New Lamps for Old – I

If the blind lead the blind, shall they not both fall into a ditch? So or nearly so runs an apopthegm of the Galilean prophet, whose name has run over the four quarters of the globe. Of all those pithy comments on human life, which more than anything else made his teaching effective, this is perhaps the one which goes home deepest and admits of the most frequent use. But very few Indians will be found to admit — certainly I myself two years ago would not have admitted, — that it can truthfully be applied to the National Congress. Yet that it can be so applied, — nay, that no judicious mind can honestly pronounce any other verdict on its action, — is the first thing I must prove, if these articles are to have any raison d’être. I am quite aware that in doing this my motive and my prudence may be called into question. I am not ignorant that I am about to censure a body which to many of my countrymen seems the mightiest outcome of our new national life; to some a precious urn in which are guarded our brightest and noblest hopes; to others a guiding star which shall lead us through the encircling gloom to a far distant paradise: and if I were not fully confident that this fixed idea of ours is a snare and a delusion, likely to have the most pernicious effects, I should simply have suppressed my own doubts and remained silent. As it is, I am fully confident, and even hope to bring over one or two of my countrymen to my own way of thinking, or, if that be not possible, at any rate to induce them to think a little more deeply than they have done.

I know also that I shall stir the bile of those good people who are so enamoured of the British Constitution that they cannot like anyone who is not a partisan. “What!” they will say “you pretend to be a patriot yourself, and you set yourself with a light heart to attack a body of patriots, which has no reason at all for existing except patriotism, — nay, which is the efflorescence,
the crown, the summit and coping-stone of patriotism? How wickedly inconsistent all this is! If you are really a friend to New India, why do you go about to break up our splendid unanimity? The Congress has not yet existed for two lustres; and in that brief space of time has achieved miracles. And even if it has faults, as every institution, however excellent it may be, must have its faults, have you any plausible reason for telling our weakness in the streets of Gath, and so taking our enemies into the secret?”

Now, if I were a strong and self-reliant man, I should of course go in the way I had chosen without paying much attention to these murmurers, but being, as I am, exceedingly nervous and afraid of offending anyone, I wish to stand well, even with those who admire the British Constitution. I shall therefore find it necessary to explain at some length the attitude which I should like all thinking men to adopt towards the Congress.

And first, let me say that I am not much moved by one argument which may possibly be urged against me. The Congress, it will be said, has achieved miracles, and in common gratitude we ought not to expose it to any sort of harsh or malevolent criticism. Let us grant for the moment that the Congress has achieved miracles for us. Certainly, if it has done that, we ought to hold it for ever in our grateful memory; but if our gratitude goes beyond this, it at once incurs the charge of fatuity. This is the difference between a man and an institution; a great man who has done great things for his country, demands from us our reverence, and however he may fall short in his after-life, a great and high-hearted nation — and no nation was ever justly called great that was not high-hearted — will not lay rude hands on him to dethrone him from his place in their hearts. But an institution is a very different thing, it was made for the use and not at all for the worship of man, and it can only lay claim to respect so long as its beneficent action remains not a memory of the past, but a thing of the present. We cannot afford to raise any institution to the rank of a fetish. To do so would be simply to become the slaves of our own machinery. However I will at once admit that if an institution has really done miracles for us, — and miracles which are not mere conjuring tricks, but of a
deep and solemn import to the nation,—and if it is still doing and likely yet to do miracles for us, then without doubt it may lay claim to a certain immunity from criticism. But I am not disposed to admit that all this is true of the Congress.

It is within the recollection of most of us to how giddy an eminence this body was raised, on how prodigious a wave of enthusiasm, against how immense a weight of resisting winds. So sudden was it all that it must have been difficult, I may almost say impossible, even for a strong man to keep his head and not follow with the shouting crowd. How shall we find words vivid enough to describe the fervour of those morning hopes, the April splendour of that wonderful enthusiasm? The Congress was to us all that is to man most dear, most high and most sacred; a well of living water in deserts more than Saharan, a proud banner in the battle of Liberty, and a holy temple of concord where the races met and mingled. It was certainly the nucleus or thrice-distilled essence of the novel modes of thought among us; and if we took it for more than it really was,—if we took it for our pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night; if we worshipped it as the morning-star of our liberty; if we thought of old myths, of the trumpets that shook down Jericho or the brazen serpent that healed the plague, and nourished fond and secret hopes that the Congress would prove all this and more than this;—surely our infatuation is to be passed by gently as inevitable in that environment rather than censured as unnatural or presuming.

If then anyone tells me that the Congress was itself a miracle, if in nothing else, at any rate in the enthusiasm of which it was the centre, I do not know that I shall take the trouble to disagree with him; but if he goes on and tells me that the Congress has achieved miracles, I shall certainly take leave to deny the truth of his statement. It appears to me that the most signal successes of this body were not miracles at all, but simply the natural outcome of its constitution and policy. I suppose that in the sphere of active politics its greatest success is to be found in the enlargement of the Legislative Councils. Well, that was perhaps a miracle in its way. In England a very common trick is to put one ring under a hat and produce in another part of the room
what appears to be the same ring and is really one exactly like it—except perhaps for the superscription. Just such a miracle is this which the Congress has so triumphantly achieved. Another conjuring trick, and perhaps a cleverer one, was the snatch vote about Simultaneous Examinations, which owed its success to the sentimentalism of a few members of Parliament, the self-seeking of others and the carelessness of the rest. But these, however much we may praise them for cleverness, are, as I hope to show later on, of no really deep and solemn import to the nation, but simply conjuring tricks and nothing more. Over the rest of our political action the only epitaph we can write is “Failure.” Even in the first flush of enthusiasm the more deep-thinking among us were perhaps a little troubled by certain small things about the Congress, which did not seem altogether right. The barefaced hypocrisy of our enthusiasm for the Queen-Empress,—an old lady so called by way of courtesy, but about whom few Indians can really know or care anything—could serve no purpose but to expose us to the derision of our ill-wishers. There was too a little too much talk about the blessings of British rule, and the inscrutable Providence which has laid us in the maternal, or more properly the step-maternal bosom of just and benevolent England. Yet more appalling was the general timidity of the Congress, its glossing over of hard names, its disinclination to tell the direct truth, its fear of too deeply displeasing our masters. But in our then state of mind we were disposed to pass over all this as amiable weaknesses which would wear off with time. Two still grosser errors were pardoned as natural and almost inadvertent mistakes. It was true that we went out of our way to flatter Mr. Gladstone, a statesman who is not only quite unprincipled and in no way to be relied upon, but whose intervention in an Indian debate has always been of the worst omen to our cause. But then, we argued, people who had not been to England, could not be expected to discern the character of this astute and plausible man. We did more than flatter Mr. Gladstone; we actually condescended to flatter “General” Booth, a vulgar imposter, a convicted charlatan, who has enriched himself by trading on the sentimental emotions of the English middle-class. But here
too, we thought, the Congress has perhaps made the common mistake of confounding wealth with merit, and has really taken the “General” for quite a respectable person. In the first flush of enthusiasm, I say, such excuses and such toleration were possible and even natural, but in the moment of disillusionment it will not do for us to flatter ourselves in this way any longer. Those amiable weaknesses we were then disposed to pass over very lightly have not at all worn off with time, but have rather grown into an ingrained habit; and the tendency to grosser errors has grown not only into a habit, but into a policy. In its broader aspects the failure of the Congress is still clearer. The walls of the Anglo-Indian Jericho stand yet without a breach, and the dark spectre of Penury draws her robe over the land in greater volume and with an ampler sweep.