CHAPTER – 1
THE SOCIO – POLITICAL SCENARIO OF GREAT BRITAIN IN THE POST–WAR ERA
(1945-1970)

The World-War II had crippled England more seriously than the World-War I. It had caused tremendous damage to England economically, politically and socially. It took many years and great sacrifices of the British citizens to salvage England from the debris of the War. In the words of C.D. Hazen:

_Six lakhs of Britons were killed or wounded, about 40 lakh houses were destroyed, the number of its cargo ships came down considerably, and its internal as also external debt increased to very big proportions._

The War had brought about frustration, fear, cynicism, bitterness, joblessness and absurdism among the British youths. What was needed at once was to create a healthy mood in the nation without which no rehabilitation, reconstruction and the revival of healthy economy was possible. In the words of its famous economist, Keynes: _“In order to achieve immediate strength Britain sacrificed all considerations for its future.”_
The immediate task which confronted Britain was to get rid of the War Government and install the Civilian Government to initiate damage control activities with the active co-operation of the British citizens. The peaceful transfer of power to a democratic government was a must after the bloody War. There was every possibility of Churchill being a dictator like Stalin in the Soviet Union. Immediately after the War, there were elections to the British Parliament in which the Labour Party had a stunning victory over the Conservative Party and a Labour Government was established in Britain. In the words of C.D. Hazen:

This was a great victory for democracy and Britain is the only country where such a big political change could be effected so peacefully.³

In the Post-War elections held in July 1945, Churchill had a hope of electoral victory through gratitude for the War time guidance and anchoring successfully the ship of the British nation to the port. But it was a wish without offering to the electorates any positive domestic programme to alleviate the miseries of the Post-War England. The Conservative Party wanted to encash its victory in the War without offering any economic and social balm to the Post-War youths. The Labour Party, on the other
hand, smelled the mood of the nation and came out with definite, radical proposals. Sharply reacting against the War time Government, the British electorates transferred the power to the Labour Party giving almost 400 out of 640 seats in the House of Commons. It was the clear-cut victory of the Labour Party with a thumping majority under the Prime Ministership of Clement Richard Attlee.

In spite of the electoral landslide of the Labour Party, it was not a bed of roses for Clement Richard Attlee to settle with the Post-War problems in the domestic front and abroad. Though Britain and its allies had won the War yet the War had cost Britain one-quarter of its national wealth. The public debt of the kingdom had tripled from 1939 to 1946. War time property damage was estimated at $5,800,000,000 at 1946 replacement costs. The total casualties (killed, wounded, imprisoned and missing) of the armed forces and the civilian population were 9,50,000.

Britain, therefore, faced many domestic problems. The bomb damage had to be repaired. Foreign trade had to be rebuilt. Large occupation forces had to be maintained in the conquered areas. Momentous decisions had to be reached
and implemented regarding India, Egypt and Palestine. Peace treaties had to be made. In 1947, severe weather conditions followed by floods also enhanced the miseries of people.

In order to solve the domestic problems, the Labour Government had no option but to exercise its complete direct and indirect control over the British economy. The way lay through socialization, nationalization and industrialization to bring about a change in the traditional Britain. In the words of W.C. Langsam and O.C. Mitchell:

*With a substantial mandate from the electorate, the Labor cabinet embarked upon an attempt to transform the war-torn British Isles into a “Socialist Commonwealth.” Soon a stream of legislation began to alter traditional Britain.*

The first task before the new government was to build and mend houses destroyed and damaged during the War. It was estimated that around 25,000 houses had been completely destroyed during the War. Nearly 3,00,000 houses had been made unfit for dwelling. By the end of 1946, the new government was able to provide permanent and temporary dwellings to some 3,00,000 families.
Another area to which the new government had to pay a greater attention was education because it involved the present and future of 3,00,000 lakhs of British youths faced with hopelessness and unprecedented crisis brought about the War. Consequently, a new Education Act was passed on April 1, 1945. It provided for reforms in the British public system of education. After April 1947, primary education was made compulsory for children of 15 years of age. Facilities for technical training and vocational education for adults were greatly enlarged. Many new schools were opened in which thousands of jobless youths were recruited. In the field of higher education, the government was determined to do a lot. Eventually, in 1963 the government appointed a committee of eleven men, which recommended expansion of Britain’s system of higher education to a considerable degree so that large number of jobless British youths could enjoy the benefits of university training.

