SECOND PHASE, 1905—1919

(RISE OF EXTREMISM OR RADICAL POLITICS)

The closing decade of the 19th century and early years of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of a new and younger group within the Indian National Congress which was critical of the ideology and method of the old leadership. These ‘angry young men’ advocated adoption of Swaraj as the goal of the Congress to be achieved by more self-reliant and independent methods. The new group came to be called the Extremist Party in contrast to the older one which began to be referred to as the Moderate Party.

The process of split in the Congress Party began when Lokamanya Tilak clashed with the Moderates (also called Sudharaks) over the question of Social Reforme. In July 1895 Tilak and his group ousted Ranade and Gokhale from the control of Poona Sarvajanik Sabha. Gokhale organised a separate political association called ‘The Deccan Sabha’. There was no love lost between Tilak and Gokhale. Tilak outmanoeuvred Gokhale from national politics over the ‘apology affair’ and Gokhale was labelled a Kacha reed i.e. spineless fellow who could be brow-beaten by the Government.

Tilak was made of a different stuff than most of the Congress leaders. He was forthright in criticism of the Government and its policies and was prepared to make sacrifices to get wrongs redressed. He was the first Congress leader to suffer several terms of imprisonment for the sake of country. As early as 1882, for criticising in strong language the treatment meted out to the Maharaja of Kolhapur, the Government tried and sentenced Tilak to four months imprisonment. Again, in 1897 Tilak was charged with ‘exciting feelings of disaffection to the British Government’ and sent to jail for 18 months’ R.I. At the Congress session at Amraoti (Dec. 1897) the supporters of Tilak made an attempt to push a resolution demanding the release of Tilak. The Moderate leaders who controlled the Congress did not permit it. Similarly, the Moderates foiled the attempt of martyrdom at the Congress session at Madras (Dec. 1898) and at the Lucknow session of the Congress (Dec. 1899). Tilak’s attempt to move a resolution condemning Governor
Sandhurst’s administration of Bombay was also blocked by the Moderate leaders on the plea that the matter was of provincial interest and could not be discussed at the National Congress. It was because of ideological differences with Tilak and his Group that the Moderate leaders were determined to keep Tilak and Congressmen of his line of thinking out of all positions of power and responsibility in the Congress and never gave him a chance to become the Congress President.

CAUSES FOR THE RISE OF EXTREMISM

The dissatisfaction with the working of the Congress had been expressed by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee when he described the Congressmen as “place-hunting politicians”. Aurobindo Ghose wrote a series of articles during 1893-94 entitled ‘New Lamps for Old’ wherein he described the congress as being out of contact with the ‘proletariat’, its character as ‘unnational’ and its work as ‘failure’ and added: “Yet more appalling was the general timidity of the congress, its glossing of hard names, its disinclinations to tell the direct truth, its fear of too deeply displeasing our masters”. He thought that the Congress was ‘dying of consumption.’

Among the cause and circumstances that helped in the growth of Extremism the following deserve special mention:

1. Recognition of the True Nature of British Rule. The efforts of the early nationalist leaders paved the way for the development of the next stage of the nationalist movement. By their painstaking studies and writings the early nationalist leaders had exposed the true nature of British Rule in India. They conclusively proved by elaborate statistical data that British rule and its policies were responsible for the economic ruin of India and her deepening poverty. Dadabhai Naoroji, for example, exposed the exploitative nature of British rule in India and proved that Britain was ‘bleeding India white’ and the constant ‘drain of wealth’ from India was directly responsible for India’s economic miseries. He characterized British rule in India as ‘a constant and continuous’ plunder. Nationalist leaders like Ananda Charlu, R.N. Mudholkar, D.E. Wacha, G.K. Gokhale, Madan Mohan Malaviya too exposed the exploitative nature of British rule in India. R.C. Dutt and G.V. Joshi, examined thread-bare the true nature of British Land Revenue policy while S.N. Banerjee explained at length the big gap
between the professed aims and practised policy of the Government of India in matters of recruitment to public service. The second session of the Congress (Calcutta, 1886) brought a resolution on increasing poverty of India and this resolution was affirmed year after year at subsequent Congress sessions. The ‘poverty verging on starvation’ of fifty millions of the population was described by the Congress as due to the most extravagant civil and military administration, mounting Home Charges, discriminating tariff policy (as evident from the frequent changes in the Cotton Duties and Sugar Duties etc.) shortsighted land revenue policy, indifference to technical and industrial development of India and exclusion of the sons of the soil from a share in the Higher and Minor services. Scholarly writings of nationalist leaders like Ranade’s Essays in Indian Economics (1898), Dadabhai Naoroji’s Indian Poverty and un-British Rule in India (1901), R.C. Dutt’s Economic History of India (1901) were the arsenals from which the new leaders shot their arrows at the British rule in India. Thus the Extremist ideology was a natural and logical next step in the development of Indian political thinking.

