

## An Open Letter to My Countrymen

**T**HE POSITION of a public man who does his duty in India today, is too precarious to permit of his being sure of the morrow. I have recently come out of a year's seclusion from work for my country on a charge which there was not a scrap of reliable evidence to support, but my acquittal is no security either against the trumping up of a fresh accusation or the arbitrary law of deportation which dispenses with the inconvenient formality of a charge and the still more inconvenient necessity of producing evidence. Especially with the hounds of the Anglo-Indian Press barking at our heels and continually clamouring for Government to remove every man who dares to raise his voice to speak of patriotism and its duties, the liberty of the person is held on a tenure which is worse than precarious. Rumour is strong that a case for my deportation has been submitted to the Government by the Calcutta Police and neither the tranquillity of the country nor the scrupulous legality of our procedure is a guarantee against the contingency of the all-powerful fiat of the Government watchdogs silencing scruples on the part of those who advise at Simla. Under such circumstances I have thought it well to address this letter to my countrymen, and especially to those who profess the principles of the Nationalist party, on the needs of the present and the policy of the future. In case of my deportation it may help to guide some who would be uncertain of their course of action, and, if I do not return from it, it may stand as my last political will and testament to my countrymen.

The situation of the Nationalist party is difficult but not impossible. The idea of some that the party is extinct because its leaders are sentenced or deported, is an error which comes of looking only at the surface. The party is there, not less powerful and pervading than before, but in want of a policy and a

leader. The first it may find, the second only God can give it. All great movements wait for their God-sent leader, the willing channel of His force, and only when he comes, move forward triumphantly to their fulfilment. The men who have led hitherto have been strong men of high gifts and commanding genius, great enough to be the protagonists of any other movement, but even they were not sufficient to fulfil one which is the chief current of a worldwide revolution. Therefore the Nationalist party, custodians of the future, must wait for the man who is to come, calm in the midst of calamity, hopeful under defeat, sure of eventual emergence and triumph and always mindful of the responsibility which they owe not only to their Indian posterity but to the world.

Meanwhile the difficulties of our situation ask for bold yet wary walking. The strength of our position is moral, not material. The whole of the physical strength in the country belongs to the established authority which our success would, so far as its present form is concerned, abolish by transforming it out of all possibility of recognition. It is natural that it should use all its physical strength to prevent, so long as it can, that transformation. The whole of the moral strength of the country is with us. Justice is with us, nature is with us, the law of God which is higher than any human justifies our action, youth is for us, the future is ours. On that moral strength we must rely for our survival and eventual success. We must not be tempted by any rash impatience into abandoning the ground on which we are strong and venturing on the ground on which we are weak. Our ideal is an ideal which no law can condemn; our chosen methods are such that no modern Government can expressly declare them illegal without forfeiting its claim to be considered a civilised administration. To that ideal and to those methods we must firmly adhere and rely on them alone for our eventual success. A respect for the law is a necessary quality for endurance as a nation and it has always been a marked characteristic of the Indian people. We must therefore scrupulously observe the law while taking every advantage both of the protection it gives and the latitude it still leaves for pushing forward our cause and our

propaganda. With the stray assassinations which have troubled the country we have no concern, and, having once clearly and firmly dissociated ourselves from them, we need notice them no farther. They are the rank and noxious fruit of a rank and noxious policy and until the authors of that policy turn from their errors, no human power can prevent the poison-tree from bearing according to its kind. We who have no voice either in determining the laws or their administration, are helpless in the matter. To deportation and proclamation, the favourite instruments of men incapable of a wise and strong rule, we can only oppose a steady and fearless adherence to the propagandism and practice of a lawful policy and a noble ideal.

Our ideal is that of Swaraj or absolute autonomy free from foreign control. We claim the right of every nation to live its own life by its own energies according to its own nature and ideals. We reject the claim of aliens to force upon us a civilisation inferior to our own or to keep us out of our inheritance on the untenable ground of a superior fitness. While admitting the stains and defects which long subjection has induced upon our native capacity and energy, we are conscious of that capacity and energy reviving in us. We point to the unexampled national vigour which has preserved the people of this country through centuries of calamity and defeat, to the great actions of our forefathers continued even to the other day, to the many men of intellect and character such as no other nation in a subject condition has been able to produce, and we say that a people capable of such unheard-of vitality is not one which can be put down as a nation of children and incapables. We are in no way inferior to our forefathers. We have brains, we have courage, we have an infinite and various national capacity. All we need is a field and an opportunity. That field and opportunity can only be provided by a national government, a free society and a great Indian culture. So long as these are not conceded to us, we can have no other use for our brains, courage and capacity than to struggle unceasingly to achieve them.

