

A Chapter Ignored: How India's Congress Stalwarts reacted to the Great War during 1914-15

Shri Anubhav Roy@

Introduction

A century ago, the Great War (1914-18), being a culmination of Europe's great power rivalries, was proliferating across imperial folds to fast become the First World War. For India – then the brightest jewel in the British crown – the period held immense significance, as the local Home Rule campaign resuscitated demands for self-rule and unified drifting political factions towards a nationalist upsurge. Yet, conventional discourses on Indian history often relegate these events to create more room for the coverage of Mahatma Gandhi's rise. As a sample, the National Council of Educational Research and Training's (NCERT) advanced history textbook for high schools, *Themes on Indian History*, Vol. 3, bears no mention of India's part in the Great War. Moreover, its detailing on Gandhi begins from 1916, with his first national address from Benaras.¹

While the Great War served a fertile ground for the revival of India's nationalist movement, the link between the two pivots of modern history remains quite obscure. Consequently, populist perspectives often see the Great War as a harbinger of retribution for the oppressive colonist, recalling how Anglophobic protestors endured British lathis (batons) at chowks (town squares) to defiantly chant 'German ki jai (victory to the German)' in India.² Often forgotten is the fact that, by 1918, over a million Indian soldiers willingly – without any conscription – fortified Allied frontlines in theatres between Flanders and Palestine, having earned 9,200 decorations to their credit. The domestic political response that legitimised such massive contributions from India towards the colonist's cause is hard to miss, despite being evidently overlooked.

The narration that follows retraces British India's political atmosphere of 1914-15, as pivoted by the Indian National Congress (INC) – which continued as the nation's political mast despite its weakening – to fathom its national position amidst an event pressuring its overlord. Why is such an inquiry crucial? Due to the populist historian's unconcern towards the era, the ensuing factual gaps impede an objective comprehension of India's past. The consequent parochial viewing of the colonist as the binary opposite of the colonised promotes the politicisation of India's freedom struggle, handpicking chapters that help cobble up a relatable, heroic script. In doing so, several heroes get buried, such as the Indian men who served overseas during the Great War, shoulder-to-shoulder with their White masters, pound-for-pound against their White foes, to assert the marginalised Brown man's martial worth affront the world.

The 'Old School' Shows the Way

In 1914, India's nationalist charge had lost steam. Bifurcated into moderate and radical camps since 1907 due to internal differences, the INC faced the threat of losing relevance. However, the Great War's advent stimulated British socialist Annie Besant to shelf her isolated theosophist pursuits and help reignite Indian nationalism with a local Home Rule stir, inspired by the original movement in Ireland. The Indian rendition of the campaign was slow to start, with Besant failing to reunite the pacifists and extremists of the INC. Simmering disputes motivated Bal Gangadhar Tilak to set up his own Home Rule League, louder than Besant's. Soon, however, both Leagues merged to capture mass imagination by 1915, thereon pushing the divided INC and the Muslim League towards the agenda of demanding self-rule for India in exchange of support to Britain's war effort. This convergence, as part of 1916's Lucknow Pact, was a turning point. India rallied behind the political shift triggered by Besant, whose arrest in 1917 only heightened agitations. Interestingly, though, most INC bigwigs had begun backing the British intent to save Europe from a collapse amidst the Great War even before Besant's activism could gain momentum.

The prominently outspoken Bal Gangadhar Tilak was India's Lokmanya (the regarded) and had led the walkout of the radicals from the INC at its Surat session in 1907, after bombarding the party's moderate faces with allegations of timidity. However, his prided ferocity proved taxing. For publicly endorsing an attempt on the life of a British magistrate by young revolutionaries, Tilak was booked for sedition and imprisoned at Mandalay in 1908. The severity of the prison time, worsened by diabetes, strangled his zeal. Upon his release in June 1914, he returned to Poona only to discover that the British police was already on its toes to monitor his moves. His old ally, Motilal Ghose, saw Tilak reduced to a 'bereaved old man [wanting] to live peacefully during the rest of his life'. Ghose's assessment, however, soon proved an overstatement.

