By 1904 it was clear to Gokhale that the Indian National Congress was losing its influence in India, and its branch in England, the British Committee, was on the verge of insolvency and collapse. The apathy of the Congress organization between the annual sessions was deplorable enough, but even the ‘three-day Congress festival’ was ceasing to be impressive. Many of the Congress leaders were well-meaning and patriotic, and some of them were really able and eloquent, but they tended to treat politics as an occasional diversion from their personal and professional preoccupations. Indian universities turned out every year hundreds of young men who had all the zest and time in the world for politics, but lacked the knowledge, training and, experience. Gokhale had long been wondering whether it was possible to harness the energy and enthusiasm of these young men for national regeneration. From time immemorial India had furnished the highest example of self-abnegation in her sanyasins, who renounced the world and its material interests, subjected themselves to a rigorous discipline and consecrated their lives to the service of God and man. Could this ancient ideal of renunciation be adapted for secular ends? What if a few young men turned their backs upon personal ambition, and made the social and political uplift of their country their sole mission in life? At the Dharwar
Social Conference in April 1903, while urging a crusade against untouchability, Gokhale had asked, Cannot a few men five per cent, four per cent, three, two, even one per cent of hundreds and hundreds of graduates that the University turns out every year, take it upon themselves to dedicate their lives to this sacred work of the elevation of low castes? My appeal is not to the old or the middle-aged the grooves of their lives are fixed but I think I may well address such an appeal to the young members of our community. What the country needs most at the present moment is a spirit of self-sacrifice on the part of our educated young men.¹

Few among India’s politicians were better qualified to make such an appeal than Gokhale. For eighteen years he served the Deccan Education Society at a pittance. In his farewell address to the Fergusson College in 1904 he said:

The principal moral interest of this institution is in fact that it represents an idea and embodies an ideal. The idea is that Indians of the present-day can bind themselves together, and putting aside all thoughts of worldly interest, work for a secular purpose with the zeal and enthusiasm which we generally find in the sphere of religion alone.²

The idea that dedicated workers’ were required in the sphere of politics and social reform no less than in that of education had
occurred to Gokhale many years before, but he did not perhaps could not give practical shape to it until his retirement from the Fergusson College. Though he had spoken about a new organization for training young men for public life to his young friend R. P. Paranjpye as early as 1897, he took it up in right earnest only in 1904-05. Early in 1905, he sounded his friends on the aims and rules of a new society he proposed to set up. The venture seemed to him at once fascinating and awesome. He wondered whether he would be able to attract enough able young men who had the spirit of self-sacrifice. Would he be able to train them for the tasks of nation-building? Would he be able to inspire, guide, and control the young men who placed themselves under his charge? Would he be able to find the money for building the headquarters of the society and running it from month to month? And finally, would the government allow him to go ahead with this scheme of training 'national missionaries'?

These and other doubts assailed Gokhale as he formulated the constitution of the ‘Servants of India Society’ in the early months of 1905. At first he thought of apprenticing young men for five or ten years, and then allowing them to go back to their professions. Life-membership was a stiffer condition, but Gokhale finally preferred it to short-term membership. He decided to recruit university-educated
‘young men with intellectual capacity, devotion to duty and mental elevation’. There was to be a period of probation during which the new entrants were to be under the immediate supervision of the First Member (as Gokhale designated himself). Not until the young missionaries had completed their training and acquired a degree of maturity were they to be allowed to act on their own. Gokhale was acutely conscious of ‘the disorganized and undisciplined public life and the want of self-restraint’ which characterized most young men. At tide 5 of the constitution of the Servants of India Society, as originally drafted, had laid down that every member on admission would be under a vow of ‘absolute obedience’ to the First Member for five years. The idea of ‘absolute obedience’ jarred on many of his friends. ‘The Society of Jesus’, he reminded one of them, ‘enjoined strict obedience on some members for a period of 31 years.’ Though Gokhale was not wholly convinced by the criticism that Article 5 posed a danger to individual liberty, he agreed to tone it down. In its revised form it read: ‘Every member shall during the time that he is under training place himself under the entire guidance and control of the First Member and shall do such studies as the First Member may direct.’ I am hopeful’, Gokhale wrote to Krishnaswami Aiyer, ‘that young men will be forthcoming in sufficient numbers. For the rest everything must depend upon the personal influence which I am able to
exert on these men. The time to speak of that will be, say, five years hence, not now.’