2. Reaction to Increasing Westernization. The new leadership felt the stranglehold of excessive Westernization in Indian life, thought and politics—Christianity and utilitarianism (visible in the teachings of Brahma Samaj) were a challenge to Indian religion and thought; the materialistic and individualistic Western civilization was eroding the values of Indian culture and civilization; and the merger of Indian national identity in the British Empire was being attempted.

The intellectual and emotional inspiration of the new leadership (Extremists) was Indian. They drew inspiration from Indian spiritual heritage; they appealed to heroes of Indian history and hoped to revive the glories of ancient India. The writing’s of Bankim, Vivekananda and Swami Dayanand appealed to their imagination. Though Bankim, in the beginning, had written in Bengali and on Bengal (Anandamath, published in 1880), by 1886 he had emerged an Indian and dreamed of a united India under the leadership of a superman like Lord Krishna (video Krishna Charitra Part 1, 1886). Bankim saw in Lord Krishna a Karamyogin i.e. a man of action who fought evil and stood for righteousness. He saw in Lord Krishna a good soldier, a clever strategist and a successful empire-builder, at Kurukshetra war Lord Krishna deliberately worked for the destruction of petty states and for the emergence of dharmaraja. The main mantra of Bankim, ‘Service
to the Motherland’ now acquired an added significance. Vivekanand a great Vedantist, gave new confidence to the Indians in India’s past heritage. He exhorted his compatriots to realize the value of their rich cultural heritage. He gave a feeling of self confidence to the youth and gave them a new mission—to conquer the West with India’s spirituality - Swami Dayanand exploded the myth of Western superiority. By referring to India’s rich civilization in the Vedic Ages, when Europe was steeped in ignorance, Dayanand gave a ‘new confidence’ to the Hindus and undermined the current belief in the superiority of the White races over the Brown or Black. Dayanand’s Political message was ‘India for the Indians’.

3. Dissatisfaction with the Achievement of the Congress. The younger elements within the Congress were dissatisfied with the achievements of the Congress during the first 15-20 years and were disgusted with the cold and reactionary attitude of the Government. They had lost all faith in the British sense of justice and fairplay. They were strongly critical of the methods of peaceful and, constitutional agitation, popularly nicknamed of 3 Ps—Petition, Prayer and Protest—and described these methods as ‘political mendicancy’. They became impatient with the slow, almost negligible achievements during the first fifteen years and advocated the adoption of European revolutionary methods to meet European imperialism.

On his return from England in 1905 Lala Lajpat Rai told his countrymen that the British democracy was too busy with its own affairs to do anything worthwhile for India, that the British press was not likely to champion their aspirations and that it was very difficult to get a hearing in England. He exhorted the people that if they really cared for their country, “they would have to strike, a blow for freedom themselves, and they should be prepared to give unmistakable proof of their earnestness.”

The younger generation of Congressmen (also called Nationalists or Extremists) had nothing but disgust for the Old Guard. According to them the only ‘political religion’ of the Congress was—loyalty to the Crown; their only ‘political aim’—to improve their chances of getting seats in the central / provincial legislatures or judicial services or acquiring titles etc.; their only ‘political activity’—excessive speech fying and attending Congress session towards December-end every year. The Moderate leaders were accused of limiting the
range of their activities for the benefit of the middle class intelligentsia and limiting the membership of the Congress to the middle class—for fear of losing their leadership if the masses joined the movement. Thus the Moderate leaders were accused ‘trading in the name of patriotism’. Tilak described the Congress as ‘a Congress of flatterers’ and’ Congress session ‘a holiday recreation’ while Lajpat Rai dubbed Congress meeting ‘the annual national festival of educated Indians.’ Both Tilak and Lajpat Rai believed that the Congress had constructive activity. Tilak affirmed. “We will not achieve any success in our labours if we croak once a year like a frog.”

