, "My policy, ever since I came to

India, has been to reduce the Congress to impotence”⁶. Curzon had the firm conviction that his policy could be realized only by dethroning Calcutta, the nerve centre of nationalist politics, from its position of regulating the all-India national movement by dividing the Bengali speaking population⁷. Risley, the Home Secretary to the government of India, harped more clearly on the same string: he said on December 6, 1904. “Bengal united is power; Bengal divided will pull in several ways”⁸. It is thus clear that all the top British officials were anxious to make a happy end of the Calcutta-manipulated nationalist movement. Curzon’s successor Lord Minto said, it mattered little what administrative grounds were there behind the partition of Bengal as the matter was practically a ‘grave political necessity’⁹.

The early nationalists, the advocates of moderate politics and moderate methods, now scientifically analyzed the draining out of Indian wealth and raised the slogan in the style of the American colonists ‘No representation , No taxation’. Gradually they moved miles away. They now put forward their demand for ‘self government’ for India like that of other British colonies. In 1905 Dadabhai Naoroji asserted: “Self-government is the only remedy for India’s woes and wrongs”¹⁰. In the Calcutta Congress he pointed out categorically that the goal of the Indian National movement was

Swaraj i.e. self-rule on the model of self-governing colonies of Canada and Australia.¹¹

By this time the inner contradiction between the imperial colonial interest and that of the Indians became quite glaring to the Indians. So they could not but think of hitting hard at the trunk of British imperialism by launching on a violent movement. It was now clear to them as broad daylight that the unity of opposites-- this very principle of Hegel's Dialectics,- could never be realized (actualized) in the Indian context. It was so because of the fact that the vapour arising out of Indian economy by nature being transformed into heavy clouds did not shower in India. They were in accordance with the colonial system only showering fertilizing rains in Lancashire and so on. Therefore this insoluble contradiction between the Indian people and British colonial imperialism could never turn in favour of India except radical changes in the present system of the colonial administration, and this could only be possible by the overthrow of the British rule. This time the British authorities settled to strike at the heart of the national movement by the application of all effective weapons, particularly by the communal weapon for partitioning Bengal. This was how the partition of Bengal was at last settled. Lord Curzon applying the sharp Delilah-communalism had Samson-locks of Bengal-unity cut off¹². The

partition of Bengal caused a tumultuous uproar. But the *Boycott* and *Swadeshi* activities did not last long. "By mid-1908, the open movement with its popular mass character had all but spent itself"¹³.

In between 1905 and 1908 two very important things took place: one was the foundation of the All India Muslim League (1906) and the other was the Split of the Congress at Surat (1907). The British Government felt very much elated at the foundation of the League as it now became easier (for the government) to play off the League against the Congress, and to play off the Muslims against the other sections of the Indian population. On the other hand British authorities felt elated at the Surat Split (1907) as it was to them an event of tremendous significance in favour of their much desired boon. Practically it was the result of their long hatched devilish machination to weaken the Congress and the national movement, and thus to expunge the anti-colonial sentiment of the Indian populace. This is evident from Minto's letter to Morley in which he wrote that the 'Congress collapse' resulting from the Surat Split was 'a great triumph for us'¹⁴. The collapse had a tremendous impact on the national movement and particularly over the Bengal nationalists. Historically a sudden change came over the country. In Aurobindo's words "A hush had fallen on the country"¹⁵. Practically a dead silence prevailed except some agitations for constitutional reforms in the

country. It was at this stage the government offered a bait of reforms in the Legislative Councils to tactically suppress the agitations, to divide the nationalist ranks and to incite Muslim communalism.

This is how an eventful and significant chapter in the history of the British *Raj* came to an end leaving behind regional and in some cases local agitations. In this context an incidental remark of Viceroy Elgin is noteworthy: "India was conquered by the sword and by the sword it shall be held". But it is striking that Elgin in one of his statements implicitly signified that in the sub-continent what was of prime importance was diplomacy not sword i.e. nationalist agitations and problems were to be handled with Machiavellian diplomacy and not by Tsarist sword. That is why the government to handle Bengal politics took recourse mainly to three policies; the policy of using indiscriminate repression over all anti-government people, the policy of winning over the Moderates by holding before them assurances of a number of political concessions and above all the policy of making the Bengal Muslims stand apart from the Congress through the device of separate electorates.

