# CHAPTER VII

THE HISTORY OF BRITISH RULE IN

INDIA

hroughout the last thirty years of his life, from 1918

to 1948, Mahatma Gandhi fought three major battles: the

JL battle with himself, the battle with Indians and the battle

with Britain.

From remote antiquity to modern times, India has been invaded

twenty-six times. The British invasion was the last. Until the end

of the fifteenth century, all of India’s conquerors came overland

and all, except Baber, approached through what is now Russian

Turkestan, crossed the Hindu Kush where the passes are from

12,000 to 16,000 feet above sea level and then filed through the

narrow Khyber Pass to the Suleiman mountain range and the

banks of the Indus and beyond.

Semiramis, Queen of Assyria, sent an army into India via

Turkestan twenty-two centuries before Christ. Cyrus of Persia

repeated this performance in 530 b.c. North-west India remained

under Persian domination (Indians probably fought the Greeks

at Marathon) until Alexander the Great of Macedon swept out

of Greece at the head of an army of 40,000 men, quickly subdued

Syria, Egypt and Palestine, defeated Persia at Arbela, marched

to the Oxus and Samarkand and then, climbing the Hindu Kush,

entered India in 326 b.c., at the age of thirty. After a nineteen

months’ stay, Alexander, a pupil of Aristotle, left for home, taking

with him several Indian philosophers. He died two years later

in Babylon.

The Greeks, and subsequently the Romans, carried to the West

the achievements of Indian science. The so-called ‘Arabic’

numerals were invented in India. The zero is an Indian concept.

An Indian brain likewise evolved the present world-wide system

of numeral placement: the system whereby a one with a four after

it is fourteen and a four with a one after it is forty-one.

Attracted by the wealth and mystery of India, more fabled

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conquerors, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, Nadir Shah and others,

added their scratches to Indian history and withdrew with loot

and lore.

On July 8th, 1497, five years after Columbus in three Spanish

vessels discovered America, Vasco da Gama in three Portuguese

ships, the largest of which displaced 150 tons, anchored off the

south-west shore of India. Thus began the first seaborne invasion

of India.

The Papal bulls of 1493 and an agreement with Spain gave

Portugal, then a world power, a Catholic monopoly in south¬

east Asia. That did not prevent the Dutch from establishing

several lucrative trading posts in India early in the sixteenth

century. The French followed a few years later. They sent home

pepper, cinnamon and other spices.

England hesitated to encroach on the formidable Portuguese.

Instead, since they had wool to sell which torrid southern Asia

did not need, the British searched for a north-west passage through

North America and a north-east passage around northern Europe

to the colder regions of China. But when this quest proved vain,

England, emboldened by her victory over the Spanish Armada in

July 1588, dared to defy Portugal, Spain’s confederate, and dis¬

patched her first expedition into the Indian Ocean in 1591.

Despite the war with Spain and Portugal, other British expedi¬

tions followed. The peace signed with these nations increased the

traffic and intensified the commercial competition.

An East India Company was formed in London in 1600; its

renewed charter of 1609 gave it a British trade monopoly in Asia

unlimited in time and space.

War greased the wheels of business. The Dutch, vigorous and

aggressive and supported by all the military might of the home¬

land, took the offensive against Portuguese settlements in India

and, with British co-operation, achieved considerable success. In

1625, an Anglo-Dutch fleet defeated the Portuguese. The victors

divided the spoils.

In 1642,, England abandoned the Dutch and became Portugal’s

ally. As reward, British merchants won unhampered trade

facilities with all Portuguese possessions in Asia except Macao.

Ten years later, Britain went to war with Holland in Europe and

Anglo-Portuguese forces fought the Dutch in India. At the

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cessation of hostilities in 1654, Britain extended her power in

India at Holland’s expense.

