Chapter Seven

CONCLUSION
The Congress movement was started in 1885 at the instance of Mr. Hume to focus Indian opinion on various questions arising out of the British Administration of India, in order that the government may be properly informed of it and be made responsive to that opinion. The early Congress-men were interested in certain reforms in the administration of the country, but they did not desire to subvert British rule. Loyalty to British rule was the keynote of their political faith. They thought British rule a providential dispensation for India.

In the beginning of the 20th century, however, the international and the internal situation in India, specially the Partition of Bengal, aroused a new spirit of independence in the country. The Congress defined its goal as self-government within the British Empire in 1906. This, however, caused a split in the Congress. Extremists like Bipin Chandra Pal and Aurobindo Ghose thought real self-government was not compatible with any kind of association with the Empire. But the gospel of extremism found no quarter in the Congress, piloted as it was then by leaders like Phirozeshah Mehta, G.K. Gokhale, Surendra Nath Benerjea and Dr. Rash Behari Ghose. The Extremists being in a small minority had to leave the Congress in 1907. The Moderates asserted their view in making the acceptance of the goal of self-government within
the Empire a condition for the membership of the Congress.

Having seen the growing political consciousness in the country the British encouraged the Indian Muslims to organize the Muslim League with loyalty to the British rule as its first objective in 1906. The mutual trust and friendship between the British and the League could not, however, have a smooth course for long. The annulment of the Partition of Bengal and the British attitude towards the Muslim states in Europe put a severe strain on Muslim loyalty. Consequently the League adopted self-government under the British Crown as one of its objectives in 1913 and it became friendly with the Congress.

The First World War strengthened the friendship between the Congress and the League and also encouraged them to demand self-government within the Empire. They prepared a scheme of reforms for India, known as the Congress-League scheme, and urged the British Government to take a definite step towards self-government and equal partnership with Dominions in the Empire.

The British Government responded sympathetically. India was given a place in the Imperial War Conference and the Imperial War Cabinet and 'the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire' was declared as the political goal of India. The declaration of 'responsible government' was welcomed by
the Indian political parties. But the subsequent Lontford-Chelmsford Reforms disappointed them. The Lontford Reforms created a rift in the Congress. The moderate section favouring the Reforms left the Congress and formed a new party, the National Liberal Federation of India in 1918. The repressive policy of the Government and the Turkish Peace Treaty (1920) increased the resentment and gave birth to the anti-British feelings in the country. The Congress and the League rejected the goal of self-government within the Empire and adopted 'Swaraj' as their new creed in December 1920.

However, they repeatedly refused to translate 'Swaraj' as independence. The leading personalities of the two organizations interpreted the new creed as 'self-government within the Empire if possible, without if necessary'. The only difference between the old and the new creeds was that in the latter the British connection at any cost was not accepted. Indeed, in subsequent years both organizations made it clear that they wanted Dominion Status and not independence outside the Empire. The top Congress leaders like Gandhi and G.R. Das preferred Dominion Status to absolute independence outside the Empire. And the Congress did not define Swaraj as complete independence until its December 1923 meeting at Lahore. Moreover, the Liberal Federation and the League still adhered to the Dominion Status while the Hindu Mahasabha had no independent policy.
of its own. It was guided by the moderate Congress leaders like Malaviya, Kelkar and Moonje who were openly in favour of Dominion Status.

Even the Congress creed of Complete Independence did not rule out equal partnership with Britain in the Commonwealth. Soon after the Lahore Congress, Gandhiji, its chief spokesman, categorically explained that the Congress by 'Complete Independence' meant 'substance of Independence' or full Dominion Status with the right to secede at will. The Congress wanted to sever the then existing connection with Britain based on domination and exploitation, but not necessarily voluntary partnership with Britain in the Commonwealth based on freedom and equality. On many occasions Gandhiji explained that the Congress wanted to remain in the Commonwealth as a free and equal partner. The Congress accepted Gandhiji's views. The Gandhi-Irwin Pact and the Congress participation in the 2nd Round Table Conference, proved beyond question that the Congress was willing to accept equal partnership in the British Commonwealth.

The repressive policy of the Government and the disappointing Government of India Act, 1935, did not alter substantially the attitude of the Congress. Despite its demand for a Constituent Assembly the Congress, except the Socialists, did not transform Complete Independence into separation from the British connection. Gandhiji, as late as
1935, held the view that complete independence did not exclude partnership between two nations enjoying equal independent status and terminable by either at will. It was not regarded as necessarily different from Dominion Status.

Other parties were, from the very beginning, opposed to the Congress creed of Complete Independence and pleaded for Dominion Status. Though they also were not satisfied with the Government of India Act, 1935, they did not plead for either a Constituent Assembly or independence outside the British Commonwealth and continued to proclaim Dominion Status as their goal. And although in 1937 the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha formally changed their respective creeds from Dominion Status to full Independence, they did not rule out British connection. The new creed of full Independence was invariably interpreted, in all cases, as full Dominion Status or Independence within the British Commonwealth. Meanwhile, the Liberal Party continued to adhere to its ideal of Dominion Status.

