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## Role of Teachers and Students in the Home Rule Movement in Tamil Nadu – A Study

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**Abstract:** *The teachers and students as a single group, while dispersing their political role developed a genuine teacher – disciple relationship. This resulted in an atmosphere of the educational institutions becoming nurseries of nationalism and anti-colonial surge.*

*Mrs. Besant resorted to launch a movement called Home Rule Movement to demand the British a responsible self-government for India. She believed that attainment of home rule would be the best weapon to redress the grievances in the British colonial in India. In Tamil Nadu Mrs. Besant was able to influence teachers and students by her charismatic leadership and inspiring home rule ideologists. In the case of students, her aims was to train the students for good citizenship and their responsive role in obtaining home rule for India. Under this line she started the “Orders of Sons and Daughters of India” in 1908 and “Young Men’s India Association” in 1914. Her New India and Common Weal ventilated her aims and shouldered her political cause. To demand from the British the home rule for India, she started the All India Home Rule League in 1916 which dragged almost all the elite sections of the society particularly the teachers and students, towards politics.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the advent of western education in India, the educated elites – teachers and students – began to play their role in politics. There were two reasons for their political emergence - the spirit of nationalism and the anti-British surge, which had developed in course of time during the British regime. The growth of British power, its revenue, judicial and educational policies evoked the literate community to rise against the British with a sense of anger and revenge. Their passionate love and responsive affection for their mother land also were responsible for their political participation against the British.

Every section in India showed the spirit of discontent towards the British Government in India, but it was more confined to the literate class. Rabindranath Tagore attributed the discontentment to the intellectual dissatisfaction of the literate class on the educational and other policies. According to J. D. W. Sewell, manager, St. Joseph college, Trichinopoly, students of that time believed that “the British were ruling India with iron rod solely in their own interest and so that no amelioration of their condition was to be hoped for from the British unless it be exhorted from them”.<sup>1</sup> The teachers as anti-British elements took the responsibility of teaching history, economics, English literature etc., in a way to inculcate patriotic fervor among their students. They kept constant touch with their students and trained them, which the students considered, a ‘best apprenticeship’. The teachers and students as a single group, while dispersing their political role developed a genuine teacher – disciple relationship. This resulted in an atmosphere of the educational institutions becoming nurseries of nationalism and anti-colonial surge.<sup>2</sup> The growing political consciousness out of nationalism and colonial resentment among the teachers and students took the Indian politics to a higher platform. In this scenario, the Indian National Congress gave them an opportunity to work better for the cause of Indian independence. The Government on its part, counter-acted against the literate community simultaneously to curb the growing spirit of nationalism among the students and the teachers and also it avoided their mixing up with the politics of India. Without studying the role of the teachers and students, the history of Indian independence movement would remain incomplete. However, studying the history with an all India focus would not be feasible considering the data collection and other research tasks. Under this context, it has been decided to deal with the role of teachers and students pertaining to Tamil Nadu alone, in Indian Freedom Struggle and hence this present topic.

### 2. ORGIN OF HOME RULE MOVEMENT

After the Swadeshi Movement, the Indian National Congress did not launch any anti-British programme engaging the Indian masses. Meanwhile Mrs. Besant, a socio-political reformist from Ireland was interested in Indian politics.

According to Mrs. Besant, "increasing repression, narrowing of liberty, the ill-treatment of students and the danger of revolution forced her into the field". To begin with, Mrs. Besant took keen interest in socio-educational reforms. However from 1914 onwards she began to take greater interest in politics as she felt that political advancement was necessary for the development of India. She aimed that home rule or self-government should be attained for the sake of India and that social justice and economic upliftment must be secured for the Indians. Hence, Mrs. Besant resorted to launch a movement called Home Rule Movement to demand the British a responsible self-government for India. She believed that attainment of home rule would be the best weapon to redress the grievances in the British colonial in India.<sup>3</sup>

In 1914 she started a daily *New India* and a weekly *Common Weal* "to press the preparation for the coming changes in India, and to claim steadily India's place in the administration of British in India". According to Mrs. Besant, religion, education, morals and politics were all parts of great national movement. Hence she believed that a new system of education securing moral based instruction must be introduced in India. In 1914, Mrs. Besant started the 'Young Men's India Association' at Madras with an appeal to the student population of Madras Presidency to extend their support to the organization. This organization aimed at the betterment of the country by finding solutions to social problems such as caste, poverty, social asterism, alcoholism and gender inequality.<sup>4</sup>

