

18. HOME RULE LEAGUES

- During the First World War, the nationalist feelings grew stronger, which outburst into rise of two Home Rule Leagues in India. One was founded by Tilak at Poona and the other by Mrs. Annie Besant at Madras.
- Mrs. Annie Besant was one of the firebrand politicians of the national movement. She was one of the leaders of the Theosophical movement and had adopted India as her home and worked for its social, educational and religious regeneration. She was disillusioned with the tone of the moderates.
- Like a true patriot, she wanted to do something tangible and concrete for the political liberation of India. It was with this aim in view that she organized the Home Rule Movement.
- Annie Besant was inspired by the Irish Home Rule Movement. In the Congress session of 1915, she proposed that a similar movement should be started in India. Bal Gangadhar Tilak and other extremists supported the move whole-heartedly. They felt that under the Moderates, the Congress organization had become lifeless and that it should be made more vigorous so as to win over mass sympathy.
- Tilak and Mrs. Annie Besant decided to put a new life in the national movement of India. They started two separate Home Rule Leagues to carry on propaganda all over the country in favour of the demand for the grant of Home Rule after the First World War. Tilak set up the Home Rule League in December 1915. Its headquarters were at Poona. Annie Besant set up a similar Home Rule League in September 1916. Its headquarters were at Adyar near Madras.
- The leaders of the Home Rule Movement followed constitutional means to achieve their aim. They shunned violent and revolutionary methods because they did not like to embarrass the British Government during the war.
- Tilak's activities were confined to Bombay Presidency and the Central province while Annie Besant popularized this movement in the rest of India. The branches of the league were set up all over the country.
- Tilak made a whirlwind tour of the country in 1916 and in his speeches he said, "Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it." He said that Home Rule was the only cure of India's political ills and the grievances of the Indians. He preached the idea of Home Rule through his two newspapers - Kesari and Maratha.
- Annie Besant also toured the country and created a lot of enthusiasm among the people for the cause of Home Rule. She carried on the propaganda in favour of it in the newspapers named New India and Commonwealth.
- The movement reached its peak in 1917. The Government got panicky at the activities of the Home Rule Movement and it thought of suppressing it with a heavy hand. The Government made use of Defence of India Act to curb the activities of the agitators. Students were prohibited from attending Home Rule meetings.
- Tilak was prosecuted for his fiery and exciting speeches and his entry in Punjab and Delhi was banned. Important leaders of the movement including Annie Besant were interned.
- Various restrictions were imposed on the press by using the Indian Press Act of 1910. But the repressive policy followed by the Government only added fuel to the fire. Strikes, agitation and protest meetings were organized throughout the country.
- The government realized the seriousness of the demonstrations that broke out in support of the Home Rule League. The Indians seemed to be prepared to pay any price to achieve the Home Rule. Therefore, to appease the nationalists, the Secretary of State for India made a declaration on August 20, 1917 announcing the British policy towards India.
- As a result, the Home Rule Movement died out gradually.

