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Delhi: The Imperial Capital (1911-1919)

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Abstract

The transfer of capital in 1911 turned Delhi into a centre of political activity. One could witness the rise of militant nationalism in Delhi during 1911-1915, like the Delhi conspiracy case in 1912 which aimed to assassinate the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge. The revolutionaries came from Bengal and Punjab and were led by people like Rash Behari Ghosh, Har Dayal (founder of Ghadar party in U.S). By 1916, the revolutionary movement was all but suppressed but they paved the ground for further collective action. It was however the period starting with the Rowlatt Satyagraha in 1919 to the Civil Disobedience movement in 1934, covering the events of Khilafat, noncooperation, communal politics, revolutionary movement in between, which constitutes the most important phase in the nationalist movement in Delhi. In this article of mine, I have examined the turbulent phase from the shift of capital in 1911 to the launching of the Rowlatt Satyagraha in 1919, focusing on the demographics of Delhi, the new imperial capital and subsequently the revolutionary phase followed by the beginning of mass mobilization and people participation in the nationalist movement leading up to the enactment of the Rowlatt Act and the agitation that followed. I have made use of certain archival records available at Delhi State Archives as well as National Archives of India and a few secondary sources available in various libraries.

Keywords: Shahjahanabad, Nationalism, Swadeshi, Revolutionary, Ghadar, Home Rule, Rowlatt, Hartal

1. Introduction & Objective

The transfer of capital from Calcutta to Delhi was a significant move taking into consideration the political developments that followed subsequently. On 12th December, 1911, King George announced the transfer of the seat of Government of India from Calcutta to the ancient capital of Delhi. It was indeed a matter of pride for the Delhi people as now they felt that their city had regained its lost place in Indian history. Even the people of the nearby provinces would have been pleased with their proximity to the power centre. In the wake of this transfer of capital, Delhi turned into nucleus of political activity.

The New Capital

Except Bengal, the news of the transfer had been received with considerable satisfaction in the other parts of the country. On 15th December 1911, the day when the King Emperor laid the foundation stone of Delhi, the Viceroy Lord Hardinge made it clear to the people that the decision to shift the capital had been reached after thoughtful consideration. The Delhi province at that time stretched over an area of 1300 square miles. Initially it was assumed that the new capital would be built near the Civil Lines area, including the ridge which was identified with the British raj. But the town planning committee headed by Edwin Lutyens had other ideas. They wanted to build the new capital south of Shahjahanabad, the walled city. Hence they chose the site in the vicinity of the Raisina region, where the New Delhi area (the imperial capital) lies in modern times. After 1912, Shahjahanabad came to be known as Old Delhi. But it needed to be ensured that the new capital should not be in any way affected by the old city, had improvements had to be given the topmost priority. After the transfer, the Delhi province was reorganized and a few additional areas were incorporated into it from the nearby tehsils. Mehrauli was taken from Ballabhgarh tehsil. 65 villages in Meerut district on the eastern bank of Yamuna river were transferred to Delhi. Also some territories were transferred to adjoining districts, thereby altering the demographic structure of Delhi. The population of Delhi which stood at 6,57,000 in 1911 decreased to 4,88,111 in 1921. Majority of the population (71%) comprised of the Hindus, followed by the Muslims, Jains, Christians, Europeans and Sikhs. Talking about the city administration, with the increase in expenditure,

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the Government was unwilling to give grants-in-aid to the newly formed Municipality of Delhi and due to the increase in municipal finances, which were bound to increase following the shift of the capital, the lower classes had to bear the brunt of extra taxation. Also the shift led to dramatic increase in the cost of living which was further aggravated by the First World War. Prices of property and cost of labour nearly skyrocketed. What is striking is that the increase occurred in the prices of European goods and in meat, while the local products like foodstuffs and cotton had actually become cheaper. A Committee appointed by the Deputy Commissioner, H.C. Beadon, consisting of people like Ajmal Khan, Girdhar Lal, Amba Prasad etc to probe into the matter accused the European firms for indulging in indiscriminate hoarding of grains. The rising prices had alarmed the Indian merchants who started voicing their protests and soon all these came to be linked with the nationalist politics. The inhabitants of Delhi had by now come into contact with the national level politicians, and were now ready to play an active role in the nationalist politics. Slogans and ideologies that had formed a part of nationalist politics now began to be used for voicing local grievances.

Revolutionary Activities

Prior to the advent of Gandhi an Nationalism, struggle for freedom in Delhi found expression in various forms, best manifested by revolutionary activities that had followed the Swadeshi Movement in 1905-06 and had again raised its head this time around. The revolutionaries did not welcome the idea of the shift of capital and in reply, an attempt was made to assassinate the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge on 23rd December 1912, who narrowly escaped, but turned deaf after the incident. This incident became famous as the Delhi-Lahore Conspiracy Case. The mastermind behind this incident was Rash Behari Bose. This incident was bitterly criticized by loyalists and various socio-religious groups, and people did not react favourably to this incident. The press too condemned the event. Among those convicted for this Conspiracy case were Awadh Behari, Amir Chand, Balraj and Hanwant Sahai. While the first two received death sentence, Balraj and Hanwant Sahai were sentenced to transportation for life. What is striking here is that inspite of the feeling of revulsion against political violence, the local people demonstrated a feeling of sympathy for the revolutionaries and the death sentences evoked strong resentment from the local populace.

