Gokhale had been elected president of the Benares Congress only a few days before he sailed for England. ‘The Presidential speech’, he wrote to N.A. Dravid from S. S. Caledonia on 26 September 1905, ‘is fermenting in the head and some of the ideas are already taking a definite shape. But the thought of the responsibility is oppressive and God alone knows how it will be discharged in the end.’ How oppressive the responsibility was to be was mercifully hidden from him at that time. During the next three months, while he campaigned on behalf of the Congress in England, the Indian political scene underwent a radical transformation.

The transformation was caused by Curzon’s persistence in enforcing the partition of Bengal in the teeth of popular opposition. Criticism in newspapers, protest meetings, petitions and deputations failed to deflect him from the ‘collision course’ on which he had embarked. The Bengali bhadralok felt (in the words of Surendranath Banerjea) that they had been ‘insulted, humiliated and tricked’. The sixteenth of October 1905, when the partition actually took effect, was observed as a day of mourning; in Calcutta thousands abstained from food, suspended business and walked barefoot to the banks of the Ganges for a dip in the holy river amidst deafening cries of Bande Mataram’. The same day Anand Mohan Bose, the
veteran Bengali nationalist, was carried in an invalid’s chair to a moving ceremony for laying the foundation-stone of the ‘Federation Hall’, which was to symbolize the indissoluble bond between the two parts of Bengal.

The official reaction to the agitation was characteristic; efforts were made to silence the critics and particularly to curb students, who were in the vanguard of the agitation. Repressive measures had, however, just the opposite effect. With the rising crescendo of popular indignation, the anti-partition agitation became more vehement.

The boycott of British manufactures and the use of ‘swadeshi’ India-made goods) were advocated to bring the government to heel. Traditional Congress policies seemed ineffective in the new political context, and there was a clamour for new methods and a new leadership. The older Congress leaders like Surendranath Banerjea at first tried to keep pace with popular feeling, but soon found that they were being led by, instead of leading, public opinion and that the reins of the movement were slipping from their hands.

The new mood of Bengal was reflected in an ‘open letter’ to the leaders of the Indian National Congress published in the Amrita Bazar Patrika. It affirmed that: the country in general has grown almost impatient of your tinkering 'Congress politics. It seems to have
realized that the most successful of your Congresses cannot secure permanent good for the country simply by a policy of what is called begging:-The congress must. Adapt itself to the changed conditions of life. Places in Government service, shadowy representation in the Legislative Councils, this or that makeshift in the policy of the Government are not exactly the things the people want at present. True self-government.... is the new creed. . . .³

The feeling that old methods would not do was also voiced by Lala Lajpat Rai, Gokhale’s fellow-delegate to England in 1905. ‘What Bengal has done’, wrote Lajpat Rai ‘should be done by every province in ventilating its grievances.’⁴ He proposed a monster demonstration against the policies of Lord Curzon by a hundred thousand men in Benares to coincide with the Congress session. Such a demonstration, Lajpat Rai told Babu Ganga Prasad Varma, a prominent Congress leader of the North-West (later, United) Provinces, will carry more weight & will impress the people in England more than any number of your Congresses. People are just now fairly well-excited & you should not fail to take advantage of this. Unless you are prepared to change the nature of your movement in this direction, you are not likely to make any progress towards political freedom at all, and I am sure that if the Congress will not take the
initiative in this matter, some other movement may have to be set up to do the same and the Congress will dwindle into insignificance.  

Lajpat Rai may have been in tune with the new spirit in Indian politics, but unlike Gokhale, he was not in the inner councils of the Congress leaders in Bombay or in the confidence of the British Committee in London, who between themselves determined the Congress strategy. Pherozeshah Mehta and his adherents in Bombay did not like much that was being said and done in Bengal in the wake of the partition. Wedderburn, Hume and Dadabhai Naoroji were extremely critical of Curzon’s decision to partition Bengal, but they saw it only as the crowning blunder of a reactionary Tory regime which was on the way out. By the end of the year Curzon had left India, and a Liberal ministry was in office in England. ‘I think’, wrote Dadabhai Naoroji to Gokhale on 26 November 1905, ‘our day of emancipation is much nearer than many of us imagine’  