4. Deteriorating Economic Condition of India. The economic miseries of the closing years of the 19th century provided a congenial atmosphere for the growth of extremism in Indian national activity. The terrible famines of 1896—97 and 1899—1900 coupled with the bubonic plague which broke out in Maharashtra took a heavy toll of life. The Government relief machinery was inadequate, slow-moving and badly organised. Tilak criticised the callous and over-bearing Government Plague Commissioners who caused more harm than good. He thundered that fear and anxiety was the cause of the disease and that “plague is less cruel to us than the official measures”. Riots broke out in the Deccan and the Government tried to stifle public opinion and suppress lawlessness. These events revealed to the Indians their plight of utter helplessness. Even recurring famines were attributed to the multinational policy followed by the Government. In his presidential speech in 1903 Lal Mohan Ghose referred to the Durbar of 1903 and said: “Nothing could seem more heartless than the spectacle of a great Government imposing the heaviest taxation upon the poorest population in the world, and then lavishly spending the money so obtained over fire-works and pompous pageants, while millions of the poor were dying of starvation”.

5. Contemporary International Influences. Events outside India exercised a powerful influence on the younger generation. The humiliating treatment meted out to Indians in British colonies, especially in South Africa, created anti-British feelings. Further, nationalist movements in Egypt, Persia, Turkey and Russia gave Indians new hopes and new aspirations. Indian nationalists gained more confidence and drew inspiration from Abyssinia’s repulsion of the Italian army (1896) and Japan’s thumping victory over Russia (1905). If Japan could become a great power
on its own, what but for the British grip—was holding India back. The spell of European invincibility was broken.

6. Curzon’s Reactionary Policies. Curzon’s seven-year rule in India which was full of missions, omissions and commissions created a sharp reaction in the Indian mind. Curzon refused to recognise that India was a ‘nation’ and characterized their activity as the ‘letting off of gas. He insulted Indian Intelligentsia and talked very low of Indian character; at the Calcutta University Convocation Curzon said, “Undoubtedly truth took a high place in the codes of the West before it had similarly honoured in the East, where craftiness and diplomatic wile have always been held in high repute.” The Calcutta Corporation Act, the official Secrets Act and the Indian Universities Act created great resentment in India. The Delhi Durbar held in 1903, coming at a time when India had not fully recovered from the devastating effects of the famine of 1899-1900 was interpreted as ‘a pompous pageant to a starving population.’

7. The Partition of Bengal. The worst and most-hated aspect of Curzon’s administration was the partition of Bengal into two provinces of Bengal and Eastern Bengal and Assam in 1905.

The partition forced in teeth of Bengali opposition and protests from the Indian National Congress (in 1904) showed the contemptuous disregard Curzon and the Home authorities had for Indian public opinion. It was abundantly clear that the partition of Bengal was a machiavellian devise to divide the people on the basis of religion and to put the Muslims against the Hindus. The utter disregard Curzon showed for public opinion gave ample evidence, if any evidence was still needed, that the Moderates’ policy of ‘petitions, prayers and protests’ was barren of results.

The Objectives and Methods of the Extremist Group

The new turn in Indian politics found expression in two forms—(i) The formation of the Extremist Group within the Congress, (ii) the growth of Terrorism or Revolutionary movement in the country at large.

Four prominent Congress leaders—Lokamanaya Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Aurobindo Ghose and Lala Lajpat Rai—defined the creed of the new group, gave
articulate form to its aspirations and guided its operations. Tilak gave the slogan to
the new group when he said “Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it.” Tilak
explained:

‘Swaraj or self-government is essential for the exercise of Swadharma. Without Swaraj there could be no social reform, no industrial progress, no useful
education and no fulfilment of the national life. That is what we seek, that is why
God has sent us into the world to fulfil Him.’