The Second World War gave further impetus to India's demand for independence. Although the Congress demanded the right of self-determination and a declaration of independence, it was willing to accept Dominion Status during the period of the war. Many prominent Congressmen, however, stated that the Constituent Assembly's decision in favour of the Commonwealth
connection was not unthinkable. Despite the anti-British feeling created during the war, specially after the August 1942 movement, the establishment of the British Labour Government and the changed situation after the war persuaded the Congress to accept Dominion Status in August 1947. The Muslim League remained opposed to independence and pleaded for the continuance of the British rule in India until Pakistan was created. The logic of the situation was such that even Pakistan was not envisaged outside the British Commonwealth. The Hindu Mahasabha which had offered its general support in the war effort continued to urge for Dominion Status after the end of the war. However, the British policy leading to the partition of India displeased the Mahasabha and consequently it later expressed its opposition against the Commonwealth connection. The Liberal Federation continued to plead that independence outside the British Commonwealth was not only impossible, but also undesirable in the present day world.

The sympathetic and friendly attitude of the Labour Government and of Lord Mountbatten created trust and goodwill for Britain in the Congress leaders. Despite the Objectives Resolution the Congress leadership was willing to continue India's association with the Commonwealth provided her proposed Republican status was accepted by the Commonwealth. Britain was also equally anxious to keep India within the Commonwealth.
Finally, the agreement was reached in April 1949 which involved no sharp change in Indian Government policy, and in January 1950 India became a republic in the Commonwealth. Pandit Nehru, the Congress’ chief spokesman, defended and continued to defend in the post-republic era India’s connection with the Commonwealth on the grounds that it was good for India, Britain, the Commonwealth and the international peace and co-operation; that it did not violate in the least India’s freedom; and that it involved no obligation. Moreover, Pandit Nehru was influenced by the changing pattern of the Commonwealth.

The opposition parties - the Socialists, the Praja Socialists, the Communist, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Jana Sangh parties - were all opposed to the British connection. They refused to believe that India had attained real and complete freedom. They argued that the connection violated the previous pledges and was immoral because of racial discrimination. Moreover, India had gained nothing by remaining in the Commonwealth. Britain, they said, had been supporting Pakistan and Portugal against India in the Kashmir and Goa issues. The Communists wanted India to join hands with the Soviet bloc. By the second general election in 1957, however, the policy of Pandit Nehru convinced them to a great extent that the India’s membership of the Commonwealth had not come in the way of her freedom of policy and action. Only
the Communist Party reiterated its demand for sovance of the Commonwealth connection in the 1957 elections. The PSP and the Jana Sangh made no such demand. The Hindu Mahasabha, no longer a party of much influence, also reiterated the demand.

The overall conclusion which emerges from the study of Indian political opinion during the period under review is that the Muslim League retained its loyalty to the British connection while the Liberal Party throughout voiced the cause of Dominion Status. The Hindu Mahasabha in the pre-independence period favoured Dominion Status, but the partition of the country turned it into an antagonist of the Commonwealth connection. In the post-independence years all opposition parties remained opposed to the Commonwealth connection. But by the 2nd general election in 1957 the opposition to it, to a great extent, had faded away except in the case of the Communist Party.

The study also reveals that the Congress, except for the occasional vituperations, had never committed itself to a complete break from Britain. For the first twenty years of its life it assumed the stability and permanence of British rule in India and the ideal of self-government was not anticipated. For the next fifteen years, 1906-20, self-government within the British Empire was its credo. Thereafter, the emphasis on the British connection was withdrawn for ever.
But nevertheless it was implicit in the creed of 'Swaraj' and was not ruled out even in the goal of complete independence. Dominion status was no doubt rejected but free and equal partnership in the Commonwealth was always desired and sought for. Even the advent of the Republic did not substantially alter this basic stand of the Congress.

The gradual transition from the objective of making the British rule firm and abiding in India to the pronouncement of India as a Sovereign Republic, however, is indicative of a great change in the attitude of the Congress towards the British connection. It involved a change in the concept of Indo-British relationship, from a ruler-subject relationship to a free and equal partnership. Many factors were responsible for effecting this change in the Congress attitude. It was a sequel to the British mistakes and her unsympathetic policy towards India; the calculated action on the part of Congress leadership in channelling the public sentiments; international developments undermining the prestige of the European countries; and the growth of nationalism throughout the world, specially in Asia.

That the movement did not culminate in a violent break off was again, partly, due to the favourable reaction to the friendly and sympathetic policy of the Labour Government, the post-2nd World War international developments and the realism and the preparedness to forget the past on the part
of the Indian leadership. That the things ended so happily passed for a wonder in the world at large.