CHAPTER VI

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The announcement of 20 August 1917 created a division in the ranks of Indian nationalists. The Moderates in Indian politics welcomed the declaration as the 'Magna Charta of India' and decided to concentrate all their energies on an educative campaign in preparation for the coming visit of Montague to India. The Indian National Congress, on the other hand, regarded the declaration as unsatisfactory both in language and content and decided to continue agitation for the better recognition of Indian claims and aspirations.

After the publication of the Montague-Chelmsford Report, nine Moderate leaders of Bombay issued a manifesto demonstrating their positive attitude towards the Reform Scheme. They were convinced that the Reform proposals marked a substantial advance upon the existing conditions and, as such, there should be a sincere appreciation instead of criticism of the good faith shown therein. They also felt that any opposition to the Reform Scheme in India would strengthen the diehards in England and this would not serve India's larger interests. They were prepared to give a fair trial to the scheme and to use their influence with Montague to secure whatever improvements they could extract.
The leaders of the left-wing of the Congress were divided into two groups. The extremist group, consisting of Annie Besant and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, regarded the scheme as 'based on an unqualified distrust on the people of India'. According to them, it was so radically wrong alike in principle and in detail that in our opinion it is impossible to modify and improve it'. However, in the meantime, Tilak agreed 'to work the reforms for all it was worth' and for acceleration of the grant of full responsible government. He himself agreed to contest the election and formed the new Congress Democratic Party on 20 April 1920. The formation of Congress Democratic Party created division in the politics of Central Provinces between the nationalists of the various linguistic and regional groups. On the other hand, the Central group, which came more and more to the forefront in the councils of the Congress as time passed after the publication of the Report, regarded the Montague-Chelmsford Scheme as unsatisfactory and unacceptable unless altered materially. However, the attitude of the Congress towards the reforms was not for total rejection of the Montague-Chelmsford Scheme but for its radical modification.

The Liberal leaders had made up their mind to dissociate from the Congress and to form themselves into

1. Indian Annual Register, Part IV, 1919, p.119.
an independent party to work the reforms. They declined to attend the special session of the Congress which was held in August 1918 at Bombay to consider the new scheme and organised a special session of their own newly formed Moderate Party. The Moderate Party met in November 1918 at Bombay to formulate their views on the reform scheme. They also abstained from the annual Christmas Session of the Congress in Delhi in 1918 and continued to keep aloof from their old organisation. They permanently separated from the Congress and assembled in their second session at Calcutta in December 1919. There they christened their party as the National Liberal Federation of India. In this manner the Liberals prepared themselves for a permanent and complete separation from the Congress, for a keen contest to secure offices under the Reform Act and to make the Act successful according to the Liberal viewpoint. Organisational efforts were made to form the Liberal Associations in various provinces. In Central Provinces and Berar, Liberal Association was formed at Nagpur in March 1919. From the beginning of 1920 onwards the Central Provinces and Berar Liberals had proceeded in various ways to organise themselves for the forthcoming elections under the new Act.

The new developments in the country during 1919 altered the entire political situation. That year the Rowlatt Bills had been passed into law in the face of unanimous and vehement opposition from the Indians.
The same year witnessed the passing of the Reform Act of 1919. In that very year occurred the famous Jallianwala Bagh massacre. An enquiry into the Panjab happenings was demanded. The Government appointed a Committee of enquiry under the Chairmanship of Lord Hunter. The Congress declined to lead evidence before the Committee as the Government of the Panjab refused to allow the leaders in prison to appear in person and tender evidence before the Committee.

Gandhiji, who had recently emerged on the Indian political scene, was greatly shocked to see the report of Hunter Committee. It destroyed once for all his faith in British sense of justice. He decided to commence the Non-Co-operation Movement with the object of redressing the twin wrongs of the Panjab and Khilafat. The Congress approved the proposal to organise the movement at its special session at Calcutta on 4 September 1920. The annual session of the Congress was held at Nagpur in December 1920, where the Non-Co-Operation programme was finally reaffirmed. The Nagpur Congress also adopted the linguistic principle for its provincial organisation. As a result the Central Provinces and Berar was divided by the Congress into three separate units, which enabled the local politicians to develop their influence in their respective regions. This led to the growth and intensification of regional and sectional feelings.