Revolutionary activities did not stop here only. In 1913, the Sikhs in USA formed a revolutionary organization, known as the Ghadar Party, aiming to overthrow the colonial rule in India by carrying out revolutionary activities. Their plan of action involved looting of treasuries, breaking of jails, procuring arms, manufacturing of explosives and recruiting young men for revolutionary activities. The organization planned out an armed uprising during the First World War but was unsuccessful. Many Ghadarites were hanged subsequently. In spite of the fact that extremist nationalism never received any substantial support in Delhi, all these incidents ultimately prepared the ground for the freedom struggle in Delhi.

Prelude to the Rowlatt Satyagraha

Nationalist politics underwent a change following the establishment of the Home Rule League on 25th September 1915. It in a way marked a turning point in the history of national movement. On February 1917, branch of the League

was set up in Delhi also. But with the arrival of the Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montague in November 1917, matters got complicated. The authorities prohibited the entry of nationalist leaders like Lokmanya Tilak into the city, in order to avoid any law and order problem. With the efforts of the Home Rule League, this ban was withdrawn however. But various other restrictions were imposed as well. No one was allowed to hold procession or public meeting without the prior permission of the police. During Montague's stay, Delhi became the hub of political activities. The frequent visits of many regional and national leaders led to the increase in political consciousness in the people. The month of December 1918 witnessed unprecedented political activity in Delhi as both Indian National Congress and All India Muslim League held their annual sessions in Delhi. On account of the harsh treatment meted out to the Ottoman Sultan by the European powers in the wake of First World War, the Indian Muslims condemned the evil intentions of the British and their allies who sought to dismember the Ottoman Empire. The Muslim League decided to join hands with the Congress against the British rule. This was to be seen as a mark of Hindu-Muslim unity. All these factors widened the political horizons of the citizens of Delhi and henceforth they started voicing their opinions on various matters of local and national importance. Their voices found expression in the press and public debates. The newspapers enjoyed a great deal of patronage. In addition, there were 13 volunteer organizations that played a crucial role in influencing the public opinion. Most notable among them were Indraprastha Sewak Mandali, Home Rule League Volunteer Corps, Moslem league Volunteer Corps, Arya Sewak Mandali, etc. These organizations were instrumental in mobilizing the masses thereby ensuring a large turnout of people and therefore, Delhi was ready launch a Satyagraha, once the Rowlatt Act was enacted.

Rowlatt Satyagraha

Upon finding the existing law machinery inadequate to cope up with the unsavoury situation that had been created due to the rising discontentment with the British Rule, the government appointed a committee under Justice S.A.T Rowlatt to curb political agitations any revolutionary activity that may have been precarious for the British raj. These bills were vehemently criticized by the Indian members of the Imperial Legislative Council when it was brought before it for consideration. Gandhi termed this measure as an open challenge to Indians and sought to involve the people in a nationwide agitation. Hence on 24th February 1919, Gandhi signed the Satyagraha pledge to refuse openly to obey these laws and affirmed to abide by the twin principles of truth and nonviolence during the agitation. He also informed the then Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford of his decision to launch a Satyagraha against the so called act. Fifteen persons including Swami Shradhanand, Dr. Ansari, Hakim Ajmal Khan, Hasrat Mohani, Shankar Lal etc took a pledge to organize the Satyagraha in the Satyagraha Sabha held on 7th March 1919. Hence even before the enactment of the Rowlatt Act, the ground for the Satyagraha had been laid.

The Rowlatt Act was passed on 18th March 1919. One of the bills called the Anarchical and Revolutionaries Crimes Act of 1919 armed the provincial governments with executive powers to arrest any suspicious person without warrant or imprison anyone without a trial. It also provided for quick trial of offences by a special court with no right to appeal. This unpopular legislation also provided for stricter control of

the press. As mentioned earlier, Gandhi had given a call for Satyagraha in February itself and Delhi played a pivotal role in this agitation. The Rowlatt Satyagraha started on 30th March 1919. On this day, the shopkeepers in Delhi were asked to keep their shops closed. It lasted for twenty days, till 18th April. D.W. Ferrell divides this period into three phases: First Phase (30-31 March 1919) - Witnessed a *Hartal* in Delhi

Second Phase (1-9 April 1919) - Aftermath of the *Hartal*

Third Phase (10-18 April 1919) - Violent Turn

During the first phase, the hartal was a success. Both Hindu and Muslim traders joined it. Senior Superintendent of Police, Mr. Marshall, and Additional Superintendent of Police, Mr. Jeffreys wanted the deployment of troops in certain densely populated areas like Chandni Chowk, Sadar Bazar, Ajmeri Gate etc. but the atmosphere in these areas remained somewhat peaceful. But it was the railway station which witnessed a chaos. Some of the satyagrahis in their bid to persuade the railway contractor to stop serving eatables, entered into heated arguments with the railway officials. Two satyagrahis were arrested in this regard but it enraged the agitators and the refusal to release the two satyagrahis further complicated the matters. Soon tensions arose between the masses and policemen, resulting in police open firing and heavy casualties. The crowds dispersed but the situation had indeed become tensed. The hartal continued the next day as well, 31st March. After these violent incidents, Gandhi published a letter in the Bombay chronicle dated 3rd April 1919 in which he warned the satyagrahis not to indulge in any such act that goes against the pledge of satyagraha. Under no circumstances should the satyagrahis forcibly demand the release of those who had been arrested. They ought to abide by the laws and peacefully carry on the struggle until the withdrawal of the unjust and unfair Rowlatt Act.