Besides housing and educational programmes of the government, another area of immediate interest was the provisions of social and economic security to each individual so that every citizen could enjoy peace of mind. Hence the Labour Government announced a comprehensive
social and economic programme. The programme launched by the Labour Party was a welcome measure for those who earned money honestly and were afraid of economic insecurity in old age after their retirement. Ronnie a character in a play, ‘Chicken Soup with Barley’ highlights the miserable plight of the working class in old age:

A man can work a whole lifetime and when he is sixty-five he considers himself rich if he has saved a thousand pounds. Rich! A whole lifetime of working in a good, steady, settled, enterprising, fascinating job! For every manager in a restaurant there must be twenty chefs terrified of old age. That's all we are-people terrified of old age, hoping for the football pools to come home.⁵

“The proclaimed aim of the new program”, write W.C. Langsam and O.C. Mitchell was to provide “against every one of the main attacks which economic ill fortune can launch against individual well-being and peace of mind.”⁶ As such the government made provisions for insurance payments in case of unemployment, maternity, sickness, and death of a bread-winner and in various other circumstances. All these facilities were offered to the British citizens as the social service of the State.

Another area of public interest which occupied the attention of the government was National Health
Service. Every British citizen was made eligible without charge for care in a hospital, medical service or special care regardless of his income or occupational status.

These social welfare schemes were a novelty in the history of Britain but none of these schemes could be effected without the proper control of the British exchequer. In order to do something more for the British public, it became necessary for the Labour Government to adopt nationalization policy. In the elections of 1945, the Labour Party had already pledged itself to the nationalization of commanding industries. Though the policy of nationalization adopted by the Labour Government was not a new thing as the telegraph and telephone system had already been operated by the Post Office Department. The radio and the sale of power had been nationalized in England as early as in 1926 and 1927. Hence the Post-War nationalization policy of the Labour Government was nothing but the extension of the scope of nationalization.

The Labour Government nationalized the Bank of England, the overseas wireless services, the coal mining industry, much of transport and electrical and gas supply. After the nationalization of these enterprises, the Labour Government
passed an Act in 1949 to nationalize the iron and steel industry. In 1951 the government set up the Iron and Steel Corporation of Great Britain and made it the owner of Britain’s important iron and steel companies.

The installation of the Labour Party heralded a millennium to the working class which often shouted “down with capitalism!” and “long live the workers’ revolution.”

In Arnold Wesker’s play, ‘I’m Talking about Jerusalem’, Ronnie welcomes the rise of the Labour Party to political power and explains to his grumbling mother how the Labour Party proved a pioneer in eliminating slums and Introducing National Health Service to the citizens of England:

*We just put a Labour Party in power didn’t we? It’s right they should be the pioneers-good! Ever-y-bo-dy is building. Out go the slums, whist! And the National Health Service comes in. The millennium’s come and you’re still grumbling.*

The citizens of Great Britain also worked very hard to get a house, a washing machine and a fridge and other basic amenities of life but the Post-War conditions were such that it was almost a dream for a common man to possess these things. People struggled to make life better in the light of the
promises made by the Labour Party. Esther, a character in the play, ‘I’m Talking about Jerusalem’ highlights the condition of a common man in the regime of the Labour Party:

"I’m a worker too. Haven’t I worked? From selling flags at a football match to selling foam cushions in Aylesbury market. From six in the morning till six at night. From pitch to pitch, all hours, all my life! That’s not work? It doesn’t entitle me to a house? Or a fridge? I shouldn’t buy a washing machine?"

But these measures adopted by the Labour Government were denounced by Winston Churchill, the leader of the Conservative Party. He saw in the new programmes of the Labour Party a danger to the traditions and liberties of the British people. He expressed his concern saying that the “liberties and free life of Britain” were “in great danger.”

Britain went to the polls in February 1951 once again. The main issue in the elections was the policy of nationalization. The Labour Party indicated in its election manifesto all the new area of nationalization. The Conservative Party, on the other hand, promised to the electorates less national control. In the elections of 1950, the majority of the Labour Party in the Parliament dropped down from some 140 to about half a dozen
These elections clearly reflected the mood of the voters and the declining popularity of the Labour Party. The British population was in no mood to bear continuing pressures and crises developing from extensive social and economic experiments of the Labour Government. The policies adopted by the Labour Government had resulted in the rise of taxes, which were resented by the British populace.

