

ORGANIZING FOR HOME RULE MOVEMENT IN MADRAS, 1915-17

R. Gopinath (M.A., Ph.D.)

Department of Indian History, University of Madras, Chennai, Tamil Nadu

ABSTRACT

The years 1914 to 1922 represent a beginning of nation-wide agitation and political change in India. The two Home Rule Leagues founded by Annie Besant and Bal Gangadhar Tilak were the organizations which, up to the beginning of 1919 channeled this process. Madras, known for long called the most 'benighted' and conservative of the presidencies, suddenly exploded into political activity in 1917. The Home Rule League, confronted the British with the most serious and largest movement of dissidence which their rule had faced anywhere in India since the Mutiny. Historians have analyzed the rise of the Home Rule movement in terms of patron-client linkages and Brahmin and Non-Brahmin conflicts. Both the Home Rule League agitation and the non-Brahman movement represented, no doubt, extremely new phenomena in Madras politics. The British could not dismiss the movement as a mere ritual performed by a handful of 'English educated Babus' and an irascible Irishwoman. The present paper is an attempt to analyze Home Rule agitation in the Madras Presidency up to 1917, the year when Mrs. Besant's political star reached its zenith.

Keywords: Benighted, Home Rule League, non-Brahman, Parliamentary Commission.

Madras, known for long called the most 'benighted' and conservative of the presidencies, suddenly exploded into political activity in 1917. The Home Rule League, organized from a suburb of Madras city, confronted the British with the most serious and largest movement of dissidence which their rule had faced anywhere in India since the Mutiny. The years 1914 to 1922 represent a beginning of nation-wide agitation and political change in India. The two Home Rule Leagues founded by Annie Besant and Bal Gangadhar Tilak were the organizations which, up to the beginning of 1919 channeled this process.

There is a growing literature on nationalist movement in India, in particular on the mass mobilization from 1917 onwards. Historians have analyzed the rise of the Home Rule movement in terms of patron-client linkages and Brahmin and Non-Brahmin conflicts. Both the Home Rule League agitation and the non-Brahman movement represented, no doubt, extremely new phenomena in Madras politics. Contemporaries never tired of pointing out how, just five years before they appeared, there was not the slightest sign of their imminence. In 1912 the men and

women who were to lead the Home Rule League were recognised generally as the most loyal supporters of the British *raj*, the later arch-ideologue of the non-Brahman cause was presenting to a Parliamentary Commission evidence which not even his enemies considered to show a trace of communal bias; and the provincial government of Madras was steadfastly denying to its superiors in London and New Delhi the existence of anything resembling communal conflict within its territories.¹

Professor Owen has analyzed the rise of the Home Rule movement at the all-India level and its utilization by Gandhi in 1919 for launching of non-cooperation movement.² The British could not dismiss the movement as a mere ritual performed by a handful of 'English educated Babus' and an irascible Irishwoman. Annie Besant joined the Indian National Congress and became directly involved in nationalist politics in 1914.

To a large extent this decision was a logical outcome of her previous intense public life. This most remarkable Irish woman had landed in India in 1893 with her interest in Theosophy when she was 46 years old. While quickly rising in the hierarchy of the Theosophical Society, of which she was a member, Mrs. Besant became deeply involved in educational and social reforms. Before she became an active theosophist, Annie Besant had a long record of radical politics and agitation, being associated with the National Secular Society in London.³

In this political field she worked for Radicals and later for socialist reforms, such as to add to free and compulsory education, free meals for hungry children and won a seat on the London School Board, where she pleaded for them, a plea since granted, though it was rejected as "Pauperizing the People". She sat for Tower Hamlets in the east end of London, where children forced into school came without breakfast, and sometimes fainted during the morning lessons. She took up the cause of them. She was associated with the historic Match Girls Strike of Bryant & Mary's, which was the forerunner of the General Union in London in the 1880. She carried the same radical agitational politics to Madras.⁴

The Official reaction

The outbreak of First World War in 1914 gave a new impetus to the nationalists as they were disappointed with the limited reform of 1909 after a long and bitter wait. The genesis of the Home Rule Leagues may be traced in the background of political lead articles that appeared in the most popularly read newspapers. Mrs. Besant started "Commonweal" on 2 January 1914 and "New India" on 14 July 1914. The Madras authorities did not ask her to deposit the securities which, according to the 1910 Press Act, they were entitled to request. However, soon afterwards, Annie Besant's activities at the all-India level and her attempt to convince Gopal Krishna Gokhale to readmit B.G. Tilak and his party to the Congress prompted the Government of Madras to ask the C.I.D. for a confidential report on the activities of Theosophical Society.⁵