Aurobindo Ghose described “Swaraj as the fulfilment of the ancient life of
India under modern conditions, the return of the Satyuga of national greatness, the
resumption by her of her great role of the teacher and guide, self-liberation of the
people for final fulfilment of the Vedantic ideal in politics, this is the true Swaraj
for India.” Aurobindo emphasised: “Political freedom is the life breath of a nation;
to attempt social reform, educational reform, industrial expansion, the moral
improvement of the race without aiming first and foremost at political freedom, is
the very height of ignorance and futility”.

Lajpat Rai bemoaned: “A subject people has no soul, just as a slave can have
none…A man without a soul is a mere animal. A nation without a soul is only
dumb driven cattle.” Thus, Swaraj was the first requisite for a nation and reforms
or good government could be no substitute for it.

It should be clearly understood that the Nationalists (Extremists) demand for
Swaraj was a demand for “complete freedom from foreign control and full
independence to manage national affairs without any foreign restraints. The Swaraj
of the Moderate leaders was merely a demand for colonial self-government within
the Empire. The methods employed by the two groups (Moderates and Extremists)
were different in their tempo and approach. While the Moderates had infinite faith
in the efficacy of constitutional agitation and in appealing to the British sense of
justice and fairplay, in holding annual conferences, making speeches, passing
elaborate resolutions and sending deputations to England, the Extremists had no
faith in the ‘benevolence’ of the British public or parliament, nor were they
convinced of the efficacy of merely holding conferences. Tilak explained his
conviction, “We will not achieve any success in our labours if we croak once a
year like a frog.” The Nationalists also affirmed their faith in Passive Resistance,
mass agitation and strong will to suffer or make self-sacrifices. The new leadership sought to create a passionate love for liberty, accompanied by a spirit of sacrifices and a readiness to suffer for the cause of the country. They strove to root out from the people’s mind the omnipotence of the ruler and instead give them self-reliance and confidence in their own strength. B.C. Pal explained the strategy thus:

“Untrained in the crooked ways of civilised diplomacy, they had believed what their rulers had said, either of themselves or of their subjects, as gospel truth. They had been told that people of India were unfit to manage their own affairs and they believed it to be true. They had been told that the people were weak and the Government was strong. They had been told that India stood on a lower plane of humanity and England’s mission was to civilise the ‘semi-barbarous natives’. The Nationalists School took upon themselves to expose the hollowness of all these pretensions. They commenced to make what are called counter-passes in hypnotism, and at once woke the people to a sense of their own strength and an appreciation of their own culture.”

**The Extremist Programme of Action** The Extremists advocated Boycott of Foreign goods, use of Swadeshi goods, National Education and Passive Resistance.

Economic boycott of British-made goods and use of Swadeshi or home-made products was designed encourage Indian industries and provide the people with more opportunities for work and employment. Lala Lajpat Rai explained that the original idea behind boycott of British goods was to use pecuniary loss to the British manufacturers and thus secure their sympathy and help for getting the partition of Bengal annulled. Soon it was discovered that economic boycott might prove a powerful weapon against economic exploitation by the foreigners. Further, it proved a most, effective weapon for injuring British interests in India. Besides, it was believed, the newly-rising Indian manufacturing class would liberally provide funds for the Congress and thus strengthen it. Lajpat Rai summed up: “We desire to turn our faces away from Government House and turn them to huts of the people. This is the psychology, this is the ethics, and this is the spiritual significance of the boycott movement.”
A National Scheme of Education was to replace the boycott of Government-controlled universities and colleges. The Extremists tried to enlist the students in their service. When the Government threatened to take disciplinary action against the students, the national leaders advocated national universities independent of Government control. Guroodas Banerjee headed the Bengal Council of National Education. Bengal National Collage was established at Calcutta and a large number of national schools sprang up in East Bengal. In Madras the Pachaiappa National College was set up. In the Panjab the D.A.V. movement made considerable headway.

Tilak preached non-cooperation. In 1902 at Poona he said, “You must realise that you are a great factor in the power with which the administration of India is controlled. You are yourselves the great lubricants which enable the gigantic machinery to work so smoothly. Though down-trodden and neglected, you must be conscious of your power of making the administration impossible if you but choose to make it.”

