IJT 46/1&2 (2004), pp. 99-107

Christians and the Indian National Movement: A Historical Perspective

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India gained Independence from the British colonial power sixty years ago. Her achievement of Independence was a result of about a century's struggle by the people. The struggle for freedom was not an involvement of few people but rather it was a people's movement where every section of people played their roles. The Indian national movement has a long history. As a matter of fact, it began with the Revolt of 1857. The Revolt had been called as Sepoy Mutiny, by the British people, but many Indians considered it as the first war of India's Independence.[1] However, the actual struggle for freedom began with the formation of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885. The period between the Revolt of 1857 till the formation of the INC in 1885 was marked by a rapid growth of national consciousness for political freedom. With the formation of INC the National struggle became an organized movement.[2]

CAUSES FOR THE RISE OF NATIONALISM

Christianity and Western Education

Christianity and western education are closely related. With the coming of William Carey in 1793 and Dr. Alexander Duff in 1930 to Calcutta, there was a spread of western education. They opened the first Anglo-Vernacular School for the youths of other faiths.[3] Christianity and education challenged the superstitious beliefs and the existing social evils. Thus, they initiated the socio-religious reformation in the country. English education also helped the Indian elites to get the idea of western Liberalism. Besides, the Indian elites got the inspiration for National struggle through the readings of the histories of the American War of Independence, French Revolution, etc. English language also served as a *lingua franca* for the whole educated Indians which unified the people.[4] Thus, Christianity and education contributed for the rise of nationalism.

The Socio-Religious Movements

The first and foremost rationalizing effect of English education was the questioning of the existing socio-religious practices. Raja Rammohan Roy was the first and the

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best representative of this new spirit of rational inquiry into the basis of religion and society. He refuted the worship of multiple gods and goddesses and advocated the worship of one true God. He was the founder of the "Brahma Samaj" in 1828.[5] Roy was against the social evil practices and it was through the joint cooperation of the missionaries that certain practices were abolished. Another movement was the "Arya Samaj" which was founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati at Bombay, in 1975. He rejected the caste system and proclaimed the rights of everybody to study the Vedas and other Hindu scriptures. The Ramakrishna mission and the Theosophical Society spearheaded the reform movements. Thus, all these movements glorified the Hindu society and religion which created a national consciousness as against the foreign religion and rule.[6] Besides, the development of press enabled the writers to spread the national consciousness through the periodicals and news papers in both English and regional languages.

The *Samachar Darpan, Bengal Gazette, Weekly Madras Courier, Bombay Herald* were some of the publications through which Indian writers expressed their views on socio-political, economic, religious ideas and thus spread the national consciousness throughout the country.[7]

Political Development between 1857-1885

Following the revolt of 1857, there was a rapid growth of Indian nationalism. The spirit of national consciousness was intensified in this period with the discontent and disaffection against the British rule. In July 1867, W.C. Banerji who later became the first president of the Indian National Congress, demanded for a representative and responsible Govt. of India. In 1874, Krishtodas Pal, a politician, proposed for similar Govt. in his article "Home Rule for India" in *Hindoo Patriot.* Being unsatisfied with the existing political associations, a few political thinkers of Bengal, started in 1875 a new association called "Indian League." The aim of this was to stimulate the sense of nationalism among the people and awaken their political consciousness.[8] In the following year, the Indian League was supplanted by a new political organization called "Indian Association" which was inaugurated in 1876, in Calcutta.[9]

In the same period, such parallel political organizations were founded even outside Bengal. The oldest political association in Bombay was the "Bombay Association" founded in 1852, which had lost its vitality within a decade and got revived only in the 1870s. In 1867, another important political association named "Poona Sarvajanik Sabha" had began which aimed at presenting the wants and wishes of the inhabitants of the Deccan. A similar important political association of the time was the "Mahajan Sabha" of Madras, founded in 1884.[10] The Indian Association of Calcutta, with the help of other Associations of the country called the first National Conference in Calcutta, in Dec. 1883. All these political developments prepared the background for an organized political movement.[11]

Formation of Indian National Congress (INC)

The formation of Indian National Congress opened a new era in the political life of India. It was formed under the leadership of Allan Octavian Hume, a retired member of the Indian civil service.[12] The INC was the continuation of the various political organizations through out the country and especially the National Conference held in 1883. Perhaps, A.D. Hume could be better known as an organizer rather than the founder. W.C. Banerji became the first president of the INC in 1885. The objectives of the Indian National Congress were: (a) To promote personal intimacy and friendship among the mere earnest workers in the cause of the country in various parts of the empire. (b) To eradicate the race, creed, and provincial prejudices among the lovers of the country and the fuller development and consolidation of those sentiments of national unity that had their origin in their beloved Lord Ripon's memorable reign. (c) To make an authoritative record after a careful and full discussion on some of the most important and pressing social questions of the day.[13]