Wars, intrigues with Indian provincial warlords, and shrewd

trading filled the coffers of the East India Company and en¬

hanced its power. In the first half of the seventeenth century,

England was importing cotton piece-goods, indigo, drugs, lac,

sugar and carpets from India. Indian calicoes were a special

favourite with British housewives. In return, the Company

brought to India broadcloth, industrial metals and gold. In 1668,

the Company received from the British King the former Portu¬

guese possession of Bombay with its magnificent undeveloped

harbour. With royal assent, a similar British position was estab¬

lished on the eastern coast at Madras. Feuds between the Moslem

or Mogul emperors of India and the warlike Maratha Hindus of

south-central India, in the area centring on Poona, east of Bombay,

enabled the Company to proclaim the fusion of money-making

and imperialism; it announced in December 1687, that it proposed

to create such civil and military institutions ‘as may be the founda¬

tion of a large, well-grounded, sure English dominion in India

for all time to come’.

The accretion of British power moved with accelerated speed.

The process was simple: early in 1749, for instance, Prince Shahji,

native potentate of the state of Tanjore, on the south-east coast,

was dethroned by a rival; he offered the British a town called

Devikottai at the place where the Coleroon River empties into

the Bay of Bengal ‘on condition’, says The Cambridge History of

India , ‘of their helping him to recover the throne’. After a few

days of siege, Devikottai surrendered. ‘The English kept it with

the country belonging to it; and as for Shahji,’ the British

chronicle notes, ‘no one thought of restoring him to his throne.’

Anybody wronged by the British was wooed by the French and

vice versa. When Nawab Siraj-ud-daula, exploiting the dis¬

integration of Mogul power at Delhi, took control of Bengal, the

British tried to prevent him from getting too strong. In one

indecisive skirmish he defeated a force of Europeans and im¬

prisoned some of them overnight in the Black Hole of Calcutta,

where an unknown number perished. But on January 2nd, 1757,

a young British officer named Robert Clive retook Calcutta and

forced Siraj-ud-daula to accept humiliating terms. The nawab

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accordingly conspired with the French. The British Admiral

Watson thereupon threatened him: T will kindle such a flame in

your country’, the Englishman wrote, c as all the water in the

Ganges shall not be able to extinguish.’ Sobered by these hot

words, the Moslem ruler shrank into a passivity that facilitated

the expulsion of his French allies from strategic Bengal areas.

But the nawab remained and so did some French advisers. An

insurrection, coinciding conveniently with the British attack,

enabled Colonel Clive with 800 English and 2220 mercenary

Indian troops to rout the nawab’s army of 50,000 at Plassey on

June 23rd, 1757. Siraj-ud-daula was executed and his rival,

necessarily a complacent British puppet, replaced him. The entire

province of Bengal was now a British colony. With a frankness

born of impunity, Clive wrote to Robert Orme, T am possessed

of volumes of material for the continuation of your history, in

which will appear fighting, tricks, chicanery, intrigues, politics

and the Lord knows what.’ It was all politics.

Warren Hastings, the Governor-General of Bengal, continued

the policy of British expansion through armed force, enforced

tributes and dynastic conspiracies. His trial in England, which

lasted from February 1788 to April 1795, showed that the British

administration in India was neither scrupulous nor incorruptible,

nor concerned with the welfare of Indians.

Gradually, by means mostly foul but considered normal in that

age and place, the British established themselves throughout the

length and breadth of the vast Indian subcontinent. In some

areas, the East India Company ruled directly through its officials.

Elsewhere it stood close behind the thrones of Hindu maharajas

and Moslem nawabs who pliantly subserved the politics of British

empire-building.

The Portuguese had been confined to a few ports. The Dutch

had been ousted. French power, though still considerable, was

waning. In 1786, Mirabeau, the French revolutionary, urged the

Russian Czar to help France by invading India. Napoleon’s

offensive against Egypt was conceived as the first step towards the

destruction of the British in India. When the Corsican’s campaign

in the eastern Mediterranean collapsed he wrote to Emperor

Paul I in St. Petersburg urging him to march on India and

promising men and supplies. Paul agreed and sent instructions

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to General Orlov, ataman of the Don Cossacks. ‘All the wealth of

India will be yours as a reward for the expedition,’ he wrote.