However the members of the Governor's Council got the impression that the influence of Mrs. Besant had been significant in preventing the Society from developing anti-British Propaganda and that her loyalty to the British causes.⁶

But a lone dissenting voice was that of Sir Harold Stuart on the Governor's Council. He agreed that Annie Besant was not "disloyal in the sense that she is in favour of assassination and rebellion", but pointed out that, after following her doings in India for a long time, he had "constantly found her magnifying the superiority of the Indian and seizing opportunities to inflame racial feelings by exaggerating cases of ill treatment of Indians by Europeans."⁷ Sir Harold Stuart's apprehensions became true. From April 1915, Mrs. Besant started displaying "anti-English and anti-missionary bias in some rather foolish speeches delivered in Madura, as well as in her leading articles." In her newspapers, Annie Besant published a series of articles on self-government and advocated a campaign to get it, although the time for such agitation was set as after the War.⁸

In the following months the tone of 'New India' became more radical and strident. Mrs. Besant, taking her cue from the work of the Public Services Commission, stated that if an unsatisfactory report was published during the war "there should be immediate and vehement agitation notwithstanding the present truce to controversy". Finally, in the 25th September issue of "New India", she announced her intention to start a movement for the attainment of Home Rule for India through a "strong steady and sustained agitation" in the press and on the platform. The Government of Madras had followed Mrs. Besant's doings with ever growing pre-occupation.⁹ In August 1915 it could console itself with the thought that, although the "New India" articles were subjects of comment in such authoritative nationalist papers as the "Bengalee" and the "Bombay Chronicle", the Madras officials comment was as usual; the Besant-edited daily was "not a paper of great influence among the Madraseses."¹⁰

Support for the Home Rule Movement

The Home Rule Movement had represented as diverse interests as landholders, merchants, rickshaw pullers and factory labour. Such huge landed proprietors as the Kumara Maharaja of Vizianagram, the Raja of Ramnad, the *zamorin* of Calicut and the *zamindar* of Munagala, and such enormous financial powers as the Gujarati banker Lord Govindoss, the Muslim Badsha family and the Calivalla brothers became involved in the agitation. These were not accidental or mere political involvement but were the result of personal connection cultivated over the years either in cultural and religious movements.¹¹

The Kumara Maharaja of Vizianagram and the Raja of Ramnad sought to give the Madras Landholders' Association a strong Home Rule flavor when Montagu visited Madras in December 1917.¹²

Popularity of the Movement

The Home rule campaign highlighted the issues of the common man. For example, prominent Home Rule politicians picked up the issue of emigrant labour and called on the government to regulate more closely and, in some instances, stop completely the traffic. These demands, The Home Rule League made a criticism of the failure of government's policy which affected economic interests of the Muslims in the important hide and skin trade, which was hit by the dislocation of communications.

Home rulers identified themselves with Indian merchants who sought to break the financial privileges of European business houses. The Home Rule Movement was significant in that it reached a hitherto untouched segment of the population, the workers. In Madras city it drew support not only from the middle and lower classes but also from the labouring class. The Home rulers based at Adayar in Madras were able to articulate their grievances. The Home rulers in Madras were successful in organizing native labour and establishing first formally constituted Madras Labour Union in Madras.¹³

The Home Rule Press and the Home Rulers in Madras saw labour as a significant force to be a part of the political movement. In this period of political tumult, the Home Rule Movement and the labour awakening became intertwined. B.P. Wadia, Home Ruler with the backing of Annie Besant, acknowledged the potential power of the working class to become an integral part of the national movement. He observed: "It is necessary to recognize the labour movement as an integral part of the national movement. The latter will not succeed in the right direction of democracy if the Indian working classes are not enabled to organize their force and come into their own."¹⁴

The support extended to these diverse interests by the Home rulers gave the British every reason to see the Home Rule League as an extremely serious threat to the continued existence of the *raj*. Furthermore, the strength of the movement rested on Indian religious and national revival, and served to concentrate the agitation on the fact that the government, besides being unsatisfactory, was alien.

In September 1915 she gave definite shape to the prevailing opinion demanding an executive organization for the Congress by arranging a joint meeting by December 1915. To get the support of the Indian National Congress for the proposed Home Rule League, Besant went to Bombay in December 1915 where the Congress was to hold its annual session. Mrs. Besant started a campaign in favor of the Home rule with the following demands:

- i. To be free in India, as the Englishman are in England;
- ii. To be governed by her own men, freely elected by her;

- iii. To form ministries at her will;
- iv. To carry arms, to have her own army, her own navy, her own volunteers;
- v. To levy her own taxes, to make her own budgets.¹⁵

She requested the Congress to consider the proposal for launching the movement to realize the above goals. The committee of All India National Congress and the Council of the Muslim League was constituted to consider the formation of Home Rule League for India and also to co-operate with the National Congress in England.