The preamble to the constitution of the Servants of India Society, drafted by Gokhale, was a confession of his political faith. He acknowledged the ‘startling’ growth during the preceding fifty years of the feeling of common nationality in India, based upon common tradition, common disabilities and common hopes and aspirations. There was a growing realization that they were ‘Indians first, and Hindoos, Mahomedans, Parsees or Christians after wards’ and ‘the idea of a united and renovated India, marching onwards to a place among the nations of the world, worthy of her great past, is no longer a mere idle dream of a few imaginative minds, but is the definitely accepted creed of those who form the brain of the community the educated classes of the country’. A new life was coursing in the veins of the people. The foundations of national regeneration had been laid, but the ‘great work of rearing the superstructure had yet to be taken in hand’. The rules framed by Gokhale required members to live on a modest allowance: Rs30p.m. for a trainee; Rs 50 for a full member. They were forbidden to earn for themselves, or to engage in personal quarrels. ‘Thus cut off from material pursuits and personal ambition, they were to give their
undivided attention to public affairs. The Servants of India Society was being established, Gokhale wrote, ‘to train men, prepared to devote their lives to the cause of the country in a religious spirit, for the work of political education and agitation, and will seek to promote, by all constitutional means, the national interests of the Indian people’. Gokhale held forth a lofty ideal before these young missionaries of Indian nationalism, the ‘ascetic pilgrims of politics’, as H. W. Nevinson, the British journalist, once described them. ‘Love of country’, Gokhale wrote, must so fill the heart that all else shall appear as of little moment by its side. A fervent patriotism, which rejoices at every opportunity of sacrifice for the motherland, a dauntless heart, which refuses to be turned back from its object by difficulty or danger, a deep faith in the purpose of Providence that nothing can shake—equipped with these, the worker must start on his mission, and reverently seek the joy which comes of spending oneself in the service of one's country.

As the appointed day—12 June 1905—for the establishment of the Society approached, and Gokhale thought of its tremendous possibilities and problems, he was swayed by feelings of anxiety, hope, and exaltation. Whether he succeeded or failed, he was conscious that he was on the brink of the most important decision of his life.
Gokhale to Sarla Ray, 3 June 1905: In about a week or ten days from today, the three men who have agreed to join, and myself will take the requisite vows and start the society and after that there will be only one purpose and one meaning to my existence. As I stand on the shore, ready to take the plunge, the immensity of the ocean in front of me overwhelms me. And various emotions crowd into my heart—a feeling of awe at the responsibility I am undertaking, a vague unstilted regret at the farewell I am bidding to all purely personal life, a sense of realization too at the thought that I have probably attained the purpose of my existence—for I feel profoundly that all my past has tended towards this consummation. If I live ten years more, I feel confident that my Society will by the end of that time have become a great power for good in the land. If I die before that, well, I shall have done my best for my country within the limitations within which work has to be done—and no one can do more than his best.\(^9\)

On the morning of 12 June 1905, Gokhale took the ‘seven vows’, and then swore in G. K. Devadhar, A. V. Patwardhan and N. A. Dravid—all in their thirties—as members of the Servants of India Society. Gokhale was already acquainted with these three men who, informally, were already working under his direction. From the
outset Gokhale yet his heart on quality rather than on numbers. The care he took in selecting new members is shown by the experience of V. S. Srinivasa Sastri. A school teacher from Madras, the thirty-seven year-old Sastri succeeded in getting himself elected as a delegate to the Benares Congress in December 1905 over which Gokhale was to preside. At Benares, he wrote a letter requesting Gokhale for an interview. The interview did not, however, take place until February 1906 when Gokhale was in Calcutta for the meetings of the Imperial Council. And it was not until January 1907 that Sastri was administered the vows. 'Gokhale’s deportment’, Sastri recalled, many years later, ‘was solemn and inspired me with ... awe. As I pronounced the phrases of each vow after him, I was seized with terrible misgivings as to my being able to keep them in a tolerable degree.’

The experience of Hriday Nath Kunzru was no different. The son of Pandit Ajudhianath, a leading figure of the early Congress and a friend of Alton Hume, Kunzru offered to join the Servants of India Society when Gokhale visited Allahabad in April 1908. Gokhale was about to leave for England and told Kunzru to wait for his return. Kunzru attended the Madras Congress in December 1908, but Gokhale was too busy to meet him and invited him to Calcutta. At
Calcutta, Kunzru had to undergo a searching cross-examination by Gokhale and was even asked to write an essay on the Madras Congress. Not until 1909 did Gokhale admit Kunzru into the Society. Two years later, he sent him to England to attend lectures at the London School of Economics.