It shows that the main objective of the INC at the time was not for political Independence, but was rather concerned, for the economic and social problems of the time. British officials such as Sir William Wedderburn, Mr. Ranade, and others participated in the early meetings of the INC. However, by around 1900, the main aim of INC shifted to the political Independence with appearance of Hindu fundamentalists like, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai and others. In 1907, there was a split in the Congress between the moderates and the extremists but after 9 years of split, the two parties had been brought together based on cooperation and alliance.[14] With the assuming of leadership by Mahatma Gandhiji in the year 1919, the freedom struggle gathered its momentum.[15] The Indian National Congress from its beginning till the achievement of Independence in 1947, dominated the political life of the Indians.

Christians' Involvement in the Indian National Movement

Indian Christians responded to the calls of national movement through their various Christian organizations. These Christian organizations arranged conferences, camps in which several issues were discussed including political issues. At times political problems were debated, passed resolutions and sent to the concerned authorities, and thereby the Indian Christians voices were made heard.

The first Christian organisation which had played a role in the national movement was the 'Bengal Christian Association' founded in 1878, by a group of Christians in Calcutta with a view to create a national, independent Indian Church. The first president of this association was Krishna Mohun Banerji and one of its active members was Kali Charan Banerji. In 1887, K. C. Banerji and Shome formed the 'Calcutta Christo Samaj' which was a Christian parallel to the Brahmo Samaj. Its purpose was for the propagation of Christian truth and promotion of Christian union. Its confession was the Apostolic Creed.[16] In 1886, the 'National Church of Madras' was founded by an Indian medical doctor, S.Parani Andy with a group of Indian Christians in

Madras. In 1892, the 'Lucknow Christian Association' was formed and also the 'Poona Christians Association'.[17] Those Associations were primarily set up to deal with the social and economic problems of the Christian community by every legitimate means. At the same time, they were very much critical of the missionaries and the western Christian theology and tried to indigenize it, which indicated clearly the presence of the spirit of nationalism. Those Associations played an important role to mobilise Christian opinions in support of the struggle for national freedom.

Young Men's Christian Associations (YMCA) and others

Several YMCAs had been formed under the leadership or initiative of the missionaries in various parts of the country such as: Calcutta in 1857, Bombay in 1875, Botriva..drum in 1873. When the National YMCA was organized in 1891, there were 35 YMCAs in the country with a total of 1896 members. V.S. Azariah, K.T. Paul and S.K. Datta were the prominent leaders. It did not directly involve in politics as it was run by the financial support of foreign donors beside an evangelistic agency. Its periodical *The Young Men of India* was used to express even political ideas; and thereby promoted national consciousness among the Indian Christians during the national movement.

The Christo Samaj of Madras, which was founded in 1908 with the aim of coordinating the factors - the country, the church and the mission to the supreme purpose of Jesus Christ, was supplanted by the 'Bangalore Conference Continuation' from 1977. It met every year for several years in south India where religious, economic and political issues were discussed. Its prominent leaders were P. Chenchiah, V. Chakkarai, S.K. George, P.A. Thangasami and others.[19]

Another important organization was the Student Christian Movement. Under the supervision of John R. Mott the first all India Conference was held at Serampore College in 1912, and formed the Student Christian Association of India and Ceylon. Burma jointed in 1920 and it became SCA of India, Burma, and Ceylon. Then in 1935, it was renamed as the Student Christian Movement of India, Burma and Ceylon. This body also contributed to the spread of national consciousness especially among the students' community.

The All-India Conference of Indian Christian (Protestants) (AICTC) was founded in 1914 at Calcutta and took up the political burdens of the Indian Christians. It met every year in December at various cities in India. The Indian Christian leaders discussed the political issues in their meetings and expressed the political ideas and views of the Indian Christian community through this Conference. In its 7th session held at Calcutta in 1920, it declared that "Indian Christian should take part in all healthy political movements of the country and oppose all that is harmful to the country and the Govt. of the land."[20]

The first All-India Missionary Conference was held in Dec. 1912 under the initiative of John R. Mott, and decided to form a permanent council called 'National Missionary Council of India' which came into being in 1914. In 1923, it was renamed as 'National Christian Council of India' (NCCI). It made prayer calls for peace in the country. In the midst of the second World War, the leadership of NCCI passed over to the hands of Indian leaders. Dr. R.B. Manikam took over the administrative leadership from Dr. J.Z. Hodge in 1941. Then the NCCI began to take positive attitude towards the nationalist movement. In January, 1944, under the leadership of Bishop V.S. Azariah, a political resolution was passed by the NCCI which read: "Educated Indian Christians fully share the national aspirations of their countrymen. Consequently they also share the sorrow and disappointment aroused by the present political deadlock."[21]

All the above mentioned organizations contributed to the national movement either directly or indirectly by spreading the national consciousness especially among the Indian Christians. They also played an important role in the search for identity and autonomy of the Indian Church.