Russia ‘would acquire treasure and commerce and strike the

enemy in the heart’. The enemy was Britain. ‘I am enclosing all

the maps I have,’ the Emperor added. ‘They go only to Khiva

and the Oxus.’

Later, Paul sent another map by special courier. General

Orlov, however, never got beyond the Urals. Paul was myster¬

iously murdered and the Russo-French alliance lapsed. But in a

few years it was renewed, and when Napoleon met Paul’s suc¬

cessor, Alexander I, at Tilsit in East Prussia in 1807, they planned

an assault on India. There is a letter in the Russian archives

penned by Napoleon to Alexander on February 2nd, 1808, in

which the Corsican proposed the formation of a Russo-French

army to conquer India. ‘England will be enslaved’, Napoleon

predicted. He promised Stockholm to Russia as a reward for her

efforts against England in Asia.

These were idle dreams. The French in India were soon limited

to a few maritime dots and when, in 1818, the British crushed the

great Maratha empire in south-central India, the last organized

challenge to British rule vanished. The rest was a clean-up

operation.

While India was being subjugated, the invention of the spinning

jenny in 1764, Watt’s perfected steam engine in 1768 and the

power loom in 1785 were converting England into a maker and

exporter of textiles. Indian cotton goods were no longer wanted

in Britain; on the contrary, Britain exported textiles and other

factory products to the people of India who, in 1800, numbered

approximately 140,000,000.

India’s industries consequently languished; Indian treasure

flowed to the British Isles as profit or plunder. Indian handicrafts

suffered too. India was transformed into a purely agrarian

country whose villages, overcrowded by the influx of unemployed

townsmen, could not produce enough food. According to a

British source, the deaths from famine in India between 1800 and

1825 were one million; between 1825 an d I ^5°> four hundred

thousand; between 1850 and 1875, fi ye million; and between

1875 and 1900, fifteen million.

Engineered by wit and violence, England’s annexations in

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India in the latter part of the eighteenth century and the first

quarter of the nineteenth left many disgruntled and dispossessed

native rulers. British attempts to introduce law and order and

an equitable system of taxation further irritated innumerable

persons nursing innumerable wounds. Widespread economic

stringency intensified the general unrest. Only a spark was needed

to produce a flame. India had not yet become totally docile, nor

had the British learned the technique, which they subsequently

mastered, of firm yet smooth and barely visible administration.

It was 1857, and a Hindu prophecy declared that on the

centenary of the Battle of Plassey in 1757 British rule would

perish. A war, officially called the Mutiny or the Sepoy Mutiny,

broke out. The immediate impetus was the distribution among

Indian troops of British-made cartridges, greased with cow or pig

fat, which had to be bitten before being loaded into rifles. Since

a Hindu must not touch cow fat and a Moslem must not touch

pork the provocation was perfect and Indian army units rebelled.

But the British authorities admitted that the Bengal Indian force

was ‘a brotherhood’ closely identified with the hungry villages,

and the same bond connected all sepoys in British uniform with

the ragged, hungry peasants.

Numerous regiments ro£e; one seized Delhi. Moslems took the

lead, but all communities assiduously annulled innovations

introduced by the British. Rail and telegraph lines were cut.

Both sides committed numerous murders. Indian soldiers killed

their British officers, and at Benares, ‘rebels, suspects and even

disorderly boys’, says The Cambridge History of India , ‘were executed

by infuriated officers and unofficial British residents who volun¬

teered to serve as hangmen’. Much blood also flowed in pitched

battles and sieges.

The mutiny was unplanned, unco-ordinated, leaderless and

hopeless. Inevitably, after many months, the British, aided by

loyal Indians, suppressed it. With the restoration of peace, the

East India Company, ‘upon which’, according to The Cambridge

History , ‘all parties in England agreed in throwing the blame of

the Mutiny’, was abolished. In 1858, Queen Victoria assumed

the government of India and appointed Lord Canning her first

Viceroy. For eighty-nine years thereafter, until August 15th,

1947, India was a colony of the British Empire.