Thus the stage for widespread Non-Co-operation Movement was set in the country. The Congress decided to
boycott the forthcoming elections to the new legislatures. In the Central Provinces also the Congressmen actively campaigned for the boycott.

In the absence of the Congress, the elections proved to be a walk-over for the Moderates. Although the proportion of the Liberals in the Council was not great, as a group they were influential. Their leaders were appointed Executive Councillors and Ministers. From 1921 to 1923 the Liberals, who dominated the legislature, adopted the policy of 'Co-operative Association' with the Government. But the direct clash between the militant nationalists and the government brought an automatic change in their tenor and they began to think of moderating the course of the events. Consequently, they expressed their annoyance at any action which they considered repressive, such as extra-ordinary legislative measures permitting arrest and trial without ordinary process of the courts or police actions involving firing and beating, hand-cuffing and ill-treatment of political prisoners and other forms of repression. They protested against all these measures through resolutions, adjournment motions, cut-motions, questions and supplementary.

The Liberals were in search for an independent line of action for working the policy of Co-operative Association with the government with the aim of gradual constitutional advance towards self-governing Dominion Status. They, however, failed to influence adequately
either the alien government or the militant nationalists. They could only try to moderate the course of events but could not determine it. Their policy of co-operative Association with the government made them unpopular among the masses. As a result, they were routed in the elections of 1923 and could win very few seats in the subsequent elections. Thus, their role as mediators became more prominent in Indian politics after 1923 than that of co-operators with the government.

However, their role in some important enactments was notable. The establishment of the Nagpur University was one such enactment. The Central Provinces Municipalities Act of 1922 marked a notable advance in the field of the local self-government.

The second phase in the working of the legislature saw the emergence and decline of the Swarajists. When the Non-Co-operation Movement failed and the authority of Gandhiji and other Congress leaders declined the nationalists suggested alternative forms of agitation, especially entry in the Councils. Their aim was to transfer the nationalist struggle to the legislatures with a view to obstructing the work from within the Council. When the Gaya Congress, held in December 1922, refused to allow its members to contest for the provincial Councils, Congressmen led by C.R. Das, Motilal Nehru and Hakim Ajmal Khan formed the All-India Congress Khilafat Swaraj Party on 1 January 1923. It had branches in the eight provinces.
In the Central provinces and Berar the move for entry in the Councils was first well supported by the Vidarbha nationalists. In demanding that they be allowed to enter the Councils, the middle class nationalists of the Vidarbha region were reviving a similar demand of their late leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who believed that nationalists should enter the Councils to fight for the self-government.

Following the establishment of the Swaraj party, the middle class nationalists of the province formed three branches of the party, one for the Mahakoshal region and two for the Vidarbha region—one each for Nagpur and Berar divisions. These branches held conflicting views on various issues from the very beginning and were motivated by the regional and personal interests. The Mahakoshal Swaraj Party was in favour of a policy of complete obstruction whereas the Vidarbha Swarajists were in favour of responsive co-operation in the Council.

The elections to the Council in 1923 resulted in a clear win for the Swarajists. Of the 54 elected seats they captured 41 seats and were in a position to implement the party’s strategy of complete, continuous and consistent obstruction within the legislature.

In 1924 Swarajists maintained their unity while obstructing the work of the Council and justified themselves by effectively bringing about a deadlock. After the elections Sly the Governor of the Province, sounded Moonje, the Swarajist leader in the Council,
about forming a Ministry, but the latter refused to accept the office under the existing policy of his party. Consequently, Sly chose his Ministers from the Liberal and Independent minority in the Council. This annoyed the Swarajists who retaliated by stalling legislative business and by passing a vote of no-confidence in the Ministers. When Sly retained the Ministers despite the vote, in March 1924 the Swarajists rejected the budget for 1924-25; they voted only two rupees for the Ministers' salaries.

These moves made it impossible for Frank Sly to work the new constitution. The Ministers resigned following the rejection of the budget and Sly suspended the constitution and assumed control of the Ministers' portfolios and certified most of the rejected grants.