Indian Christians' Participation in INC

The Indian Christians' involvement was by and large conditioned by the attitudes of the missionaries towards the national movement or the INC. In the early years of the INC, Indian Christians enthusiastically supported the National Congress and attended its annual meetings. According to the official congress report, there were 607 registered delegates at the Madras meeting in 1887, and there were 35 Christians.[22] The Indian Christians well represented at the next four sessions of the Congress i.e., 1888-1891. Kali Charan Banerji, C.G. Nath from Lahore, Peter Paul Pillai of Madras played important roles in the Congress sessions. It is also interesting to note that some Christian women were present at the Bombay session of 1888 when women attended for the first time. Among the ten women delegates who participated in the session, there were three Christian women namely, Pandita Ramabai, Mesdames Trimbuck and Nikamba.[23] The early attitude of missionaries towards the INC had been stated by T.E. Slater at the Bangalore missionary conference of 1888 as: "Apart from its political aims, the Congress is in its very constitution a moral and social educator of the greatest value, and as such should be welcomed and supported by every missionary."[24] However, there were some missionaries who were against the national politics and urged the Indian Christians not to participate in the Congress. William Harper wrote in 1890 "Even should it be unquestionably wise and right for the Christian community totally itself with the Congress, it would still remain the duty of the clergy to take no active part in it, or in the local meetings relating to it. Politics lie outside the sphere of the Christian ministry."[25] But majority of the missionaries had a positive attitude towards the Congress and encouraged Indian Christians to participate in it. Few missionaries like T.E. Slater, C.F. Andrews and E. Greaves even attended the Congress sessions. Inspite of their initial enthusiasm for the INC and the advice of European missionaries, the number of Indian Christian

delegates slowly declined. From 1900-1910, the Christian delegates never crossed beyond six members.[26]

As long as the INC remained moderate and did not have a clear political independence vision, the missionaries were positive towards the national movement. However, when the movement turned out to demand a political independence and swadeshi movement began, the missionaries except few like C.F. Andrews, changed their attitude. They were not only aloof themselves, but also discouraged the Indian Christians to participate in the Congress.[27]

On the other hand , we have a few Indian Christian leaders and missionaries who were for the national movement. Again, it was C.F. Andrews who wrote that "It is my own conviction, which grows stronger everyday, that Indian Christians will lose a great and noble opportunity if they hold aloof at the present time from the National Movement in India."[28] He further said that Indian Christians should not lead people of other faiths to take Christians as opposed to national movement for being kept aloof, but, rather should show plainly and clearly that their Christianity had made them more patriotic.[29] K.T. Paul also said in 1909 that Indian Christians should not persist in the policy of keeping aloof, but should fully participate in the movement.

There was also an accusation against the Christians as denationalized people and to become "a Christian means to be a non-Indian!" Against this, professor S.C. Mukherji, a prominent Indian Christian leader wrote in 1923 "One immediate duty of the Indian Christian would be to remove from the mind of the people of other faiths the misconception that the Christian community is a denationalised one."[30]

The Indian Christians very much sympathised with the national spirit, but they preferred to adopt constitutional methods. As such, when Gandhiji called for a non-Cooperation Movement, Christians were greatly troubled. In the 8th AICIC meet in Lahore, in Dec. 1921, the AICIC resolved to plead both the Govt of India and the leaders of Non-cooperation movement, in order to bring a sane settlement to the situation. It resolved to plead the Govt. of India to convene a Round Table Conference for discussion, and also plead the Non-cooperators to call off the movement.[31]

The Indian Christians were reluctant to participate in the Civil disobedience movement for it was mostly thought to be un-Christians. In the mean time, a meeting of Indian Christians was held in Bombay in 1930 which passed several resolutions on the prevailing situation. The first resolution read that they were one with the other communities in their desire to win for India 'complete swaraj' at the possible moment and were of the opinion that absolute non-violent satyagraha was in no way against the teaching of Jesus Christ.[32] Indian Christians' attitude to the idea of swaraj was clear in the memorandum submitted to Gandhiji by the Indian Christians on the eve of his departure for the Round Table Conference in 1931. The

memorandum:

> We wholeheartedly support the National demand that real political power and responsibility must be transferred without delay and without reservation from the people of England to the people of India. We stand for full freedom, for the unrestrictive authority to direct, in whichever way, we desire the management of our economic and political affairs. We would, however, welcome Indo-British cooperation based on terms of perfect equality, without the surrender of our sovereign rights.[33]

In the 1940s, the NCCI leadership was passed over to the native Christians. As a result of the call of 'Quit India' in 1942, Gandhiji and other Congress leaders were arrested and imprisoned. The anti-British and anti-missionary feeling was not only with the people of other faiths but with the Indian Christians as well. The Christians bodies like Madras Christian Council, Church leaders in Tinnevelly, Theological Students in Bangalore, ministers in Calcutta passed strong resolutions condemning the arrest of the Congress leaders and demanding immediate Independence.[34] At the meeting of the NCCI in 1944, the Council adopted a statement on 'Church and State in Post-War India' which says:

> To the Christian conscience, the present relation between the government and governed in India is by Christian standards fundamentally unsatisfactory, and it is clear that the time has come when these relations should radically be altered. Imperialism is condemned by Christian conscience, and it is agreed that in India it should be brought immediately to an end....[35]

Thus, it is clear that the Indian Christians always desired the same political freedom along with the people of the country, although at times they kept aloof from taking active participation in the national movement.

There are some individual Christians who actively participated in the national movement such as: Kali Charan Banerji, who was a leader of the Bengali Christian community and was an eminent scholar. He became a prominent figure in the Indian National Congress in the early years of its formation. He defended the Indian Christian nationality in 1870, in *The Bengal Christian Herald* saying: "In having become Christians, we have not ceased to be Hindus. We are Hindu Christian... We have embraced Christianity but we have not rejected our nationality. We are as intensely national as any of our bretheren."[36]

Upadhyaya Brahmabandav: According to C.Fonseca, Upadhyaya was the first of the national leaders to suggest complete independence for India. He actively participated in the boycott and swadeshi movement following the partition of Bengal in 1905. He was one of the early architects of India's independence and in many ways a forerunner of Mahatma Gandhiji.[37]

K.T. Paul: He was one of the prominent Indian Christian leaders. He took the positive approach to the national movement and as such did not agree with the policy of aloofness from the Congress and nationalist movement. While many other Christians were keeping aloof, he encouraged the Indian Christians to actively participate in the Congress and national struggle. He attended the Second Round

Table Conference in London, in 1931 on behalf of the Indian Christians. He played a great role in the national movement.[36]

V.S. Azariah: He was the first Indian national elevated to the Anglican episcopate. He stood for the unity of the country and as such was against the provision of separate electorate on the basis of communities.

He defended the Christian cause for conversion against Gandhiji's criticism. He became the president of NCCI and raised his voice for freedom and encouraged Christians to participate in the national movement.

Besides, leaders like S.K. George, P. Chenchiah, V. Chakkarai, S.K. Mukeerji and others also contributed considerably to the national movement.[39]

Conclusion

The history of India from the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries was a history of the national struggle for freedom. We have also noted that there were several factors for the rise of nationalism. In the courses of the national movement, the Indian Christians had raised their voices through different organizations and sometimes as individuals. The Indian Christians as a Church did not participate in the national movement. However, there were quite a good number of Indian Christians who had made valuable contributions towards the national movement for freedom.

NOTES

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3. *Ibid.*, p.68.
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5. *Ibid.*, p.261.
6. *Ibid.*, p.264-8.
7. *Ibid.*, pp.302-12.
8. *Ibid.*, p.325.
9. *Ibid.*, p.326.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.336-8.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 334.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 344.
13. P.N. Chopra, *A Century of Indian National Congress* (1885-1985), (Delhi: Agam Prakashan, 1986), pp.1-2.
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15. *Ibid.*, p.119.
16. Kaj Baago, "The first Independence Movement Among Indian Christians", *Indian Church History Review*, Vol. 1, No.1, (1967), p.65.

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19. *Ibid.*, p.88.
20. *Ibid.*, p.77.
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22. G.A. Oddie, "Indian Christians and the National Congress, 1885-1910" *Indian Church History Review*, Vol. 11. No. 1, (1968), p.45.
23. *Ibid.*, p.46-47.
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35. *Ibid.*, p.65.
36. Kaj Baago, The first Independence Movement among Indian Christians," p.67.
37. C. Fonseca, SJ, "Upadhyaya: The political years," *Indian Church History Review*, vol.XIV, No.1, (1980), pp. 21, 26.
38. Oddie, p.51-2.
39. Susa Billington Harper, "The politics of Conversion: The Azariah-Gandhi Controversy over Christian Mission to the Depressed Classes in the 1930s," *A Journal of History*, n.d., p.147.