CHAPTER - 4

POLITICAL CHANGES IN INDIA (1881 TO 1936)
CHAPTER IV

Political changes in India during the period 1881 - 1926

Against the background of social and economic changes which came about in India from 1881-1926, it would be very easy to follow the changes during this period in the political sphere. It would also further help to get correct understanding and proper perspective of Premchand's social and political ideas in this field. With the assumption of the parliamentary control over the East India Company's administration in India in 1858 a new era began in the political life of India. While, on the one hand, there was frustration on account of the failure of the hard struggle for independence, and yet uncertainty in the minds of Indians about possible developments in the future, it was also a period which could be as it was utilized by the British Rulers for initiating certain steps to introduce constitutional rule in India which would in course of time develop a sort of democratic constitutional machinery. The political movements which took place during this period have an intimate relation with the constitutional developments that followed. There is a point of view of looking at these developments which holds that the constitutional reforms introduced by the British from time to time were only the
direct response to the political aspirations expressed by the people though the response was the minimum at every stage as is bound to be the case at the hands of alien rulers. This is no place to deal with this dual development in detail but a rapid survey of these developments, to the extent to which it helps the understanding of political thought in Premchand, can be given.

The establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885 is a significant event in Indian political development. After the ruthless suppression by British Government of the armed revolt attempted by Vasudev Balwant Phadke, which followed the equally ruthless suppression of the armed revolt on a much larger scale in 1857, the slender hopes in Indian minds of re-conquering their lost freedom by arms almost vanished and other ways and means of trying to resuscitate social, economic and political life in India began to be explored...

In general, it may be observed that there were four different reactions to the British conquest of India. The first, as already stated, was that it was by arms that we were conquered and hence it is only by arms that we can regain our freedom, but this proved to be abortive, and barring sporadic attempts in the following years by persons like Sawarkar, or the Bengal Revolutionaries (like Shri Arbindo in his earlier life ) in the wake of participation,
or the Gedar party during the First World War, such attempts were conspicuous by their actions.

A second reason was that the British conquered us not merely by the force of arms but by dint of their supreme political institutions, such as parliamentary democracy on a broad based suffrage, responsible cabinet supported by a majority party and a regular firm opposition. Dedicated and educated Indians who studied British and European Political History, therefore, cherished the legitimate aspiration to form and develop similar political institutions in India. As Pattabhi Sitharamayya points out in 'History of Congress' the invitation issued for the first session of the Indian National Congress held in 1885 contained the following observation: "Indirectly, this conference will form the germ of native parliament and, if properly conducted will constitute, in a few years, an unanswerable reply to the assertion that India is still wholly unfit for any form of representative institutions."(1) It is significant that the sponsors of the Indian National Congress had the models of England and America before them and had perused the History of French Revolution which is interpreted as the victory of French people over the French Government. They had absorbed the notion of democracy and nationalism from the history of the West and had also realised that the British Rulers were responsive to constitutional and democratic appeals. Knowing
fully well that an armed revolt would not be possible they took particular care to clarify that it was not their aim and some went further to make it clear that their aim was to avoid an armed revolt which they considered not only inadvisable but even ridiculed it. Even the British Government, as already stated, regarded the Indian National Congress as a steam valve to let out extra political fervour. The British, on their part in their statesmanlike attitude, had clearly realised that Indians would not completely and permanently acquiesce in their rule and sooner or later they were bound to formulate and press their political ambitions and they deliberately chose the line of lesser resistance namely that of helping the formulation of, and dealing with, a moderately constituted liberal minded political organisation like the Indian National Congress.

It is, however, a patent historical fact that this very moderate organisation since outgrew its original limitations and was sought to be captured by extremist minded political leaders. Though this attempt proved unsuccessful in the beginning, the international situation created by the First World War increased the importance of cooperation by Indians in the War effort and British Government was required to negotiate with Indian political leaders partly on their (that is latter's) terms.

