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## **Indian Politics during First World War**

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### **Abstract**

*The desire to rule one's own self is the greatest desire of mankind. Thus, when one agrees to support his or her enemy at the promise of getting some sort of liberty or freedom, no one can put any blame on him/her. On this ground, the help of Indians to the British in the First World War (WWI) cannot be seen as illogical, as it was derived by the former's urge to get some sort of self-rule and the latter's promise of providing so, immediately after the war. The politics in India formally can be said to have started with founding of Indian National Congress in 1885 with an aim of winning political rights for Indians. During War, it was revolved around self-rule and saw its manifestations in various forms not only within the country but also outside its periphery The War ended with the signing of 'Treaty of Versailles' on June 28, 1919 and the Indians were now looking forward towards a responsible government but the Rowlatt Act and Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of the British made this dream futile. Gandhiji now appeared on the scene in a very gigantic manner and this made it clear that the Indian politics in the subsequent years will be Gandhian phase of freedom struggle.*

The desire to rule one's own self is the greatest desire of mankind. Thus, when one agrees to support his or her enemy at the promise of getting some sort of liberty or freedom, no one can put any blame on him/her. On this ground, the help of Indians to the British in the WWI cannot be seen as illogical, as it was derived by the former's urge to get some sort of self-rule and the latter's promise of providing so, immediately after the war. No doubt, India had experienced large scale sufferings during the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and witnessed the destruction of her economy, social customs and religious sentiments during the Revolt of 1857, this war once again brought a new hope on the minds of the Indians to live a life of happiness and freedom. Unfortunately, the promise was not fulfilled. But it certainly initiated the process of independence by increasing nationalistic spirit of the Indians. Bipan Chandra thus points out "The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 gave a new lease of life to the nationalist movement which had been dormant since the heady days of the Swadeshi movement"<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>. [www.historydiscussion.net](http://www.historydiscussion.net) > ... > Extremism and Revolutionary Terrorism Movement  
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The politics in India formally can be said to have started with founding of Indian National Congress in 1885 with an aim of winning political rights for Indians. In his second Presidential address, Dadabhai Naoroji said, "We are met together, as a political body to represent to our rulers our political aspirations" Consequently, he declared that the goal of the Indian national movement was 'self-government' or Swaraj (Chandra, 1989). Initially, the policies and activities of the Congress were directed to get political concessions through peaceful means and humble prayers to the British Government. Gradually, a section of radical leaders were depressed with the working of the moderates and realised that no sort of peaceful protest could change the tough attitude of the British Government towards the Indians. By this time, the Swadeshi Movement made its appearance and with it, the internal conflict within the INC became more prominent. Debates and disagreements ran into two directions\_ while the moderates wanted to restrict the course of the movement within Bengal, the radicals (like Lal-Bal-Pal) wanted to extend it beyond Bengal. The differences reached to such an extent that in 1907 at Surat Session, the organisation was divided into two groups \_the Moderates and the Extremists. The nationalistic zeal however had not become weakened with this split. Both the groups in their own way, tried to achieve their goal of independence.

When the rest of the country with the starting of WWI, got a scope to teach a lesson to the British by remaining aloof from the war, Gandhiji (and some others who lived at the mercy of the British) addressed Indians on England saying that "I did not believe that we had been quite reduced to slavery. I felt then that it was more the fault of individual officials than of the British system, and that we could convert them by love. 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."<sup>2</sup> He however did not seat in idle. After championing the cause of Blacks in South Africa, he returned to India and without playing an active role in the freedom struggle, he marked his participation through non-violence and non co-operation. Thus, in 1917, "he went to the indigo-growing district of Champaran and took up the cause of the tenants against the European planters. The same year he led the textile workers of Ahmedabad in a strike against the mill-owners. The following year, he agitated for reduction of land tax in Kaira district where crops had suffered from the failure of rains. The local officers were perturbed by Gandhi's activities but the Government was anxious not to precipitate a show-down. Gandhi himself took care to localize these conflicts and sought solutions which secured a modicum of rust ice to the workers and peasants without creating a national crisis"<sup>3</sup>. Like Gandhi, Mohammad Ali Jinnah (founder of Muslim League) and the members of other political parties like Madras Provincial Congress, Hindus of Punjab and the Parsee community of Bombay also wanted India to take side of the British in order to get political reward in the form of 'self-government'. Similarly, the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Nawab of Palanpur and the Aga Khan appealed to their subjects, saying, "at this critical juncture it is the bounden duty of the Mohammedans

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2, 3. <http://www.mk Gandhi.org/biography/wrldwar1.htm>

of India to adhere firmly to their old and tried loyalty to the British Government”.(Das, 2014). Probably their words had stirred the minds of Indians. People from all walks of life now were ready to support Great Britain along with France, Russia, Japan (joined later by Italy) against Germany, Austria, Hungary and Turkey.

What-so-ever, India’s decision to get involved into the War had far-reaching negative consequences for her. India contributed more men, a total of some 1.5 million, to the war than any other country of the empire, apart from Britain itself (Markovits, 2014). The first battle that the Indian corps fought in was Neuve Chapelle, where the Indian contribution helped stem the German advance and where the Indian casualties amounted to almost 5,000. From August 1914 until December 1919, India recruited for purposes of war 877,068 combatants and 563,369 non-combatants, making a total of 1,440,437; in addition, there were an estimated 239,561 men in the British Indian army in 1914, including both combatants and non-combatants, and around 20,000 in the Imperial Service Corps. India also made a substantial contribution in terms of cash, animals, transport and material (Das, 2014). Her soldiers specially of Indian Expeditionary Forces, were active in East Africa, Mesopotamia (Iraq), Gallipoli, Egypt, Palestine and Syria. Some 50,000 Indian soldiers died, 65,000 were wounded, and 10,000 were reported missing, while 98 Indian army nurses were killed during the war, but the recognition from Britain was not profound. Rather “there were no howitzers, no mechanical transport, a scant supply of medical equipment and signalling apparatus, and innumerable other shortages” (Bostanci, 2014). Shrabani Basu (2015) in her book, “For King and Another Country”, showed that the racial discrimination by the British also prohibited wounded Indian soldiers to take medical care in British hospitals. Instead, they were called “bloody niggers” who were “no good at fighting”.

