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Gandhi and Bengal Politics 1920 - 1940

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Gandhi and Bengal Politics 1920 - 1940

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Abstract- Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi entered nationalist politics in 1920 and changed the character of the national movement completely. Before 1920, Bengal politics was mainly dominated by the activities of the revolutionaries and the politics within Congress. Anushilan Samity and Yugantar were the two main revolutionary groups in Bengal at the beginning of twentieth century. Their main intention was to liberate their motherland through violent struggle. The Congress leaders as well as the revolutionaries of Bengal were not at all ready to accept Gandhi and his doctrine of non-violence. Gandhi too had no sympathy for the revolutionaries, as their method was against his principle of non-violence. C R Das and Subhas Chandra Bose of Bengal Congress gave stiff opposition to Gandhi. Eventually, the death of C R Das and the imprisonment of Bose at Mandalay prison, Burma saw the emergence of *Gandhiites* like J M Sengupta through whom gradually the control of Bengal Congress went into the hands of Gandhi. The final showdown between Gandhi and Bose came in 1939 when Bose was compelled to resign as Congress President at Tripuri. Disunity within the Left wingers, non-cooperation from the Congress leaders forced Bose to leave the country to liberate his motherland with foreign help.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in 1920 was one of the most epoch-making events that changed the course of the Indian National Movement, forever. This paper aims to discuss the early Congress, Bengal politics at the eve of Gandhi's entry into nationalist politics, the role of the revolutionaries and their reluctance to accept M.K. Gandhi as their leader. Further, it will also try to look into the different aspects of Bengal politics like the emergence of leaders like C. R. Das, Subhas Chandra Bose, and their conflict with Gandhi; the Indian National Congress and the decline of the Bengali political identity in national politics by 1940 and the emergence of a new group of followers of Gandhi in Bengal.

II. THE EARLY CONGRESS

Charles E. Trevelyan, a distinguished British Civil Servant in India pointed out in a small pamphlet written in 1838, that there were two models of political current in India at that time. According to him, one model named as the native or indigenous model, involved both the Hindus and Muslims constantly hatching plots to oust the British from India. The other

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model had been introduced into India through Western education, where a generation growing up in the metropolitan towns of India, hoped to revive India through constitutional means and ultimately attain self government.

Before Gandhi's rise, Bengal politics had two main features - (1) the rise of the revolutionaries and (2) the politics in the Congress. During the early years of the 1930's there were two currents of political movements--- 1) was the mass movement organized by the Congress, generally on the basis of non-violence. The other was a current of violent revolutionary activities organized by secret revolutionary groups.

a) *The rise of the revolutionaries*

Non-violence was unthinkable to the Bengalis. They had been inherent worshippers of Shakti for generations, so it was now difficult for them to accept non-violence. To quote a staunch Gandhian Nripendra Chandra Banerjee "it was hard for a Bengali Shakta to follow Gandhi." However, this Shakta mentality of the Bengalees is much too exaggerated. Some revolutionaries were not even ready to accept non-violence as a temporary measure. The two main revolutionary groups in Bengal were the Anushilan Samiti and the Yugantar group. The Yugantar and the Anushilan groups wanted to join the Congress to transform it into a violent revolutionary organization. But when they realized that this would not materialize some of them like the Yugantar group declared open revolt against non-violence. Arun Chandra Guha and Hari Kumar Chakravarti began publishing a weekly called 'Swadhinata' which became a powerful vehicle of violence determined to throw out all the misconceptions about non-violence. The weekly admitted, that in 1921-22, they had been misled by Congress, but in the future movements, they would answer violence with violence. The revolutionaries of Bengal were not terrorists nor were they anarchists. Their sole aim was to liberate their motherland from the clutches of the British and establish a National government. The ineffectiveness of the Indian National Congress dominated for a long time by the moderates, believed that the British government would by stages confer on India the benefits of constitutional rights and representative government. The activities of the revolutionaries covered a period of nearly 70 years (1879 - 1946). The revolutionaries in Bengal generally came from the Hindu educated middle class who were greatly influenced by the teachings of Bankim Chandra and Swami Vivekananda. The Anushilan Samity was the

pioneer revolutionary organization in Bengal. However, the revolutionaries made no attempt to mobilize public opinion in support of their activities. Unlike the leaders of Indian National Congress, they did nothing to organize the workers and the peasants to start a mass movement against the British government.

