

DISMANTLEMENT AND DECLINE OF HOME RULE LEAGUE – A STUDY

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The formation of the Non-Brahmin movement or the Justice Party was harmful to the survival of the Home Rule movement. In due course, the Justice Party succeeded in its attempt to spread a wave of racial hatred across the Presidency and also to divide the society into many political communities. Some of the prominent leaders of the League were Non-Brahmins who were influenced by the activities of the Non-Brahmin leaders, making the way for the desertion of Mrs. Besant, and ultimately leading to the decline of the Home rule movement.¹

To the Congress, which till then remained a party of the English educated elite, the launching of the non-Brahmin movement served as an eye-opener and they initiated steps to enlist mass support for the cause of national emancipation.²

Several other causes also contributed to the decline of the Home Rule League since 1917. The moderates, satisfied with the promise of Mrs. Montagu and the release of Besant, did not attend the Congress from September 1918 onwards. Mrs. Besant worked hard but failed in her attempt to keep her position in the Central and Provincial Congress Committees. In spite of her efforts to prevent the secession of the moderates from the Congress, they formed a National Liberal Federation, in early 1919. This event increased

the dissatisfaction among her followers. In March 1919, Besant and her friends resigned from the Madras Provincial Congress Committee. The extremists also turned against her. She criticised the extremists for their changing attitude. Many Congress leaders were critical of her Presidential Address and the manner in which she directed the Meeting.³

Mrs. Besant made no attempt to strengthen the movement at the district level or to integrate the branches of her Home Rule League with it.⁴ Later, she tried to connect the branches and the headquarters of the League more effectively by setting up Provisional Councils. She abolished Arundale's position as the Organizing Secretary. Ramaswami Aiyar resigned from the General Secretaryship of the League.⁵

Another important cause for the decline of the League was the opposition of the Tamil extremists, who in the beginning were willing to co-operate with Besant in her Home Rule Movement. Rangaswami Iyengar, one of the extremist leaders, worked as one of her lieutenants. Later on, since 1918, they had asserted their separate identity.⁶ They tried to capture the Madras Provincial Congress Committee and used the Congress as a base for capturing the Madras legislature under the Mont-Ford Reforms.⁷ V.S Srinivasa Sastri made a comment on her during this period. "The old lady had best shut up her political show as having in a way achieved its purpose after Montagu's announcements of his Proposals and retreat with flying colours into her theosophical shell. Will somebody put it to her Mahatmas?"⁸

At the Madras Provincial Conference held at Conjeevaram in 1918, the younger members of the extremist party raised the banner of revolt against her. The cause of this revolt was a resolution moved by her on the subject of recruiting. In moving this

resolution, she made no attempt to encourage the Sepoy army. She believed that no one could move any amendment to her resolution. But S. Satyamurti moved an amendment. Mrs. Besant got angry and threatened that if the amendments were passed, she would call meetings in every part of the Presidency to pass the resolution. But in spite of her appeal, in the amendment a poll, it was announced that the votes were 123 for the amendment and 121 against it. It is also said that one man who was not a delegate had recorded a vote and thus one vote was invalid. This made the voting equal. The President gave her casting vote against the amendment.⁹ Even though Mrs. Besant came out successful, this incident exposed her and weakened her position as the most influential leader of the Madras Presidency.

After the Conjeevaram Conference, there arose another conflict between the Besantines and their opponents. The London Home Rule Committee sent a cable requesting the Indian Home Rulers to accept the Mont-Ford scheme. This brought about a complete change in Besant's original stand on the reforms. She decided to accept the reforms with certain modifications. This incident surprised her Home Rule followers, because only some time before had she asked them not to co-operate with the Government unless the Government promised them Home Rule. This shift in the stand of Mrs. Besant that India itself was in danger now, and that protecting their motherland was more important to them than the reforms, did not satisfy her followers. Satyamurti and his group were against the decision taken by Besant. Most of the delegates were in favour of total rejection of the scheme. Seeing the attitude of most of her followers, Besant announced her decision of resigning from the presidency of the Home Rule League.