However, in 1925 and 1926, the Swarajist unity collapsed as the nationalists of the two regions vied with each other for the formation of ministries. These developments took place evidently due to the social and economic forces working in the background. The Governor also encouraged them to form linguistic and regional groups to organise themselves separately to drive a wedge in the Swarajist ranks and to ensure the working of the reformed constitution. He was able to establish a link with the Vidarbha nationalists. Later on the leading Mahakoshal politician E. Raghavendra Rao too fell in the British trap.
Although the Swarajists belonged to a single party under the leadership of Moonja, they remained loyal to groups representing the main regions in the province. Though united by a common nationalist objective, these regional branches were rivals on many issues. Each, in varying degree, identified with the interests of its region, especially the interests of the middle classes and land owners. As these groups comprised the dominant section of the electorate and the membership of Swaraj Party, members of each party regarded offices in the government as a means of furthering their regional and sectional interests. They wanted a say in shaping the government's decisions on appointments and the allocation of finances in favour of their own regions. Of the three Swaraj Party branches the one from Berar most consistently sought office in the government. There were compelling reasons to do so. Following the amalgamation of the prosperous territory of Berar with the Central Provinces, the government poured the revenues collected from there into the other comparatively backward parts of the province. This led to a persistent protest from revenue-payers in Berar for about 20 years, before the government accepted the findings of the Sim Committee in 1922 that the Central Provinces should receive 60 per cent of the divisible revenues and Berar 40 per cent. But between 1923 and 1926 Berar did not receive its Sim quota of revenues, and members from the division believed that participation in the government was the only way of securing allotted share.
A shrewd politician, Butler, who succeeded Frank Sly as Governor of the Central Provinces, backed these moves while taking advantage of the situation and persuaded S.B. Tambe, leader of the Swarajists from Berar group to come over the government side and appointed him Home Member in 1925. Tambe's acceptance of office was an important landmark. It helped in dividing the Swarajists into two groups; one supported the strategy of obstruction in the Council in obedience to the Swaraj Party. The other group revived the policy of responsive co-operation which had originally been proposed by Tilak. It also led the Vidarbha leaders to form ministries in 1925 and 1926. Ultimately a Responsive Co-operation Party was formed in 1926. The Responsive Co-operation Party permitted its member to accept office in the government and provided the Vidarbha leaders with an opportunity to advance the cause of self-government and at the same time defend their regional interests.

In October 1925 those Swarajists who supported obstruction reestablished their links with the Congress, which had been broken when it was set up in 1923. In 1926, the followers of the policy of responsive co-operation joined forces with kindred politicians and groups in other provinces who desired to work the reforms to their own as much as for nationalist advantage. Thus, on the eve of the elections to the third Council the Swaraj Party split.
In the elections for the third reformed Council, the electorate of the province voted solidly for the policy of responsive co-operation. The elections resulted in severe defeat for the Swarajists and the Responsive Co-operators secured a position strong enough to form a ministry.

However, the Responsive Co-operators clashed with each other in the furtherance of their personal ambitions and sectional interests and also for preserving the dominance of their regions in forming ministeries between 1927 and 1929. This resulted in confusion and divisions which diminished their effectiveness as a force working for the attainment of self-government through legislature.

The activities of the small group of Swarajists in the legislative remained a standing check on the activities of any ministry that was formed by the Responsive Co-operators from 1927 to 1929.

The third phase in the working of the fourth Council the last under the government of India Act of 1919 lasted from 1930 to 1937. It witnessed the second mass movement launched by the Congress, the Civil Disobedience Movement. The Congress, therefore, boycotted the elections and the Responsive Co-operators and Responsivists of the Vidarbha took part in it. The Responsivists of the Vidarbha also participated in launching the campaign of Civil Disobedience. However, in doing to their aim was entirely different; they wanted
to win the public support in the coming elections to the provincial legislature.

From 1930 to 1937 those who believed in responsive co-operation dominated the legislature. E. Raghavendra Rao, who was appointed as Home Member in October 1930, emerged as the central figure in the political life of the province and dominated the legislature behind the scene. He also controlled the ministries formed during the period with the help of the support of the Democrats, non-Brahmin and Nationalist coalition. His efforts in supporting and helping the administration were generously rewarded by the government by his nomination as the officiating Governor; he held the office from 16 May 1936 until 11 September 1936.

The Responsive Cooperators were successful to a considerable extent in exposing the repressive policy of the government, which it adopted to suppress the movement through resolutions, adjournment motions, cut-motions and interpellations. Their contribution in the fields of social and economic reforms was also notable.