Several members of the Servants of India Society were destined to make a mark in the public life of India. Srinivasa Sastri was to distinguish himself as a legislator, envoy and Privy Councillor; Kunzru was to shape into an outstanding parliamentarian; A. V. Thakkar (‘Thakkar Bapa’) was to make his mark as a great social reformer and N. M. Joshi, as an eminent labour leader; N. A. Dravid was to serve as the editor of the Dnyana Prakash; and A. V. Patwardhan as the manager of the Arya Bhushan Press, which was eventually to become the mainstay of the Society. Hardly any of these ‘Servants of India’ could have foreseen the vistas which were to open to them in future. To the new entrants in the years before the First World War, the Society must have seemed the gateway to a monastery, rather than to honour. Fame or influence. Renunciation of all personal ambition and the acceptance of voluntary poverty evoked feelings of shock and disbelief amongst relatives and friends. The case of A. V. Thakkar, who resigned his job to join the Society, was probably not atypical.
Dear Brothers, (he wrote in his farewell letter to his family)

It pains me to write this letter and I believe it will pain you all very deeply to read its contents.

I have resigned my service from the Bombay Municipality and shall immediately join the Servants of India Society. I have consulted no one in this matter, and have acted entirely according to the dictates of my own conscience. I may have erred, if the voice of my conscience errs. Whatever it may be, I can ‘ignore the voice no longer...’

Not everyone had the courage of Thakkar Bapa. C. Y. Chintamani, the young journalist from Andhra, the editor of the Indian People, who was one day to win his laurels as the editor of the Leader, pleaded his inability to join the Servants of India Society. He wrote to Gokhale:

I curse myself that God has not placed me in a position to have the privilege of being trained under you. I have a mother who has suffered more than her fair share of misfortunes, a widowed sister and a motherless son to look after. My eldest brother has been an insolvent and we are scattered with not a rupee to our credit in this wide world.
A similar plea was offered by young Rajendra Prasad, a promising lawyer from Patna, who was destined to be the first President of the Indian Republic. The thirty-two year-old M. R. Jayakar, who had met Gokhale three weeks before the Society was founded, wrote in his diary:

Gokhale spoke very enthusiastically about his scheme. The veteran patriot was aglow. His face shone brightly in the morning sun. I gave him a complete picture of my present situation and some idea pleaded for time to get over my family difficulties. On that he rightly observed: ‘My mind may change or I may not live long enough to receive you at a later date. Besides, ten years of your present age are worth twenty a decade hence’.14

Jayakar did not join the Society, but begged Gokhale to understand, if he could not forgive, one to whom 'the tears of his dearest relatives are more than the censure of the motherland’.15

One of Gokhale’s worries, while he made preparations for the launching of the Servants of India Society, was the possibility of suspicion and even hostility on the part of the government. The constitution of the Society avowed 'frankly' the acceptance ‘of the British connection as ordained, in the inscrutable dispensation of Providence, for India’s good’, and held out self-government on the
lines of English Colonies’, as the goal. The guardians of the British Raj were not won over by felicitous phrases. The Indian National Congress had at several of its sessions professed its loyalty to the ‘Throne’ and concluded its meetings with three cheers for Her Majesty the Queen of England, but it had nevertheless remained on the wrong side of her government and her agents in India. Few British statesmen or civil servants at the turn of the century would have conceded even the remotest possibility of India becoming a self-governing colony like Canada or Australia. There was no getting away from the fundamental fact that Gokhale was setting up an organization for systematically training full-time politicians who were likely to follow in his footsteps. One Gokhale was bad enough; a battalion of young Gokhales could hardly be a welcome prospect to British officials.

Anticipating possible obstruction from the government, Gokhale was inclined to present it with a fait accompli. He deliberately avoided publicity. His friend V. Krishnaswami Aiyer, however, advised him to take the government into confidence. ‘They are sure to disapprove of your scheme’, Aiyer wrote, ‘but they will know what it is, and won’t suspect. Secrecy engenders suspicion and suspicion of authorities in India means danger to individuals.’
Gokhale took the cue, and called on Du Boulay, the private secretary to Lord Lamington, the Governor of Bombay. He explained the objects of the Servants of India Society. Lamington hastened to take the Viceroy in to confidence.

Lamington to Curzon, 8 July 1905: I enclose a copy of the Rules of a Political Brotherhood, which Gokhale is starting... Gokhale came to see Du Boulay, to impress upon him that the object of the Society was to agitate upon constitutional lines for fuller rights of citizenship and larger political power for natives of India: and that one of its principal aims was to counteract the growing tendency of the rising generation to adopt the seditious attitude and wild language of such papers as the Kal and the Kesari. Gokhale said ...that he had a firm faith in the ultimate, if deferred, realization of his political aspirations! that he was convinced that a real national spirit would eventually be born: but that it would not come until the people saw that their political leaders were animated by a spirit of self-sacrifice and devotion to their country such as underlies the code of rules of his new brotherhood. His particular object in seeking an interview was doubtless to discount the suspicions attached towards the movement which he anticipated on the part of the police.
The city Magistrate one carvalho says he cannot help thinking that Gokhale is becoming more advanced in his opinions and fears that in time he will become a violent opponent of government.  