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The blood-and-plunder period was ended. England’s ideals of

clean government filtered into the British administration of

India. The British watered some deserts and improved com¬

munications. Many British officials, after twenty or thirty years’

service in India, felt at home in India and like foreigners when

they went home to England. They were devoted to India.

They ate out their hearts and ruined their health coping with

difficult problems.

The British in India, however, were a fifth caste, the first caste.

They interdined with Indians perfunctorily and intermarried

seldom. The British were the super-Brahman-Kshatriyas; all

Indians were ‘untouchables’. The British were in India, never of

India. They were like teachers who keep the class quiet and

teach the children to read, write and reckon and to march in

twos, but who do not really teach the children anything, nor

help them, because they regard themselves as animal trainers and

the children as nasty animals.

The British were masters in somebody else’s home. Their very

presence was a humiliation. Despite the best intentions of the

best among them, their every act was a humiliation. Then they

complained, with pain, that Indians were ‘ungrateful’. The

complaint was a measure of the lack of understanding.

The British never deciphered the palimpsest which is India.

They merely read the inscription on the surface: India was a

weak, dirty, backward country, with some fine monuments to be

sure, and some superior brains, but generally inferior, and Asiatic.

Even if the British had converted India into a land flowing with

milk and honey they would have been disliked. Imperialism, like

dictatorship, sears the soul, degrades the spirit and makes in¬

dividuals small the better to rule them. Fear and cowardice are

its allies. Imperialism is government of other people, by other

people, and for other people. What the subjects gain, be it ever

so great, is only the by-product of efforts on behalf of a distant

master.

The requirements of British prestige hurt Indian pride. All

the visible manifestations of the British regime — the ceremonial

pomp, the isolated cantonments or villas where the British dwelt,

and the use of English — told the Indians that they were a subject

race. Subjection stimulated a desire for liberation.

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That is why colonial administration never is, and never can be,

successful. History has known no good colonizers. Every empire

digs its own grave. Imperialism is a perpetual insult, for it

assumes that the outsider has the right to rule the insiders who

cannot rule themselves; it is thus arrogant nationalism and

inevitably begets an opposing nationalism.

Alien rule thwarts the native lovers of power. The British

could never forget the Mutiny. ‘After all,’ Lord Linlithgow, the

British Viceroy, said to me in 1942, ‘we are the occupying power.

Ever since the Mutiny we have hesitated to put arms into the

hands of Indians.’ Decades after the Mutiny, when the British

were secure enough in their power to share it, the share of Indians

was small. Real power — the authority to decide, appoint, recall

and spend — lay with the British. No matter how high an Indian

rose in the government service he remained a British hireling.

His power was not merely severely restricted; it lacked one of the

sweetest concomitants of power: popularity; for the more the

British trusted him the more his own people rejected him.

Unloved and unwanted, the British found it dangerous to

arouse too many expectations of self-government and inconvenient

to kill too many hopes for it. Hence, all the eighty-nine years of

British rule constitute a series of oscillations between bold promises

and disappointing performances. When the Queen took over from

the Company in 1858 she announced that ‘as far as may be’

Indians would be given responsible posts in government. But

Lord Lytton, Viceroy from 1876 to 1880, wrote in a secret report,

‘Since I am writing confidentially, I do not hesitate to say that

both the government of England and of India appear to me up to

the present moment unable to answer satisfactorily the charge of

having taken every means in their power of breaking to the heart

the words of promise they have uttered to the ear.’

This was the complaint by a man who, unfettered by London,

would have done better. But the Indians naturally regretted the

breach of faith even more keenly than the Queen’s first officer

in India.