The Extremists also encouraged co-operative organisations. Voluntary associations were set up for rural sanitation, preventive police duties, regulation of fairs and pilgrim gatherings for providing relief during famines and other national calamities. Arbitration Committees were set up to decide civil and non-cognizable disputes. The object of the co-operative movement was explained by B.C. Pal thus:

“To create in the first place a strong civic sentiment in the people with the help of cooperative organisations for the furtherance of the common good, and thus to train them gradually for the longer and heavier responsibilities of free citizenship, and in the next place to cover the whole country with a network of active political organisations which would place the leaders in direct and living touch with the people, and enable them to bring from time to time, the irresistible pressure of organised public opinion to bear upon the government, helping thereby the gradual expansion of popular rights.”

Assessment of Extremism In any assessment of what popularly known as ‘extremist’ thought and politics one must not lose sight of the fact, that it was not a consistent political philosophy. Advocates of extremism ranged from active revolutionarise at one end to secret sympathizers of revolutionary activities, to
those who were opposed to all violent methods at the other end. Further, its top leaders—Aurobindo, Tilak, Pal and Lajpat Rai—differed in their emphasis on political ideals and practical course of action. Even the views of individual leaders underwent change with changing circumstances. For example, Tilak’s conception of ‘Swaraj’ meant some sort of self-government while Aurobindo conceived of ‘Swaraj’ as ‘complete independence’ from foreign rule, Further, Tilak’s revolutionary fervour somewhat mellowed towards the end of his political career and he showed signs of cooperation with the government, while Aurobindo’s concept of ‘complete independence’ was transformed into ‘human unity’ and ‘world union’ in his later career. However, it must be stated that all extremist leaders were one in realising the evils of foreign rule and in demanding some degree of independence from colonial stranglehold. Extremism was, in fact, an attitude of mind and a practical strategy to meet a particular situation.

The extremists talked of democracy, constitutionalism and progress and talked of broadening the social base of the national movement. Most of them represented the urban lower middle class and aimed at spreading the Congress message to the people. They spoke, wrote and edited newspapers in vernacular languages and thus succeeded in conveying their message to a larger audience.

The extremists well understood and highlighted the negative role of Britain in India. They saw clearly the clash of interest between the British rulers and Indian national interests. Thus the main focus of their politics was (a) to get a larger share for Indians in the administration of their country and (b) to end Britain’s economic exploitation of India. They also realised that these objectives could not be realised without pressure tactics and some sort of direct action. Hence the Moderates philosophy of co-operation gave place to non-cooperation and resistance to unjust acts of the government. Thus the Extremists gave new slogans to the Indian nationalist movement—non-cooperation, passive resistance, mass agitation, self-reliance, discipline of suffering etc. The Extremists transformed patriotism from ‘an academic pastime’ to ‘service and suffering for the nation’.

Socially speaking, the rise of the Extremist ideology proved to be a reactionary development. In contrast to the Moderates (who were modernists and enlightened in matters of social reform) the Extremists became revivalists and obscurantist in matters of social reforms. Tilak’s opposition (for whatever reasons)
to the Age of Consent Bill (which proposed to raise the age of consummation marriage for girls from 10 to 12 years), his association with Anti-Cow-Killing societies, his organisation of the Ganesh Festival (1893) as a national festival projects him as the leader of Hindu orthodoxy and a Hindu nationalism. Similarly, Lala Lajpat Rai and B .C. Pal, though ardent advocates of social reform spoke of Hindu nation and need for protection of Hindu interests at political levels. Though the revivalist dimension of Extremist politics was mainly directed against the foreign rulers, it developed an unhealthy inter-relationship between religion and politics apart from encouraging communal and Muslim separatism.

The policy of the Extremists yielded good dividends. The partition of Bengal was annulled in 1911 which gave a new self-confidence and self-assurance to Indian nationalists. The aim of ‘Swaraj’ though denied by Lord Morley was no longer looked upon as a revolutionary demand and the shock of the First World War was required to compel the British Government to Proclaim self-government institutions as the goal of constitutional development in India.