With the object of preventing Indian students from drifting towards anarchism under sinister influence of revolutionaries from abroad, Mrs. Besant, with the help of some of her followers started the 'Order of the Sons of India,' in 1908 and a little later, that of the 'Daughters of India.' Both women and men, foreign or India, took special pledges that they have to support the cause of Home Rule Movement of Mrs. Besant. She sought official approval, to protect the Orders from the persecution of the lower officials. Lord Minto, the then Viceroy cordially approved the order as a "movement to rescue young men from sedition and the gallows and to restore the Indian womanhood to its ancient splendor." Deeply impressed by the importance of the work of the order, Sir Aurther Lawley, the then Governor of Madras became the patron of these Orders. The yellow-scarved lads of the Orders were trained for social work and they did yeoman service whenever occasion demanded. These Orders acted as instrument to publicize the political concept of Home Rule.

On 3 September, 1916, Mrs. Besant formally inaugurated the All India Home Rule League at a meeting held at Gokhale Hall, Madras. A very large number of members and associates attended the meeting. Mrs. Besant indicated that the object of the League was to begin at once a 'strong, steady and sustained agitation' in the press and on the platform. The government reacted against the move of Mrs. Besant. It persuaded Mrs. Besant to drop her propaganda, but in vain. An Executive Council with seven office bearers was elected for a period of three years by the thirty four branches. Mrs. Besant was elected as its President, Arundale, organizing secretary, C.P. Ramasamy Aiyar, general secretary and B.P. Wadia as the treasurer. Both men and women above the age of eighteen who accepted the objectives of the League were enlisted as members. School students were not admitted as members. However undergraduates were enlisted as associates. More than 100 students from various colleges in Madras enrolled themselves as members of the League.<sup>5</sup>

Mrs. Besant who addressed the gathering on that occasion said "I may be ruined but Home Rule for India is secured by my method, I am content to pay the price". Thereafter, she undertook extensive tours covering the different parts of the country and preached the gospel of swadeshi, boycott of foreign goods, temperance and national education. She wrote powerful articles in *New India* and *Commonweal* on Home Rule; published books and pamphlets opened reading rooms and formed discussion groups which helped the people to know the programmes of her movement. She wrote in her *New India* dated 5 July, 1916 to make people realize the greatness of the past, Mrs. Besant urged the Indians to study their own history. She said, "If you know your past, you will be proud of being Indians. A nation which gave to humanity not only religion and philosophy, not only literature and drama, but the most splendid warriors, the most deathless loyalty, the most sublime patriotism, that nation can never fade in the pages of history except by the treachery of the children of her own womb."<sup>6</sup>

### **3. CONTRIBUTION OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN HOME RULE MOVEMENT**

In response to the call of Mrs. Besant, teachers and students of Tamil Nadu organized strikes and held demonstrations which greatly disconcerted the government college students and school boys read *New India* regularly. In Trichinopoly, the school boys were heard reciting the last sentence of Besant's article on *Tilak's*

*Security Case:* "The agony of the cross precedes the resurrection of India nation." The students of St. Joseph's College, Trichinopoly and Government Arts College, Coimbatore displayed the wordings 'Kill the English' and 'Worship Mrs. Besant' in their college notice boards. They also made it a point to read the pamphlets issued by Mrs. Besant and attended home rule classes and lectures. Week-end home rule classes were conducted at Pachaiyappa's College, Madras, Christian College, Madras and Wesley College, Madras; Vellore College, North Arcot; American Mission College, Madurai; CMS College, Tinnelvely; Govt. College, Coimbatore; Kumbakonam College and others.<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. Besant addressed a students' meeting at Madras in August 1916 when she explained that educational system should inculcate the spirit of patriotism among the students. She condemned the existing educational system as backward, reactionary and unpatriotic. As the students were raising hope of India, she decided to replace the existing educational system by introducing national education based on Indian values and spirituality. She said that love for motherland; patriotism and devotion to the country should be taught in the National Schools and Colleges. G.S. Arundale, the organizing secretary of Home Rule League urged the people to compel the Government to appoint Indians as heads of schools and colleges. He demanded that Indian languages should be taught to the Indian children and the teachers should cultivate a great love for India and the Indian child.<sup>8</sup>

