

## 16. EARLY NATIONALISTS AND MILITANT NATIONALISTS

A fundamental difference existed between the policy and programmes of the early nationalists and the militant nationalists. It is essentially due to this that the first group of nationalists (early nationalists) are described as the 'moderates', and the second group (militant nationalists) as the 'extremists' and the consequent periodisation of the Indian nationalist movement into the moderates era (1885-1905), the extremist era (1905-1919) and the Gandhian era (1919-1947). Though much can be said in favour of this division of the Indian nationalist movement, the basic continuities and changes involved in this periodisation are subject to diverse opinions. As a matter of fact, there has existed a general tendency to overlook some of the basic continuities from the early nationalist or the so called moderate era to the militant nationalist era or the extremist era. To see discontinuities or changes where none existed, and to over emphasize or wrongly interpret the change that did occur.

### THE MODERATES

The moderates did not advocate a direct struggle for the political emancipation of the country, instead, they worked towards a number of political achievements. The most important of these activities were:

- completion of the process of unifying Indian people into a nation,
- creation of a national political platform,
- exposing the exploitative character of British imperialism,
- introduction of modern politics,
- creation of a feeling of self-confidence among Indians,
- promotion of the growth of a modern capitalist economy in India, etc.

They were fully aware of the fact that India was a nation in making and Indian nationhood was gradually coming into being and could not, therefore, be taken for granted. They were also aware that the political leaders had to constantly work for the development and consolidation of the feeling of national unity irrespective of region, caste or religion. The economic and political demands of the moderates were formulated

with a view to unite the Indian people on the basis of common economic and political programme.

### Moderates' Programme

Moderates desired to create a national political platform on which all Indians belonging to different regions, religions and social classes could agree and which could serve as the basis for all-India political activity whose basic aim was not just good government, but democratic self government. The Indian National Congress, for instance, was established apart from other reasons with the hope to provide a national political platform and thus promote close contact and friendly relations among active nationalists from different parts of the country.

From the beginning the moderates believed that India should eventually move towards democratic self-government. But they did not demand immediate fulfillment of this goal. Instead, they suggested a gradual approach towards it. Their immediate political demands were extremely moderate. Initially, they demanded that Indians should be given a large share in the government by expanding and reforming the existing legislative Councils. They also demanded the widening of the powers of the councils and an increase in the powers of the members who were to be the elected representatives of the people. The Indian Councils Acts of 1892 and 1909 were passed mainly due to the efforts of the moderates, though these Acts did not secure much for the Indians. But by the turn of the 19th century, the moderates made good progress in their political demands. Their demands were no longer confined to petty reforms but were extended to full self-government, including full Indian control over all legislation and finances, on the model of the self-government colonies of Canada and Australia. This demand was initially made by Dadabhai Naoraji in 1904 and later by Gokhale in 1905.

**Economic Critique:** Exposing the exploitative character of British imperialism and spreading their understanding of the British rule in India among the people was another important item on the agenda of the moderates. They took note of all the three forms of contemporary economic exploitation, namely, through trade, industry and finance. Realizing that the essence



of British imperialism lay into subordination of the Indian economy to that of Britain, they strongly opposed the British attempts to develop in India the basic characteristics of the economy, viz., the transformation of India into a supplier of raw materials, a market for British manufacturers and a field of investment for capital. Moreover, in every sphere of economic life they advocated the lessening and even severance of India's economic dependence on England.

**Agitations:** Besides, they organized many agitations against all the important official economic policies based on the colonial structure. For instance, they organized a powerful all-India agitation against the abandonment of tariff duties on imports from 1857 to 1880 and against the imposition of cotton excise duties in 1849-96. This agitation played a major role in arousing country-wide national feelings and in educating the people regarding the real aims and purpose of British rule in India. Thus, all the efforts of the moderates finally resulted in the growth of an all-India opinion that the British were exploiting India and thus leading to its impoverishment, economic backwardness and under development.

**Sovereignty:** Another important programme of the moderates was the introduction of modern politics based on the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people and on the notion that politics is not the preserve of the ruling class only. They formed several political associations, including the Indian National Congress, to spread political education and to initiate political work in the country. This work was to be based on new political ideas, a new intellectual perception of reality, new socio-economic and political objectives, new forces of struggle and resistance and new techniques of political organization. It was to represent a turning point in ideology, policy, organization and leadership.

**Capitalism:** They also wanted to promote the growth of modern capitalist economy in India. They rightly believed that the British economic policies were responsible for bringing about the ruin of India's traditional handicraft industries and for obstructing the development of modern industries. Most of them opposed the large scale import of foreign capital for investment in the Indian railways, plantations and industries on the ground that it would lead to the suppression of Indian capitalists and a further increase

in the hold of the British over India's economy and polity.

**Remedy:** The chief remedy they suggested for the removal of poverty was the modernization of Indian life in all fields and, in particular, the development of modern industries, which are essential for the proper growth of a capitalist economy. But rapid industrialization required active state assistance and a policy of tariff protection. So, they urged the British government to aid Indian industries through financial subsidies, loans and guarantees through state-aided or controlled banks, by borrowing abroad and lending in India, by pioneering state-owned industries in fields such as steel and mining which Indian capitalists were too weak to enter, but which were essential for industrial development, by collecting and disseminating industrial and commercial information and by promoting technical education.