Curzon had never been able to understand, much less sympathize with, Indian political aspirations. he admiration for Gokhale’s ability had from the first been tempered by a deep suspicion of his motives. This suspicion turned to active hostility during the winter session of the Imperial Council in 1904-5, when Gokhale stoutly fought one unpopular measure after another brought forward by the Government of India. it is therefore not surprising that Curzon’s comments on the Servants of India Society should have been caustic:

I do not believe in the least (he replied in a letter to governor lamington) either in Gokhale or in his new brotherhood. Gokhale either does not see where he is going, or if he does see it, then he is dishonest in his pretensions. You cannot awaken and appeal to the spirit of nationality in India and at the same time, profess loyal acceptance of British rule.

Mr. Gokhale was the greatest leader that India has ever produced,’ wrote the Statesman on 21 February 1915, ‘perhaps her greatest man.’ A few days later, at a memorial meeting in London,
Sir Krishna Gupta, a member of the India Council, referred to Gokhale as the greatest Indian of his time. Obituaries and memorial tributes often need to be discounted, but there is no doubt that at the time of his death, and indeed for nearly a decade before it, Gokhale occupied a unique place in the public life of India. ‘You know’, Mrs Besant had pleaded with him in 1914 ‘that India cannot spare you and a month or two of rest may mean year of work.’\textsuperscript{19} ‘You must remember’, wrote Rabindranath Tagore in December 1913, ‘that for a man like you to Ike is in it Self service—to your country—for your life is not merely useful, it is a light to others.’\textsuperscript{20} In November 1913, When her own life hung precariously in the balance, the poetess Sarojini Naidu sent ‘a message of love and gratitude’ to Gokhale: ‘You have been a beacon light of hope to the young generation.’\textsuperscript{21} She was reflecting the feelings of many others, of Motilal Nehru, Tej Bahadur Sapru, C. Y. Chintamani, M, R. Jayakar, M. A. Jinnah and, above all of M. K. Gandhi of South African fame, who was to mourn Gokhale’s death by walking barefoot for a year.

It was no mean achievement for a man who had started life without the advantages of birth or fortune to have attained such pre-eminence. Gokhale had forged his way to the forefront of Indian politics by 1902. But from 1905, when he presided over the Benares Congress,
until his death in 1915, he was, to use the expressive phrase of Mohammed All (the future Khilafat leader), the ‘First Moderate’.  

Gokhale owed his rise primarily to his own outstanding ability, industry and public spirit. His ambition to excel in everything he attempted, whether it was a college examination, a magazine article, a public speech or a game of billiards, had turned him early in life into an assiduous student of politics. He was lucky enough to serve his political apprenticeship under Ranade, who instructed him in the principles of a humane, liberal and secular nationalism, besides giving him a thorough grounding in Indian politics and economics. To be Ranade’s protégé was an obvious asset. The Bombay Moderates, led by Ranade’s friend, Pherozeshah Mehta, who disliked and distrusted Tilak, were glad to find in Gokhale an able Maharashtrian politician who could act as a counterweight to Tilak. Gokhale owed his election to the Imperial Legislative Council—which proved to be a turning-point in his political career—largely to the support he received from Pherozeshah Mehta. Again, it was Wedderburn another friend and admirer of Ranade—who helped Gokhale shape into a successful unofficial envoy of his country to England. Wedderburn initiated Gokhale into the mysteries of British politics and introduced him to ministers, politicians, editors and officials in London who were concerned with Indian affairs. Gokhale shed his early shyness and diffidence and
learnt to be at home in England, addressing public meetings in London and the provinces, briefing friends of India in Parliament, crossing swords with Anglo-Indian officials and interviewing British ministers in Whitehall.

The clarity, conviction and courage with which he spoke up for his country raised Gokhale’s stock with the Indian educated classes. What impressed them was not the ‘moderation’, but the sharpness of Gokhale’s indictment of the policies of the government. The fact that this indictment rested on carefully marshalled facts and arguments made it all the more powerful. As they read or heard Gokhale, educated Indians felt that he was articulating their own inmost thoughts and aspirations. They also saw in Gokhale an embodiment of personal sacrifice and dedication, which they admired, but could not bring themselves to emulate.

