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Internment of Mrs. Besant and Montague's Declaration, August 1917

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ABSTRACT

The Home Rule Movement witnessed a number of anti-British steps all over India including Tamil Nadu. The Madras Presidency government planned to check the Home Rule surge by arresting Mrs. Besant and her associates. The internment aroused a new political climate and consequently India obtained some constitutional favour in the name of Montague-Chemsford reform proposal a little later and on the other side Congressional activities widened in the period followed by the closure of the Home Rule Movement in 1917. This chapter discusses the closure of Home Rule Movement followed by the upheaval that arose due to the antagonistic steps against Mrs. Besant and her associates. This chapter explores the consequences of the Movement especially in Tamil Nadu.

KEYWORD: Home Rule Movement, Mrs. Besant, Montague's Declaration.

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I INTERNMENT OF MRS.BESANT AND HER ASSOCIATES

Mrs. Besant's handling of press to propagate her ideologies as well to criticize the British authority alarmed the government of the Madras Presidency. On June 14, 1917 Mrs. Besant and her two lieutenants were served by Pentland, the Governor of Madras, with the Order of internment.¹ There arose uproar against the government.² The resentment was universal and the leaders like Motialal Nehru, TejBahadurSapru, C.R. Das, C.P. RamaswamyAiyar, M.A. Jinnah, Bhulabhai Desai, M.R. Jayakar and others joined the Home Rule League in spite of the government threat.³ Besides, the Home Rule League's advocacy won many more adherents. The Maharaja of Bikaner expressed the sympathy on behalf of the princes for her release. Aga Khan privately suggested to the British government that India should be suitably rewarded for her services not punished.⁴ Jinnah strongly protested against the internment of Mrs. Besant. He said as president of the Bombay branch of the Home Rule League that it was "an attempt to intern the Home Rule or Self-government scheme framed and adopted conjointly by the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League at Lucknow".⁵

Gandhi wrote privately to Chelmsford, Viceroy of India that in my humble opinion the internments are a big blunder.⁶ Sapru in paying a glowing tribute to Mrs. Besant said that she conceived the idea of Home Rule for India. It drew a general unrest in the entire country. He maintained that they were seeking of reforms, expansion of Councils and swore by Swaraj but their ideas were nebulous, whereas her clear thinking gave concrete shape to their undefined and indefinite ideas, resulting in an organised movement for Home Rule for the entire country.

Mrs. Besant before meeting the Viceroy of India, published an article in *New India*, entitled, *To My Brothers and Sisters in India*, on 15 June, 1917, wherein she defended all her activities as absolutely constitutional and blamed the colonial government for the prevailing situation in India.⁸ Mrs. Annie Besant also opined that, "the difference of opinion between the Governor of Madras and the Large majority of educated Indians is a small matter; but the resolution to crush Home Rule by force is a very serious one. It means practical proposal to strangle by violence. So the Congress ordered its Committees, the Home Rule Leagues and other similar public bodies to carry on. We are therefore faced by the alternative of disobeying the mandate of the country or that of the Governor of Madras. For myself, as a member of the All-India Congress Committee, I elect to obey the mandate of the country in preference to that of the Governor of Madras, it has no moral justification behind it, which outrages British law and custom and imposes an unwarrantable and I believe, an illegal, restriction on the fundamental rights of man."⁹ She further added, "I shall either to go to England or to promise to abstain from political speaking and writing. I shall do neither. I do not run away from a struggle into which I have led others, and leave them in the middle of the field. Our work has been

wholly constitutional. There has been no threat, no act of violence; to rebuke that Law has been transgressed".¹⁰

Mrs. Besant strongly felt that, "life does not consist, in money and clothes, in motorcars and invitations to government houses. Life consists in liberty for self-respect, in honour, in right ambition, in patriotism, and in noble living. Where these are absent, life is not worth living. It is not the life of man, in the image of God, but of a brute, well fed by his owner. To surrender liberty and being in touch with those I love worse than death".¹¹ She further added that, "England fighting for liberty in Europe, and posing as its champion, is more false, to liberty in India than she is even in Ireland, is in India an autocracy, naked and unashamed, under which neither liberty of person and speech nor possession of property is safe, being at the mercy of Executive Orders... We are to be punished because we stand by the principles for which England stand in Europe, and ask peacefully and constitutionally for responsible Self-Government which we work for, on Law-abiding lines".¹² Mrs. Besant was asked to call upon the Governor at Madras on 16 June 1917. At this time, there were already rumours prevailing about her being interned and her activities going to be stopped completely. On her part, Mrs. Besant also anticipated her arrest after the meeting with the Governor.¹³