When the demand for broader participation in local govern¬

ment and for redress of grievances grew more insistent, Lord

Dufferin, Viceroy from 1884 to 1888, intending to direct upper-

class discontent into an artificial canal, sired the Indian National

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Congress; subsequent Viceroys blessed it. Even if they had

foreseen that a callow Indian law student in London in the late

1880s would make Congress an instrument of the downfall of

British rule, they could not have helped themselves. The history

of the British rule in India is a record of retreats, more graceful in

some Viceregal quinquenniums than in others, but always

enhancing Indian strength. Torn between their political sagacity

and their power lust, the British yielded as much of the appear¬

ance of power as circumstances required and as little of its

substance as conditions permitted.

Many times, for instance, Indians had been promised equality

of employment in the I.C.S. (Indian Civil Service), which was

the British administration of India. ‘After eighty-two years of

equality,’ H. N. Brailsford remarks sarcastically, Englishmen held

95 per cent of the posts in the I.C.S. in 1915. In 1923,\*he declares,

using accepted figures, Indian participation was still only 10 per

cent.

Jealous of her power, England feared the Indians. Conscious of

their white skins and racial superiority, the British scorned the

Indians.

Fear, and the administrator’s natural wish to administer with

maximum facility, impelled the British to adopt the approved

imperialistic tactic of Divide and Rule. Since the Moslems played

the leading role in the Mutiny and were thought to harbour

dreams of empire, the British at first preferred the Hindus to the

Moslems. When unrest and political ambition stirred the Hindus,

the British used the Moslems against the Hindus.

Similarly, Britain divided the country between British India,

governed directly by England, and native India, governed in¬

directly by England but directly, and ostensibly, by Indian princes.

It was a cynical device, avowed as such by Lord Canning on

April 30th, i860; he wrote, ‘It was long ago said by Sir John

Malcom that if we made all India into zillahs [or British districts]

it was not in the nature of things that our empire should last

fifty years; but that if we could keep up a number of native states

without political power but as royal instruments, we should exist

in India as long\* as our naval supremacy was maintained. Of the

substantial truth of this opinion I have no doubt; the recent

events make it more deserving of our attention than ever.’ In the

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twentieth century, these royal instruments without political power

numbered over five hundred and fifty. With that number of

puppets the British thought they were secure.

Professor Rushbrook Williams, a brilliant Englishman who

often served as official intermediary with Indian princes, wrote in

the London Evening Standard of May 28th, 1930, ‘The situations of

these feudatory states, chequerboarding all India as they do, are a

great safeguard. It is like establishing a vast network of friendly

fortresses in debatable territory. It would be difficult for a general

rebellion against the British to sweep India because of this net¬

work of powerful, loyal, native states.’

Nothing could be more clear.

Lest India become strong enough economically to break from

the Empire, and in order, too, to help British industries in the

motherland, Indian industries were discouraged and Indian

shipping and shipbuilding were officially restricted. Education

was not designed to train a technical staff for industry nor a

professional class to serve the country. With a population of

approximately 380,000,000, India, in 1939, had only 1306

students of agriculture, 2413 of engineering, 719 of veterinary

science, 150 of technology, 63 of forestry and only 3561 in medi¬

cine, in her colleges and universities, according to the official

Statistical Abstract for British India .

In 1939, India, with three times the population of the United

States and two-thirds the area, had 41,134 miles of railway track,

compared with 395,589 miles in the United States. India pro¬

duced 2,500,000,000 kilowatt-hours of electric energy in 1935;

the United States, 98,464,000,000 kilowatt-hours.

These conditions were not the sole fault of the British; Indians

shared the blame. But Indians blamed everything on the British.

Indians delight in criticizing, and autocrats detest criticism.

‘All opposition’, writes Sir Valentine Chirol, a British authority on

India, ‘even in the shape of criticism which it can treat as mere

waste of breath, is distasteful to an autocracy and apt to be

regarded even as pregnant with sedition, and the British officials in

India honestly believed in an autocratic form of government

though they tried to make it as paternal as possible.’