Wedderburn was more explicit. He wanted the Benares Congress ‘to take full advantage of the great upheaval in this country [Britain] which has suddenly placed in power the friends (& some very advanced ones) of progress and popular aspirations and expressed the hope that the Benares Congress would be guided by Gokhale.’
Gokhale’s task as president of the Congress was more difficult than Wedderburn and Dadabhai Naoroji knew. The aftermath of the partition had strengthened the hands of extremist elements in the Bengal Congress. These elements found allies in like-minded men in Maharashtra and the Punjab, who had been chafing under the inaction of the Congress leadership. The anti-British upsurge in Bengal had given a temporary spurt to ‘swadeshi’ and the boycott of British goods, and there was even talk of passive resistance. Gokhale saw that it was not going to be easy to keep the Congress at Benares in the grooves within which it had moved for twenty years. He looked around for allies. If only he could persuade Pherozeshah Mehta to go to Benares, all might be well. Pherozeshah knew how to handle dissidents and rebels; he had silenced his critics in 1903 at the Madras Congress, and deftly managed the Bombay Congress the following year; he could be relied upon to ensure a smooth session at Benares. But Pherozeshah declined to attend the session with a single peremptory sentence: ‘We shall not go to Benares.’ It was not only his sore throat which held him back. In recent months, Pherozeshah had not been able to see eye to eye with Gokhale on several matters. He had a lurking feeling that Gokhale had not been ruthless enough in his criticism of the Universities Bill. Pherozeshah did not like the way he had been pushed by the British Committee into sanctioning Gokhale’s
departure for England in September 1905. Some of the radical stuff in Gokhale’s speeches in England also seems to have jarred on Pherozeshah. It seemed to him that Ranade’s disciple was going off the track. Even the foundation of the Servants of India Society had struck Pherozeshah as a presumptuous if not futile exercise. Would not Gokhale’s ‘political missionaries’ with their emphasis on renunciation develop a supercilious attitude towards their colleagues in the Congress? The fact that, on his return from England, Gokhale had been taken out in a huge procession in Poona (in which Tilak’s adherents had enthusiastically joined) and that he had even spent an hour at Tilak’s house in Gaikwad Wada struck Pherozeshah as odd. Indeed, the Kesari and the Mahratta were already hinting at an estrangement between Pherozeshah and Gokhale, commending Gokhale’s views on the partition of Bengal and the boycott, and denouncing Pherozeshah as the major reactionary influence in the Congress. The editor of the Gujarati, who was close to Pherozeshah and also a friend of Gokhale, thought it prudent to warn Gokhale of the pitfalls which awaited him at Benares.

N. V. Gokhale to G. K. Gokhale 22 December 1905: Please do not get offended, because I can mean no offence to you. But Sir P.M.M. [Pherozeshah M. Mehta] thinks that you are, in spite of
yourself, about to play into hands of men, who until recently persecuted & denounced you, & who, you declared, were not gentlemen to be argued with & were irreconcilable. This was said to a few select friends who have a high regard for both of you. The situation is very delicate and difficult, and I only hope everything may pass off successfully.9

The choice of Benares as the venue for the annual Congress session had struck some observers as a ‘daring’ one. The ancient city of Benares was the principal seat of Sanskrit learning and a stronghold of Hindu orthodoxy, but its citizens were not much concerned with politics. Nevertheless, during the Christmas week of 1905 Benares was gog with excitement. Besides the Congress session, an industrial conference was being held for the first time to coincide with the industrial exhibition. There was a ‘Ladies Conference’, besides ‘caste’ gatherings of Gaur Brahmans, the ‘Rajput Sabha’ and the ‘Kalwar Sabha’, in addition to a meeting of scholars presided over by R. C. Dutt to consider the question of a uniform script for the whole of India.