They, however, neglected wider national issues and concentrated their energies on forming ministries and protecting their regional and sectional interests during 1930 to 1937. As a result they were unable to win the permanent sympathy of the electorate and were routed in the elections to the Legislative Assembly held in February 1937 under the Government of India Act of 1935.
During the period under study the activities of Muslim and depressed class members were confined only to securing the interests of their respective communities. They did not appear to be much interested in, or aware of, the momentous national issues. They, by large, supported the government to achieve their aims.

A content-analysis of the material at hand appears to reveal some interesting points. It may be worthwhile to touch upon two of them before we wind up the study.

That the British introduced social democratic institutions in India primarily to act as a safety-valve is an oft made observation. If evidence was needed, the proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Central Provinces and Berar may be looked into. Elections to this body, though based on a very limited franchise, did manage to keep a sizable proportion of otherwise vocal and active middle class busy. It gave the impression that those taking part in the process were doing something highly useful for the society. Large sums of money were spent during the elections since the voters were few and far between and had to be contacted individually. Either only reasonably educated persons with ample means could hope to win or the support of a group or political party was needed for success. Consequently, we see that both individuals and kaleidoscopically changing political groups played a key role in whatever legislative activity went on during this period. Personal ambitions and class
interests combined to predetermine the individual behaviour of many legislators. It will be futile to expect high political morality or even adherence to any set of principles with any degree of consistency in such circumstances. Such a situation was not very conducive for providing any worthwhile training in the democratic processes.

The Council had little powers and could hardly exert any influence on the working of the government. Most of the time the active legislators either endeavoured to put the government in a spot through embarrassing questions and supplementaries or indulged in obstructionism, including no-confidence motions against other elected members serving as ministers. The government managed to stick to its guns most of the time. Thus, no amount of legislative inquisition could oblige the government to deal with political agitators, both outside and inside the prisons, leniently. It is true that some measures of social and economic significance did come to be enacted. But these had nothing to do with the principal imperial interests. Perhaps the aim was not to allow a popular say in the vital questions of the administration but only to provide an opportunity to work out the steam. Even this limited purpose could not have been served much since the province did not have a press coverage extensive enough to reach the largely illiterate masses.
In brief, the whole exercise remained limited to the educated middle classes. If it could influence the freedom struggle in some measure, it was indirectly since the leadership of the national movement also came from the same middle classes. The possibility of this class adopting a less accommodating attitude could not be ruled out in the absence of these legislative activities.

The other point is specific to the local or regional situation. Analysts even today never tire of saying that Madhya Pradesh suffers from a split personality, that it has failed to evolve a regional identity, an ethos, of its own. That it is largely true cannot be gainsaid. Though the state is no longer bi-lingual, it clearly has a number of well marked sub-regions, each with its own history and character. On the basis of discussions in the foregoing chapters, it can be surmised that the roots of this phenomenon go back to the period under study. The province came into existence in 1861 as a result of a union of many diverse territories for administrative convenience, and not because of cultural or historical factors. By creating three regional Provincial Congress Committees, the Congress strengthened this sense of separateness. The interesting thing to note is that the two Marathi-speaking regions, Nagpur and Berar, which went to Maharashtra after the States Reorganisation in 1956 on linguistic basis, have also not ceased even today to make their regional identity felt.
This furnishes a good example of the strength and pervasiveness of the regional pulls in a plural situation like that found in the present day Madhya Pradesh.

Despite all its negative factors, the Central Provinces and Berar Legislative Council did play a positive role in the freedom struggle as well as in the scheme of constitutional evolution, political education and social and economic legislation. However, it made no change in the basic imperialistic policy of the British Government. Indeed, as Bhalabhai Desai once rightly said in the Legislative Assembly, the Government of India always acted on the premise that the Indian members of the Assembly 'are useful when we agree (with the government) and . . . we are useless when we disagree . . . .' 2

The truth of this assessment was established time and again on the floor of the Council at Nagpur. In such a situation, the efforts to wreck the Reforms of 1919 from inside the Council never had a chance to succeed. The government could always find the members embued more with personal or regional ambitions than with the nationalist sentiments; they were, indeed, available in plenty.