British paternalistic autocracy irritated some Indians and

embittered others. Towards the end of the nineteenth century,

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Indian terrorists began to operate in Bengal and other areas.

Terror invited repression which provoked more terror.

One school of British politics wished to meet Indian hostility

with blood and iron; a second school wished to mollify it with

reforms. Each of these had its counterpart inside the Indian

National Congress.

The British autocrats did not help the Indian moderates. Late

in the nineteenth century, Field-Marshal Lord Roberts, well

known in India, said, ‘It is this consciousness of the inherent

superiority of the European which has won us India. However

well educated and clever a native may be and however brave he

may have proved himself, I believe that no rank which we can

bestow upon him would cause him to be considered an equal by

the British officer.’

Such racialism bred implacable enemies and embarrassed the

moderates. The liberal lawyers, publicists and capitalists retained

their control of Congress, but not everybody was in Congress.

Boys were hurling bombs. Young men with degrees from Oxford

and Cambridge were rejecting the West. East is East and West is

West, and if the twain cannot meet, they said, it is because East

was slave and West was master.

In Toward Freedom , an autobiography, Jawaharlal Nehru

writes that in 1907, at seventeen, when he had just gone to

Cambridge from Harrow, he was an extremist. In fact, speaking

of the Indian students, he says, ‘Almost without exception we

were Tilakites or Extremists. 5

Bal Gangadhar Tilak, known as ‘Lokamanya 5 or ‘Respected by

the People 5 , played a key role in the development of the Indian

independence movement and in Gandhi’s life.

Tilak was a high-degree Brahman, a Chitpawan Brahman,

from Poona in the land of the Marathas, the last Indian folk to be

conquered by the British. The Marathas are highlanders who

many times in their history descended into the lowlands, notably

into Gandhi’s homeland Gujarat, to dominate the less bellicose

peoples of the plains. Once, these fighting Hindus captured

Moslem Delhi; they remained foes of Islam.

Tilak inaugurated an annual festival to celebrate King Shivaji

(bom 1627, died 1680) who brought new triumphs to the Maratha

empire. He wrote a most scholarly commentary on the Gita and

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defended every orthodox tenet and practice of Hinduism, includ¬

ing child marriage. He branded as a puppet any Indian who

worked for the British. He exposed the emptiness of British

concessions to Indian home-rule aspirations.

Tilak’s fierce imprecations, the British charged, stirred a young

Ghitpawan Brahman to assassinate a British official on June 27th,

1897, the day of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee, and Tilak

was condemned to two years in prison. Liberated before the end

of his term, he resumed his Hindu-religious agitation which,

while aimed at the British, did not, to say the least, improve

relations between Hindus and Moslems.

Hindu passions continued to simmer. Indian nationalism found

food in numerous events at home and abroad: the hollowness of

British reforms nurtured it and so did the Japanese defeat of the

Russians in the 1904-05 war (the first time a coloured nation

defeated a white one), the 1905 Russian revolution and the rise

of the Young Turks.

In 1904 Lord Curzon, considered by some the greatest Viceroy

of India, decreed the partition of the province of Bengal. This

act may have been the beginning of the end of British rule in

India; Indians always mention it as a British atrocity. Curzon,

despite his monumental ability and industry, was a bureaucrat,

autocrat and aristocrat. He lived close to his files and far from the

people. Bengal had a population of over seventy million and

Curzon divided it the better to administer it. But the bisection

was on religious lines: the Moslem area was separated from the

more powerful Hindu area. Bitterness knew no restraint. Curzon

was accused of anti-Hindu prejudice and of trying to put the

Moslems under a debt which they would have to pay in the coin

of submissiveness.

These and similar charges were directed at Curzon until he

left India towards the end of 1904. Bengal answered the partition

with assassinations. In the land of the Marathas, Tilak whipped

his followers into a frenzy. In both provinces British goods were

boycotted; in both, Gandhi always found his most stubborn

enemies.