On 9 September, 1916 college students of Madras convened a meeting which passed resolution accepting the 'gospel of Arundale'. On 11 September, 1916, Sir Sivaswami Iyer, member of the Executive Council, presided over a meeting in the Presidency College, Madras. Some of the students raised questions on future of youth in India. They also expressed that unemployment problems, discrimination between the Indians and whites in India, less educational opportunity to Indians were the hindrance to progress of the youth. It was said that the students entering in to the vortex of politics was attributed to the imprint of New India which was read by the students regularly.<sup>9</sup>

The students of Tamil Nadu expressed their support to Home Rule Movement by their own way. Fortnightly Report, 29 September, 1916, had stated that there were occasions for the writing by students on blackboards as follows: "We do not ask for Home Rule; we demand it," "Annie Besant –the saviour of India", "Besant-Ki-Jai" etc. A home rule meeting was held in the Pachaiyappa's Hall on 6 November, 1916. A student who addressed the meeting expressed that the anarchical and cruel government should be vanished. When a policeman attempted to charge on audience, some students pricked him with pins and snatched away his cap. The government officials believed that such unseemly disturbances were the consequences of Mrs. Besant's unmeasured condemnation of the Criminal Investigation Department, which she termed the Crush India Department.<sup>10</sup>

A home rule meeting was held at Mylapore on 18 October, 1916, which was addressed by Dadabhai Paramanandadas Thokore. This was disturbed by the students who attended the meeting. This was because that "Mr. Arundale, though originally invited to preside, refused to occupy the chair on learning that the lecturer had on one occasion attacked Mrs. Besant at a meeting." On the next day a mammoth political meeting was held at Triplicane beach addressed by Thokore. The student audience numbered over 200 attended it. The chairman's speech was repeatedly interrupted and his references to Mrs. Besant and Arundale were cheered. His speech was punctuated with much ironical laughter and applause and in the disorder the police had to see the lecturer back home.<sup>11</sup>

The associations formed to popularize home rule ideologies and other concepts of Mrs. Besant were found working satisfactorily. This was because of the charismatic leadership of Mrs. Besant as well as her student centric philosophies. With the home rule experience, the educated elites especially some of the students of Tamil Nadu organized "discussion groups" in their colleges under the strict supervision of teachers. But such gatherings were held only to discuss matters related to their studies and to get organized and united to demand the British home rule to India. To keep the students themselves with matters outside the educational sphere was considered to be their first entry into the arena of politics. In, December 1916 a Home Rule League Branch was founded at Cuddalore. More than 20 students of the town enrolled in the league. Under the auspicious of the league of the political meeting was held at Cuddalore on 16 December. M. Rajavel, an elementary school teacher cum a theosophist addressed the meeting insisting the importance of *swadeshi*, boycott and temperance. In January, 1917 the students of Trichinopoly colleges paraded the main streets of the town explaining home rule principles. A

meeting of college and school students was held at Kumbakonam on 16 February, 1917 when, a resolution was passed rejecting the government order of prohibiting students from attending political meetings. In a meeting held at Madras on 2 March, 1917 a student speaker said that the government neither regarded that the students were the sons of Indians nor gave any importance to the opinions of their parents and teachers. Such a student meeting was held at Madurai also.<sup>12</sup>

Mrs. Besant while addressing the students of Theosophical College Adyar said that if the home rule propaganda does the harm of making our young men more patriotic, more courageous, more frank and less docile, less timid and less emasculated, then all Indians will agree that the more such 'harm' come to the young the better. In a meeting held at Coimbatore on 2 April, 1917 a student speaker opposed the attempt of spying students by pro-British people including some teachers and officials.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. GOVERNMENT RESTRICTION AGAINST HOME RULE MOVEMENT**

