

THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS *By M. N. Roy*

THE Thirty-seventh Annual Session of the All-India National Congress was celebrated at Gaya, an old pilgrimage town in the heart of the Province of Behar. It is one of the most backward provinces of the country, being the seat of powerful landlordism. Except coal-mining and several small ironworks and railway workshops, the entire province is predominantly agricultural. The great Tata Iron and Steel Works are geographically situated within the boundaries of this province, being at the farthest southern end. In short, the province of Behar is industrially backward, and therefore lacks on the one hand a progressive bourgeoisie, and on the other a newly-created proletarian mass in the throes of a spontaneous social upheaval. The peasantry is cruelly exploited, and supplies the labour forces for the far-off tea plantations of Assam, as well as for the jute and other industries around Calcutta.

The National Congress met at the end of a year which has been the period of the acutest crisis in its whole history. The social elements that control the Congress and that had to fight in the last session to maintain its domination could not have chosen a better place. The reactionary and politically bankrupt petty bourgeoisie, the standard-bearers of "pure Gandhism," were very anxious to go away from the dangerous influence of the two revolutionary factors behind the national movement, namely, the progressive

bourgeoisie and the militant proletariat. They took the Congress to Gaya, and placed it under the hospitality of and tied it to the purse strings of the landlords wearing the Gandhi-cap, which symbol alone is enough to cover their sinister economic character. The Reception Committee (a body entrusted with the organisation of the Congress) was composed of these landlords and their relations at the Bar. The chairman of the Reception Committee was one of the richest landholders in the province. Under such auspices did the Thirty-seventh Congress meet. The result has been precisely what was to be expected from those seeking such eminently reactionary patronage. "Pure Gandhism" has held its own against the onslaught of the Radical intellectuals from the Right and of the Utopians from the Left. The petty bourgeois religionists are so much encouraged by their victory at Gaya that the next annual session of the Congress will take place at Andhra, the stronghold of Brahmanic reaction.

Objectively, however, Gaya marks the beginning of a new period in the Indian national struggle. The apparent victory of petty bourgeois reaction is in reality its last gasp of life. Though the great political questions confronting the Congress still remain unsolved, the confusion reigning in its ranks ever since the fateful days when the mighty mass demonstrations during the visit of the Prince of Wales, as well as the revolutionary agrarian uprisings, were disowned and denounced under the personal leadership of Gandhi, is nearing its end. Social readjustment outside is reflecting itself upon the Congress, in which class demarcation can no longer be kept confused by sentimental effusions. The events of the last twelve months proved that the Congress could not continue as a heterogeneous body, united not by political expediency, but on the treacherous ground of sentimentality. What happened during the last twelve months has crystallised at Gaya in the form of a split which is the forerunner of the growth of cohesive political parties, reflecting the interests of the several social classes objectively antagonistic to British rule, and forming a fighting coalition inside the National Congress, and which can only be the organ of national struggle. So the process of political regrouping begun at Gaya sounds the death-knell of the non-political Gandhites, in whose hand the Congress lately came to be more of a prayer-hall and a conclave of theologians rather than the leader of a national struggle. It can be predicted, in the words of C. R. Das, the defeated President at Gaya, that "the minority of to-day will be the majority of to-morrow." That is, those who have at last raised the standard of revolt against the quietism of "pure-Gandhism" may appear to be beaten to-day, but the future belongs to them. They will initiate a new period of action in the national movement, and thus will capture before long the leadership of the Congress. This welcome eventuality was indicated by the split at Gaya, which therefore marks a step forward in the Indian National Struggle, the temporary victory of the petty bourgeois centrists notwithstanding.

Three social elements went into the composition of the non-co-operation movement from the very beginning, namely, the middle-class intellectuals with a Radical tendency, the petty bourgeoisie in a desperate economic condition, and the masses of workers and peasants in the initial stages of awakening. Taken as a

whole, the non-co-operation movement was a petty bourgeois movement. Fundamentally, it was not so much a struggle against imperialism as it was a revolt against the big bourgeoisie. It may sound strange, but it is the fact none the less. The gradual clarification process is proving it to be so. Towards the close of the Great War the situation in India came to such a state, the national struggle objectively became of such potentiality through the awakening of the proletariat and the wide-spread discontent among the peasantry, that imperialism found it imperative to accommodate itself with the aspirations of the native bourgeoisie. The Montagu Reforms were conceded, and the big bourgeoisie, which had so far been the leader of the national struggle, was placated and won over. The non-co-operation movement was initiated with the avowed object of wrecking the reforms which had given the native bourgeoisie a place in the sun. Divested of its metaphysical phraseology and sentimental effusions, the non-co-operation movement politically meant "the reforms have left the middle and lower strata of the bourgeoisie in the lurch: we won't have anything to do with them until they are so extended as to make provisions for us." The Swaraj of the non-co-operators, to which many a revolutionary interpretation has been attributed, never stood for anything more than such measures of self-government and concessions, which would transcend the limits of the big bourgeoisie. During two eventful years this petty programme was kept shrouded in bombastic phrases, and the movement was carried on, not on account of the attractiveness of the programme, but by a spontaneous revolutionary upheaval, with which the petty bourgeoisie and their moderate programme had not only nothing to do, but of which it has always been in deadly terror. It was not possible for the non-co-operation movement thus to ride always on somebody else's horse, especially when the wildness of this horse was not very agreeable to the rider. In the course of a movement, which was essentially an opposition to the big bourgeoisie coming to power, the class consciousness of the petty bourgeoisie, went on developing till it discovered the danger of playing with fire. Consequently, it severed all connection with the revolutionary workers and peasants, which separation, however, proved its own political impotency. Non-co-operation became a moral creed, a religious dogma, a metaphysical abstraction, and anything else that goes to strengthen the hand of social reaction, thus hindering the development of the political consciousness of the nation.