Gandhi and Tilak were opposites. Gandhi was a quiet public

speaker, Tilak the consummate orator. Gandhi was wedded to

non-violence; Tilak justified violence. Gandhi fostered Hindu-

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Moslem amity; Tilak favoured Hindu supremacy. Gandhi

respected means; Tilak pursued ends. Tilak’s work bore bitter

fruit.

The 1906 annual session of Congress met in Calcutta, then the

capital of India as well as of Bengal. It demanded a reversal of

the partition, supported the anti-British boycott and resolved in

favour of self-government for India.

Lord Minto, Curzon’s successor, let it become known in 1906

that he was contemplating reforms which would give Indians a

bigger voice in the provincial legislatures and more jobs in govern¬

ment offices. But the Tilak extremists were not mollified. Violence

continued in Bengal and Maharashtra and spread to the Punjab.

At the 1907 Congress session in Surat, moderates and extremists

threw sandals at one another. After the fray, the Tilakites with¬

drew from the Congress, leaving the lawyers in control.

The reforms drafted by Lord Minto, with the assistance of

John Morley, Secretary of State for India in London, were

introduced in 1908 and 1909. They extended Indian participa¬

tion in the all-Indian and provincial legislative councils and in

provincial executive councils as well. One Indian joined the

Viceroy’s executive council. But Morley made it clear, in the

House of Lords debate in December 1908, that ‘if it could be said

that this chapter of reforms led directly or indirectly or necessarily

up to the establishment of a parliamentary system in India, I, for

one, would have nothing to do with it’. More Indians sat on

legislative councils and they talked more, but they had no more

power, for the councils themselves had no power; their function

was consultative.

Any joy which Indians might have derived from the Minto-

Morley reforms was soured by a concomitant measure: the intro¬

duction of separate electorates. In 1906, a Moslem deputation

led by the Aga Khan waited upon Lord Minto and urged that in

all future elections Hindus vote for Hindu representatives and

Moslems for Moslem representatives. Nationalist historians have

branded this interview as a ‘command performance’ rehearsed

and conducted under Minto’s baton. Whatever the facts, Minto

and Morley granted the Moslem request, and in 1909, separate

religious electorates, embellished with a device enabling Moslems

to obtain more than their proportional number of seats (weight-

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age, this was called), became a permanent Indian institution

whose mischief was incalculable, for it made religious differences

the decisive factor in every political contest. The central political

problem in India was to bridge the gulf between Hindus and

Moslems; this widened it.

However, the first though not lasting effect of the separate

electorates was to bring more Moslems into the Congress party.

Prominent among them was Mohamed Ali Jinnah.

In 1911, the new King, George V, and Queen Mary, visited

India amid fantastic pomp. The King announced the removal of

the capital to Delhi and the annulment of the partition of Bengal.

Nevertheless, and though Tilak had been sentenced for sedition in

November 1907 to a long term of imprisonment and was ailing

in Mandalay, acts of personal terror continued; in 1912 Lord

Hardinge, the Viceroy, narrowly escaped death by a bomb.

The outbreak of war in 1914 found some Indians loyal, some

disloyal and few enthusiastic, but many ready to serve in the

British Army. More than half a million Indians fought for England

in France, Flanders, Palestine and on other fronts. Indian princes

and commoners distinguished themselves in combat on the ground

and in the air.

Tilak had returned from exile in 1914 and pledged loyalty.

Gandhi returned from South Africa, via London, in January

1915 and recruited for the British Army. But idleness and the

Irish rebellion at Easter, 1916, were too much for Tilak’s fiery

spirit and he burst forth into a passionate anti-British campaign

in favour of home-rule. His companion agitator, who if anything

excelled him in oratory and vituperation, was Mrs. Annie Besant.

They were vigorously assisted by Sir G. P. Ramaswami Aiyar and

by Mohamed Ali Jinnah.