**Constraints:** The task was difficult for Moderates since Indians were utterly unfamiliar with modern politics. Even the notion that people could organize themselves politically in opposition to their rulers was a novel one. Consequently their work proceeded rather slowly and it took more than half a century to bring the common people within the fold of modern politics.

## THE EXTERMISTS

The programmes of the militant nationalist or the extremists were almost similar to those of the moderates. Their programmes were built on their predecessors' programmes and their i.e., the moderates concrete exposure of the character of the British rule in India. But they differed from the latter in one important respect, i.e., the extremists demanded complete independence, while the moderates were content with democratic self-government as in the colonies of Australia and Canada.

However, this difference in their political goals was not substantial as the moderates were as much interested in the question of political power as the extremists. In fact, Tilak himself repeatedly pointed out that there were no real difference between him and the moderates regarding the goals of the national movement. The moderates did not strive for complete independence mainly because of the feeling that the time was not yet ripe for it. It is interesting to note here that even Tilak had no hesitation in going back time



and again from the demand for complete independence to dominion status.

Thus, the basis difference between the early nationalist and the militant nationalists did not lie in their programme or in a different definition of the nationalist political goal. The real difference, if there was any, lay in their policies or the methods of struggle to achieve the agreed goals. In other words, the difference was not in the programmes or what was to be done, but in the policies or how it was to be done.

#### **What were the Extremists' policies?**

Some of the extremists deviated from the moderate method of peaceful and bloodless struggle in theory. In practice, however they too operated within its basic framework. The tenet was to serve as a basic guarantee to the propertied class that they would at no time be faced with a situation in which their interests might be put in jeopardy even temporarily. The only difference between the moderates and the extremists in this matter was in their attitude towards non-violence. It was a matter of personal conviction for most of the moderates though practical considerations too played an important role in determining their attitude towards non-violence. To the extremists, it was mostly a practical expedient. The extremists, therefore, did not condemn violence as such, though they themselves did not resort to violent methods.

More importantly, the extremists advocated the organization of mass struggle against British imperialism. This was, in fact, the most important and, perhaps the only significant difference between the policies of the extremists and those of the moderates. Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai and other extremists had infinite faith in the power of the masses for action and in the Indian people's capacity to bear the strain of a prolonged political struggle against imperialism. They believed that suppression by the government would not throttle the mass movement. It would instead, educate the people, arouse them further, strengthen their resolve to overthrow imperialism and lead to a heightened political struggle. They therefore, advocated the organization of a mass struggle against imperialism as a first step in making the masses politically active. They talked of bridging the gulf between the educated people and the masses though not all of them.

**Different Concept:** The extremists evolved a higher concept of the forms of political struggle in order to improve the techniques of political action. In other words, the extremists apart from employing the moderate forms of agitation gave a call for passive resistance, to cooperate with the government and to boycott, government service, government courts and government schools and colleges. But they were unable to implement this concept fully and as a result, not transcend agitation (the form adopted by the moderates,) though their agitation was much more militant and effective than that of the moderates because the former had a broader base than the latter.

**P-C-P strategy:** The extremists too like the moderates, had adopted the P-C-P (pressure-compromise-pressure) strategy in order to attain completed independence. Because the extremists gave several calls for immediate independence, it is easy to be misled into thinking that their strategic approach was deferent. In fact, such calls were part of the same overall strategy. Every such call was succeeded by a set of immediate demands which had little direct relation to the demand for immediate and complete independence. So what changed after 1905 was not the basic strategy of P-C-P. The extremists were not working for the direct overthrow of British rule. They too emphasized the technique of negotiations backed by controlled mass action.

**Different Mode:** The extremists did, however, change the mode of persuasion or putting pressure. They put greater mass pressure behind demands. They shifted from intellectuals to the masses to a significant extent; and from memorials, petitions and resolutions; to processions, demonstration and large mass movements. The sanctions behind their demand were different and far stronger. But the political advance was still to occur by stages and through compromise, that is, ultimately through British consent and action.

**Short-comings:** While recognizing this different between the moderate and the extremist eras; we should also make a distinction between hope and the fulfillment. For one even at the height of the extremist movement in Bengal, the peasantry was not mobilized. The alienation between the educated extremist political workers and the masses was not lessened to any significant extent. In fact, the extremists did not even know how to go about the task. In practice what they



succeeded in doing was to spread the movement deeper among the lower middle classes who were already brought within the ambit of nationalism in the moderate era.

**Failure:** The failure of the extremists inevitably led to revolutionary terrorism. Since most of the extremist leaders had wrongly defined their differences

with the moderates (they had concentrated on 'action' and sacrifices rather than on the need to evolve a different type of politics), the young men brought upon an ideology of 'action' and sacrifice were soon disenchanted with militant agitation, demanded 'action' and took recourse to individual terrorism.