The citizens of Benares gave a splendid welcome to Gokhale. He was taken in a huge procession from the railway station to the venue of the Congress and was deeply moved by the popular
enthusiasm. At the plenary session on the afternoon of 27 December, Gokhale’s name was formally proposed for the presidency by Pandit Bishambhar Nath, one of the oldest Congressmen of U.P. and seconded by R. C. Dutt and G. Subramania Iyer. Bishambhar Nath, in traditional Congress oratory, described the Congress as ‘the crowning triumph of Pax Britannica with its untold numerous blessings’. Munshi Madholal, the Chairman of the Reception Committee, also repeated the old cliches about the Congress being ‘the intellectual product of British rule and English education’. Earlier, in a telegram to the Viceroy, the Munshi had ‘respectfully’ pleaded for an alteration in the Prince of Wales’ tour programme, enabling him to see the industrial exhibition organized by ‘the Indian National Congress, a loyal body representing all sections of His Majesty’s Indian subjects’. The sedate tone of these speeches was to some extent a part of the ritual at Congress sessions, but it was also a reminder that the North-West (United) Provinces continued to be a political backwater, barely ruffled by the storm of the partition of Bengal. Gokhale had a keen sense of political realities; he perceived the beginning of the process of polarization in the Congress; and the belligerent mood of Bengal had struck sympathetic chord in the Central Provinces, Berar, Maharashtra and the Punjab. These
provinces accounted for more than half of the delegates present at the session and two-thirds of the delegates from outside the United Provinces. It was obvious that an inter-provincial group, visibly impatient with old leaders and old slogans, was emerging at Benares, informally evolving a common approach to controversial issues, and trying to push forward the Congress in opposition to the government. This group by and large admired and respected Gokhale, who himself took care not to gratuitously offend it. Indeed, in his presidential address, which usually set the tone for the Congress session, Gokhale shrewdly took a position half-way between the Congress Establishment and the new radicals.

Gokhale’s presidential address included an appraisal of the political situation at the end of 1905, a historical retrospect and a forecast of the future. It also contained a reiteration of his own political faith and a restatement of the ideals and policies of the Indian National Congress. He recalled the days when the Congress had first met at Bombay in 1885, when ‘hope was warm and faith shone bright’, and the founders of the Congress believed that they would secure a steady advance ‘in the direction of the political emancipation of the people’. Twenty years had elapsed and much had happened to chill that hope and dim that faith. It was true
the Congress had succeeded in making only mere political gains and latterly stagnation, even reaction, had set in. Nevertheless, the Congress was resolved, to attain its goal ‘that India should be governed in the interest of the Indians themselves, and that in course of time a form of Government should be attained in this country similar to what exists in self-governing colonies of the British Empire’. The advance to such a goal could only be gradual, for it was a ‘reasonable proposition, that the sense of responsibility required for the proper exercise of the political institutions of the West can be acquired by an Eastern people through practical training and experiment only’. To admit this was not to question the fitness of the Indian people for self-government. Had not Mr Gladstone ‘in words of profound wisdom’ pointed out that ‘it is liberty alone which fits men for liberty’?

Gokhale made a scathing attack on the monopoly of power by the British bureaucracy in India. The gulf separating British officials from educated Indians had widened; the bureaucracy was growing frankly selfish’ and ‘openly hostile’ to the national aspirations of India. The domination of one race over another inflicted great injury on a subject race, which faced not merely demoralization, but also impoverishment. For a century or more, India had been for the
British ‘a country where fortunes were to be made to be taken out and spent elsewhere’. As in Ireland, the evil of absentee landlordism had in the past aggravated the racial domination of the English over the Irish, so in India, ‘absentee capitalism has been added to the racial ascendancy of Englishmen’.