A meeting of Besant's followers, of about 200 strong, drawn from both the Congress and the Muslim League, was held on 27 December 1915. Opinion was divided among the leaders on the immediate formation of the Home Rule League. Srinivasa Sastri and Surendranath Banerjee, the moderates, advised Besant to refrain from inaugurating the Home Rule League for the time being. C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, C.Y Chintamani, editor of the 'Leader', Tej Bahdur Sapru, the moderate leader from U.P. and Jehangirpetit of Bombay favored the immediate formation of the Home Rule League. The meeting passed the following resolution moved by Besant: "that this conference approves of the establishment of a league to carry on an educative propaganda on the principles of and the necessity for, Self-Government in India."

The subjects committee of the Congress, to which the resolution was referred, decided to appoint a committee to study the various aspects relating to the formation of the league. The committee was to send a report to the Congress President by 31 August 1916. The General Secretaries of the Congress were asked to circulate the report to the various provincial Congress Committees that "the congress is of the opinion that the time has arrived to introduce further and substantial measures of reforms towards the attainment of the Self-Government as the immediate goal of the congress."

Around this time Bal Gangadhar Tilak was also released from Mandalay Jail at the end of six years term. Among the nationalists Tilak stood tallest and his presence gave stimulus to patriotic sentiments. Mrs. Besant for sometime did not get much success in reuniting the moderates and the extremists under the banner of the Congress. After the death of Gopal Krishna Gokhale in February, 1915 and Sir Ferozeshah Mehta in November of the same year, Mrs. Besant prevailed upon both the groups to work together again.¹⁶

Tilak and his group agreed to the policies and programmes of Mrs. Besant's Home Rule League but the moderates were unwilling in their approval of her proposal. Plan was made to organize a new agitation to attain self-rule and promote national freedom. In April 1916, the Home Rule League was founded by Tilak. Later in September a similar organization in Madras with the co-

operation of Mrs. Annie Besant was established. Gradually branches of it spread over the major part of the country.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak started the initial League in Pune, while Dr. Annie Besant and her co-worker Subramaniya Iyer headed the League in Madras. Most of the activities by Home Rule movement were undertaken in the cities like Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and the head quarters of this movement was situated in Delhi. It also attracted the attention of All Indian Muslim leagues by the resolution of Home Rule league. Thus, Tilak promoted the idea of Swaraj and also demanded the separate linguistic states be formed and education should be provided in local vernacular languages. Due to the collective effective effort of B.G. Tilak and Annie Besant, Indian National Congress and Indian Muslim League got united. After the arrest of Annie Besant, the movement spread further into the states and the rural areas.¹⁷

In the formation of the Home Rule league, Besant had to draw largely on the loyalty of the members of the Theosophical Society. Her ardent supporters in Madras presidency were G.S. Arundale, C.P Ramaswamy Aiyar and S. Subramania Iyer, all moderates, in the Tamil area, N. Subba Rao, B. Pattabhi Sitaramayya and A. Ranganatha Mudaliar in the Telugu area; and Majesri Ramier in Malabar.

Plan was made to organize a new agitation to attain self-rule and promote national freedom. In April 1916, the Home Rule League was founded by Tilak. Annie Besant inaugurated the All India Home Rule League at Madras in September 1916. She wrote, thus in "Commonweal" that "In political reform we aim at the building up of complete self-government from village councils, through District and Municipal Boards and provincial Legislative Assemblies, to a national parliament, equal in its powers to the legislative name they may be called; also at the direct representation of India in the Imperial parliament when that body shall contain representatives of the self-governing states of the Empire". Gradually branches of it spread over the major part of the country.¹⁸

Counter Movement of Loyalty

As the Home rule Movement gained momentum in the cities and towns, the counter move against the Home Rule Movement was initiated by a small group of highly placed civilians like Cardew, H. F. W. Gillman, Sir Lionel Davidson and Sir Murray Hammick. In late 1916, faced with the growing strength of the Home Rule League crusade, they began to look around for elements which could be used in a counter-movement of loyalty. At first, communalism alone was not central to their plans. They responded to the initiatives of a few *zamindars* who wished to oppose the League on a straight ticket of loyalty to the *raj*.¹⁹

Non-Brahmin reaction

One consequence of Home Rule Movement was the hostility of the non-Brahmins both in Bombay and Madras. But it is wrong to assume that Non-Brahmins as a whole did not support the movement.