This degeneration of the non-co-operation movement naturally failed to win the approbation of the Radical intellectuals within its ranks. The latter revolted and demanded that "the object of the Congress should be material." They called for "political activities" as against the ethical vegetation and religious quietism of the petty bourgeoisie. So the Congress became the ground of battle between the two strata of the middle class, which originally had started the non-co-operation together. This battle was fought at Gaya. The Thirty-seventh Annual Session of the National Congress was engaged in deciding whether the Radical upper middle class or the reactionary petty bourgeoisie would lead the national movement in the next period. This otherwise harmless battle was, however, fought before an extremely revolutionary background, where were arrayed the mighty forces of the workers and peasants,

awakened, but still unconscious of their historic rôle, without leadership, and advancing with faltering steps. The presence of these revolutionary forces standing in the background was felt in the Congress through the medium of a Left Wing, which, however, had a very hazy outlook, and was actuated more by sentiment than by understanding. The voice of the workers and peasants was raised through the programme published by the Communist Party on the eve of the Congress, a programme which burst on the situation like a bombshell, created great consternation in the Congress, and helped very much the process of class-clarification. But we will not deal with that episode in this article. The Communists sought to strengthen the hand of the Left Wing, but only succeeded in frightening it. This was, however, a gain. It proved how unreliable is the sloppy sentimentality of those who talk glibly about "the masses."

C. R. Das, a renowned lawyer, who gave up his extensive practice at the Bar, who was clapped into jail on the eve of the Ahmedabad (1921) Congress, to whose presidency he had been unanimously elected, and the president-elect of the Gaya Congress, unexpectedly put himself at the head of the incipient Left Wing. Four months before the Congress met at Gaya he came out of jail, and, to its great surprise, the country came to know that the man who had been raised to the pedestal of Gandhi was advocating the abandonment of the path marked out by Gandhi. The evolution of Das in his post-jail days was rather interesting. It appeared that in order to feel the pulse of the country, he kept on talking vague generalities in the first months. Suddenly he came out with a statement couched in such phrases as: "We do not want bourgeois democracy," "Brown bureaucracy will not be any better than the white bureaucracy," "The middle classes have failed to carry on the non-co-operation," "The masses want Swaraj more than the middle classes," and similar other sentiments, which outraged the sense of propriety of the Congress, and brought upon the devoted head of Das the epithet of "Bolshevik" from the ruling class. Many of the sentimentally revolutionary elements within the Congress, who had been smarting under the ethical dictums imposed upon them by Gandhism, enthusiastically welcomed the leadership of Das. Thus, in addition to the Radical intellectuals, who had been for a long time demanding a change in the Congress programme, came into existence another factor advocating a change in the Congress activities. This latter had the appearance of a Left Wing Party, and, in fact, its rank and file did contain Left Wing, that is, revolutionary elements. But the leadership of this incipient Left Wing Party proved lacking in revolutionary vision. At Gaya, they identified themselves with the Radicals of the Right Wing, the change advocated by whom would mean practical repudiation of the method of non-co-operation and would lead the national movement back to the tactics compatible with constitutional agitation. Both the wings wanted a change and joined forces on this identity of issues. This tactical mistake proved suicidal for the growing Left Wing, which thus forfeited the adhesion of a considerable section of the lower middle-class sentimentalists who mean well, but do not possess the courage and vision to carve out a revolutionary path for themselves. The make-believe talk of the "pure Gandhites" about civil disobedience proved more fas-

cinating for these elements, who therefore remained attached to the Centre. The Left Wing forces failed to assert themselves on the situation and when the split came, they were found with the Radicals of the Right.

The split, which ought to have taken place on the issue of petty bourgeois politics versus mass action, was diverted to an internal quarrel for power between the Radical Liberals and the lower middle-class reactionaries. The latter have won, because the Left Wing was not yet developed enough to take the field alone. The new opposition party is a combination of two diametrically divergent forces which cannot be expected to operate in harmony. Therefore a second split is inevitable. This split will happen as soon as a sufficiently strong nucleus of a mass party is formed. The materials for such a nucleus are there. They are already in the process of accumulation. The publication of the Communists' programme has, on the one hand, exposed the real intentions of the petty bourgeois politicians, and, on the other, opened up an inspiring vision to all the elements revolutionarily inclined. Hopeful signs were to be seen even at Gaya, where reaction reigned supreme. In spite of the obstruction of the bureaucratic machinery of the Congress, the resolution calling for complete independence as the aim of the Congress received more support this year than the last one. More than 30 per cent. of the delegates voted for it. A great majority of the delegates came back disgruntled, looking for a new lead which can alone be given by a truly revolutionary Left Wing Party, whose rise is imminent.