It was during three generations that this ascending importance of the Indian National Congress took place. Dadabhai
Nowrojee may be regarded as the grand old man of India representing the first generation. Born in 1825, seven years after Karl Marx was born, and surviving him by thirty-four years - Marx died in 1883 and Dadabhai Nowrojee in 1917 - he elucidated the process of the economic drain by British Imperial Rule and as early as in 1870 declared that within the growing poverty and economic exploitation of India there will be a major revolt by Indians in which either the British Empire will collapse or the Indian Nation will be destroyed. It may generally be concluded that while Karl Marx mainly thought of exploitation by one class of another, this process resulting in a revolution, Dadabhai Nowrojee elucidated the process of exploitation by one nation of another, this latter process too resulting in a revolution. Since violence was not taboo to Karl Marx, his teachings resulted in the communist revolutionary machine and the subsequent communist dictatorship, but as Dadabhai Nowrojee's mind was constitutional and peace loving, the process suggested by him was to result in a non-violent revolution and democratic socialism.

The second generation of political leaders in India brought forth by the Indian National Congress consists of Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Gopal Krishna Gokhale. They respectively led the liberal and the extremist parties and left their permanent impress on the course of Indian political
life but it is to be remembered that both these younger leaders had abounding respect for Dadabhai Nowrojee and both claimed to continue his work. It should also be acknowledged that the latter pair, having founded distinct and separate political parties, did not command a nationwide support, unlike the grand old man Dadabhai Nowrojee.

The third generation of Indian political leaders is unquestionably represented by Mahatma Gandhi. Before Mahatma Gandhi came on the Indian scene Lenin had successfully led the Russian Revolution. Gandhi, who was born one year earlier than Lenin and survived him by twenty four years, was undoubtedly the great revolutionary leader. Both Lenin and Gandhi proved successful national revolutionary leaders in their respective countries and gave the world a new political philosophy. But whereas Lenin's political philosophy was a further modification of that of Karl Marx, the political philosophy contributed by Gandhi was all his own, and so far as the Indian context was concerned, more suitable and appropriate which accounts for its practical success. It is therefore another acknowledged fact that just as Dadabhai Nowrojee was looked upon as the grand-father of the Indian national, Mahatma Gandhi was unequivocally accepted as the father of the Indian Nation.

Along with the progressive contribution to political thinking in India, there was a gradual change in the techniques
of movement. While in the beginning the mood of the Congress in the early years was that of a reasonable mendicant and the technique that of passing of recommendatory resolutions, pressing petitions and sending deputations, the mood imperceptibly changed to one of expression of determination and the technique to that of trenchant criticism and positive action. The action was confined in this stage (that is during the time of Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak) to organisation of Swadeshi and preaching of boycott. The temper however gradually rose to that of fearless indictment of British Rule which was made by long terms of rigorous imprisonment. But after the passing away of Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak leadership passed into the hands of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhian leadership was marked by a wide appeal to the masses, a more outspoken condemnation of the satanic government and an ultimatum to start the non-cooperation (and later on civil disobedience) movement involving extreme steps like withholding of taxes leading to the break down of machinery of Government, though of course by non-violent means.

While leaders of Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak's generation defended themselves in the law courts and claimed not to have committed sedition by spreading disaffection against government but to have offered a well-eant criticism of acts and policies of the government, Mahatma Gandhi's generation defied the very jurisdiction of the British courts
and refused to offer any defence. They claimed, as Mahatma Gandhi did in his famous Sabarmati trial, that it was their sacred duty to spread disaffection against Government that if this constituted sedition they had committed it and would continue to commit if whenever opportunity offers itself.

It was under Mahatma Gandhi's influence that Premchand worked and wrote. His works are therefore replete with pen-pictures of situations, characters and moods which reflect the various stresses and strains experienced by average men and women under the challenging and ennobling impact of Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements as we shall see in the coming chapters.
CHAPTER 4

References