A section of the Moderates in the beginning welcomed the proposals of the Act of 1909 as 'large and liberal'; but very soon they on considering the excessive concessions granted to the Muslims became very much critical

of the Act. The Muslims now felt themselves much empowered by the Act, and by nature and activities they became much more different from what they had been before the creation of the new province. As a result looting, killing and setting fire on Hindu houses and market places, attacks on Hindu landed- gentry and on Hindu women and despoiling of temples and so on went on rampant. Law and order now failed; the government failed to enforce the rule of law. As a result the new province was turned into an abyss of disorganization, confusion and anarchy.

To the provincial authority and so also to the British government both in India and Britain the crisis of the new province gradually became very much perplexing. To get rid of the 'partition ulcer' the government thought of revoking the partition of Bengal. In December 1911 Emperor George-V at the Delhi Durbar revoked the partition. The two Bengals were now united, and the capital of British India was transferred from Calcutta to Delhi. At this the Muslim political elite was rudely shocked. The main purpose behind this recalling of the Delhi-based Mughal glory was only to sop the enraged Muslim sentiment. But owing to changes in British foreign policy towards Turkey the Muslim opinion in India towards the British authority became hostile. Gradually this hostility grew deeper, and during the inter-war years it grew much more tense and violent. Under the circumstances the

government was to adopt a new course of action according to varying changes.

In fine it requires a particular mention of the fact that the aforesaid factors both governmental and nationalist both knowingly and unknowingly slowly but steadily paved a solid ground for the emergence of a new nation and a new India. Coming events cast their shadows before--- in the Indian context this maxim proved true to every word as the late 1910's heralded a new era in Indian politics. Particularly 1920 heralded the birth of a new India-wide national movement under the leadership of a new leader leading the nation with a new course of action against a super colonial power bent on crushing the birth of the nation in its embryo.

In 1913 a new chapter opened in the history of Contai consequent to a catastrophic flood that made the people socially disrupted and economically crippled. Again with this socio-economic crisis Contai had to face the crises generated by the war.¹⁶

The attitude of the colonial government towards the flood-victims and its administrative activities during the pre-flood and post-flood periods exposed clearly the hard-hearted nature of the colonial rule. That is why the Contai nationalists put forward a number of grievances against the government: (i) the government did not organise a proper effective prompt

relief system; (ii) it did not provide the flood-victims with employment; (iii) the embankment and canal systems of the locality all along remained neglected, and so there was the over-flooding of the Contai areas; and the canals could not properly discharge the locked waters of the lower areas; (iv) the neglected government sanitation, health-care and medical facilities of the people of the flooded areas, and it did not take any particular care for supplying pure drinking water to the victims, and if this could have been done epidemics might have been kept under control¹⁷. In addition to these grievances the government proposal to realise the loans and revenues at this critical hour made the people critical in respect of the government. Besides the government proposal to close the sluices after *aman*-harvest was very much perplexing to them¹⁸. It was at this stage the lesson propagated in the *swadeshi-katha* sittings that 'a good king's rule is good for people and a bad king's rule is bad' – was very much appreciating to the people. It meant that if the alien ruler was right and alert there would have been no flood, no famine and no flood generated epidemics. There is no doubt that this lesson implicitly ignited the nationalist spirit of protest of the people and made them prepared to respond according to circumstances.

Contai in 1913 as a result of natural disasters was transformed into a new Contai, totally different from the Contai of the former times,

particularly from the Contai of the *Swadeshi* days. Truly speaking, Contai was now economically crippled. Her society and social relations were disrupted. There was no food, no clothing and no medical care. Instead there were hunger, starvation, diseases and deaths. There were no *mahajani* loans. Government relief was irregular and insufficient, and local benevolences were only little. It was at this critical stage there was none to instil in the misery- stricken people the hope and confidence of a new life and of new days. In spite of this their stringency they hoped against hope. They somehow managed to cultivate their paddy fields; but all along they had the apprehension that all their fields might be washed away again as a result of heavy rain and by the water coming from the west high lands.¹⁹

In August 1914 the apprehension of the people came true. The paddy fields were all submerged due to heavy rains. Besides this natural calamity they faced a terrible man-made calamity, the Great War. The War broke out in August 1914. None knew what might come out of the War. At this state of confusion the statesmen of the belligerent states particularly those of Britain and the USA with a view to clearing the aims and objectives of the War made the public declarations that the Allies were fighting for liberty, for self-government for the development of all peoples, and for making the world safe for democracy. The British Prime Minister Lloyd George

repeatedly announced: "The Allies are fighting for nothing but freedom". These solemn and liberal declarations from the beginning of the War went on ringing in the ears of the nationalist leaders. So they were in favour of showing sympathy and rendering support for Britain. From the beginning of the War Britain made an indiscriminate use of Indian's men and money and other material resources for conducting the War. The Congress made no protest over it. In the Madras Conference (1914) the I NC adopted the resolution that the Indians should support the British Empire in her great peril whole-heartedly and with all loyalty. Probably this time it was considered that "England's necessity was India's opportunity". That is why the Indian national leaders remained loyal to the government and thought of demanding political reforms as a price for their loyalty.

