



## INDIAN LIBERALS AND INEFFECTUAL ROLE IN POLITICS

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### Abstract

*Several influential, but intellectual persons constituted the Liberal party during the period under review. They held many conferences under the auspices of the National Liberal Federation of India. The Liberals generally blamed the government for their unfortunate position. The paper presents the facts of liberals and their role in politics.*

**Keywords:** *liberals, politics, ineffectual role*

Several influential, but intellectual persons constituted the Liberal party during the period under review. They held many conferences under the auspices of the National Liberal Federation of India. These conferences were presided over by very prominent persons, who were known for their outstanding abilities. Among them, the beginning was made with Surendra Nath Banerjee in the year 1918. Some of the best and most experienced brains called themselves liberals and they were willing to participate in the Liberal councils. What, then, were the reasons of their ineffectual roles and the apathy towards the Liberal Party?

The Liberals generally blamed the government for their unfortunate position. Firstly, there was some reality in such accusation, The Party was constituted in the year 1918 as a 'break away' from the Congress when the Congress rejected the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1918. Its initial viewpoint was that though the Reforms of 1918-19 did not offer as much as they should have, they contained the promise of enough real advance to warrant patriotic Indians' sincere attempts to work them. The Liberals thought that they would be able to modify the working of that part of the system over which under the constitution they had no control. Secondly they also expected to establish themselves in the eyes of the countrymen. They would also be able to prove that the rash methods and undue haste of the Indian national Congress were unnecessary. Accordingly the Indian Liberals took office and at first exercised some influence on the course of the government. Of course, they got valuable support from Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India. In fact, he was a pillar of strength to them, all the time that he was in power.

It appears that Montagu has really an ardent desire to lead India towards full self-government. "You must govern India," he wrote to Chelmsford, "as a country on its way to self-government and not as a dependency unless all the work which we are doing is merely to be a sham." But in this desire Montagu was alone. He was the member of a coalition government in England. It, as he himself described, consisted of the whole of the Conservative Party, a few Liberal members disowned by their organization and a few Labour members repudiated by the Party that they presented. However, to the Conservatives Montagu had already been a figure of dubious motives whose highest crime was the 'Reckless surrender of India to the

revolutionaries'. It was, indeed disheartening to him to find a lack of interest and enthusiasm in the affairs of India. Montagu was really a 'tragic figure' from 1917, groping his way almost alone by the flickering light of liberalism on the wane.

Montagu had a fight against heavy opposition at home in piloting the Government of India Bill through its final stages. The Liberals rightly thought that Montagu was a genuine friend and he meant well by India. At the very outset, they, therefore, put their trust in him. They also felt that with Montagu's firm patronage from London and with their own presence in various ministries in India, they would exercise a constitutional presence which would hasten the process of constitutional evolution. This faith was abundantly justified. Montagu recognized the great help that the Moderates in India had rendered him by supporting the reforms of 1919, and he advised Chelmsford always to encourage the Moderates, to put fresh life into them so that they might be strengthened to attract the waverers from the extremist camp who must not be left sitting on the fence. Montagu also advised Lord Reading to take the Moderates into greater confidence of the government and to lend a more sympathetic ear to their appeal.

The news of Montagu's resignation in March 1922, therefore, came as a serious blow to the Indian Liberals. Thenceforth, they could no longer hope for any support from the British official circles. Their impact in Indian affairs started steadily to dwindle. It was true that the Labour party, which had committed itself against imperialism and had repeatedly promised to grant India her right of determination, came to power in Great Britain with Mr. J. Ramsay MacDonald as the Prime Minister in 1924 and again in 1919. The Liberals' opinion expected that the Labour party would do big things for India. However, the attitude of the Labour Party, at that time made them realize that, after all, where the question of Indian self-government was considered, there was very little to choose between one British party and another.