Gokhale vowed himself to voluntary poverty for life, first as a member of the Deccan Education Society, and then as the First Member of the Servants of India Society. He viewed politics not as the pursuit of power or influence on behalf of individuals or groups, but as a lever for the regeneration of his country. This idealistic conception of politics seemed to fit in with the needs of a subject race struggling to be free; it did not sound hypocritical when it was expounded by a man whose words never went beyond his deeds. Gokhale saw how well trained and organized the British bureaucracy in India was; he saw what little chance there was of challenging
its monopoly of power without enlisting an equivalent measure of talent, training and discipline in the nationalist ranks. This was why he set out to build a cadre of 'political missionaries' through the Servants of India Society.

In India, more than perhaps in any other country, a charisma tends to grow around a public figure who is seen to be utterly selfless. Gokhale’s call for renunciation struck answering chords among his countrymen. Not only did he live a simple and austere life, but in the long years of negotiation and discussion preceding the MintoMorley reforms, he never sought the slightest advantage for himself. He was remarkably free even from that occupational disease of politician’s vanity and self-advertisement. When it was suggested to him during his visit to Madras in 1907 that he should lay the foundation-stone of a new building, Gokhale protested that he deserved no such honour, that too much was made of the too little done by public figures in India, and that men like him had ‘to think of the vast work that lies in front of them compared with what little they may have been privileged to attempt’.23

It was this extraordinary self-effacement which led R. P. Paranjpye to remark that Gokhale’s ‘patriotism was pure gold with no element of dross in it’.24 Lovat Fraser, the editor of the Times of India, who was no friend of Gokhale, but saw something of him in London during his last years, noted
that he had ‘in his heart spiritual hunger. From his youth he was vowed to poverty, and when one met him clad in silk hat and frock-coat in the lobby of the House of Commons, one knew that he secretly loathed these trappings. His mild and gentle eyes shone with the light of soaring thoughts, and only his love of country kept him to his self-appointed path.’ 25 The dinner tables of London—in the words of Cobden—may have had their ‘insidious attractions for the simple-minded’, 26 but they failed to seduce Gokhale, Till the last he continued to light tenaciously for a better future for his country. And till the last he remained the bite noire of successive Viceroy's, and high officials in Calcutta, Simla and London.

It was not only the British bureaucracy which questioned Gokhale’s bona fides. In Maharashtra, and especially in Poona, he was often maligned by his political opponents as a traitor or a coward. It was all part of a political vendetta which stemmed from personal rather than ideological animosities. In this vendetta Gokhale—like his mentors Agarkar and Ranade before him was generally at a disadvantage. His antagonist, Tilak, with the halo of recurrent imprisonments in British jails, and as the reputed defender of the Hindu faith and orthodoxy, enjoyed a charismatic appeal in Maharashtra which Gokhale and his fellow-Moderates, with their constitutional methods and secular philosophy, could never attain. In the Marathi press, there was a continual sniping at Gokhale; he was
lampooned by cartoonists, and vilified in malicious verses sung in the
Ganapati festival processions in Poona. For this smear-campaign, Tilak
may not have been directly responsible, but he does not seem to have done
very much to stop it. Between the rival parties in Poona the Moderates and
the Extremists it was almost a thirty years’ war, sometimes ‘cold’, sometimes
‘hot’, which was to end (and even then not completely) only with
Gokhale’s death in 1915. While Gokhale’s body was being consigned to
the flames on the afternoon of 20 February, Tilak paid a magnificent public
tribute to Gokhale, 27 but the Extremist bitterness towards Gokhale may be
glimpsed from the entry in the diary of G. S. Khaparde (a friend and
follower of Tilak), on the same day: ‘In the Bar Room I heard that Gopal
Krishna Gokhale died yesterday night. I am sorry he did not live long
enough to endure the consequences of his double-dealing and roguery.’ 28

The tragedy of Gokhale’s, as his friend, K. Natarajan of Indian Social
Reformer; graphically described it, was that ‘a proud and sensitive spirit
was forced by the stress of self-imposed duties to expose itself to frequent
galling wounds’. 29 Gokhale shed some of his hypersensitivity after the
terrible ordeal of the ‘apology incident’ in 1897. But he never developed a
thick enough skin. He would have suffered less if he had not thought of
politics as a game to be played according to the rules of Westminster. He
would have suffered less if he had possessed the stoicism of his master.
Ranade, the nonchalance of his rival. Tilak or the egotism of his eminent contemporary, Pherozeshah Mehta.