In the latter part of 1918, branches of the League had become inactive. When she tried to revive the League, it was too late because the young men of Madras had already deserted her. The Home Rule Leagues had been weak in the regions of Bengal and the Punjab, and in May 1919 she had lost control of the League as a national body. In spite of her attempt to revive her League, it was divided into two. Her failure to get elected as the President of the Home Rule League forced her to found the National Home Rule League in April 1919. At the Excelsior Theatre in Bombay, where she spoke, people even refused to hear her words. The National Home Rule League had the old aims. On 14 April 1919, the constituent meeting of the National Home Rule League was held at Benares. This meeting announced the constitution of the League as an independent organization. Its meetings were held on April 20th at Bombay and on April 25th. Madras also accepted the new constitution. By 30th April, the New Home Rule League had founded more than 19 branches. S.Subramanya Iyer was made the Honorary President and Mrs. Besant, the President. The objects of the new National Home Rule League were as follows:

- 1) To secure Home Rule for India through all law-abiding and constitutional activity.
- 2) To maintain the connection with Great Britain by becoming a free nation within the British Empire under the imperial crowns of His Majesty the King-Emperor George V and his successors.
- 3) To support and strengthen the National Congress which had laboured for more than 30 years to lay the foundations of Indian self-government.

- 4) To carry on a continuous educative propaganda on the necessity of Home Rule for India.¹⁰

Another meeting held at Madras on 28th April passed a resolution supporting Mrs. Besant going to England on a deputation. At Adyar, even a women's branch of the National Home Rule League was formed and this branch requested her to represent their views on Home Rule to the government during her stay in England and to work for women's political freedom. Mrs. Mahadeva Sastri was the President of this branch and S. Bhaghirathi Ammal, the Secretary.

The new Congress leaders did not support it. The original Home Rule League became the Swarajya League with new objects, under the leadership of Gandhi. On 28 April 1920, Gandhi was elected President of the Home Rule League. The Home Rule branches in the various parts of the country communicated Gandhi's plans. In 1920, his statement published in this connection clearly declared his ideas. He said that he belonged to no party and wished to belong to none. Thereafter, the constitution of the League required it to help the Congress. But he did not consider the Congress as a party organization. As such he would not treat the All-India Home Rule League as a party organization in any sense of the term.¹¹ In 1920 Gandhi changed the name of the Home Rule League into Swaraj Sabha. But the Sabha never had any chance to function. Besant's new League never had a serious following. By the middle of 1919, she lost her old power and prestige. She continued the campaign for Home Rule within the empire, but it lost its momentum after 1929.

The absence of Tilak from India during these critical months was another cause for the decline of the Home Rule League. When Mrs. Besant lost her control over the Home Rulers, there was no other figure to give proper lead to them.

The controversy with Tilak in 1919-1920 led to the Home Rule Movement's isolation in politics. In England, she did not co-operate with Tilak, and was incised more towards the moderates. That invited the dislike of many of her Indian followers. After returning to India, she found that politically she became an absolute zero. A few followers supported her amendment to the resolution on the Reform Act, at the Amritsar Congress. Angrily, Besant started a campaign against Tilak, even insulting him by saying that he had very little regard for truth. But Tilak never took her attacks seriously. At the same time, V.J. Patel, another leader, made some serious allegations against Mrs. Besant through his speeches. The most important charges were working against the Congress while in Europe, not taking interest in the question of women's suffrage, and not allowing the members representing the Labour party in the House of Commons to move any amendments to the Reform Bill. G.S. Khaphade supported these charges. Against these charges, Mrs. Besant made an appeal to the All-India Congress Committee. Before the appeal was published, Patel went to England. Now Tilak decided to give an answer to Mrs. Besant and marshalled facts and figures. He repudiated every one of her charges, and this weakened her influence in the congress camp completely. Practically she was thrown out of the Congress. Later, Tilak wrote: "Though I admire her eloquence, learning and unflinching energy for work, I cannot bear for a moment the supremacy which she claims for her opinions in matters political."¹² Tilak later criticised Theosophy and Besant's

dependence on the Mahatmas. He even said that the Congress accepted no Mahatmas to rule over it except the Mahatma of the majority. This again made her unpopular.