As the battle lines got drawn across Europe, Tilak issued a statement to the press on 27 Aug 1914, which bore a unique sense of camaraderie for the very British State he detested. As Stanley Wolpert saw it, Tilak, in that statement, 'sounded [...] more like Gokhale than the pre-Mandalay Lokmanya.'³ He claimed:

'[There is] a marked increase of confidence between the Rulers and the Ruled. [...] The view may be optimistic to some, but it is an article of faith with me. [...] I may state once [and] for all that we are trying in India [...] for a reform [...] and not for the overthrow of government; and I have no hesitation in saying that [...] acts of violence [...] may have [...] unfortunately retarded [...] our political progress.'⁴

Irrespective of whether Tilak's declaration was a guise for distraction, or a temporary spurt of despair, it did repair his controversial image. Soon, Tilak's friend-turned rival, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, announced that he saw 'reasonable prospects of a reunification' of the INC.⁵

Since the Surat Split, the flag-bearer of the largely mellowed INC was Gokhale, who, upon the Great War's arrival, was on his last legs. Juggling his duties towards the Imperial Legislative Council, his Servants of India Society and the INC had exhausted him. Yet, despite medical worries, he kept a balance between his administrative and nationalist

priorities. Gokhale oversaw the Royal Commission on Expenditures, just as he opposed the disparities between Indian and British officers of the Public Service Commission. Moreover, he declined Knighthood in June 1914.⁶ He longed for a political heir – for which, he eyed Gandhi – and a return to his homeland. Nonetheless, despite the war prolonging his stay in London, Gokhale, in November, personally suggested Lord Robert Crewe, the Secretary of State for India, to ‘open the King’s Commission to the Indian youth’, so that even they may serve Britain on its war fronts.⁷

The newfound compatibility between Tilak and Gokhale amidst the war hinted an INC reunion, much to the joy of Besant. However, upon his return to India, a bedridden Gokhale skipped the 1914 session of the INC, which was slated to wash away the enmity between the extremists and the moderates. His demise, a few months later, quashed all optimism.⁸ The session was hosted at Madras under the presidency of Bhupendra Nath Bose, the esoteric Bengali politician, who had foregone his career as a legislator to consolidate the Swadeshi agitations in his partitioned home province in 1905-06.⁹ His verdict on the Great War, though, was quite distant from the staunchly anti-colonial ethos of Swadeshi:

‘Moslem and Hindu in India are, alike, united in their unswerving devotion and loyalty to the Empire in this crisis. Nobody doubts [...] that we shall emerge victorious out of this terrible chapter in our history, [...] for [...] India and overseas dominions shall stand and grow together united in bonds sanctified in the field of battle.’¹⁰

By then, the founding patriarch of the INC, Dadabhai Naoroji¹¹, was on the brink of political extinction. At his peak, Naoroji had unsparingly critiqued the British Raj with his seminal ‘Drain Theory’, which exposed the hazards of colonial economics to soundly intellectualise India’s anti-imperial discourse. However, Naoroji came out of retirement to side with his nation’s colonist at war, lauding the British repelling of Wilhelmine Germany.¹² On August 10, 1914, he wrote to the Viceroy of India, Lord Hardinge: ‘I trust this is the greatest struggle for liberty [...] and will end gloriously to the credit of England and the good of mankind.’¹³ Two days later, as part of a message to the nation, he pledged:

‘Fighting as the British people are [...] is a righteous cause, to the good and glory of human dignity and civilization, and moreover, being the beneficent instrument of our own progress [...]. Our duty is clear: to do everyone our best to support the British fight with our life and property.’¹⁴

Such appeals by the likes of Bose and Naoroji were cited as representations of India’s voluntary will to enter the Great War, in a Government volume, *India and the War*, published in 1915. The treatise flaunted an introductory note by Lord Sydenham.

As the Governor of Bombay, in 1914, Sydenham was engaged in a personal war of his own against Pherozeshah Mehta. He could not tolerate ‘Ferocious’ Mehta’s imposing sway over the province’s legislature and municipality. Meanwhile, the office rivalry’s heat took a toll on the septuagenarian Mehta’s health. Until then, as the sixth President of the INC and amongst the party’s earliest molders, he was revered as an educated critic of colonial meddling. Despite his softening, one of Mehta’s last speeches, delivered to Bombay’s Town Hall on August 13, 1914, met a ‘rousing reception’. The address expressed ‘feelings of loyalty and devotion which the [Great] War had aroused.’¹⁵ Mehta, disobeying his doctor’s orders to avert excitement, argued:

‘At this solemn moment, [...] we owe sacred duties and hold obligations to that British rule under whose [...] wise, provident, and righteous statesmanship, the welfare, happiness, and the prosperity [of India] are being incessantly promoted.’¹⁶

The Town Hall gathering went on to resolve ‘that the citizens of Bombay [...] desire to give expression to their feelings of unswerving loyalty and devotion to the British Crown.’¹⁷ Since the Great War seemed as a prized opportunity for India to demand self-rule, Mehta wanted the INC in ‘firm and sagacious hands’. Due to his lasting distrust for the extremists, thus, he ensured the hosting of the INC session of 1915 at his bastion, Bombay, ‘where he could control [its] every phase’. However, weeks before the session could be held, he passed away, leaving the door open for an eventual absorption of the radical camp into the INC by 1916.¹⁸

The ‘New School’ Follows Suit

A similar community congregation was organised at Allahabad, led by four-time INC President, Madan Mohan Malaviya. Known for his conservative reserve, Malaviya’s censuring of the call for separate Muslim electorates during the Lucknow Pact deliberations in 1916 hinted at his more defiant side. He went on to steer closer to unhesitant anti-colonists such as Lala Lajpat Rai, and even inspire Hindu hyper-nationalists like Madhav S Golwalkar. Much before, however, at the Allahabad assembly of 1914, Malaviya’s say on the Great War conformed to the trend:

‘The destinies of our dear country are linked closely with the destinies of Great Britain. Any reverses to Britain means a serious menace to India. [...] I do not hesitate to say that I am loyal to the British throne because I love my country.’¹⁹

Notably, unlike the champions of restraint within the INC – who egged on the onslaught against Germany in Europe as a just cause – Malaviya was amongst the few to conspicuously iterate his support for the British war effort in favour of his own nation’s interest. His was not the only prominent voice on the issue to emanate from Allahabad, nonetheless.

The ailing Pheroze Shah Mehta's prized local daily, the Bombay Chronicle, was effectively run by its influential left-liberal editor, Benjamin G Horniman, a friend of Jawaharlal Nehru's. In a letter, dated July 1, 1917 – the day Russia's last offensive in the war commenced – Horniman wrote to Nehru about the proposed protests against the British internment of Annie Besant. The letter brought to fore the mention of a certain 'JDR':

'As regards the JDR, I am sorry to say that our [British] people here, or most of them, are not in favour of your action [of withdrawing contributions to it]. Jinnah, who with great trouble was originally persuaded to support the recruiting movement, is now strong on not dropping it as a protest, and I seem to stand alone.'²⁰

The JDR, in Nehru's own words, was a 'reserve military organisation which was then proposed for training to be given to educated Indian young men.'²¹ Long before becoming India's first Prime Minister, Nehru, even as a Cambridge-trained barrister in his twenties, was intellectually loud. For his probing criticism of political mildness, he was then seen as a Fabian-turned radical with a liking for Gandhian resistance, which was considered no less unorthodox in 1914-15.

Jawaharlal's truculence was, in part, a bid to evade the shadow of his father, Motilal Nehru, who, at the time, attracted adequate attention within the INC. While the Nehrus, led by him, managed the Allahabad wing of Besant's Home Rule front, Jawaharlal was 'more sympathetic politically to the Tilak League'.²² Like Gandhi, the younger Nehru was upset by the populist Anglophobic responses to the Great War, which he despised as uncivil acts of 'vicarious revenge', led by the 'middle classes, [who] despite their declarations of loyalty, [had] little enthusiasm for the British cause.'²³ Therefore, when the British set up the JDR to form a unit of educated Indian reserves for the fronts, Nehru readily enlisted as a loyalist. However, the outfit never served any recorded utility, as Besant's arrest led to the withdrawal of applications, including that of Nehru²⁴ who went on to serve the St John's Ambulance in Allahabad as compensation.²⁵