Our ideal of Swaraj involves no hatred of any other nation nor of the administration which is now established by law in this

country. We find a bureaucratic administration, we wish to make it democratic; we find an alien government, we wish to make it indigenous; we find a foreign control, we wish to render it Indian. They lie who say that this aspiration necessitates hatred and violence. Our ideal of patriotism proceeds on the basis of love and brotherhood and it looks beyond the unity of the nation and envisages the ultimate unity of mankind. But it is a unity of brothers, equals and freemen that we seek, not the unity of master and serf, of devourer and devoured. We demand the realisation of our corporate existence as a distinct race and nation because that is the only way in which the ultimate brotherhood of humanity can be achieved, not by blotting out individual peoples and effacing outward distinctions, but by removing the internal obstacles to unity, the causes of hatred, malice and misunderstanding. A struggle for our rights does not involve hatred of those who mistakenly deny them. It only involves a determination to suffer and strive, to speak the truth boldly and without respect of persons, to use every lawful means of pressure and every source of moral strength in order to establish ourselves and disestablish that which denies the law of progress.

Our methods are those of self-help and passive resistance. To unite and organise ourselves in order to show our efficiency by the way in which we can develop our industries, settle our individual disputes, keep order and peace on public occasions, attend to questions of sanitation, help the sick and suffering, relieve the famine-stricken, work out our intellectual, technical and physical education, evolve a Government of our own for our own internal affairs so far as that could be done without disobeying the law or questioning the legal authority of the bureaucratic administration, this was the policy publicly and frankly adopted by the Nationalist party. In Bengal we had advanced so far as to afford distinct proof of our capacity in almost all these respects and the evolution of a strong united and well-organised Bengal had become a near and certain prospect. The internal troubles which came to a head at Surat and the repressive policy initiated immediately afterwards, culminating in the destruction of our organisations and the effective intimidation of Swadeshi workers

and sympathisers by official underlings, have both been serious checks to our progress and seem for the moment to have postponed the realisation of our hopes to a distant future. The check is temporary. Courage and sane statesmanship in our leaders is all that is wanted to restore the courage and the confidence of the people and evolve new methods of organisation which will not come into conflict even with the repressive laws.

The policy of passive resistance was evolved partly as the necessary complement of self-help, partly as a means of putting pressure on the Government. The essence of this policy is the refusal of co-operation so long as we are not admitted to a substantial share and an effective control in legislation, finance and administration. Just as “No representation, no taxation” was the watchword of American constitutional agitation in the eighteenth century, so “No control, no co-operation” should be the watchword of our lawful agitation — for constitution we have none, — in the twentieth. We sum up this refusal of co-operation in the convenient word “Boycott”, refusal of co-operation in the industrial exploitation of our country, in education, in government, in judicial administration, in the details of official intercourse. Necessarily, we have not made that refusal of co-operation complete and uncompromising, but we hold it as a method to be enlarged and pushed farther according as the necessity for moral pressure becomes greater and more urgent. This is one aspect of the policy. Another is the necessity of boycott to help our own nascent energies in the field of self-help. Boycott of foreign goods is a necessary condition for the encouragement of Swadeshi industries, boycott of Government schools is a necessary condition for the growth of national education, boycott of British courts is a necessary condition for the spread of arbitration. The only question is the extent and conditions of the boycott and that must be determined by the circumstances of the particular problem in each case. The general spirit of passive resistance has first to be raised, afterwards it can be organised, regulated and, where necessary, limited.