Self-government was the only real and permanent remedy for the evils from which India suffered. The time had come for the British bureaucracy in India to part with some of its powers in favour of the educated classes. The argument that the educated classes were as yet a very small fraction of the community was unconvincing. At the end of the eighteenth century, not one man in ten or one woman in twenty knew how to read and write in England, and yet there was a House of Commons. In India about fifteen million could read and write, and a million of them had come under the influence of some kind of English education. It was true that the educated class was still small in size, but in the circumstances prevailing in India, they were the natural leaders of the people. They controlled the vernacular press which reached the masses; in a hundred ways they had access to the latter’s minds, and ‘what the educated Indians think today, the rest of India thinks tomorrow’.
Gokhale called for a beginning, even a modest beginning in administrative and constitutional reforms: the enlargement of the size, elective element and powers of the legislative councils, the appointment of Indians to the councils of the Secretary of State, the Viceroy and the provincial Governors, the formation of advisory boards at the district level, the separation of the judicial from the executive functions, the reduction of military expenditure, and the expansion of primary, technical and industrial education. These demands, many of which were embodied in Congress resolutions from year to year, may not sound revolutionary today, but in 1905 few Britons (or even Indians) considered them immediately attainable. What lent special significance to the reiteration of these demands in 1905 was the exit of the Tory Government in England. ‘For the first time since the Congress movement began’, said Gokhale, ‘the liberal and radical party will come into real power.’ He described the Liberal Prime Minister, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, as ‘a tried and trusted friend of freedom’, and referred to John Morley, the new Secretary of State for India, as ‘the reverent student of Burke, the disciple of Mill, the friend and biographer of Gladstone’, to whom large numbers of educated men in India felt ‘as towards a Master and the heart hopes and yet it trembles as it had never hoped or trembled before’.
‘A more gratifying combination of circumstances’, declared Gokhale, ‘could not be conceived and it now rests with us to turn it to the best advantage we can for our motherland.’ Though he ended on a note of cautious optimism, he had earlier in his address bluntly analyzed the great ferment caused by the partition of Bengal. The partition was a cruel wrong inflicted on our Bengali brethren a complete illustration of the worst features of bureaucratic rule in India, its utter contempt for public opinion, its arrogant pretensions to superior wisdom, its reckless disregard of the most cherished feelings of the people and its cool preference of Service interests to those of the governed.

Gokhale’s tribute to ‘Bengal’s heroic stand’, his support for swadeshi and even for boycott as a political weapon in extreme cases were not merely sops to Bengali delegates at the Benares Congress. There was hardly anything in his address which he had not expressed a few weeks before in England in even stronger language.

Khaparde, an associate of Tilak, grudgingly confided to his diary on 27 December 1905: ‘Mr Gokhale’s speech as president was not quite in the ultra moderate style and was cheered in its stronger parts.’ F. J. Bennett of the Times of India regretted that Gokhale had ceased to be ‘a steadying force’ on public feeling.13 ‘The Mr Gokhale
who presided over the Benares Congress yesterday’, wrote the Times of India on 28 December 1905, ‘will seem to many readers of his inaugural address to be a different person from the Mr Gokhale whom they knew some years ago as a sober and dispassionate critic of the acts and policy of the Government.'

It seemed to this Anglo-Indian paper that Gokhale had fallen into ‘the wild ways of the perfervid orators and writers of the Deccan who, in the days when he was much more restrained in utterance than he is now, seemed to move him to remonstrance’.

The presidential speech was a great occasion at the annual Congress session, but the crucial decisions which determined its success or failure were taken in the meetings of the Subjects Committee. The Subjects Committee, which met after the presidential speech on the evening of 27 December, got begged down on the very first resolution, one welcoming the Prince of Wales (later King George V) to India. Lajpat Rai raised objections to the resolution on the ground that the country, suffering from famine and the after-effects of Curzon’s repressive policies, was in no mood to stage pageantry for the royal couple. The Prince had been invited to Benares, but had not responded. In fact, the Congress could express its regret that the Prince had not found it possible to see the Congress session and the exhibition. Tilak
supported Lajpat Rai, but the original resolution was passed by a majority. A threat was then held out by Lajpat Rai and his supporters that they would oppose the resolution in the plenary session.

The Congress leaders had so far scrupulously kept the royal family above politics; the debate on the Prince of Wales was inadvisable, an ill-chosen phrase could do much harm by tarnishing the image of the Congress in England just when the Liberal Government had come into office. There was much excitement in the Congress camp on the night of 27 December, and Munshi Madholal and his friends in the Reception Committee even feared a riot. Gokhale did not, however, lose his nerve; he preferred quiet diplomacy to an acrimonious public debate. Just before the Congress session was scheduled to begin on 28 December, he sent for Lajpat Rai and made a ‘personal appeal’ to him not to oppose the resolution on the Prince of Wales and sought his assistance in persuading Tilak and the Bengali extremists to exercise similar restraint. While the controversial resolution was debated in the plenary session, the opponents of the resolution stayed out of the Congress pavilion; some of the Bengali delegates had to be forcibly kept out by Lajpat Rai and S. B. Bapat, an adherent of Tilak. On his part Gokhale was sporting enough to agree that the Congress
records would not show the resolution as having been passed unanimously.\textsuperscript{15}