Notably, Mohammad Ali Jinnah – the future founder of Pakistan, then a moderate supporting the Lucknow Pact – was amongst the few who opposed the JDR's retaliatory disbandment in 1917.²⁶ In 1914, albeit, he stood amongst the Indian elites in London reluctant to publicly endorse the colonist's war.²⁷ Alongside him was Lala Lajpat Rai, a top INC extremist. Rai spent the Great War years in North America, even investigating the Komagata Maru fiasco in Canada.²⁸ Before leaving London, though, he was caught in an episode he later deemed embarrassing. In August 1914, a team of influential Indian Londoners, led by Bhagwan Din Dube, chose to extend a joint declaration of support to war-struck Britain. Despite much persuasion, Rai refused to hop onto the bandwagon due to his unhindered dislike for imperialism. By then, however, the statements of Naoroji and Mehta were winning over Britain's press, mounting pressure on him to respond. Frustrated, Rai eventually stormed into the city's National Liberal Hall and signed Dube's letter, committing 'loyal cooperation in the war [for] the interests of the Empire'.²⁹

The letter from Dube's delegation was posted to Lord Crewe. Another Indian in London, at the time, was influential enough to reach the Secretary of State for India personally. That man was Mohandas K Gandhi, the barrister who had set the benchmark for peaceful resistance in South Africa. When the Great War began, he set sail to India, with a halt at Britain. Upon disembarking at Southampton, he could not avoid the anxiety and fervour predominant across British society. In Chapter 115 of his autobiography, Gandhi rationalised his response to the circumstances:

'I felt that Indians residing in England ought to do their bit in the war. [...] A number of objections were taken to this line of argument. [...] We were slaves and they were masters. [...] Was it not the duty of the slave, seeking to be free, to make the master's need his opportunity? This argument failed to appeal to me then. [...] If we would improve our status through the help and cooperation of the British, it was our duty to win their help by standing by them in their hour of need. [...] The opposing friends felt that [it] was the hour for making a bold declaration of Indian demands [...]. I thought that England's need should not be turned into our opportunity, and that it was more becoming and far-sighted not to press our demands while the war lasted. I, therefore, adhered to my advice and invited those who would to enlist as volunteers.'³⁰

The credulous reputation commanded by Gandhi as early as in 1914 was attested by the response his call for volunteers received. He swiftly gathered about 80 recruits of Indian ethnicity for an Ambulance Corps, ratified by Lord Crewe himself, to tend to war casualties in London. Medical and military skills were duly imparted to the unit before it began its aid services. Sarojini Naidu – an accomplice of Annie Besant and, later, the first woman President of the INC – was a part of London's Lyceum Club that year. Almost instantly drawn to Gandhi, she 'threw herself whole heartedly into the work' of the Corps.³¹

Conclusion

As evident, despite their stature as anti-colonists, the most noted political voices – young or old, moderate or radical – from India's leading political outlet echoed unequivocal solidarity to the British Empire during the Great War, without any coercion or coaxing from the colonist. While a radical like Tilak cited a rise in Anglo-Indian fraternity, a Swadeshi such as Bose made sanguine predictions about British victory. Indeed, Naoroji saw the war waged by Britain as a 'righteous cause' and a 'struggle for liberty', but for the likes of him and Mehta – the elders of anti-colonial skepticism – to praise the British Raj was no co-incidence. One might suspect them as appeasers, for their moderate inclinations. However, with uncertainties looming, the more sprightly faces of the INC, too, hummed a chorus advocating the colonist's case. In fact, the INC's new school of the day was more active in its backing of Britain. Nehru enlisted in a reserve military unit, just as Gandhi and Naidu willfully undertook medical duties in war-hit London. Even reluctant figures like Rai and Jinnah failed to resist the soaring Anglophile tempers.

The INC stalwarts surely had their own rationales for standing by Britain during its days of distress. Quite like Malaviya, perhaps all of them tacitly tied their decisions to India's national interests. However, these leaders, despite their internal disagreements, were seasoned enough to know their public responsibilities. The dangers of thumping immature proclamations at a fragile time in history did not elude them. For national benefit, no INC member could afford to lose the advantage of being the trusty conduits between London and India's masses. Their responses to the Great War, thus, had to be well thought out, even if with crude Machiavellian intents. Despite being spontaneous and sporadic, the reactions on the war from leading INC affiliates emerged on the same page, resultantly going on to unify a discourse for the nation to follow.