b) *The politics in the Congress*

Before 1921, the Congress leadership consisted of a group of men who got western education, accepted western culture and became anglicized. Their demands were only to plead for self government as enjoyed by self governing members of the British Empire and participation by them in the rights and responsibilities of the Empire on equal terms with those members. The intention of the Indian National Congress was to achieve these by constitutional means, by bringing about a steady reform of the prevailing administration system and by promoting national unity. Most of the members of the Indian National Congress at that time considered politics as a pastime and not their only aim of life. They were so indifferent that they did not care to attend the annual session of the Congress if they were busy in their personal work. Recalling his dissatisfaction with the early Congress, Mahatma Gandhi wrote in his autobiography "The Congress would meet three days every year and then go to sleep."

The revolutionaries however remained outside Congress. Some of them expressed utter contempt for the Congress. In his autobiography Damodar Hari Chapekar observed "*Englishmen know that the National Congress means eating, drinking, recreation and a profusion of tall talk and nothing more.....*"

Tilak and the extremists were largely responsible for the changes in the goals, methods and organizational structure of the Congress. It was they who constantly pressurized the Congress to move from the demand for constitutional reforms to the demand for Swaraj. Instead of cooperating with the British, the Congress began to oppose the alien rulers. The motto of the Congress now became self-help and not political mendicancy.

Bengal occupied a predominant place in nationalist politics during the first 32 years of the Indian National Congress during which nine Bengalis were Presidents of the Congress. During the Swadeshi Movement Bengal was at the center of politics. But it may be noted here that it did not lead to any mass mobilization as such. Within the Bengal Congress there were two factions--- one, who opposed Gandhi but still worked with him and the second who were ideologically committed to Gandhi. Among the former mention must be made of men like Subhas Chandra Bose and C.R. Das while among the latter there were Dr. B.C. Roy, Prafulla Ghose and others.

III. OPPOSITION FROM BENGAL

Gandhi faced opposition from the leaders in Bengal before starting the non-cooperation movement in 1921. Bengal's C. R. Das aspired for national leadership and so his followers saw in Gandhi a rival to their leader. The Bengali leaders were particularly apprehensive about Gandhi when he told a meeting of Muslims early 1920 "you must accept my conditions, you must accept dictatorship and the discipline of martial law." This was somewhat outside the purview of the Indian nationalists. Formerly the great Congress leaders like Naoroji, Lajpat Rai, Tilak, Gokhale had worked in alliance with each other with the understanding that they would not interfere in each other's regional activities. But Gandhi's aim was to put his national plan above all kind of regional differences.

The leaders of Bengal were not at all ready to accept the personal dictatorship of Gandhi in the nationalist movement. "Blind reverence for Gandhiji's leadership" wrote Bipin Chandra "would kill people's freedom of thought and would paralyze by the deadweight of unreasoning reverence their individual conscience."

Psychologically also the Bengali mind differed. Gandhi coming from a Gujarati trading caste had been strongly influenced by Vaishnavism and Jainism and was firm in applying the principle of non-violence (Ahimsa) to politics. He advocated self-abasement and self-denial. The Bengali leaders were not ready to accept this. They had been familiar with the writings of Bankim Ch. Chatterjee, Swami Vivekananda who advocated self-assertion.

Moreover, the Bengal leaders were unwilling to non-cooperation as it was similar to the Anti-partition agitation. Before the non-cooperation movement began Surendranath Banerjee wrote "*we were non-cooperators before the rest of India thought of it*". The effects of the anti-partition agitation had been serious in Bengal as it faced the repression and retaliation of the government. Bengalis were not ready to repeat such a movement again and were in a way opposed to non-cooperation as they feared that mass agitation would lead to violence and that violence against the British would lead to violence against themselves, the socially elite and privileged class.