It was very difficult for the Labour Government to continue in the office for another term of five years with a bare majority in the Parliament. The Labour cabinet was immediately faced with many acute problems. The entry of the British into the Korean War was not popular in Great Britain. The adverse trade balance of Britain created a severe financial situation. In addition to it, the defence needs made the British budget higher than ever before. Hence the social and economic programmes of the Labour Government were opposed and Prime Minister Attlee had no option but to declare another election in late 1951. Consequently, the Labour Party had to drop new nationalization schemes in the election of 1951 whereas the Conservative Party campaigned its election after the slogan “Britain strong and free.” Consequently, the Conservatives and
their allies won 320 seats to 295 seats of the Labour Party. Winston Churchill once again assumed the office as Prime Minister.

The new government immediately set about dismantling the Welfare State. Under the Steel Act of 1953, the Iron and Steel Corporation of Great Britain was dissolved, and a private agency was established in its place. However, the government continued with the house-building activities and social insurance plans of the past government. The British youths had already lost their faith in the Labour Party for making compromises during the last two elections. They were disillusioned with the new government also as they found it no better than the previous governments. The War time controls particularly rationing of food and coal were removed neither by the Labour Government nor by the Conservative Government until 1954. The tight control over the economy was made necessary by an excess of imports over exports.

But the dismantling of the Social Welfare Programme by both political parties of England disillusioned the common man who had reposed his trust on these parties for his betterment. In the play, ‘I’m Talking about Jerusalem’, when
Ronnie withdraws himself from the socialist party, his mother Sarah asks him, “What’s wrong with socialism that you have to run to an ivory tower?” Ronnie replies:

Oh, yes, that’s right! We put a Labour Party in power. Glory! Hurrah! It wasn’t such a useless war after all, was it, mother? But what did the bleeder do, eh? They sang the Red Flag in Parliament and then started building atom bombs. Lunatics! Raving lunatics! 11

In May, 1955, elections to Parliament were held again. The Conservatives again came to power with a resounding majority under the leadership of Sir Anthony Eden. During 1956, the Conservative Government was confronted by a series of problems. By 1956, the level of unemployment had risen and inflationary pressures had increased. In the Suez Canal issue, the Conservative Government had miserably failed. The whole adventure of the Government had proved nothing except that the days for grand imperial gestures were over and that Britain had to accept a back seat in the conduct of the world. In this connection John Russell Taylor aptly remarks:

*In the Mediterranean the Egyptian Government announced that it was taking over the Suez Canal, up to then owned and run by Anglo-French interests. In a surprising attempt to revive nineteenth-century gunboat-diplomacy, Britain*
and France sent in troops to protect their interests in the Suez area. The result was that after taking over the Canal Zone they found themselves virtually without support in the world, and had to hand their conquest over to the United Nations, who then handed it back to Egypt. The whole adventure proved nothing except that the days for such would-be grand imperial gestures were over and that Britain must accept a back seat in the conduct of the world.\textsuperscript{12}

When in Hungary, the people revolted against the Communist Government imposed upon by the Soviet Union, and Russian government quelled the rebellion by sending its tanks, Britain kept mum and did nothing. John Russell Taylor wrote:

\textit{In Hungary the people rebelled against their Russian-imposed Communist Government, and Russia put down the revolt in a good old-fashioned imperialist way by sending in tanks, while the rest of the world looked on and did nothing.}\textsuperscript{13}

Meanwhile a protest was organized round the question of nuclear disarmament because people feared the atom bomb more than any thing else. A direct political action was avoided. Instead, individuals thought together in non-party groups to offer passive resistance. Marches and sitting down programmes in the streets were organized against the manufacturing of the atom bomb by Britain. The people of all parties marched to Aldermaston, an air base where nuclear weapons were stored.
In the foreign affairs, Britain lost its colonies like India, Palestine, Burma, Malaya. With the loss of these colonies, the rapid shrinkage of the British empire set in, and the national pride of the British youth was badly hurt. There were causes and issues worth dying for but nobody did anything to check the national loss. Jimmy Porter outlined the anger of the British youths in the play ‘Look Back in Anger’:

I suppose people of our generation aren’t able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and the forties, when we were still kids. There aren’t any good, brave causes left.  