Truly speaking, the Indian soldiers were not well trained to fought such a mighty war, the arms and weapons supplied to them were of low quality and absence of strong leadership and well-equipped armaments created an unfavourable conditions to them. Still, they fought with great courage and vigour. Basu thus pointed out, “when the British troops were exhausted in the first weeks of warefare, the Indians arrived in the nick of time”. “They went into the trenches still in their cottoc khakis, soon to face one of the harnest winters they had ever seen” (Uday, 2015). The sacrifices made by the indian soldiers were marked by The New York Times in 1918 with the words that “The world must pay India in whatever India wants, for without Indian products, there would be greater diffulty in winning the war”. A large sections of soldiers from tribal areas of North East India also were forced to get into the war which adversely affected their traditional normal life. The impact of war was not confined to men alone, Even women were employed with low wages to work in hazardous occupations like production of arms and weapons in absence of men<sup>4</sup>. Obviously, the recruitment of Indian women to such works was also visible. The war destroyed Indian agriculture, increased the prices of food grains, levied high taxes, caused

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<sup>4</sup> [www.striking-women.org/module/women-and-work/world-war-i-1914-1918](http://www.striking-women.org/module/women-and-work/world-war-i-1914-1918)

diseases like influenza, threw the country in a state of bankruptcy and above all sacrificed the lives many soldiers. It also called for Great Depression throughout Europe in 1929 which further aggravated the economic condition of the country.

The Indian politics which was during war time revolved around self-rule, saw its manifestations in various forms not only within the country but also outside its periphery. Thus a group of revolutionaries who were mostly Punjabi immigrants of poor background in the West Coast of North America popularly called, Ghadarites preached swadeshi values to their immigrant friends through organising meetings, issuing circulars and reciting secular nationalistic poems. They got a huge response in the Philippines, Hong Kong, China, the Malay States, Singapore, Trinidad, the Honduras. Unfortunately, within the territory of Punjab, they failed to popularise their ideals in absence of a strong leadership which later on was provided by Rash Behari Bose. Some other revolutionaries under the name of “Berlin committee” who had maintained a link with Ghadars also got help from Germany in their opposition to mighty British, perhaps, with Germans’ belief that, “enemies enemy is our friend”. The Ghadarites and the Berlin committee did not succeed due to their inherent weaknesses but they could certainly remain politically effective if supported by the rest of the country.

Within the country, both the moderates and the extremists felt that they should change their attitude towards each other to win the struggle for self-rule. While the moderates were disappointed with the constitutional reforms of 1909, the extremists like Tilak who was released from jail in June, 1914 now in a soft voice urged to support the British in the War and confessed, “the acts of violence....retarded to a great extent, the pace of our political progress” (Chandra, 1989). Though the reunion of the two groups remained dream until Dec. 1915, Tilak as a part of his political activity made every attempt to spread the message of the INC to the remotest corners of the country. Finally, in 1916 with the help of Mrs. Annie Besant who previously took a leading role to consolidate the two groups of INC, Tilak started the Home-Rule League and with this, his political career reached its zenith. He in one way tried to inculcate nationalistic ideas and in another way raised voice against the issues of untouchability and casteism that stood in the way of nationalism. His stress on Hindu-Muslim Unity ultimately brought a common agreement in the form of The Lucknow Pact in Dec. 1916 which also demanded self-government. The Home-Rule Movement failed but it definitely posed a threat to the expansionist policy of the British. Mr. Montague’s decision “to increase the association of Indians in every of administration” in August 1917 clearly revealed this fact. Surendra Nath Bannerjee, one of the leading members of the INC in his ‘A Nation In Making’ (1925) remarked, “ ‘The most striking event in 1917 was the announcement made by Mr. Montague in the House of Commons promising the grant of responsible government, to be realised by progressive stages’. Whether the ‘August Announcement’ figured very largely on the world scene or not, it was certainly a landmark in Indian Political development”. (Tinker, 1968)

The WWI ended with the signing of ‘Treaty of Versailles’ on June 28, 1919 between the victorious allied forces and the Germany, Habsburg, Ottoman and Russia on the other. The

Indians were now looking forward towards a responsible government but the subsequent efforts of the British like the rejection of Lucknow Pact made the ill-intention of the British Government very clear. Gandhiji with greater disillusionment rejected the scheme and INC denounced it as 'inadequate, unsatisfactory and disappointing'. Meanwhile, the whole country was set on a volcano with the passing of notorious 'Rowlatt Act' (Feb.1919). The provisions of the Act were so cruel that Amrita Bazar Patrika called it a 'gigantic blunder'. When the whole country was agitating, Punjab had seen a violent attack on the common people which was marked as Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, and with this, the freedom struggle in India took another turn. Realising the gravity of the situation, Gandhiji suspended satyagraha and 'relinquished his title 'Kaiser-e-hind' bestowed on him by the British for his services during the Boer War in South Africa'. Similarly, Rabindra Nath Tagore gave up his knighthood. The British Government finally withdrew the Act in 1922 but continued the passing of other repressive policies in subsequent years. What-so-ever, since 1919 it became prominent that Indian politics was going to be dominated by Gandhiji and truly speaking the period from 1919-1947, can be legitimately described as Gandhian phase of freedom struggle.

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