The first obstacle to our evolution is the internal dispute which has for the moment wrecked the Congress and left in

its place the hollow and mutilated simulacrum of a National Assembly which met last year at Madras and, deprived though it is of the support of the most eminent local leaders, purposes to meet again at Lahore. It is a grievous error to suppose that this dispute hung only on personal questions and differences of a trifling importance. As happens inevitably in such popular contests, personal questions and differences of minor importance intervened to perplex and embitter the strife, but the real questions in debate were those which involved the whole future development of the spirit and form of self-government in this country. Were that spirit and form to be democratic or oligarchic? Were they to be constitutional in procedure or governed by arbitrary and individual choice and discretion? Was the movement to be progressive and national or conservative and parochial in its aims, policy and spirit? These were the real issues. The Nationalist party stood for democracy, constitutionalism and progress. The Moderate party, governed by an exaggerated respect for old and esteemed leaders, helped, without clearly understanding what they did, those who stood for oligarchy, arbitrary procedure and an almost reactionary conservatism. Personal idiosyncracies, preferences, aversions settled like a thick cloud over the contest, the combatants on both sides flung themselves on every point of difference material or immaterial as a pretext or a weapon, the tactics of party warfare were freely used and, finally, the deliberate obstinacy of a few Moderate leaders in avoiding discussion of the points of difference and the unruly ardour of the younger men on both sides led to the violent scenes at Surat and the break-up of the Congress. If the question is ever to be settled to the advantage of national progress, the personal and minor differences must be banished from the field and the real issues plainly and dispassionately considered.

The questions of particular importance which divide the parties, are the exact form of Swaraj to be held forward as an ideal, the policy of passive resistance and the form of certain resolutions. The last is a question to be decided by the Congress itself and all that the Nationalists demand is that discussion shall not be burked and that they shall not be debarred from their

constitutional right of placing their views before the National Assembly. On the other points, they cannot sacrifice their ideal or their policy, but their contention is that these differences ought not in a free deliberative assembly to stand in the way of united progress. The Swaraj matter can easily be settled by the substitution of "full and complete self-government" for "self-government on Colonial lines" in the Swaraj resolution. The difference as to passive resistance hinges at present on the Boycott resolution which the Nationalist party — and in this they are supported by a large body of Moderate opinion, — cannot consent to sacrifice. But here also they are willing to submit the question to the arbitrament of a freely elected Congress, though they refuse to recognise a close and limited Subjects Committee as the final authority. It will be seen therefore that the real question throughout is constitutional. The body which at present calls itself the Congress, has adopted a constitution which is close, exclusive, undemocratic and so framed as to limit the free election of delegates by the people. It limits itself by proposing a number of articles of faith in a particular form of words to every intending delegate before he can take his seat; it aims at the election of delegates only by select bodies and associations instead of the direct election of the people; it excuses many from the chances of election and gives them an undue weight in the disposal of the affairs of the assembly. These and similar provisions no democratic party can accept. A Nationalist Conference or a Moderate Convention may so guard its integrity, but the Congress is and must be a National Assembly admitting freely all who are duly elected by the people. The proposed passing of this reactionary constitution by a body already limited under its provisions will not cure the constitutional defect. It is only a Congress elected on the old lines that can determine the future provisions for its constitution and procedure with any hope of universal acceptance.

It is not therefore by any manipulation of the Convention Congress that a solution of the problem can be brought about, but by the Provincial Conferences empowering the leaders of

both parties to meet in Committee and provide for an arrangement which will heal differences and enable the Congress to work smoothly and freely in the future. If there is a minority who refuse to associate themselves with any such attempt, the majority will be justified by the mandate of the Provinces in disregarding them and meeting to carry out the popular wish. Once the lines are settled they can be submitted to the free choice of a freely elected Congress for acceptance, rejection or modification. This will restore a Congress on sound constitutional lines in which the bitter experience of the past may be relied on to prevent those mistakes of obstinacy and passion which prevented a solution of the problem at Surat.

Outside the Congress the chances of united working are more complete than within it. There are only two questions which are likely either to trouble harmony or hamper action. The first is the question of the acceptance or rejection of the present reforms introducing, as they do, no element of popular control nor any fresh constitutional principle except the unsound principle of privileged representation for a single community. This involves the wider question of co-operation. It is generally supposed that the Nationalist party is committed to the persistent and uncompromising refusal of co-operation until they get the full concession of Swaraj. Nationalist publicists have not cared to combat this error explicitly because they were more anxious to get their ideal accepted and the spirit of passive resistance and complete self-help popularised than to discuss a question which was not then a part of practical politics. But it is obvious that a party advancing such a proposition would be a party of doctrinaires and idealists, not of practical thinkers and workers. The Nationalist principle is the principle of "No control, no co-operation." Since all control has been refused and so long as all control is refused, the Nationalist party preaches the refusal of co-operation as complete as we can make it. But it is evident that if, for instance, the power of imposing protective duties were given to a popular and elective body, no serious political party would prefer persistence in commercial boycott to the use of the powers conceded. Or if education were similarly