The other resolution which caused some anxiety\textsuperscript{4} Moments at the Benares session was on the boycott of foreign goods ‘as a last protest, and perhaps the only constitutional and effective means left to them (the people) of drawing the attention of the British public’ to the iniquity of the partition of Bengal. The remaining twenty resolutions, such as those on the expansion of the Councils, the public service question, military expenditure, police and land revenue reforms, were hardy annuals. One of the resolutions recorded the appreciation of the work done by\textsuperscript{a}\textsuperscript{iai} in England; another enjoined him to visit England again ‘to urge the more pressing proposals of the Congress on the attention of the authorities’.

To have emerged unscathed from the Benares Congress was no mean achievement for Gokhale. The tensions released by the partition of Bengal had fortunately been contained within the Subjects Committee, and not allowed to spill into the plenary session. The battle lines between the Congress Old Guard led by the adherents of Pherozeshah Mehta and the emerging Bengali- Maharashtra Punjab alliance had been drawn, but a clash had been avoided, thanks to Gokhale’s acumen, patience, and tact. In his presidential address he
succeeded in treading the tight rope between the old Congress orthodoxy and the new radicalism. The absence of Pherozeshah Mehta, whose sledge-hammer tactics could crush, but also incite opposition, Gokhale’s personal equation with Lajpat Rai, and the latter’s influence over Tilak had helped to stave off a show-down at Benares and to maintain the fade of Congress unity. This unity was essential if Gokhale was to plead for a new deal for his country under the new regime in India and England.

In the last months of his viceroyalty, Curzon had so thoroughly alienated large sections of Indian opinion that almost any Viceroy following him would have been popular. Lord Minto did not have Curzon’s dominating personality, intellectual stamina and demoniac energy, but he was also free from his predecessor’s flamboyance, conceit and irascibility. Soon after his arrival in India, the new Viceroy stumbled upon the key to popularity which had eluded Curzon for six years. ‘It takes a very short time in this country’, Minto wrote, ‘to realize how much may be done by a sympathetic appreciation of existing conditions’.\textsuperscript{16} He noted how ‘the excitable and impressionable leaders of India are curiously amenable to personal influence’.\textsuperscript{17} A year later, Motilal Ghose of the Amrita Bazar Patrika, a caustic critic of Curzon and official policies, was assuring Dunlop-Smith, the Viceroy’s private
secretary, that ‘it would take two Curzons in succession to disturb the calm Lord Minto had brought’.\textsuperscript{18}

Minto seems to have tried his charm on Gokhale. Their meeting on 30 January 1906 went off very well. Had a long and most cordial interview yesterday with the Viceroy’, Gokhale confided to Krishna-swami Aiyer. ‘He had sent for me himself and asked my opinion about several important matters, including the Partition and expressed himself in very flattering terms about my Congress [presidential] address’.\textsuperscript{19}

A few days later, Gokhale used his influence in the vice regal camp to intercede on behalf of his friend Samuel Ratcliffe, the editor of the Statesman, who had got into trouble with the Home Department of the Government of India for publishing one of Curzon’s minutes on the partition of Bengal.\textsuperscript{20} Enraged by this breach of the Official Secrets Act, the Home Department had barred the Statesman from government advertisements and other privileges. Gokhale spoke to Dunlop-Smith, who helped in arranging an interview between Samuel Ratcliffe and Arundel. The Home Member. A compromise was reached, the Statesman published an apology and the government withdrew the ban.

Gokhale’s first impressions of Minto as a cool and sympathetic ruler were confirmed during the winter session of the Imperial Legislative Council. Aware that ‘no Viceroy of recent times has had to
succeed to a greater legacy of difficulties than Lord Minto’, 21 Gokhale was anxious not to embarrass him. In his budget speech on 28 March, he concentrated on economic rather than political issues. He outlined a comprehensive scheme of state action for improving the condition of the masses: the reduction in the salt duty and land revenue at least in the famine-stricken areas, the amortization of rural debts, the provision of funds for local bodies, particularly for rural water supply and drainage, the extension of primary education and the establishment of a technological institute. The additional funds for this programme were to be found partly by financing railway construction through loans rather than through taxation, and partly by scrapping the costly military reorganization scheme prepared by the Commander-in-Chief, Lord Kitchener, before the Japanese victory over Russia altered the balance of power in Asia. The power of Russia has been broken’, Gokhale argued. ‘Her prestige in Asia is gone. She has on her hands troubles more than enough of her own to think of troubling others for years to come: and thus a cloud that was thought to hang for twenty years and more over our north-western frontier has passed away’. 22