The Indian earth rumbled with the noise of the volcano beneath

it. Not only the politicians, but the soldiers and even the peasants,

felt that the blood Indians were shedding in Britain’s battle should

be recompensed. On August 20th, 1917, accordingly, Edwin S.

Montagu, Secretary of State for India, announced in the House of

Commons that British policy envisaged ‘not only the increasing

association of Indians in every branch of the administration, but

also the granting of self-governing institutions with a view to the

progressive realization of responsible government in India as an

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integral part of the British Empire’. This was interpreted as

being a pledge of Dominion Status.

Tilak thought that on occasions it might be desirable to occupy

positions of power within the state apparatus. He once sent

Gandhi a cheque for fifty thousand rupees as a bet that-he could

recruit five thousand Marathas for the British army if Gandhi

extracted a promise from the Viceroy that some of the enlisted

personnel would receive officers’ commissions. Gandhi returned

the cheque. He did not like betting. And he felt that if you do

something you do it because you believe in it and not for what you

hope to get out of it.

The war closed victoriously in November 1918. Trouble did

not wait long; it came early in 1919.

Tilak had been interned again in August 1918. Mrs. Besant

was also under arrest. Shaukat Ali and Mohamed Ali, brothers

and powerful and prominent Moslem leaders, had been impri¬

soned during the war. Secret tribunals had been sentencing people

in all parts of India. Many newspapers were muzzled by war¬

time censorship. These measures evoked great bitterness. But

with the coming of peace, the country expected the restoration

of civil liberties.

Instead\* a committee headed by Sir Sidney Rowlatt, who had

come from England to study the administration of justice, issued

a report on July 19th, 1918, which recommended, in effect, a

continuation of the war-time rigours. The Congress party fiercely

denounced the Rowlatt findings. In February 1919 a bill em¬

bodying them was nevertheless offered by the Government to the

Imperial Legislative Council. Gandhi attended the debate and

appreciated the attacks levelled by Indian members against the

bill but, since a majority of the Council consisted of British

government officials, its passage, after what Gandhi called the

‘farce of legal formality’, was assured.

Gandhi, just recuperating from dysentery and from an opera¬

tion for fissures necessitated by it, decided that the impending

government legislation was ‘unjust, subversive of the principle of

liberty and destructive of the elementary rights of individuals on

which the safety of the community as a whole and of the State

itself is based’.

Assuming that the bill would be enacted, Gandhi began pre-

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parations for civil resistance on the pattern of his victorious effort

in South Africa. Though still so weak that somebody had to read

his speeches, he travelled to many cities laying the groundwork

for a gigantic, nation-wide Satyagraha campaign designed to

induce the Government to withdraw the repressive legislation.

Meanwhile, he appealed to the Viceroy by letter and through the

press not to approve the law.

On March 18th, 1919, the Rowlatt Act became the law of the

land. An electric shock ran through India. Was this the com¬

mencement of Dominion Status? Was this the reward for the

blood shed in the war?

The next day, Mahatma Gandhi, who had come to Madras for

a meeting, said to his host, C. Rajagopalachari, ‘Last night the

idea came to me in a dream that we should call on the country to

observe a general hartal.’ A hartal is a suspension of economic

activity: shopkeepers do not open for business, employees do not

report for work, factories stay shut, ships are not loaded or un¬

loaded. Gandhi urged that hartal day be a day of ‘fasting and

prayer’ and of ‘humiliation and prayer’. Thereafter Satyagraha

would unfold according to circumstances; resisters might, for

example, buy and sell proscribed books, or manufacture salt in

contravention of the law which made its production a state

monopoly.

The hartal was Gandhi’s first act against the British government

of India. Indeed, it was his first political act in India. His

intervention on behalf of the Champaran sharecroppers had

unintentionally involved him in friction with a British court.

But now he deliberately appealed for a nation-wide demonstra¬

tion against the British authorities. It was the beginning of his

twenty-eight years of struggle against British rule in India. The

end of the struggle was the end of British rule.

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