It is worth mentioning that without the moral support of White Hall since Montagu's fall from power (Wedgwood Ben's term of office may be ignored) the Liberals in India began to find themselves in a difficult position. They were now confronted with a Secretary of State who presented neither Montagu's vision nor sympathy. For the remaining period the Liberals had to face a Pusillaninous Government, afraid



of the rashness of its own promises and 'bent on nothing so much as on taking back in practice what it had already conceded in theory'. Under such circumstances 'the cooperation of the Liberals, depending as it did on the political life of one man, was a political mistake of first magnitude.

Up to the time of Simon commission, the Liberals in India were passing through a very poor situation; many of them were passing time occasionally taking part in various conferences with the motive of expediting the progress of the constitutional development of India or devoting their energies to such matters as ameliorating the conditions of Indian overseas. When the government of India declared the setting up of a purely parliamentary commission in the autumn of 1927, the Liberals joined the Indian National Congress in declaring a boycott. The Liberals could get a fresh lease of life with Irwin's announcement on the Round Table Conference on dominion Status in October 1929. They understood at the same time very well the need of securing the co-operation of the Congress, for the acceptance of the announcement by them would have little practical worth in India if the congress Party was not reconciled to it. In the autumn of 1929, the Liberals re-emerged in Indian politics in the role of mediators between the government and the Congress. However, all their efforts at securing the co-operation of the Congress were rendered futile by the reactionary debate in British parliament, and the subsequent rough handling of the situation by the government of India. The Liberals finally left for London amidst maledictions of the Congress sympathizers. But they knew from the very beginning that no constitution could be worked in India with active hostility of the Congress because it was the most effective and well organized party in India at that time. Being in close touch with the Congress circles, the Liberals were sure that there was growing body of opinion among them which, while dissatisfied with the constitution and unprepared to bless the proposal of the Round Table Conference, would like to capture the machinery so as to prevent reactionary elements from doing so and for that vision they would enter the Legislature. Sapru thought that they should be better inside the constitutional framework and face responsibility then remaining outside. The sad experience of the Swarajists' non-cooperation from within the Council during 1924-26 was not forgotten by them. They were sure that once the Congressmen went in, they would work upon the Constitution agreed upon.

Thus while the Conference was in session and more especially during its later stages the Liberals' policies had been directed at the one end to try to influence the deliberations of the Conference and the joint parliamentary Committee in their favour as well as on the other side to impress upon the Viceroy of India the need of the repeal of repressive ordinances. It was also to impress upon him to release the political prisoners. If these demands were met, it would facilitate the Congress participation in the conference. It

would also secure their acceptance of the constitution which would emerge out of its deliberations.

However, all their efforts proved meaningless. for it appears that the policy of both the Secretary of State, who was hard pressed by the Tories at home, and the Viceroy, similarly pressed by reactionary officials of the government of India, had been characterized by a contemptuous disregard of the wishes and opinions of the Liberals. They displayed a tendency to lean more and more upon their two reactionary props—the princes and the various minority factions, especially the Muslims. The latter appeared to fall in line with their opinion. The Liberals were distressed to say that the die-hard politicians in Great Britain and bureaucrats in India had reverted to the time honoured policy of 'no truck with the Congress' from which the Gandhi-Irwin Pact' had been a temporary deviation.

It must be admitted that the Liberals had time and again been treated in this manner by the government particularly since they went out of office in 1923. Sapru rightly made a complaint: "We Liberals are being blamed both by the people and the government. My feeling is that government recognizes us a Party only when we are on any question in agreement with them, otherwise we are dismissed a Party with no influence and no backing." Indeed, whenever the government of India found itself in trouble, it turned to the Liberals for help. The Liberals also lost no time in responding to such a situation, Being assured of government's sincerity they began negotiations galore and devised legion formulas. While their advice was being considered, they would be hopeful that their method would prove most effective in helping to free India from the foreign domination. However, reaction would not be long in coming. The Liberals would soon be asked to retire from the scene. They lamented that notwithstanding their tried policy of co-operation with and confidence in government, the liberals should be treated in this manner. "We feel like cardinal", Wolsley said, the most imminent among them.