Gokhale cited the example of Japan to expose the ‘un-national character of the Indian army’. With an expenditure of 37 million yen, or a little under six crores of rupees, Japan had a standing army of
167,000 men with reserves which could be raised to 600,000 men. ‘We spend’, Gokhale reminded the Imperial Council, ‘six times as much money a year and yet in return for it we have only an in expansive force of about 230,000 men with about 25,000 Native reservists and about 30,000 European volunteers!’ Indians were barred from the officers’ cadre. The exclusion of the people of India from all honourable participation in the defence of their own country was, said Gokhale, ‘a cruel wrong to a whole people—one-fifth of the entire population of the world’.

In a telling comparison with Japan, Gokhale pointed out that though the Japanese people had come under the influence of western ideas only forty years before, they had, under the fostering care of their own government, taken their place by the side of the proudest nations of the West. Indians had been under English rule much longer, and yet continued ‘to be mere hewers of wood and drawers of water in our own country and, of course. we have no position anywhere else’.

‘What the country needs at this moment above everything else’, Gokhale told the Imperial Legislative Council, ‘is a government, national in spirit, even though it may be foreign in personnel—a government that will enable us to feel that our
interests are the first consideration with it, and our wishes and opinions are to it a matter of some account.'

Gokhale concluded: ‘My Lord. I have ventured to make these observations because the present situation fills me with great anxiety. I can only raise my humble voice by way of warning, by way of appeal. The rest lies on the knees of the gods.’

Gokhale’s speech had ended on an ardent note. It included a trenchant criticism of the government, but it did not refer to the controversial issues of the partition of Bengal and the boycott. This studied restraint could not have passed unnoticed by Minto, who presided over the deliberations of the Imperial Council. The Viceroy and his Finance Member, E. N. Baker, seemed to have made an earnest effort to win over Gokhale, who returned to Poona from the winter session of the Imperial Council with high hopes.

Gokhale to G. A. Natesan, 2 April 1905: You will be glad to know that my budget speech this year was extremely well received in the Council. The Viceroy specially sent for me at the conclusion of the proceedings and congratulated me in very flattering terms. He further assured me that it would be his ambition to advance to some extent at any rate, to work on the lines indicated by me during his regime.
Mr Baker (Finance Member), with whom I had a long interview at his special request the next day, assured me that he would provide funds in next year's budget for making a beginning in the direction of free Primary Education. He said very kind things, which I need not repeat here, but you will judge how friendly he is when I tell you that he made an earnest appeal to me not to retire from the (Imperial Legislative) Council next year, as he knows it is my intention to do. He said, 'Give me two to three years and I will make a beginning in regard to most of the things you are advocating, only you must be in the Council to hack me up by your criticism and your demands.' He explained to me confidentially his difficulties, but with the retirement of two of his senior colleagues, his voice will prevail more and more on the Executive Council and you may rest assured that that voice will be raised wholly in our interest. . .

Altogether, I feel the situation is most hopeful and I have never returned from Calcutta with such a sense of satisfaction within me as this year. Now that the Government of India have themselves taken up the question of a further reform of Legislative Council, my hands will be immensely strengthened in pressing the question forward during my forthcoming visit to England.25
Gokhale was in a buoyant mood when he sailed for England from Bombay in the S.S. Egypt on 14 April. This was his fifth sea voyage, but the first which he really enjoyed. In 1897, the thought of the ordeal awaiting him before the Welby Commission had weighed on him; the return voyage had been clouded by the ‘apology incident’. In 1905, the breeze with Pherozeshah Mehta, the aftermath of the partition of Bengal and the critical responsibility of having to preside over the Benares Congress had kept his nerves on edge. In the spring of 1906 he was happily free from such anxieties, and cheerfully looked forward to being in England. He wrote from Aden on 18 April.

