

Nationalism and Imperialism in India: Special Focus on the Viceroyalty of Lord Curzon (1899-1905)

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ABSTRACT

The Colonial Rule that was established in India brought Rajas, Nizams, Nawabs and other political stake holders and a larger chunk of fragmented state under its control. The Raj established a mechanism not to administer but to have its sway and imperial regime in India to be consolidated and sustained. The Imperial Government in India never wanted her resources spent in India rather to drain India as much she can. As Anil Seal rightly says that "Imperialism built a system, which interlocked its rule in locality, province and nation; nationalism emerged as a matching structure of politics". The era of Lord Curzon in India gave a new twist to Imperialism; the state which had been liberal became the past and took every effort towards its permanency through bureaucracy. In the same way Nationalism in India witnessed a change in its morphology where the educated elite interested in politics stood against the state with Swaraj and Swadeshi as their arm. The paper envisages the paradigm shift in the Colonial Policies towards strengthening the hand of Imperial Rule in India and a transition in the programmes of the Nationalist to counter through Swaraj and Swadeshi.

Keywords: Nationalism, Imperialism, Colonialism, Swaraj, Swadeshi.

INTRODUCTION

Lord Curzon's viceroyalty marks a crisis in the development of the national movement in India. Since the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, its leaders had been committed to a political programme conceived in the spirit of English liberalism. They desired the gradual advancement of India toward self-government under British aegis, along the lines envisaged by Macaulay, Elphinstone and others in the 1830s. The constitutional agitation commenced by the Congress to secure this objective did not succeed. Certain reforms were made with respect to the number of Indians in the civil service in 1889, and in the structure of the Legislative Councils in 1892, but they fell far short of what the Congress expected and desired. This failure was a damaging blow to the prestige of the liberal Congress leaders.

Curzonian Imperialism

By the end of the nineteenth century, disillusionment had set in within the Congress ranks, and many who had initially placed their faith in the original Congress programme were forced to reappraise their position. Subsequently, in the years 1899-1905, Lord Curzon made it clear that in the new age of imperialism the liberal policy of the past was dead, and that British rule must be considered permanent. So the nationalists were forced to search for a new programme better able to meet the challenge with which they were faced. They turned to the technique of passive resistance, and to the boycott and *swadeshi* movements. In this way, they sought to bring patriotism down from the lofty heights of abstract idealism, where it touched only the Western-educated few, to the hard realities of Indian life and surroundings, where it would strike a response from the masses. By 1905 the new form of nationalism, stimulated by the challenge of Curzon's imperialism, had captured the imagination of a large segment of the nationalist movement.

Curzon's imperialist convictions explain his inability to acknowledge the existence of a growing spirit of national self-consciousness in India. It did not seem to occur to him that if it was Britain's mission to effect the moral and material regeneration of India, it must equally effect its political regeneration and willingly accept the consequences.¹ Curzon, fully occupied with bearing the white man's burden, could spare no attention for the claims of an Indian intelligentsia

aspiring to lead and speak for the masses. He believed that concessions to them would hinder Great Britain in the discharge of the task committed to her by God by reason of her loftier standards.²

This attitude was at total variance with the new spirit which “possessing India at the moment he took up the reins of office, viewed the new imperialism from a very different angle. They saw it as a meaning of self-government for Britain and the white colonies, autocracy for the rest of the Empire. As one of the moderate leader of Indian nationalism, Surendra Nath Banerjee, stressed it at the annual session of the Indian National Congress 1902.”³

By 1902 he had come to the conclusion that the moral and political uplift of the people of India could never be achieved by the methods of constitutional agitation hitherto favored by the Congress. Writing in his news-paper *New India* on 17th September, 1902, Pal declared that it was no use begging for rights and looking for help from outside in securing them. Indians had given a new name to begging: they called it agitation, but the Congress agitation had not brought India any greater advantage.⁴ “Agitation is not, in any sense, a test of true patriotism. That test is self-help and self-sacrifice; and the time, perhaps, is coming faster than we had thought, when Indian patriotism will be put to this test.”⁵