Among all eminent Congressmen, Gandhi only had the support of Motilal Nehru. All others like C. R. Das, B. C. Pal, Motilal Ghosh were all opposed to the idea of non-cooperation. However, C. R. Das came to a settlement with Gandhi on the basis of an agreement. The agreement included C. R. Das's terms such as making 'Swaraj' or self-rule as the goal of the impending struggle in addition to the narrow and sectarian goals of the redressal of Punjab and Khilafat wrongs as suggested by Gandhi. In addition, mobilization of labor and peasantry under Congress leadership was another

among Das's terms. C. R. Das had opposed the program of boycott of the councils. Gandhi agreed to drop for the time being the program of council boycott. Under these conditions C. R. Das agreed to support the program of non-cooperation. Gandhi's promise of 'Swaraj' to the Bengali youth won them over to the non-cooperation movement within a year. Thus in 1920 for the first time the Indian National Congress adopted the program of non-cooperation involving all sections of the people.

Among the revolutionaries, the Anushilan Samity decided to oppose the non-cooperation movement but only some of its members joined C. R. Das. They gave Gandhi one year's chance for carrying on a non-violent struggle. Gandhi knew that he would not be able to carry out the non-violent struggle successfully without the co-operation of the powerful Bengalis.

Ultimately the main debate on non-cooperation took place in the Subjects Committee when Bipin Chandra Pal's resolution for an amendment regarding delaying the implementation of the non-cooperation came up in September, 1920. It was rejected and Gandhi's resolution was supported by a large majority. C. R. Das as the leader of the Bengal politicians had no option but to accept Gandhi's program of non-cooperation.

However, with the establishment of the Swaraj Party by C. R. Das, the non-cooperation movement soon showed a slow withdrawal. The Swaraj Party soon acquired complete control over the Congress machinery, so that it seemed that the Congress in Bengal was the Swaraj Party. C. R. Das with his able leadership qualities was able to bring under the Congress the revolutionaries and separatist Muslims. The unity of all these people was essential for a struggle against the strong imperialist British power. Das's proposal of alliance with the Muslims would have yielded a solid foundation in the national interest. But due to some members of the Congress working committee Das's proposal was rejected. However, in later years the Congress had no other option but to grant separate electorates to the Muslims.

a) *Subhas Bose and C R Das*

Soon after he returned from England Subhas Bose started working with Deshbandhu for the freedom of India. Letters written by Bose to C.R. Das from England showed his desire to give up the lucrative job with the British Administration and serve his motherland. Das welcomed him as he was facing a crisis of sincere workers for his party.

Even before he joined the National Movement, Bose was very clear about his aims and plan of work. His letters to C.R. Das reflected his ideas about the steps the Congress should take to attain freedom. He wanted that the Congress should adopt definite policies

about labor, factory legislation, vagrancy and poor relief. The most significant suggestion made by Bose was the immediate framing of the Constitution of India. Soon after his arrival, Bose was appointed as the Secretary of the Publicity Board under the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC). In 1923, the Swaraj Party was formed by Deshbandhu and Bose became the ablest of his followers. It was very unfortunate that Deshbandhu met with an untimely death in 1925. A vacuum was created in Bengal Politics with the death of Deshbandhu and the absence of Bose (he was imprisoned by the British Government and was at Mandalay prison, Burma).

b) *The Bengal Congress and Gandhi*

The responsibility of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) passed on to J.M. Sengupta under Gandhi's direction, though Bengal was dissatisfied with it. Since Gandhi had faced opposition from Deshbandhu in the latter half of 1920, so he wanted a leader who would act according to his wishes. In November 1927 Bose was released and elected as the President of the BPCC. This started the differences between the BPCC and the Congress High Command. The immediate cause of the feud was regarding the goal of the Indian National Congress. In the words of R.C. Majumdar, "*like the pendulum of a clock Gandhi's interpretation of Swaraj was moving between Dominion Status and Complete Independence.*"

Subhas Bose and Gandhi had met in July 1921. However, the two did not click, as their chemistry was different. Actually Subhas did not believe in non-violence as a practical policy. He considered armed struggle with foreign help the only effective method of winning freedom. He firmly believed that the 2nd World War would help India to get back her freedom. To Gandhi, Subhas was a rebel. At the Calcutta Congress of 1928 he had defied Gandhi which so far nobody had done before him. According to Subhas "the success of the Mahatma had been due to the failure of constitutionalism on the one hand and armed struggle on the other."