In fact, the two major political parties of Britain were equally worse. It disillusioned many who had been active in politics and believed that the political activity held the solution for all the ills of the world. Those who voted for one party were unhappy when they did not find any noticeable difference. Consequently, the dissatisfaction which many people felt with life in the early 1950s became aimless. There were no obvious forces for resentment on the political scene. The intelligent young men and women felt that their fate would not be different whosoever was in power or out of power.
Most of the young men and women searching employment were very much disappointed. They felt that they were a party of the generation which was rootless in the Post-War period. In the play ‘Roots’, Beatie who is a representative of British youths tells Mr. Bryant that their generation is rootless and every young man and woman is trying to get his or her roots and make them strong and healthy:

*I’m telling you that we don’t know what we are or where we come from. I’m telling you something’s cut us off from the beginning. I’m telling you we’ve got no roots. Blimey Joe! We’ve all got large allotments, we all grow things around us so we should know about roots.*

1957, the Conservative Party made Harold Macmillan Prime Minister in place of Anthony Eden. The economic policies followed by Macmillan improved the financial conditions of Britain during 1957 and 1958. There was a great increase in British exports. Moreover, the investments from the United States gave a new lease of life to the British economy. It was the most fitting time for the Conservatives to give their party another victory at the polls. The general elections of October 1959 brought a stunning victory to the Conservative Party. In these elections, Hugh Gaitskell emerged as the most powerful leader of the Labour Party. He had
dropped the policy of nationalization to gain the votes of the middle class that opposed the socialization of British industries. Macmillan led the government till 1963. In 1963, the Labour Party lost its prominent leader Hugh Gaitskell who was succeeded by Harold Wilson.

From 1955 to 1963, both the major political parties in Britain were subjected to severe criticism because neither of them did any satisfactory work either on the domestic or foreign front. The leaders of both the parties, Macmillan and Hugh Gaitskell were condemned by the British youths and intellectuals for sagging the Socialist Utopia and taking a back seat in the international hegemony. John Osborne was so angry with the leaders of both the political parties that he nursed the idea of murder of such leaders. He expressed his anger in ‘A Letter to My Fellow Countrymen’:

This is a letter of hate. It is for you, my countrymen. I mean those men of my country who have defiled it. The men with manic fingers leading the sightless, feeble, betrayed body of my country to its death. You are its murderers, and there’s little left in my own brain but the thoughts of murder for you.

There is murder in my brain, and I carry a knife in my heart for every one of you, Macmillan, and you,
Gaitskell, you particularly. I wish we could hang you all out, with your dirty washing, on your damned Oder-Neisse Line, and those seven out of ten Americans, too. I would willingly watch you all die for the West, if only I could keep my own miniscule portion of it, you could all go ahead and die for Berlin, for Democracy, to keep out the red hordes or whatever you like.16

In late 1963, the British political trend tilted towards the Labour Party. The Labour Party had already gained control of local governments where, the Conservative Party had enjoyed a comfortable majority. The reasons behind the decline of the popularity of the Conservative Government were primarily three. First, there was wide-spread unemployment among both the educated and ill-educated British youths. Secondly, John Profumo who was the War Minister then was found involved in a moral scandal. This scandal filled the headlines of the British newspapers and tobaloids for weeks. Thirdly, the Labourites had been charging the Conservative Government with inactivity in public health, housing trade and education-all areas in which the Labour Government had done a lot but not up to the satisfaction of the British people whenever it was posted in power in the past. In addition to it, Wilson and his Labourites continued their onslaught on the Conservatives for the bad economy and formidable...
problems developing into the industry and trade. Consequently, at the polls held in October 1964, the Labour Party came to power defeating the Conservative Party with a majority of only four seats.

When Wilson was voted to power, the dark economic clouds were hanging over Britain and the housing problem was getting acute as large areas of the cities were to be rebuilt. The ship-building industry was damaged by Swedish and Japanese competition. The Wilson Government took extreme measures and imposed restrictions against corporate mergers, tightened the laws against monopolies and dropped many defence projects. The British were satisfied with the performance of the Wilson Government. In the new elections of 1966, Wilson was again voted to power with the majority of about hundred seats. In the spring of 1966, Britain reduced its overseas forces by a third. It openly admitted that without the help of the United States, it could not manage any major military operation. In 1967 and 1968, the pound was devalued as a measure of austerity. However, the trade continued to sag. The British Government got no economic help from the Commonwealth. The Britons found their economic celebration only in their membership of the Common Market.
In 1970, Britain went to the polls in the eighth general election since 1945. In this election, the issue of race and the problems of British migrants and black immigrants were taken up by the Conservative candidates. As a result of people’s aspirations, struggles for independence were going on in many of the British colonies. By 1970, many of the colonies were made free by the British people. The result was that there was a great flux of both the whites and blacks into Britain. Both the migrants and immigrants caused the problems of housing, unemployment, and social security. The cause of these people was taken up by the Conservatives in the elections of 1970 and the Labour Government was charged with cruelty against the white and black immigrants from Asia and the Caribbean states. The Conservatives demanded citizenship legislation to differentiate between those who belonged to Britain and those who did not. It was at this juncture that the Britain was making attempts to enter the Common Market-the most important problem facing the British in 1970. In this election, the Conservatives emerged victorious with a majority of thirty votes and Edward Heath was made a new Prime Minister. The Conservative Party was brought to power in this election with a hope that a Tory Government would cut taxes.
The social and political events which took place between 1945 and 1970 were very disturbing both in the domestic and foreign fronts. Britain suffered heavy losses in the Post-War period in trade, industry and foreign affairs. The only achievement of both the Labour and Conservative Governments was that they made Britain a nuclear power and developed a successful and independent delivery system.