The South India Liberal Federation, a Non-Brahmin association in Madras, opposed the Home Rule League demand on the grounds that 'if a class oppresses another, there will be no way open for the oppressed class to get Justice.' She criticized severely the anti-Home Rule stand pursued by the Non-Brahmin leaders, especially in seeking official support for their narrow cause.²⁰ As the organizer of the Home Rule movement, she wrote that in the event of India being granted Home Rule, it mattered little whether Brahmin or Non-Brahmin or Muslims would become most powerful, for after all, "we could have persuaded, for instance a leader like P. Kesava Pillai to rally round her in the Home Rule movement, for the latter, had openly repudiated the 'Non-Brahmin manifesto of P. Thyagaraya Chetti.'" In fact, Tamil Press in Madras stoutly defended Home Rule Movement. Thiru. Vi. Kalayanasundra Mudaliar through his columns in the *Desabhaktan* wrote that communal antagonism prevailing in Tamil Nadu was the greatest impediment for attaining Home rule. The *Desabhaktsn* further accused the justicites as suffering from Anglo-mania and branded them as enemies of Tamil culture. It held out the hope that Home rule alone would infuse new blood into 'Mother Tamil'.²¹

In addition to the *Desabhaktan*, the *Swadesamitran* was another nationalist newspaper which attempted to counter communal politics and spread Home Rule ideas. These papers carried the message of Home Rule to the people. In short, they outweighed communal propaganda indulged in by the Justice party at a crucial point of political change in Madras Presidency.²²

Impact of the Home Rule League

It is no exaggeration to say two Home Rule Movements organized by B.G. Tilak and Mrs. Annie Besant channelized the public opinion against the inadequacy of the Government of India Act of 1909, carried the message of Home rule to the all classes and compelled the government to pass the Government of India Act of 1919.

Work of Home Rule League

The Home Rule League campaign carried on in the preceding months was largely instrumental in drawing the Congress and the Muslim League together. The branches of the Home Rule League held regular discussions for their members. They organized public meetings too. The Home Rulers toured the various towns and villages in the Presidency. They lectured on the growth of nationalism in Europe and reminded the people of India's glorious past.

Besant visited a number of places like Kakinada, Rajahmundry and Bangalore and enlisted popular support for the Home Rule campaign. The majority of the political leaders in Andhra

joined the campaign and by mid 1917 about fifty branches of the Home Rule league sprang up in the Andhra area alone. In Coimbatore, ten Theosophical lodges became centers to convene the meeting of Home Rule League. In Tanjore, V.V Ramanujachari, member of the Madras Legislative Council became the leader of Movement. Home Rule became the central topic for discussion at the Godavari, Krishna, Visakapatnam, Guntur and Ganjam. District conferences held under the presidentship of "middle level" nationalists like P. Narayanamurthi, C.V. S. Narasimha Raju, A. Suryanarayana Rao and B. Venkatapathi Raju. The moderates in the Congress who had wished for greater nationalist activity under the Congress banner lent support to the Home Rule campaign.

The mofussil areas of the Madras presidency were drawn into the campaign through the distribution of vernacular leaflets and illustrated postcards. The Home Rule campaign was to give an added impetus to the growing consciousness of the Telugu speaking people in Madras presidency in their demand for a separate identity.²²

Probably the momentum created by the Home Rule Movement compelled Mr. Montague in 1919 to announce in British parliament a gradual transfer of power from the British to Indian hands. In order to enlist the firm support of the Indians for the cause of war, Montague, Secretary of State for India, arrived in Bombay on 10 November, 1917. Tilak joined the large body to welcome him and garlanded him on behalf of the Home Rule League. After his arrival at Delhi, Montague received a series of deputations. A joint delegation representing the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League waited until 26 November. Montague was fully conscious of the political importance of the delegation. Montague also interviewed Tilak separately and wrote of him as one "who probably has the greatest influence of any person in India and who is very extreme. His procession to Delhi to see me was a veritable triumphant one. He was really the author of the Congress-League scheme ... he is a scientific man of great erudition and training. It was quite obvious that he was not going to be satisfied with anything but what the Congress asks for." the very next day," His main purpose was to formulate the scheme of reforms in consultation with the Government of India and various political leaders and at the same time to divert the attention of the Indian politicians from war and think of nothing else but the mission of the Secretary of State. In his mission he admirably succeeded."

This tribute is the admission of the strength and victory of Tilak and his Home Rule League with which Annie Besant got identified in Madras with her own brand of Home Rule Movement with branches throughout Madras Presidency. Hereafter the national movement had shed its middle class background and had prepared itself to become a mass movement.

END NOTES

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