In clarifying their optimism as early as in 1914-15 – before the Home Rule campaign could turn nationwide – India's nationalists exhibited wisdom, not populism. For the gain of history, it must be upheld that had India not marched by Britain's side during the Great War, it would have lost its *raison d'être* to repel colonialism, by attracting the tag of a savage opportunist from its prowling critics in the West. Consistent with its long trajectory of patient politics, India did not stab its colonist in the back, but chose to earn the heeding of its wants by fulfilling prior needs for a virtuous cause. Thus, by 1918-19, after Indian blood curbed Europe's implosion, as Britain did a volte-face on its assurances and unleashed a fresh wave of repression – including the Rowlatt Act clampdowns and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre – India rightfully funnelled its protest into a persistent, organised nationalist movement led by Gandhi. For revilers of India's stance during the Great War, the Mahatma reserved a wise answer: 'he who is not qualified to resist war, may take part in war [to] try to free himself, his nation, and the world from war.'³²

Endnotes

- 1 Guha, Ramachandra. "Mahatma Gandhi and the Nationalist Movement." In *Themes in Indian History*, Vol. 3, by NCERT. New Delhi: NCERT, 2007, p. 347.
- 2 Zachariah, Benjamin, Nehru. London: Routledge, 2004, p. 31.
- 3 Wolpert, Stanley A Tilak and Gokhale: *Revolution and Reform in the Making of Modern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962, p. 264.
- 4 Ibid, p. 264-65.
- 5 Ibid, p. 265.
- 6 Gupta, VP, and Mohini Gupta. *The Life and Legacy of Gopal Krishna Gokhale*. New Delhi: Radha Publications, 2000, p. 92.
- 7 Khan, Mohammad Shabbir. *Tilak and Gokhale: A Comparative Study*. New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1992, p. 278-79.
- 8 Ibid, p. 300-301.
- 9 De, Amalendu. *Raja Subodh Chandra Malik and His Times*. Kolkata: National Council of Education, West Bengal, 1996, p. 96.
- 10 India, Government of. *India and the War*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915, p. 72.
- 11 Dadabhai Naoroji's grandson, KAD Naoroji, joined the British Army's Middlesex Regiment upon the Great War's outbreak, and briefly served in France. Along with a young AA Rudra, he re-enlisted at the Inns of Court's OTC in 1918, and formed part of the 17th OTC Battalion. However, before his course could meet completion, the Armistice of Compiègne ended the war. See: Barua, Pradeep. *Gentlemen of the Raj: The Indian Army Officer Corps, 1817-1949*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing, 2003, p. 47.
- 12 India, Government of India and the War, p. 68-69.
- 13 Khan, Mohammad Shabbir. *Tilak and Gokhale*, p. 278.
- 14 India, Government of India and the War, p. 68-69.
- 15 Mody, Homi. Pherozeshah Mehta. New Delhi: Publications Division: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1963, p. 192-93.
- 16 Brothers, Khosla. *India and the War, 1914-18*. Lahore: Imperial Publishing Co., 1924, p. 34-35.
- 17 Ibid, p. 35.
- 18 Mody, Homi. Pherozeshah Mehta, p. 204.
- 19 Natesan, G.A. *The Indian Demands*. Madras: G. A. Natesan and Co., 1917, p. 264.
- 20 Nehru, Jawaharlal. *A Bunch of Old Letters*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 2005, p. 1-2.
- 21 Ibid, p. 2.
- 22 Zachariah, Benjamin. *Nehru*, p. 32.
- 23 Zachariah, Benjamin. *Nehru*, p. 31-32.
- 24 Nehru, Jawaharlal. *A Bunch of Old Letters*, p. 2.
- 25 Ghose, Sankar. *Nehru: A Biography*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1993, p. 25.
- 26 Nehru, Jawaharlal. *A Bunch of Old Letters*, p. 2.
- 27 Chand, Feroz. *Lala Lajpat Rai: Life and Work*. New Delhi: Publications Division: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1979, p. 265-66.
- 28 Ibid, p. 262-63.
- 29 Ibid, p. 266-67.
- 30 Gandhi, Mohandas K *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust, p. 183.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid, p. 183-83.

@ **Shri Anubhav Roy** is a Research Analyst for Shri Hardeep S Puri, IFS (Retd) India's former Permanent Representative to the United Nations. He also edits for the online journal, E-International Relations. Previously, he was associated with the 'India and the Great War' project at the USI's Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research. *Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. CXLV, No. 602, October-December 2015.