The opposition of some of the Madras Congress leaders like Kasturiranga lyengar, Varadarajulu Naidu and V.O. Chidambaram Pillai was one of the causes for her decline. They travelled throughout Madras and delivered speeches against Mrs.Besant and her movement. They tried their best to defame her and eject her out of Indian politics. V.O.Chidambaram Pillai even went to the extent of using vulgar words against Mrs.Besant.¹³ Later, P.Varadarajulu Naidu became anti-Besant and his speeches were highly critical of Besant. Besant's articles against Naidu wounded his feelings. In one such article appeared in *New India*, she charged Naidu "as a man who had just completed a tour of criminal speeches in Tiruppur and other places inciting people to violence"¹⁴, a charge condemned by Rajaji. But with great vigour, he continued his work against her. Finally, Besant appealed to P.Kesava Pillai to check Naidu's anti-Besant activities. P.Kesava Pillai failed in his attempt. Naidu even considered Besant "a lady who has no patriotism for her own country but professes patriotism for a foreign country like India".¹⁵ The controversy between Naidu and Besant also smashed her power in the Madras Presidency.

The prominent leaders of the Ledague in Bombay wanted to remove Besant from the All India Home rule League. They cancelled the elections to the League held at Delhi in February 1919. As a protest, she returned to the Government, the priority certificates already issued to the of the All India Home Rule League's deputation to England, in execution of the Delhi resolution.¹⁶ Many blamed her for returning the certificates

without the permission of those who managed the affairs of the League. They viewed that she should at least have returned them to C.P. who lodged them under her keeping. Many turned against her and her resignation.

Following this, she promised to resign her leadership of the League after her election as the President and resigned accordingly, and her resignation was at once accepted. After her resignation, in a letter published in this press, she revealed that she was made to resign for her attitude towards the Satyagraha Movement. In this letter she concluded that the League would never find one who loved India more than she did.¹⁷ In a strongly worded letter to the press, C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyar accused Besant of publishing her letter without the prior permission of the council of the AIHRL. Her forced resignation was justified for two reasons: (1) The formation of a new League at Benares, without giving any notice to the older organization, and (2) the surrender of the priority certificates issued to the deputationists, to the Government.¹⁸

The disagreement between C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar and Annie Besant swelled from the middle of 1918. By 1919, her decision to take a different line as regards the policy of the Home Rule Movement marked the parting of the ways. C.P., who had always kept aloof from her religious activities, did not like her efforts to concoct a message she had received from Lord Maitreya and some other Mahatmas. On this point, he openly differed from her and decided to dissociate himself from Besant's League.¹⁹

The desertion of the Dwarakadas brothers to Gandhi's camp was a terrible blow to Mrs.Besant. In the opinion of Dr.Sukhbir, the delivery of public speeches and writings for the freedom of the country was not accompanied by any positive action. It remained only

a theoretical contribution. Mrs. Besant never planned any passive resistance or any other kind of agitation.²⁰ Even though she continued the struggle for Home Rule within the Empire, it lost its importance from 1929 onwards. Her National Home rule League did not live beyond 1927.

Thus the same people “who in 1917 shouted for her now yelled at her, tried to gag her in the Indian National Congress and on public platforms and tried to hound her out of the field of politics. She was howled down and even hooted and hissed”.²¹ Three years after her undisputed election as President of the Indian National Congress, she stood alone with merely five of her lieutenants.

End Notes

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