As it was, the never-ceasing duel with his political opponents in Poona was a great strain on Gokhale’s dwindling reserves of physical and nervous energy. Indeed, had it not been for his election to the chairmanship of the municipality of Poona, he would have left Poona for good and settled in Bombay in 1902. Fortunately, after his election to the Imperial Council, he had ceased to be a man of Poona or of Bombay. His influence extended beyond the bounds of the Deccan and western India; he came to be respected as much in Calcutta and Madras as in Lahore and Allahabad. No other Indian politician of the time, with the possible exception of Dadabhai Naoroji at the turn of the century, commanded such high prestige among the Indian elite outside his own province. The fact is that most Congress leaders were bogged down in local politics and controversies: this was as true of Pherozeshah Mehta and D. E. Wacha in Bombay as of B. G. Tilak in Maharashtra. Surendranath Banerjea and B. C. Pal in Bengal, G. S. Khaparde and R. N. Mudholkar in Berar, and Lajpat Rai in the Punjab. Gokhale, who had outgrown regional and sectarian loyalties early in his life but had failed to strike strong roots in his home region, Maharashtra, was well suited for a role on the national stage.
It was characteristic of Gokhale that in Bombay his best friends and hosts were not Maharashtrian Brahmans, but Gujarati and Parsi families, and that the two ‘trustees’ he nominated to look after his daughters after his death were both Gujaratis. His Servants of India were recruited from different provinces; his successor, Srinivasa Sastri, was a South Indian. He was one of the few Congress leaders who continued to carry some weight with the Muslim community. And despite the nagging official suspicion of his motives, the more far-sighted Englishmen learnt to recognize in him a bridge-builder between India and Britain. ‘The most statesmanlike mind I have known’. was the verdict of H. W. Nevins on, the well-travelled correspondent of Manchester Guardian. To Sir Henry Cotton, a former Chief Commissioner of Assam and a member of the British Committee of the Congress, Gokhale seemed ‘an ideal interpreter between India and England’.

G. P. Gooch, the British historian and Liberal member of Parliament, who had an opportunity of coming into contact with ‘almost all the leading performers on the Indian stage’ before and after the First World War, records in his memoirs that he was most impressed by Gokhale in whom he saw ‘not only a great Indian, but a citizen of the world’.

Gokhale had begun his life as a teacher; he loved English literature and especially English poetry. He had in some ways the approach of a scholar
to politics. His speeches and conversation had a fine literary flavour, but it would be wrong to think of him as an intellectual who had strayed into public life. Even though he was conscientious about his teaching chores, his heart was always in politics, with all their excitement and heartache. Neither academic laurels nor the seductions of authorship could divert him from his self-imposed tasks in public life. He declined to serve as principal of the Fergusson College, and even his project of writing a biography of Ranade had to give way to the urgent claims of public duties. With his increasing immersion in politics, Gokhale gave up physical exercise and the hobbies of his youth. Politics became a constant preoccupation, almost an obsession with him. He had little time for personal affairs. His two motherless daughters—who lived not far from the Home of the Servants of India Society—saw little of him. No wonder he should have found it impossible to take even the first yoga lessons on the concentration of the mind. 'Directly he set himself to the task,' a friend recalled, 'visions of blue books and government resolutions appeared before him to distract his attention.'

Gokhale’s consuming interest in politics stemmed from his passionate patriotism. He hated foreign rule, but he did not blame all the ills from which India suffered on the British. He wanted her to shake off the shackles of social and economic backwardness as well as of political subjection. He wanted to
turn the encounter with the Raj into an opportunity for building a secular, modern and democratic society. The task was formidable. ‘I sometimes think’, he wrote ‘that no country in the world has been called upon to face such a problem as ours.’ The inculcation of discipline and team-work seemed to him essential prerequisites for a healthy political life. ‘Our public life is weak’, he observed, ‘because our public spirit is weak’.

And public spirit required the subordination of individual gain and convenience to the collective good.

‘We are most of us in India ....’ Gokhale said, ‘a somewhat dreamy race.... Dreams have their importance in shaping aspirations for the future, but in practical matters, we have to be practical men.’

He called for honest, unremitting application to the work in hand. It was characteristic of him that he should have advised the young graduates of Bombay, aspiring to enter public life, to make a beginning by cleaning the dust from the books of the Royal Asiatic Society Library.

Gokhale’s political ideals were the ideals of the founding fathers of the Congress. The chief formative influence in his life was, of course. Ranade, who, in turn, had been inspired by the example of Dadabhai Naoroji. Gokhale used to describe himself ‘as an intelleced grandson of Dadabhai Naoroji’.