The test about which Pal wrote was provided by Curzon’s general policy of benevolent imperialism, and in particular by certain measures which he set on foot during his last two years as Viceroy. The first of these was in the field of education. The preliminary work began in September 1901, and the final stage was the passage in March 1904 of an Act to reform the Indian Universities. The main objective of this legislation was to raise the standards of University Education in India. Curzon’s method was to reconstitute the administrative structure of the universities by turning their Senates into bodies of experts, largely nominated by the Government. This led Indians to believe that the Government had ulterior motives unconnected with improving the standards of education as such, but designed rather to control the universities so as to deal a blow to the educated classes who formed the spearhead of the nationalist movement.

Curzon’s consuming passion for efficiency quite blinded him to the human side of things. He criticized Indians for their exaggerated fears of the intentions of the Government without ever attempting to analyze what lay at the bottom of those fears. Indians had before them the precedent of the officialization of the Calcutta Corporation, and they saw in the Universities Act the application of the same principle to the field of education.⁶ They interpreted it as simply a particular expression of Curzon’s general policy which, as Pal had pointed out in *New India* in August 1903, was shaped so as to strengthen England’s hold on India and to establish her as India’s permanent overlord. Curzon confirmed this conclusion in a speech less than a year later, while in London to receive the freedom of the City at the end of his first term as Viceroy.

Curzon resurrected it in 1902 as part of a general examination of the question of Provincial boundaries in India. At the end of 1903 he had scheme ready, and when it was made public there was a storm of protest. Nothing daunted, Curzon set off on a tour of Eastern Bengal returned convinced that the original partition proposal was not large enough in scope. Consequently he decided that the amount of territory to be severed from Bengal should be increased, and an entirely new Province created. In speeches delivered during, the end of his tour, the Viceroy declared that the Government of India had no conceivable object in view but the administrative advantage of the country as a whole, and he dismissed the extent of public feeling on the partition issue as greatly exaggerated.⁷ The foundation of Indian opposition to partition was the fear that it was not really projected for reasons of administrative efficiency at all, but was in fact another blow aimed at the educated classes in Bengal, and hence at the head and centre of the national movement in India for the Bengalis in particular, partition was the logical sequence to the Calcutta Corporation Act and the Universities Act. Curzon, however, constituted himself the arbiter of public opinion in India, and he dismissed the real fears which the scheme had conjured up in Indian minds as ‘the frothy ebullition of irrational sentiment.’⁸

The Government published its final scheme for the Partition of Bengal on 20th July, 1905. The reaction was swift. It began with a great public meeting in the Town Hall of Calcutta on 1st August. A resolution was adopted calling on Bengalis to boycott British goods until the partition scheme was withdrawn. The boycott movement quickly expanded into a movement for *swadeshi*—the use of home produce as against imported manufactured goods.⁹ The agitation which accompanied these developments was so wide-spread that it began to impress the Home Government. At the height of the agitation, Curzon resigned as Viceroy because of a disagreement with the British Government over a new system of military administration.

In the Congress party, the partition issue brought in to loggerheads differences between two schools of thought. The “moderates”, by G.K. Gokhale, Surendra Nath Banerjee, and Dadabhai Navroji, still put their trust in the old methods of constitution. Gokhale told the Benares session of Congress in 1905 that the advent to power of the Liberal party in England offered better prospects for India. A recent visit to England had convinced that a strong current had already set

in against the tide of recessive imperialism. The “extremists”, on the other hand, led by Pal, B.G. Tilak, and Lajpat Rai, called for direct action instead the barren policy of begging for concessions. Lajpat Rai, who accompanied Gokhale to England, told the Congress delegates that the British democracy was too busy with its own affairs to do anything for India. It was hard for Indians to get a hearing in England, where the influence of retired Anglo-Indians was too strong. Lajpat Rai advocated passive resistance, a proposal first made by Tilak at a meeting of the younger generation of nationalists held during the Congress session. It was there decided to inaugurate a new era of self-help and self-reliance based on an active boycott of Government service and institutions.¹⁰