IV. GANDHI'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE REVOLUTIONARIES

The Gandhi- Irwin Pact in 1931 played a crucial role in estranging the revolutionaries from the Congress. One of the terms of the Pact was the release of the 'political prisoners'. By 'political prisoners' the revolutionaries meant themselves along with the non-violent satyagrahis. They wanted the commutation of the sentence on Bhagat Singh who was under capital punishment, and secondly the release of the Garhwali soldiers who had been imprisoned for disobeying the order of firing on non-violent demonstrators in Peshwar. When the terms of the Pact came to be known it was found that only the prisoners arrested during the Civil

Disobedience were released. The revolutionaries were dismayed at the turn of events. Throughout the Civil Disobedience Movement they carried out a parallel movement in Bengal. By 1925, Gandhi's position within the Congress became more secure. He opposed and vehemently denounced the activities of the revolutionaries. This made the British government relieved because the Bengal revolutionaries were a common enemy for both the government as well as the policy of non-violence of Gandhi. As a result, by the 1930's the Bengal revolutionaries who supported Gandhi during the non-cooperation movement became his arch enemies. Thus they were alienated completely. It was Gandhi's indifferent and unsympathetic attitude towards the revolutionaries of Bengal that they started distrusting him and his policy of non-violence.

V. CONFLICT BETWEEN GANDHI AND SUBHAS BOSE

In January 1939 there was conflict between Gandhi and Subhas regarding the presidency of the Congress. Bose had held this office in 1938 and was re-elected in 1939 January against Gandhi's opposition. This was an unhappy episode in which Gandhi refused to give a second term to Subhas Bose as the Congress President. Dr. P. Sitaramayya was put up against Bose. Bose got 1580 votes whereas his opponent got 1377 votes. Bose won the election comfortably but it disturbed the political balance for some time and led to schism and conflict within the Congress. On his victory Gandhi made the issue a matter of his own personal prestige by declaring Sitaramayya's defeat to be 'more mine than his' (Gandhi's statement on 31st January, 1939). In March 1939, at the annual session of the Congress, Subhas Bose proposed that the Congress should immediately send an ultimatum to the British Government, demanding Independence within six months and the country should prepare for a national struggle at the same time. This proposal was rejected by the Gandhi wing within Congress. Unfortunately, on every occasion the new Congress President was opposed. It became impossible for him to function as the President of the Congress. He also came to know that several senior Congress leaders were seriously considering the acceptance of the federation scheme of the India Act, 1935. On 22nd February, 1939, 13 members out of the 15 members of the old Working Committee resigned, on the ground that Subhas had publicly criticized them. Unfortunately, Bose was deprived of using his prerogative as Congress President to choose his own working committee members. As the Congress Working Committee could not be formed according to the wishes of Bose he tried to negotiate with Gandhi when the AICC met at Calcutta in April 29th, 1938. But Gandhi refused to come to terms. Gandhi was also not willing to accept a person who was so opposed

to his ideas. Bose declared that '*he considered his victory meaningless if he failed to win the confidence of India's greatest man*'. All members of the Working Committee except two were persuaded to refuse to serve Bose. Bose had no other alternative but to resign from his post as President of AICC. The Congress leaders felt that Gandhi was indispensable for any kind of mass movement in India. So though differing with Gandhi on several occasions they gave their allegiance to Gandhi. In February, 1939 a significant resolution known as "the Pant Resolution" was passed in Congress Working Committee meeting at Tripuri which asserted that "the Congress executive should command his (Gandhi's) implicit confidence" and also "requests the President to nominate the Working Committee in accordance with the wishes of Gandhi". Though the supporters of Bose vehemently opposed the resolution, it became clear that the majority of the Congress leaders did not want to place anyone in Gandhi's position. Bose's successor as President was Rajendra Prasad, who gave the Bengal seats on the Congress executive to the factions opposing Bose. On 3rd May, 1939 Bose's reply was the formation of the Forward Bloc inside the Congress to bring together all radical and anti-imperialist progressive elements in the country, and for organizing protest demonstrations against AICC decisions. Bose's aim of forming the Forward Bloc was that 'in case of a conflict with Gandhi he would be able to fight more effectively' and he hoped to win over the Congress one day. In June, 1939 two resolutions were passed by the AICC – firstly no Congressman should start Satyagraha without the approval of the Working Committee and secondly the Provincial Congress Committees (PCC) should not interfere with the working of the ministries under the control of the Working Committee. On 9th July, 1939 an All India Protest Day was organized by Bose against these two resolutions. This was regarded as a direct defiance of the Congress and at the next meeting of the Working Committee held in August, 1939 the members expressed their displeasure about Bose's behavior. It was Gandhi himself, who drafted the resolution which disqualified Bose as President of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) for three years from August, 1939. Later in January 1940, Gandhi wrote to C.F. Andrews describing Subhas as '*my son - but a spoilt child of the family who needed to be taught a lesson for his own good*.' However, the members of the BPCC had full faith in their leader and passed a resolution in this respect. The BPCC was suspended and an adhoc committee was set up with Maulana Azad as President to reorganize the body (BPCC).