There was a striking unanimity among the early leaders of the Congress in their approach to politics. Gokhale’s own contribution to (what
may be called) the Moderate Congress ideology was to impart to it greater clarity, coherence and sophistication\(^{38}\). He was no defender of the status quo in the political, social or economic sphere. Nor did he idealize the Masses; in accordance with the liberal thought of the time, he considered literacy as a sine qua non for an intelligent interest in politics. If he assumed that there would be no franchise for the illiterate masses in his country, it was not for all time. Indeed, one of the avowed objects of his campaign for free and compulsory education was to bring the mass of the Indian people more effectively into the mainstream of national life. That he should have always felt an affinity with the unprivileged millions among his countrymen is not surprising; he had himself sprung from them. In his youth, he had known the pinch of poverty, and all his adult life he had lived simply, almost austerely. ‘The sadness of an Indian village’, wrote one of his British colleagues on the Public Services Commission, ‘was never very far from him.’\(^{39}\)

Gokhale’s exposition of the nationalist case was almost invariably a notable achievement and occasionally a triumph. But the same cannot be said of his management of men and events. In the Indian National Congress, he never tried to organize a personal following: even when his prestige was at its peak, he commanded more respect than authority. The result was that at crucial moments, such as at the Surat Congress in December 1907, he
could exercise only a limited influence on the course of events. During the same year, when communal disturbances occurred in East Bengal, he hastened to Calcutta and stayed there for a fortnight, but his role was no more than that of a distressed observer. Two years later, on the crucial issue of separate electorates, he was completely outplayed by the Aga Khan-Ameer Ali group. If the South African crisis of 1913-14 had a happier ending, the credit for it was largely due to Gandhi.

As a politician, Gokhale seems to have suffered from the defects of his virtues. His complete freedom from racism, communalism and casteism predisposed him to underrate the strength of these dark forces in others. His instinctive aversion to acrimonious controversy, his extreme sensitivity to criticism and his natural disinclination to hit back at his enemies often placed him at a disadvantage. His lofty ideal of ‘spiritualizing’ politics was practicable only in small groups; it enabled him to kindle the pure flame of patriotism in some of the finest young men and women who came under his spell, but it could not protect him against the savage assaults of his political opponents or the calculated stratagems of the hard-headed guardians of the Raj. His faith in the virtues of rationality and moderation may have been admirable, but it was a fallible guide in a world largely swayed by irrationality and expedience. Gokhale, however, shared this faith with most of his great contemporaries among the Moderates. To assess his
achievements and limitations it is essential to see him in the context of the Moderate era, which was more or less conterminous with his own political career.

Gandhi had the highest respect and affection for him and in the foreword that he wrote to Srinivasa Shastri’s My Master Gokhale he described him as a political worker “pure as crystal, gentle as a lamb, brave as a lion and chivalrous to a fault.”

Gokhale’s sympathies were with the poor and oppressed who this country and he realised that sacrifice had a meaning in the life of the people. This led him to found the servants of India society which was to be a body of dedicated men and women working on a small pittance for the social and political uplift of the country. He thought grew with age. He was not tied to any vested interest. He was a liberal in the sense that he had a deep and abiding faith in democracy, civil liberal liberties, a free press and free association and hatred for racial discrimination of any type. He worked hard to make both government and people appreciate the value of education in a well-ordered society. He was no friend of class distinctions and clearly his sympathies were with the poor and the downtrodden in the land.

He gave to this country disciples like G.K.Deodhar, a valiant fighter for righteous causes, N.M.Joshi, the father of the Trade union movement, Srinivasa Shastri, scholar, statesman and orator of detached temperament and
H.N.Kunzru, a parliamentarian of rare skill and integrity. Mahatma Gandhi was very much influenced by Gokhale’s thoughts.

What Gokhale’s attitude worlds have been today can only be guessed, for man changes with age and the conservative of yesterday is the radical of tomorrow. One thing, however, can be safely said of him. He was a great patriot who dedicated his life to service of his fellowmen.

Reference may be made to Gokhale outlook on the question of the minority community in India. Though Gokhale was a firm believer in the one-nation theory and the thought that one day India would find herself partitioned never crossed his mind. He was strongly of the opinion that for the purposes of strengthening Indian unity, it was desirable to provide for even generous treatment in our constitutional and administrative arrangements for communities which were in a minority in this country. Though not a supporter of a separate electorate for the Muslim minority, the claim to which had been conceded by the Minto-Morley reforms, he was not prepared to make it an issue of dispute between the Hindu Majority and the Muslim minority. Viewing things in their that this represented a policy of appeasement which was likely to have disastrous consequences for the unity of this country. For the seeds of the partition of the country were sown when separate electorates became a feature of our constitutional arrangement. Gokhale cannot be blamed for not anticipating events, as even after his death the Congress in its
Congress-League scheme for self-government came to an arrangement with the Muslim League on the basis of separate electorates for purposes of constitutional advancement in this country.

The question of Indian states and their future had not become an acute one in the lifetime of Gokhale. It was obvious to every thinking Indian that in any federal system of full self-government for this country there had to be a place for the Indian States and that they too had to be democratised. Gokhale was not unaware of the many difficulties which 562 States of varying sizes presented in this country. It was left, however, to the genius of Vallabhbhai Patel to unify India by bringing in the States as an integral part of our democratic structure.