New Heights of Nationalism

These differences between the moderates and the extremists threatened to split the Congress party. The breach was averted at the 1906 session only when the moderates agreed to resolutions defining the Congress objective as “Self-Government or *swaraj* like that of the United Kingdom or the Colonies,” and favouring the boycott and *swadeshi* movements. But the differences were too fundamental to be restrained for long. They extended not merely to political objectives and to the methods of attaining them, but included the opposition between the ideals of Western liberalism derived from English education, and resurgent Hindu nationalism. As Bipin Chandra Pal expressed it: “Behind the new nationalism in India stands the old Vedantism of the Hindus”¹¹ In a speech delivered in Madras in 1907, Pal emphasized that the real conflict between the educated classes and the Government was over the possession of the minds and hearts of the people. Curzon, he said, had realized this and consequently all his measures had been directed towards capturing the public mind, by means of rural reforms, agricultural banks, pageantry, and a scrupulous regard for justice. Thus he hoped to secure at least the passive acquiescence of the people, if not their allegiance. Therefore, said Pal, recognizing the existence of this conflict, it was important that nothing should be done to make that government easy for the people. If that condition were reached, the sense of separation between Government and people, brought about by the Partition of Bengal, would be lost.¹² Pal recognized that the strength of British arms in India made violence in the pursuit of freedom suicidal. Instead, he advocated passive resistance. In the political sphere, Indians should refuse to be members of municipalities, District and Local Boards, and Legislative Councils; in the economic sphere, the boycott should take the form of a refusal by the people to buy foreign articles, thus indirectly protecting indigenous industry and developing a spirit of self-sacrifice among the people.¹³

Such tactics were completely unacceptable to the moderate elements in the Congress, who pinned their hopes on the constitutional reforms then being considered by Morley, and Curzon’s successor, Minto. At the end of 1907 the Congress session at Surat broke up in disorder as a result of the irreconcilable differences between the opposing groups. This event marked the end of an era in the history of the Indian National Congress.¹⁴

Curzon left behind him an unhappy legacy. The passions he stirred up resulted in outbreaks of terrorism in Bengal and anger in other parts of the country. Legislation was passed to curb and restrict public meetings. The leaders of the “extremist” of the Congress, among them Tilak, Pal, and Lajpat Rai, arrested, and imprisoned or deported on charge of sedition.¹⁵

The entire tone of the nationalist movement was altered by Curzon effect, had presented the movement with a challenge the challenge of benevolent British imperialism as an active to developing Indian nationalism. The different phases of Imperialism in establishing a state mechanism to administer and control also played a significant role in setting the goal of the Nationalist Ideals in India.¹⁶ The imperial state was bent upon breaking the hearts and minds of the people through its repressive policies. Further the state in the disguise of protecting and fostering the rights and privileges of the people tightened its grip over the state by policies and bureaucracy.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Hence one cannot brush aside the imperialism as it shaped the prospects of Nationalism. But in so doing, had carelessly overstepped the bounds of political prudence, by pursuing such measures as educational reform and the partition of Bengal in the face of widespread popular opposition, he presented the extremists with ready forged weapons with which to attack his whole concept of paternal despotism. Guided, as he was, by the maxim that administrative efficiency is synonymous with the contentment of the governed, Curzon sought to strangle nationalism with bureaucracy. In fact, in his single mindedness, he aided rather than deterred the forces undermining the British position in India. Consequently, it does not seem too much to say that, as far as British rule in India was concerned, the Curzon regime marks, if not the beginning of the end, at any rate the end of the beginning.

END NOTES

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