For another reason also the moderates had blamed the British. If the British had conceded reforms in time, the Congress policy would not have taken such a radical turn. Indeed, nothing was more fatal to the moderates' position than an Indian policy of vacillation. From 1916 onwards the old moderates had been steadily losing their influence in the Congress. As Lord Sinha, who had presided over the session of the Indian National Congress in 1915 had predicted: "Government's long delay in making its intention clear had undermined the position and authority of the moderates." Both in 1919 and in 1935 the reforms had come after long delay, which discredited the Liberals in popular esteem. The Liberals' position was bound to be somewhat shaky and embarrassing whenever the concessions they asked for were refused or postponed. They deplored that the government should be playing into the extremists' hands by repeatedly declining to listen to their voice. It was a vicious circle in which the Liberals gradually found



themselves involved. For a while the attitude of the bureaucracy towards legitimate Indian aspirations stiffened the Congress attitude in India, the utterances and activities of the Congress extremists in turn hardened the heart of government against any material surrender of power. For all these ills the Liberals continued to blame the government for its stiff naked attitude for their obtuse method of 'riding roughshod over the delicate susceptibilities of the Indian people. They also censured the Congress for having opened Pandora's Box of mass politics, which it could not contain or control.

But why, knowing that their advice would rarely be followed by the government, did the Liberals allow themselves to be treated in this manner? The Liberals took it as a matter of duty towards the country to help avoid clashes and to do what they could to prevent direct conflict between the Congress and the government. They thought that they should put their case properly time and again. They should hammer it into the consciousness both of the people of India and the British government. They took great pains in mastering the facts of the case and presenting it in a very sober, well balanced form before the government and the public.

The Liberals thought it their pious duty to remain true to their pledge to Montagu. It appeared that Montagu had never held any high opinion about Chelmsford and the government of India. Montagu had lamented again and again about their complete lack of any political sense. He found the Indian politicians ready to co-operate with him. A kind of personal friendship developed between him and them. Surendra Nath Banerjee was a great friend of Montagu. However, of all the Indians, Lord Sinha knew Montagu best and next to him came Sastri and Sapru. It seemed that he entered into an understanding with them that they should stand by the reform and help the government whenever they could. As a result, the Indian Liberals had been loyal to their pledge and hoped that they would be able to influence the course of the government.

Another fact which counts for the fate of Indian Liberalism was that the Liberals were oblivious of the necessity of any proper political organization. It can not be denied that despite their wealth and their far-reaching influence among prominent personalities both in British and in India, the Liberals never had a real organization or an effective machine of propaganda in the sense in which the Congress or the Muslim League had. They were blissfully ignorant of all these so much so that any man who did not belong to any other Party could call himself a Liberal. There were only two newspapers in the whole country and one of these, 'The Leader' was increasingly becoming more radical in its views. After Surendra Nath Banerjee's demise, the Party's leadership passes to the United Provinces and Bombay which henceforth become the stronghold of the Liberal Party in India. However there were endless jealousies and countless personal quarrels. Chitamanii, Kunzru and Stalved led one group. This group showed a distinctly Leftist tendency. Soon, Sapru, in disgust,

resigned his membership because the Party could not make up its mind about any definite course of action. So all they could present to Indian and the world was a disunited front. The Liberals had thus made a pathetic exhibition of themselves.