I am enjoying the voyage immensely. The sea so far has been calm and there is a beautiful breeze all day long on the deck. I spend my time mostly in walking and reading, with a little conversation with fellow-passengers by way of variation. The Aga Khan is also with us and I am delighted to find that he is coming over to our way of thinking in politics more and more.26

The Aga Khan expressed his happiness at the formation of the Servants of India Society, offered to contribute Rs 5000 to its funds, and invited Gokhale to stay with him in Switzerland for a month to improve his health. As we shall see later, the Aga Khan’s
cordiality was not as disinterested as it seemed at the time; these conversations on the S.S. Egypt were exploited to embarrass Gokhale’s mission in England.

On the evening of 30 April Gokhale reached London. The trains was two hours late, but about fifty Indians, headed by Dadabhai Naoroji, were waiting at Victoria station to receive him. On 1 May he met the British Committee of the Indian National Congress. The next day he called on J. E. Ellis, the Under-Secretary of State for India. On 3 May he addressed about fifty M.P.s at a meeting of the Indian Parliamentary Committee. Two days later he was Wedderburn’s guest at Gloucester where he spoke on temperance. He returned to London to address the Indian Parliamentary Committee and a meeting convened to protest against the ‘Barisal Incident’ in East Bengal. He visited Cambridge and Oxford, attended a peace conference at Birmingham, and addressed the East India Association.

The paper that Gokhale read before the East India Association on 11 July 1906 was one of the clearest and most forthright expositions of the Indian case for self-government which he had ever attempted. It was sporting of the East India Association comprising predominantly former governors, judges, generals, bankers and planters to invite him to speak. The consciousness of an unsympathetic or even hostile audience
seems to have put Gokhale on his mettle. He asserted that the faith of
the people of India in the character and ideals of British rule had been
shaken, and its place was being taken by ‘a conviction that, however
great England may be, she is not great enough to forgo voluntarily the
gains of power from considerations of mere justice or national honour’.  

He admitted that the English-educated class in India numbered merely a
million in a population of three hundred millions. There was, however,
no greater mistake than to imagine that ‘the influence of this class was
proportionate only to its numbers’. The members of this class
‘constituted the brain of the community’ they did the thinking not only
for themselves, but also for their ignorant brethren. They controlled
the Indian language press, which shaped the thoughts and swayed the
feelings, not only of the fifteen million literates in vernaculars whom it
reached directly, but also of many more who were indirectly under its
influence.

It was possible, argued Gokhale, that ‘bureaucracies like the
Bourbons’ never learnt, but it should not be difficult for Englishmen to
realize that you cannot have institutions like the universities working
for more than half a century in India, and then expect to be able to
govern the people, as though they were still strangers to ideas of
constitutional freedom or to the dignity of national aspirations. Those
who blindly uphold the existing system, and resist all attempts, however cautious and moderate, to broaden its base, prefer practically to sacrifice the future to the present. The goal which the educated classes of India have in view is a position for their country in the Empire worthy of the self-respect of civilized people. They want their country to be a prosperous, self-governing, integral part of the Empire, and not a mere poverty-stricken, bureaucratically-held possession of that Empire. The system under which India is governed at present is an unnatural system, and however one may put up with it as a temporary evil, as a permanent arrangement it is impossible. . . .28

Gokhale conceded that since self-government for India had to be on western lines, the steps by which the goal was to be reached would be slow. But there was all the difference between cautious progress and no progress at all. The bureaucracy which stood in the way of all reasonable installments of reform was ‘undermining its own position by such a short-sighted and suicidal policy’.29 It had been argued by British officials that India would have to wait till the mass of the people had been qualified by education to take an intelligent part in public affairs. But was it not the fault of the government that after a century of British rule, seven children out of eight in India continued to grow up in ignorance and darkness? In any case, what he was
asking for immediately was a voice in the administration only for those who were qualified by education to exercise their civic responsibilities.