Towards the so-called depressed classes Gokhale’s attitude was one of undiluted sympathy. He was opposed to all caste distinctions and he wanted the scheduled castes who had hardly become vocal at that time fully integrated with the Hindu community. Gokhale knew the important part that women play in the life of a country. Naturally he was for their emancipation from the thraldom of ages. The servants of Indian Society which he had established made notable contributions towards their emancipation.

To sum up, Gokhale was a nationalist who believed that India’s political future lay in a form of democratic government which would provide equal opportunity to all her citizens to work for the attainment of all that was
best in them. For him the individual was important. He knew that it was not possible for this country to achieve a position of honour among the nations of the world without modernising itself. But, he was not prepared to completely discard tradition and to make India an imitation of the west, without regard for what was good in western civilisation. He was not prepared to see his motherland occupy a position inferior to that of any independent country in the world. He was not unaware of the many wrongs that British administration had inflicted upon us. But, the methods that he wanted it to pursue for achieving his ends, though vigorous, were not of a revolutionary character. He cannot, therefore, be classified as a revolutionary in the methods that he wanted his country to pursue. He had a deep and abiding affection for Gandhi and though a constitutionalist he gave to constitutional agitation a wide meaning, which did not, if his speeches and writings are carefully read, exclude non-co-operation, passive resistance or even refusal to pay taxes.

He was in the true line of those liberal thinkers of the nineteenth century who brought about great reforms in their countries. He is, therefore, entitled to be remembered with affection and respect as a thinker-politician who rendered distinguished services to his country and placed the interests if the masses who inhabit this land in the forefront.
Gokhale was not dreamer. He was a practical moderate idealist. Like other moderates leaders he protected, promoted strengthened and kept Congress Party alive for development of the country in critical times. Gokhale was the eminent forerunner of spiritualized public life in India. The tradition was passed on to Gandhi. Gandhi followed moderates methods. This is the contribution of Gokhale to Gandhi If statesmen and public workers choose to hold that torch aloft today, precious enough will have been achieved in their bid to emancipate public life. That is the only ray of hope for the crisis in character we face now.

Gokhale was a firm believer in constitutional politics. Independent India has adopted parliamentary democracy. This was the logical and inevitable outcome or culmination of the process, which was going on for about half a century. Now after more than half a century of Parliamentary democracy, its future in this country is still being discussed because the parliamentary mentality is not firm and has not formed deep roots. Democracy cannot be devoid of emotions, but when politics is reduced to emotions and not restrained by reason, it turns into demagogy which in turn relies more on extra parliamentary activities; and streets, not the Parliament or Legislatures, become the focal point. Though extra-parliamentary politics is unavoidable even in parliamentary politics, it should strengthen the parliamentary process and not weaken it. In England, the Chartist movement
was the biggest extra Parliamentary movement, which did not destroy or weaken the British Parliament but strengthened it. Gokhale’s life was a shining example of devotion to the rule of law and to the Parliamentary politics, and of the aptitude which sustains them.
References

1. Speeches of Gokhale, p. 902

2. Ibid., p. 897.


6. Ibid., p. 181.

7. Ibid., p. 182.

8. Ibid.

9. S. Ray P.

10. Sastri, My Master Gokhale, Madras, 1946, p. 82.

11. Interview with the author.


15. Ibid., p. 67.

16. C.P.


19. A. Besant to Gokhale, 12 May 1914 (G.P)

20. R. Tagore to Gokhale, 9 Dec. 1913 (G.P)

21. S. Naidu to Gokhale, 28 Nov. 1913 (G.P)


27. ‘This diamond of India, this jewel of Maharashtra, this prince of workers, is taking eternal rest on the funeral grounds. Look at him and try to emulate him.’


31. India, 12 March 1915.

32. Gooch, op. cit., p.128.


36. Limaye (ed), op.cit. pts. II & III, PP.160-1


38. ‘Till that sober and patient politician, Mr. Gokhale, formulated his idea of expansion with in the Empire, there were in evidence in the Congress camp only crude, undefined and often conflicting aspirations. The fluent but the unsubstantial pathos of Mr Banerji’s long drawn eloquence, the vehement and senile insistence of Mr Dadabhai Naoroji’s denunciations, and Sir Pherozeshah's spicy oratory, coupled even with the thousand-and-one resolutions of twenty sessions of the Congress, failed to give one a clear idea of what was needed as a general remedy, though they created a vague sense of universal
suffering and made audible the resonance of more or less unmusical sounds where all spoke and few cared to hear.’ (Mohammed Ali in 1907, quoted in Selected Writings and Speeches of Moulana Mohammed Ali, Lahore, 1944, p.6)