made free of official control and entrusted to a popular body, as Lord Reay once thought of entrusting it, no sensible politician would ask the nation to boycott that education. Or if the courts were manned by Indian judges and made responsible not to the Executive but to a Minister representing the people, arbitration would immediately take its place as a supplementary aid to the regular courts. So also the refusal to co-operate in an administration which excludes the people from an effective voice does not involve a refusal to co-operate in an administration of which the people are an effective part. The refusal of autocratic gifts does not involve a refusal to take up popular rights inalienably secured to the people. It is on the contrary with the object of compelling the concession of the various elements of Swaraj by peaceful moral pressure and in the absence of such concessions developing our own institutions to the gradual extrusion and final supplanting of bureaucratic institutions that the policy of self-help and passive resistance was started. This acceptance of popular rights does not imply the abandonment of the ideal of complete autonomy or of the use of passive resistance in case of any future arbitrary interference with the rights of the people. It implies only the use of partial Swaraj as a step and means towards complete Swaraj. Where the Nationalists definitely and decisively part company with an influential section of the Moderates is in refusing to accept any petty or illusory concession which will draw away our aspirations from their unalterable ideal or delude the people into thinking they have secured real rights.

Another question is that of cleaving to and enforcing the Boycott. In Bengal, even if there are some who are timid or reactionary enough to shrink from the word or the thing, the general feeling in its favour is emphatic and practically unanimous. But it is time now to consider seriously the question of regulating the boycott. Nationalists have always demurred to the proviso "as far as possible" in the Swadeshi resolution on account of the large loophole its vagueness left to the hesitating and the lukewarm, and they have preferred the form "at a sacrifice". But it will now be well if we face the concrete problems of the boycott.

While we must keep it absolute wherever Swadeshi articles are procurable as also in respect to pure luxuries with which we can dispense, we must recognise that there are necessities of life and business for which we have still to go to foreign countries. The public ought to be guided as to the choice of the countries which we shall favour in the purchase of these articles, — necessarily they must be countries sympathetic to Indian aspirations, — and those which we shall exclude. The failure to deal with this question is largely responsible for the laxity of our political boycott and our consequent failure to get the Partition rescinded. There are also other questions, such as the attempt of shopkeepers and merchants to pass off foreign goods wholesale as Swadeshi, which must be taken up at once if the movement is not to suffer a serious setback.

A final difficulty remains, — by what organisation are we to carry on the movement even when these questions are settled? The Nationalist programme was to build up a great deliberative and executive organisation on the basis of a reconstituted Congress, and this scheme still remains the only feasible means of organising the country. Even if a united Congress cannot be secured, the provinces ought to organise themselves separately, and perhaps this may prove to be the only possible way of restoring the Congress, by reconstituting it from the bottom. Even the District organisations, however, cannot work effectively without hands, and these we had provided for in the Sabhas and Samitis of young men which sprang up on all sides and were just succeeding in forming an efficient network of organisation all over Bengal. These are now being suppressed by administrative order. It becomes a question whether we cannot replace them by a loose and elusive organisation of young men in groups ordering each its own work by common agreement and working hand in hand, but without a rigid or definite organisation. I throw out the suggestion for consideration by the leaders of thought and action in the provinces where unity seems at all feasible.

This then is the situation as it presents itself to me. The policy I suggest to the Nationalist party may briefly be summed up as follows: —

1. Persistence with a strict regard to law in a peaceful policy of self-help and passive resistance.
2. The regulation of our attitude towards the Government by the principle of “No control, no co-operation.”
3. A rapprochement with the Moderate party wherever possible and the reconstitution of a united Congress.
4. The regulation of the Boycott movement so as to make both the political and the economic boycott effective.
5. The organisation of the Provinces if not of the whole country according to our original programme.
6. A system of co-operation which will not contravene the law and will yet enable workers to proceed with the work of self-help and national efficiency, if not quite so effectively as before, yet with energy and success.

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