The interview between the Governor and Mrs. Besant took place at Madras at noon on 16 June, 1917. At the close of the interview, the Governor said to her "I wish you to consider, Mrs. Besant, be stopped".¹⁴ She replied to the Governor "you have all the power and I am helpless, and you must do what you like. There is just one thing I should like to say your Excellency, and that is I believe you are striking the deadliest blow against the British Empire in India". Then as they neared the door, she said "You will pardon my saying to your Excellency that as you are acting as the Governor, I have no personal feeling against your Excellency". The Governor asked Mrs. Besant, "You must stop your political work in its present form". To this Mrs. Besant replied "your Excellency I must go on, and as I think best".¹⁵

According to GO No. 836 of 1917, the Governor of Madras in exercise of the powers conferred in him by Rule-3 of the Defense of India Rules 1915, served an order for internment of Mrs. Besant and her two colleagues, prohibiting them from attending or taking part in any speech or publishing or processing the publication of any writing or speech compared by them placing their correspondence under censorship. As Mrs. Besant refused to leave India, she was interned along with G.S. Arundale and B.P. Wadia on June 16, 1917. Further, the Order directed that after the expiry of seven or fourteen days from the date of service of the Order, they shall cease to reside in the city of Madras or in the district of Chinglepet and shall take their residence within any one of the following six areas:

1. Nilgiri District
2. Coimbatore District
3. Bellary District
4. Palani Hills
5. Shaveroy Hills
6. Vizagapatnam.

Mrs. Besant selected Ootacamund as her residence for her internment. She occupied the Society's bungalow called Gullistan at Ootacamund. With the internment of the three persons, the Home Rule Movement became more popular and intensified.¹⁶

II PROTESTS AGAINST THE INTERNMENT OF MRS.BESANT

A nationwide protest and agitation carried for Mrs. Besant's release. Several new Home Rule branches sprang up in various parts of India including Tamil Nadu and protest meetings were held everywhere. The Moderate Congressmen were involved and participated in Home Rule agitations. It was an open secret that Mrs. Besant despite governmental surveillance, was freely writing to her paper, *New India*.¹⁷ The internment of Mrs. Besant aroused intense public indignation not only in India, but throughout the world. Mr. H. Baillie Weaver, the General Secretary of the Society in England protested the misrule of the government in India. He continued to bring all possible pressure to bear upon the British government to have the internment order reversed, and found a more sympathetic response from E.S. Montague, who had become Secretary of State for India. The representatives of the Indian National Congress and Muslim League met at a joint conference in Bombay on 28 and 29 July, 1917, on internment of Mrs. Besant to discuss the issue of passive resistance. The Madras Provincial Congress Committee approved the Resolution of the joint conference on 14 August 1917 that the unjust and unconstitutional Orders of internment must be annulled.¹⁸

At Gandhi's instance, Shankerlal Banker and Jammadas Dwarkadas collected signatures of one thousand men willing to defy the internment orders and march to Besant's place of detention. They also began to collect signatures of a million peasants and workers on a petition for Home Rule. C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer was devoting his talents to the work of Home Rule toured most of the cities in Tamil Nadu such as Salem, Kanchipuram, Vandavasi, Madurai and Ramnad and delivered speeches demanding to release of Mrs. Besant. Jinnah has joined in Home Rule Movement.¹⁹ Many prominent leaders such as S. Subramaniam Iyer, C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, Justices Sadasivam Iyer, A. Rangasamy Iyer voiced against the policy of repression of the government and they demanded the release of the arrested. Sir. S. Subramaniam Aiyer, a senior Congressman, a retired judge of the Madras

High Court and the Honorary President of the All India Home Rule League wrote a letter to President Wilson of United States America, on the situation of India following Mrs. Besant's internment and oppressive policy pursued by British government in India. Sri KondaVenkatappaiah and NageswaraRao also supported and signed on SubramaniaAiyer's letter. There held a meeting at Madras to enlighten the public on the current political issue. The Madras Government took serious objection to this letter. S. Subramania Aiyer renounced his knighthood 'Sir' as a protest against the internment of Mrs. Besant.²⁰