The second phase which lasted from 1st to 9th April, witnessed less political activity. The masses attended the funerals of those satyagrahis who had lost their lives in the police firing. The vernacular newspapers like *Vijaya* and *Congress* too condemned the March 30 incident, terming the British rule as 'Nadir Shahi' and highlighting the sacrifices made by the people thereby denouncing the police repression. But the authorities considered the people involved in the hartal as 'foolish' and 'Badmashes' (hooligans) and wanted to ensure peace in the city at any cost. On 4th April a prayer meeting was held at Jama masjid in memory of those killed. Swami Shraddhanad was invited to address the gathering from the pulpit of the mosque. This event clearly demonstrates the Hindu-Muslim unity against the British raj. On 6th April there was another hartal that was observed in the city in which two prominent leaders Swami Shraddhanad and Dr. Ansari addressed meetings at Daryaganj, Edward Park and Fatehpuri mosque. It seemed that the entire adult population of Delhi attended these meetings. This shows that the popularity of these leaders was increasing day by day, and this was indeed a matter of grave concern for the colonial authorities. The peaceful hartal on 6th April proved that the firing on March 30th was absolutely unnecessary.

Talking of the third phase (10-18 April), the Delhi leaders invited Gandhi to pay a visit to the city which he agreed to do, but the Government, sensing danger, prohibited the entry of Gandhi in Delhi and Punjab. His train was stopped at Palwal and he was sent back to Bombay. This left the people of Delhi highly disappointed. As a mark of protest the local satyagraha sabha called for a hartal on 10th April. A large

meeting was held on the banks of the Yamuna which was addressed by Swami Shraddhanand, who read out the message of the Gandhi to the gathered masses. He asked the people to boycott the official enquiry into the riots of 30th March as well as law courts but urged them to end the hartal on 12th April. But in spite of his pleadings, the hartal in Delhi continued unabated. The local leaders, encouraged by the positive response of the people persuaded the local government officials, bank employees, domestic servants etc to join in. The Chief Commissioner met the local leaders on 14th April to persuade them to call off the hartal. They were ensured of a peaceful hartal by the leaders. But the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre on 13th April, where General Dyer opened fire on a peaceful gathering at Amritsar, worsened the matters. In the public meetings that followed subsequently, the people started using violent tactics like beating up of police officials. The leaders now, on being again urged by the Chief Commissioner asked the people to call of the hartal and by 17th April most of the shops and banks had resumed business. There prevailed some amount of peace following the turbulent agitations. But sadly, such state of affairs did not last long. The leaders had advised the Senior Superintendent of Police as well as the Deputy Commissioner against the deployment of police force in the markets as such a move could infuriate the people. But their advice was ignored. In Chandni Chowk, a constable was assaulted by an angry mob which resulted in a severe backlash from police who opened fire in retaliation. All these developments frustrated the Delhi leaders so much so that they decided to call of the hartal on 17th April because they felt that the Satyagraha movement that was based upon the principle of non-violence was lacking direction. During the Rowlatt Satyagraha in Delhi, five men were killed and fourteen were injured. It was pioneered by Gandhi and carried forward by leaders like Dr Ansari, Hakim Ajmal Khan, Swami Shraddhanand etc. Hence Delhi was linked to the mainstream nationalist politics. The Rowlatt Satyagraha, even after its premature end, went a long way in preparing base for future course of action. And in this sense, it acted as a launching pad for nationalist agitations in future. And in the subsequent period, Delhi was to play a major role in Khilafat, Non Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements. As the Deputy Commissioner of Delhi, H.C. Beadon puts it, Delhi had undergone a transition from a simple *mofussil* town, with no political agitation, no real political participation, into a centre of political unrest.

Conclusion

Ever since the transfer of capital, Delhi witnessed an increase in political activity. The city attracted various political figures as well as various political organizations and hence a platform was created for the mobilization of masses which the leaders were able to do to a considerable extent. But the violent nature of masses on particular instances left the leaders dejected and frustrated, as was the case with the Rowlatt Satyagraha, when the leaders were forced to call of the hartal on the grounds that masses often crossed the limits of non-violence and became aggressive which gave the authorities an excuse to come down heavily upon the agitators. But it cannot be denied that all these events led to the emergence of political awakening among the masses and we shall see in the subsequent chapters how the people of Delhi rallied to the call of Gandhi and the various leaders during the subsequent nationalist movements.

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