One can only guess how the audience, consisting mostly of ola India hands, must have squirmed when Gokhale told them that ‘the efficiency attained by a foreign bureaucracy, uncontrolled by public opinion’ was bound to be of a ‘strictly limited character’,30, that as things were, there was ‘no one ever in the Indian Government who is permanently interested in the country as only its own people can be interested . . . the true well-being of the people is systematically subordinated to militarism, service interests of English mercantile classes. . . Gokhale denounced the virtual British monopoly of the higher posts in the administration in India. He warned that unless the educated classes were conciliated, ‘England will find on her hands before long another Ireland, only many times bigger, in India’. ‘I cannot say’, Gokhale concluded, ‘that I have much hope that any such policy will be at once adopted. The struggle before us is, I fear, a long one, and, in all probability, it will be a most bitter one. The flowing tide, however, is with us, and such a struggle can have but one issue.’31
In the summer of 1906, as in his earlier visits, Gokhale’s mentor in England was Sir William Wedderburn. Sir William’s watchword was ‘moderation’. ‘The object should be’, he told Gokhale, ‘to show the moderation and practicality of our proposals.’

Despite occasional tours and public meetings, the emphasis during this visit was on quiet diplomacy rather than on overt propaganda. Sir William introduced Gokhale to a number of M.P.s, including Ramsay MacDonald, Sir Charles Dilke, Keir Hardie, C. P. Trevelyan and G. P. Gooch. Some of them drew upon him for facts and figures for asking questions or moving amendments to official resolutions. Many years later, G. P. Gooch, in his memoirs, described Gokhale as the most eminent Indian statesman of his time, with ‘mellow wisdom and quiet strength’.

Ellis, the Under-Secretary of State for India, was extremely well-disposed to Gokhale and invited about forty members of Parliament to meet him at breakfast. The Inter-Parliamentary Conference invited Gokhale to attend the conference. From the ‘Anti-Imperialist League’ of America came a request that Gokhale should visit the United States and deliver a series of lectures on India.

All this was very flattering, but somewhat irrelevant. The main purpose for which Gokhale had come to England was to persuade the new Liberal Government to recognize the gravity of the crisis in India.
and to reverse the process of alienation of the people which Curzon had set in motion. There was no time to lose. ‘Now is the time for work,’ R. C. Dutt wrote to Gokhale from Baroda on 24 May 1906, ‘now or never. If this Liberal Govt. fails to give a more representative character to the Indian administration, we shall never get anything by peaceful methods, and England will be teaching us to pursue Irish methods in a country which has more than 50 times the population of Ireland’.

The central figure in the Liberal Government, who needed to be educated from the Indian point of view, was John Morley, the Secretary of State. Gokhale had met him during his earlier visits to England in 1897 and 1905. These visits made it somewhat easier for Gokhale to approach Morley, who received from the young Indian politician a full exposition of Indian grievances and aspirations. ‘I made a passionate appeal to Mr Morley yesterday’, Gokhale wrote home on 10 May 1906, to realize the great responsibility of his teachings in his present office. And he was much moved and he spoke freely of his difficulties and intentions.’ Eight days later, Gokhale felt that Morley was ‘at last waking up to the situation and we may expect further developments yer. ‘I may tell you privately’, Gokhale
confided to Krishnaswami Aiyer, ‘that I have been able to establish excellent personal relations with Mr Morley.’

Wedderburn and his colleagues in the British Committee were glad that Gokhale was hitting it off so well with Morley. In India hopes rose high. ‘You have secured the ear of Mr Morley’, Gokhale’s friend R. N. Mudholkar wrote to him. ‘You have opened his eyes. Through him you have moved that immovable barrier, the India Office.’ Another friend, Hari Narayan Apte, was delighted when he was approached on behalf of an English Radical, J. Seymour Keay, to secure Gokhale’s help in finding him a safe seat in the House of Commons.

When my friend asked me to write to you in this connection (Apte told Gokhale) I was not a little overjoyed for this shows that making India a plank in their platform has been considered advantageous by some [British] politicians at least. This gives me hope that the time is not far distant when there will be an India Party as strong as the Labour Party in the British Parliament. I only hope you will be there to lead it.

This optimism was racing ahead of events. Soon Gokhale was complaining of ‘adverse influences’ being at work. The anticlimax
came with Morley’s long-awaited speech on the Indian budget on 20 July.

Three months of silent and strenuous diplomacy had nearly broken Gokhale’s health, but they had not brought him visibly nearer the constitutional reforms he had been advocating. Some of the obstacles to the reforms were inherent in the structure of the British Raj; others arose at the time from conflicting pressures on John Morley.

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