The internment followed by strong protests by the public in every corner of the country. A meeting was presided by B.N. Sarma at Young Men's Indian Association in Madras on 2 July 1917. Subscriptions were collected for the 'Besant Fund'. A number of meetings were arranged by the local branches of the Home Rule League and Lodges of the Theosophical Society either independently or in combination with district and taluk associations and Congress Committees. These condemned the repressive policy of government. Hundreds of students attended a meeting held at Triplicane beach on June 17, 1917 notwithstanding the prohibitory issued by the government of Madras. In order to get Mrs. Besant released, a special meeting was held at Triplicane on 14 September 1917 by some women, including Dorathi Jinaraja Dasa and SivakamurAmmal.²¹ On that day, women offered prayers in the temples in Madras and then a procession was taken in order to test whether the police would enforce the orders provisionally issued prohibiting general processions. The protest meetings were held in Madras, Chenglepet, Adayar, Tindivanam, Mayavaram, Madurai, Virudhunagar and Ramnad. In Kumbakonam Posters were displayed on walls demanding the release of Mrs. Besant. Many more branches were of the Home Rule League started in a number places in Tamil Nadu including Tuticorin, Musiri, Pabanasam and Dharmapuri. Protest rallies were organized at Saidapet, Chinglepet, Trichirappalli and other places carrying Home Rule flags. Prayers were offered at Tirupapuliur temple, Cuddalore for the release of Mrs. Besant. A huge meeting with the audience of about 2500 was held at Tanjore. The president of the occasion demanded immediate release of the Home Rulers. There were scenes scripted 'Worship Mrs. Besant', 'Down with Imperialism' and 'OlcattiDuraiani Ki Jai at Cuddalore'. An indoor meeting was held at Parthasarathi temple, Mylapore to discuss the ongoing political tussle.²²

Newspapers flashed in support of Mrs. Besant. *Swadesamitran* stated that suppression should not let the Home Rule Movement slacken, in contrary it would shock the entire India. *Desabaktan* stated that the government could not reprimand the home rulers instead of heeding their words. *Deshabimani* said, to intern Mrs. Besant who has identified her welfare with that of the people and who has devoted her all to the cause of righteousness is a stain on the British government. There are signs all over India that the internments will in no way affect the Swaraj agitation. In short, repression

only served to harden the attitude of the agitators and strengthen their resolve to resist the Government.²³ Montague, writing in his diary commented: ‘Shiva cut his wife into fifty-two pieces only to discover that he had fifty-two wives. This is really what happens to the Government of India when it interns Mrs. Besant.’ The result of continuous agitation and of growing public indignation Dr. Besant and her two colleagues, G.S. Arundale, B.P. Wadia were unconditionally released from internment on 17 September, 1917.

III MONTAGUE’S DECLARATION, AUGUST 1917

On 20 August 1917 Montagu made his declaration in the British Parliament, the internment lost all its meaning. Montague, the Secretary of State, came to India in November 1917 and travelled with the Viceroy Lord Chelmsford over the country, meeting deputations representing every type of political opinion. The National Congress and the Muslim League, and the two Home Rule Leagues presented memorials at Delhi on 26 November, 1917, demanding Home Rule. The National Congress and the League were represented by a Joint Deputation from their respective Executives, and the memorial was read by Surendranath Banerjea.²⁴ After a careful argumentative presentation of the Indian case, it summed up: “We submit that the reforms for which the National Congress and the Muslim League plead, are needed as much in the interests of the good government of the country and the happiness and prosperity of the people as for the legitimate -satisfaction of our National self-respect and for a due recognition of India’s place among the free and civilized Nations of the Empire and the outside world. Nor are they less necessary to strengthen and solidify the British connection with this ancient land. India has given freely her love and service to England, and she aspires to attain to her proper place of equality and honour in the Commonwealth of Nations, which are proud to win fidelity to his Imperial Majesty the King-Emperor. If, as has been said, the British Empire is the greatest secular power on earth making for the good of mankind, India is hopeful and confident that she will not be denied what is in every way due to her, especially after this great War of Liberty, in which it has been authoritatively recognized that she has played a distinguished and honourable part”²⁵.

The government in Britain decided to effect a change in policy and adopt a conciliatory posture. The new Secretary of State, Montague, made a historic declaration in the House of Commons on 20 August, 1917 in which he stated. “The policy of His Majesty’s government is that of the increasing association of Indians in every branch of the administration and the gradual development of self-governing institutions, with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire.” This statement was in marked contrast to that of Lord Morley who, while introducing the Constitutional Reforms in 1909, had stated

categorically that these reforms were in no way intended to lead to self-government. The importance of Montague's Declaration was that after this the demand for Home Rule or self-government could no longer be treated as seditious.²⁶ This did not, however, mean that the British government was about to grant self-government. The accompanying clause in the statement which clarified that the nature and the timing of advance towards responsible government would be decided by the government alone gave it enough leeway to prevent any real transfer of power to Indian hands for a long enough time. In keeping with the conciliatory stance of the Montague declaration, Mrs. Besant was released in September 1917.

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