It was inevitable, however, that the influence and effectiveness of the Indian Liberal Party in organised politics should wane as extremist views began to dominate the scene and inter-communal antagonism overshadowed the land. For the appeal of the Indian Liberals was always an appeal 'to moderation, to precedent which had been the characteristic of British political development and to an equitable settlement of internal communal claims based primarily on the objective condition of the Indian situation and broad logical principles of equity'. However, the emergence of the Liberals created a separate political climate in the country. Reforms previous to the year 1919 had not made very great impact on India; Montagu had intended his 'reforms to disturb the placid, pathetic contentment of the Indian masses'. In this desire he succeeded to a great extent. The characteristic feeling of unsettlement caused by the First World War and followed by such brutal incidents like the Rowlatt Act and Jallianwala Bagh massacre awoke the people from their long slumber and then Gandhi appeared on the political stages. Gandhi's programme and activities created political excitement in the country. Politics was no longer confined to the intellectual classes alone. The Liberals could not identify themselves with the aftermath of this process that they had to deal.

However, despite this radical change in political atmosphere, the Liberals had first hoped that they would be able to influence the course of events. For some time this hope was justified. In the early days of reform though the Indian Congress at first refused to work, it slowly saw the mistake of leaving the fields of the Liberals alone. The rise of the Swarajya Party in 1923 clearly meant, in reality, a relapse into constitutionalism. In the legislative assembly and the provincial councils the Swarajya had in practice played the role of a constitutional opposition. By the mid twenties the Liberals, responsivists, independents, all were for accepting office and working the reform for what they were worth.

There were also some minor organizations and some other individuals with local and sectional influence for instance, Justice Party of Madras, the Indian Christians, some prominent landowners, Zamindars and some Muslims whose views were not completely different from those of the Liberals. However, no attempt could be built upon all those Liberal elements—the independents, the responsivists, the Liberals, the Justice Party, landholders, moderate type of Muslims and some others who differed in no material sense from one another; a constructive cohesive party, non-communal, all-embracing and 'stable enough to assume the immense burden of self-government'. The reason, no urge formally to coalesce with the Liberals. The trouble about these people was that, as the government rightly saw the

situation, there was always communal feeling or personal jealousy getting in the way of any possible teamwork in order to secure any purpose which they might have in view. But though no such middle party could be constituted based upon all these elements, the Liberals had fairly succeeded in justifying their initial viewpoint to all those groups in one respect viz. the reforms were to be worked, for stalemate led nowhere.

The Liberals, in fact, become anxious from 1920 onwards when they notice the quick growth of the youth movement as well as the spread of socialistic and communalistic ideas. The youth movement thought in 'apocalyptic terms of new world emerging out of cataclysm, and it despised the bourgeois objects and methods of the Indian National Congress as much as the Congress had spurned the moderation of Indian Liberals'. Once the young men had come to dominate the Congress, there is no room for men of the liberal sedate outlook. The Liberals saw that neither side in their hearts of hearts wanted their formulas for action or their devices for exit. Indeed, when there was one side determined to secure power and the other side determined not to yield any, when the Congress was firm to organize itself as a parallel government and the government of India was hardened against any material surrender. There was no room for any carefully devised phraseology of Liberalism which smacked of Victorian consensus of fundamentals. The Liberals gradually found themselves encircled by an uncongenial atmosphere from which they could desire no encouragement.

However, of their faith was shaken it was a temporary weakening, for in 1931 they again persuaded the Indian National Congress to agree to take part in the proceedings of the Round Table Conference and when the Act was finally passed in the year 1935, they found the Congressmen ready to enter the provisional legislature. After that they went to the background.

### Conclusion

The Liberals were destined to play a tragic role upon the stage of Indian history. They followed a course of action which, for the circumstances in which they worked, would perhaps have met with greater success. The current of public opinion was against them; instead of swimming with it, as was done by the Congress, they swam against it. Hence the fate of the Liberals in India reminds one of the similar fate of the Liberals in England after the fall of Lord George. Placed between conservatives and Liberates, the English Liberals too petered out. As Major Milner, the labour MP one told Chintamani in 1932, "You are between two stools, and will be crushed as the British Liberals have been". Hence the methods followed by the Liberals were outstripped by events which had thrown them in to the background.

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