A Cheap Shoddy Import*

AUROBINDO GHOSH

[...] To begin with, I should a little while ago have had no hesitation in saying that the National Congress was not really national and had not in any way attempted to become national. But...[n]ow to deal with this vexed subject, one must tread on very burning ground, and I shall make no apology for treading with great care and circumspection... It is therefore incumbent on me to explain what I wish to imply, when I say that the Congress is not really national. Now I do not at all mean to reecho the Anglo-Indian catchword about the Hindus and Mahomedans. Like most catchwords it is without much force, and has been still further stripped of meaning by the policy of the Congress. The Mahomedans have been as largely represented on that body as any reasonable community could desire, and their susceptibilities, far from being denied respect, have always been most assiduously soothed and flattered. It is entirely futile then to take up the Anglo-Indian refrain; but this at least I should have imagined, that in an era when democracy and similar big words slide so glibly from our tongues, a body like the Congress, which represents not the mass of the population, but a single and very limited class, could not honestly be called national. It is perfectly true that the House of Commons represents not the English nation, but simply the English aristocracy and middle class and yet is none the less national. But the House of Commons is a body legally constituted and empowered to speak and act for the nation, while the Congress is self-created: and it is not justifiable for a self-created body representing only a single and limited class to call itself national. It would be just as

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absurd if the Liberal Party, because it allows within its limits all sorts
and conditions of men, were to hold annual meetings and call itself the
English National Congress. When therefore I said that the Congress was
not really national, I simply meant that it did not represent the mass of
the population.

But Mr. Pherozshah Mehta will have nothing to do with this sense of
the word. In his very remarkable and instructive Presidential address at
Calcutta, he argued that the Congress could justly arrogate this epithet
without having any direct support from the proletariat; and he went
on to explain his argument with the profound subtlety expected from
an experienced advocate. ‘It is because the masses are still unable to
articulate definite political demands that the functions and duty devolve
upon their educated and enlightened compatriots to feel, to understand
and to interpret their grievances and requirements, and to suggest and
indicate how these can best be redressed and met.’

This formidable sentence is, by the way, typical of Mr. Mehta’s style
and reveals the secret of his oratory, which like all great inventions
is exceedingly simple: it is merely to say the same thing twice over in
different words. But its more noteworthy feature is the idea implied that
because the Congress professes to discharge this duty, it may justly call
itself national. Nor is this all; Calcutta comes to the help of Bombay in
the person of Mr. Manmohan Ghose, who repeats and elucidates Mr.
Mehta’s idea. The Congress, he says, asserting the rights of that body
to speak for the masses, represents the thinking portion of the Indian
people, whose duty it is to guide the ignorant, and this in his opinion
sufficiently justifies the Congress in calling itself national. To differ
from a successful barrister and citizen, a man held in high honour by
every graduate in India, and above all a future member of the Viceroy’s
Council, would never have been a very easy task for a timid man like
myself. But when he is reinforced by so respectable and weighty a citizen
as Mr. Manmohan Ghose, I really cannot find the courage to persevere. I
shall therefore amend the obnoxious phrase and declare that the National
Congress may be as national as you please, but it is not a popular body
and has not in any way attempted to become a popular body.

But at this point some one a little less learned than Mr. Pherozshah
Mehta may interfere and ask how it can be true that the Congress is not
a popular body. I can only point his attention to a previous statement
of mine that the Congress represents not the mass of the population,
but a single and limited class. No doubt the Congress tried very hard
in the beginning to believe that it really represented the mass of the
population, but if it has not already abandoned, it ought now at least to abandon the pretension as quite untenable. And indeed when Mr. Pherozshah Mehta and Mr. Manmohan Ghose have admitted this patent fact—not as delegates only, but as officials of the Congress—and have even gone so far as to explain the fact away, it is hardly requisite for me to combat the fallacy. But perhaps the enquirer, not yet satisfied, may go on to ask: what is that single and limited class which I imagine the Congress to represent? Here it may be of help to us to refer again to the speeches of the Congress leaders and more especially to the talented men from whom I have already quoted. In his able official address, Mr. Manmohan Ghose asks himself this very question and answers that the Congress represents the thinking portion of the Indian people. ‘The delegates present here today,’ he goes on, ‘are the chosen representatives of that section of the Indian people who have learnt to think, and whose number is daily increasing with marvellous rapidity’” Perhaps Mr. Ghose is a little too facile in his use of the word thinking. So much at the mercy of their instincts and prejudices are the generality of mankind, that we hazard a very high estimate when we call even one man out of ten thousand a thinking man. But evidently by the thinking portion Mr. Ghose would like to indicate the class to which he himself belongs; I mean those of us who have got some little idea of the machinery of English politics and are eager to import it into India along with cheap Liverpool cloths, shoddy Brummagem wares, and other useful and necessary things which have killed the fine and genuine textures. If this is a true interpretation he is perfectly correct in what he says. For it is really from this class that the Congress movement draws its origin, its support, and its most enthusiastic votaries. And if I were asked to describe their class by a single name, I should not hesitate to call it our new middle class. For here too English goods have driven out native goods: our society has lost its old landmarks and is being demarcated on the English model. But of all the brand new articles we have imported, inconceivably the most important is that large class of people—journalists, barristers, doctors, officials, graduates, and traders—who have grown up and are increasing with prurient rapidity under the aegis of the British rule: and this class I call the middle class: for, when we are so proud of our imported English goods, it would be absurd, when we want labels for them, not to import their English names as well. Besides this name which I have chosen is really a more accurate description than phrases like ‘thinking men’ or ‘the educated class’ which are merely expressions of our own boundless vanity and self-conceit. However largely we may
choose to indulge in vague rhetoric about the all-pervading influence of the Congress, no one can honestly doubt that here is the constituency from which it is really empowered. There is indeed a small contingent of aristocrats and a smaller contingent of the more well-to-do ryots: but these are only two flying-wheels in the great middle-class machine. The fetish-worshipper may declare as loudly as he pleases that it represents all sorts and conditions of people, just as the Anglo-Indians used to insist that it represented no one but the Bengali Babu. Facts have been too strong for the Anglo-Indian and they will be too strong in the end for the fetish-worshipper.