This time the national leaders like Tilak and others appealed to the Indians to stand by the government with men and money in order to qualify India for *Swaraj*. This appeal of Gandhi to the national leaders created a great sensation all over the country. Meetings and seminars were organised to publicize the necessity of rendering help to Britain. In this connection it is striking that as soon as the War broke out a general meeting was convened in the Bell Hall at Madras to assure the government that the Madras people would render loyal services to the government with all sorts of help²⁰.

On September 17, 1914 in a meeting convened at the *Mukhteer* Library under the presidentship of ... the S D O , Contai there was formed one *Yuddha Sahayak Samiti* (War-Aid Committee) by the respectable persons of the district²¹. The prominent members of the committee were some big zamindars and the teachers of the Contai High English School and the Contai Model Institution. It is strange that most of these persons before the breaking out of the War were mostly devout nationalists, and they participated in anti-British meetings and agitations. But now the tables turned, and their political colour was now changed, and most of them with a crusading zeal came forward to speak in favour of the government, and they asked the people of the locality to serve the government with all possible ways and means. Not only that they also engaged themselves in collecting donations for the Imperial Relief Fund, and in persuading the young people to join the War for the greater interest of the country²². It is thus evident that the flow of the national movement was now almost totally checked. On the contrary there flowed a strong current towards furthering the interests of a new social class composed of zamindars and school teachers. In this War-generated environment almost all the zamindars of the Contai sub-division in association with the teachers occasionally convened meetings to explain to the people the necessity of providing helps to the government as dutiful and

loyal subjects. In those days some might remark that they did so only to show themselves off that they were more loyal than the others²³.

The Nihar gives a date-wise list of meetings held at different places in the Contai sub-division. In the meetings the speakers put before the people the necessity of joining the British Army, and giving war-loans to Britain and of remaining loyal to the government²⁴. In addition to this they made the people known of the progress of the War, and assured them that as soon as the War would come to an end they would attain Swaraj i.e. liberty and self-government and development in all respects. All these their saying encouraged and inspired the people; so they willingly promised to donate to the Imperial Relief Fund through Post Offices, and they felt eager to enlist themselves for being recruited for the Army.²⁵

The history of Contai from 1913 to 1918 was a period of great socio-economic and socio-political crises. Occasional draughts and recurrent floods and War-related problems made the sub-division economically devastated. Owing to natural and man-made calamities agriculture, cottage industries and trade and business of Contai were all ruined. So there was only hunger, starvation, diseases and finally sure death. There was no employment, even no sufficient relief. At this stage they could not but leave their so dear ancestral homestead. Some went away to towns like Kharagpur

and Midnapore and to some distant unknown places like the Sundarbans and so on. Some parents sold their children with the expectation that they might get food elsewhere, and this was how they would live²⁶. The *Nihar* reports (Sept. 21,1915) that in the Khejuri P.S in 1915 there was almost no cooking of rice in 90% houses²⁷. Again on October12,1915 the *Nihar* writes that about 90% men were prey to hunger and starvation, and that there was none in the sub-division of Contai who could give one handful of rice to any beggar²⁸. At this stage of crisis when a householder found a rent-collector at his door he could not but go on shedding tears.²⁹

The socio-political picture of Contai was to a certain extent better. The news of the emergence of Gandhi and of his reforming activities at Champaran, Ahmedabad and Kaira held before the helpless and destitute people of Contai hopes of a new life. They eagerly expected that their hard times under the cruel and hard-hearted rule of the colonial government would surely come to an end if a new leader would appear with the prospect of a new course of life and instil in them the faith and confidence of a free life free from their present crises.

Notes and References:

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11. Bipan Chandra and Others, *India's Struggle for Independence 1857-1947*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1989, p.100.
12. The Lord of the Philistines being advised by his counsellors, engaged Delilah, a lady of super human beauty to know the secrets of Samson's strength; and Delilah through her coquetry won over Samson to disclose to her the source of his super human strength.
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21. *Ibid*, September 22, 1914, V-14, N-6.

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