Britain, the sun of which had never set was now gradually sinking. Britain suffered more than most from the loss of her colonies after the Second World War. The immediate loss to Britain was the independence of India. In this connection W.C. Langsam and O.C. Mitchell write:

Britain had possessed the greatest of the European colonial empires and thus suffered more than most from the loss of her colonies. After the Second World War, the masses of many lands were filled with a seething nationalism. In many parts of the British Empire, men proclaimed an end to the old order. In India demands for political independence were more vocal than ever. The British decided that their presence in India could be maintained only with difficulty. The granting of independence seemed the easier course. India in 1947 accordingly was divided into two independent British dominions-Pakistan and India.17
Britain could not maintain her interests in Palestine after the War. In 1947, Britain, therefore, announced her intention of surrendering the mandate of Palestine and withdrawing completely from Palestine. The burden was left to the United Nations and the new state of Israel was born. W.C. Langsam and O.C. Mitchell write how Britain discontinued its rule in Palestine:

*After the war, the British interests in Palestine could not be maintained without great difficulty and expense. In 1947, therefore, Britain announced her intention of surrendering the mandate of Palestine and withdrawing completely, leaving the awesome burden of difficulties existing there between Arab and Jew to the United Nations. When Britain officially terminated her thirty-one year rule of Palestine on May 15, 1948, the Jews proclaimed at Tel Aviv the independence of the new state of Israel.*

Some of the territories which broke free from the direct control of Britain did not seek complete separation. After 1945, India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Ghana, Cyprus, Nigeria, Tanzania, Trinidad, Jamaica, Uganda, Kenya, Zambia, Malta and Malaysia joined the Commonwealth. Though the Post-War size of Commonwealth was quite impressive yet it was illusory because many of the new member states like India, Pakistan and Ghana became independent republics. The only bond which existed
between those states and Britain was an economic one. The majority of non-white people within the Commonwealth also sought independence. Thus, Britain suffered many hardships which she had never endured before.

After the War, the leaders of Britain believed that their country would be able to play the role of the keeper of the European balance of power but due to the adverse economic situation at home and overseas troubles, Britain was forced to play a second fiddle in the global affairs. Britain could not protect Turkey and Greece against the Soviet expansion in 1947. Its responsibility was shifted to the United States. Britain admitted that she needed a collective defence arrangement. The rapidly changing economic situation made Britain more and more dependent on the United States to meet her defence obligations. As such the standing of Britain in global affairs much diminished.

In the domestic affairs, the eight general elections within a period of twenty five years since the end of War brought nothing but high taxes to the public. The British populace was badly dissatisfied with the performance of both the major political parties as they expected nothing from them. Both the political parties had miserably failed to save the British empire and
invigorate the British economy. In this connection W.C. Langsam and O.C. Mitchell remarked:

When Wilson’s Labour Government took office in 1964, the balance of payments deficit had mounted to just over $2,000,000,000. The Government resorted to extreme measures in an attempt to correct the situation. There was placed a temporary charge of 15 per cent on all imports except foodstuffs. The standard rate of personal income tax was raised, as was the gasoline tax. The new economic measures caused something of an international panic. A run on the pound developed and the Bank of England was able to stabilize affairs only after negotiating $3,000,000,000 in loans. The economic situation continued to worsen, even though British currency had been momentarily stabilized. In 1965, the annual defense outlay was reduced again and, eventually, it became necessary to devalue the pound once more. Many of these severe economic adjustments in the 1960’s were tied to Britain’s loss of empire and the failure of her leaders to secure full integration into the European Economic Community. 19

Thus, the dream of the British people to restore the Pre-War days of the thirties and to revive the days of security, stability, affluence and imperialism were belied in the Post-War era causing violence, moral degradation, economic and social insecurity and sense of hopelessness among the British youths.
REFERENCES


8. Ibid. P. 147.

9. Ibid. P. 199.


18. Ibid. P. 563.

19. Ibid. PP. 562-563.