In 1940, the relation between Bengal and the Congress further deteriorated. Though Subhas was expelled, he refused to obey the party's orders and continued to control the BPCC. He also tried to establish a link with the Muslim League and decided to start a civil

disobedience movement to destroy the Holwell monument in Calcutta. The monument reminded people of the Black-Hole tragedy and Bose's intention was to strengthen the relations between Hindus and Muslims. Before he could do anything he was arrested by the British Government on 3rd July, 1940 under the Defence of India Act. Though the leaders of Bengal started requesting Gandhi for the release of Bose, Gandhi made it known, that though Bose was a popular leader of Bengal and also an ex-president of the Congress, but he had no intention of letting the Congress fight for a side- issue. By this time 2nd World War had begun and there was an on-going debate regarding the stand of the Congress on starting a mass movement. The Congress cited three reasons in support of their inability to start a mass movement - 1) the cause of the allies was a just one 2) The lack of Hindu- Muslim unity 3) the Congress as well as the masses was not ready for a mass movement. The left-wing groups however, differed. They felt that the masses were fully ready for action and urged the Congress leaders to start a mass struggle, as they felt that the situation was opportune to achieve freedom through a mass struggle against British imperialism. Gandhi felt that "*India should cooperate with Britain in her hour of danger.*" Dismayed and frustrated in his efforts to convince the Congress along with Gandhi to liberate India Subhas Bose left the country alone, to seek the help of the Axis Powers in January 1941.

VI. CONCLUSION

To sum up it may be said that Subhas Bose's defeat at the Tripuri session of the Congress ended the convention of Bengal's opposition to Gandhian leadership. Though Bengal had enjoyed the leadership of the Congress for a long time, but Gandhi managed to take a firm grip on the Congress after the death of C R Das. There is no doubt that Gandhi's entry into the Congress as a leader of the masses changed the character of the national movement. The expulsion of Subhas Bose from the Congress proved to be disastrous for Bengal. Torn by rivalries and communal conflicts Bengal began to lose all interest in national politics. There were no other leaders in Bengal after Subhas Bose who could challenge Gandhi's leadership. In no time Gandhi managed to win over men like Kiran Shankar Roy, Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy and Nalini Ranjan Sarkar from the Bengal Congress. The Left failed to resist the anti-labour and anti-kisan policies of the Congress ministries. CPI General Secretary P.C. Joshi argued in the Party organ National Front in April, 1939 that 'the greatest class struggle today is our national struggle' of which the Congress was the 'main organ'- and so Congress-kisan unity had to be preserved. Thus the disunity within the left gave the 'Right wing in the Congress' to take an upper hand. It may be argued that

since Subhas Bose was not willing to be a puppet President and on the other hand the Gandhi wing within Congress were not ready to accept his leadership so he had no other alternative but to resign. Before his secret escape to Berlin, Bose had expressed his wrath against Gandhi that it was due to Gandhi's weakness for Nehru that he had to leave the Congress. However, Subhas Bose had failed to bring the Socialists under one banner, though he had started the Forward Bloc with the intention of uniting the Left elements within the Congress. It is unfortunate that he failed to get the support of the Royists (M.N.Roy) and the socialists who were more interested to maintain Congress unity. If Subhas Bose had not lost his life in the plane crash, many hitherto undisclosed chapters of contemporary politics would have come to limelight.

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