The Government of Madras Presidency considered that home rule propaganda by Mrs. Besant and other home rulers would aggravate anti-British feeling among the minds of the youths. It considered that the young required to be protected from falling a prey to the flattery of the agitators who called them patriots and saviours of the motherland and thereby sowed the seeds of indiscipline and anarchy among them. The Government felt that the students should be prevented from attending meetings in pursuance of the Home Rule campaign and also that the powers available under the Defense India Act should be invoked against those who tried to delude their judgment and unbalance their unformed mind. It also tried to delink students from associating with Mrs. Besant in the face of her increasing popularity among students. It issued orders to heads of educational institutions and police department as a measure for curbing the students' activities. Absenteeism in the case of students should be considered as punishable default. Such defaulted students may be expelled or debarred from appearing for their examinations. Mrs. Besant was enraged at this. She expressed: That repression would not check the rising tide of Indian struggle for liberty. Youngmen driven out of the constitutional arena of politics, which they had the right and duty to study and discuss, would turn to anarchical methods.<sup>14</sup>

In the wake of the Home Rule Movement, which involved the students in political agitation, the Home Department issued a circular on 20 March, 1917, prohibiting their attendance at political meetings and held that the powers available under the defence of India act should be used to control the persons who tried to influence the young. Following this circular, the local governments issued new orders stiffening the orders of 1907, bringing in a special reference to the home rule agitation. Madras was the first in implementing the circular. 15

The students and teachers opposed the decision of the government authorities. They started to disobey the government order. In Trichinopoly about 200 students decided to disobey the order. Every student questioned on the point, expressed similar attitude of defiance. Heads of some of the institutions in Tamil Nadu also opposed the circular but a few favoured it. Principal Statham of the Kumbakonam College set up a good precedent, who, knowing that his students had followed a procession, admonished them not to do so and refrained from punishing them for the first mistake. The principal of the Hindu College demanded an unconditional apology from the students, who gathered on 8 September, 1917 at the residence of C.V. Venkatramana Iyengar, to pray for the repeal of the circular. 16

Teachers' associations in Tamil Nadu came to the forefront to support Mrs. Besant. The Madras Teachers' Association staged a demonstration with the help of students against the suppressive measures of the government. In 3 April 1917 mass procession was organized at Triplicane, Madras when home rulers numbering about five hundred including a large number of students paraded the main streets in Triplicane displaying placards and depicting anti-British slogans. The teachers supporting of students and vice-versa was obvious and common during the days of Home Rule Movement. The teachers felt that the ideologies of Mrs. Besant would enlighten the students on the duties and responsibilities in protecting the cultural grandeur of India and in revamping the existing socio-economic systems. Some of the teachers working in Madras discarded their jobs meant to render service for the sake of Home Rule Movement.<sup>17</sup>

With the insistence of Home Rule Leaders and teachers, students' associations multiplied. A genuine spirit of fellowship, co-operation and brotherhood among students in different parts of the country created a sense of

oneness among the students for Indian cause. University and college students' conventions kept the same spirit among them. The Madras Students' Convention brought out a monthly magazine, *The New Student*. This journal was started as the organ of the Madras Students' Convention in 22 April, 1917. This journal had a circulation of about 250 copies per month. A Jeffery, Professor of History, Madras Christian College was the Managing Editor of the journal. K.Swaminatha Iyer, a law student, was the working editor. Most of contributors were law students from Madras. The journal revealed the Home Rule philosophies. Mrs.Besant felt that learning the philosophies by the students themselves will be considered as students' involvement in politics. Teachers' Union, Madras resolved that the European presence in India, was not an acceptable one. The students of Madras organized a meeting when the student speaker delivered that home rule would settle all the problems in India. Madras Students' Convention held at Trichinopoly on 24 April 1917 and K.V.Srinivasa Iyengar, the Chairman of the reception committee, said that Europeans were an alien race who had no business to be delivered before a student audience.<sup>18</sup>

Not minding the authoritative behaviour of the Government Mrs. Besant took initiative to form 'National Board of Education' to spread the ideals of a good society. The main aim of the Board was to give religious instruction to the students and make them respect their mother tongue and enable them to have greater knowledge of their motherland and train them as patriotic citizens. On 24 May, 1917 she invited seventy-four persons who had distinguished themselves in different fields to join the Governing Body of the Board to frame curricula, appoint examiners, conduct examinations and to issue diploma to those who completed their course in the national schools. Further, it was also decided to establish such schools throughout the country to save the "unfortunate youths" of Government schools and colleges "from becoming either slaves or rebels". Arundale was selected as the honorary Registrar, Sir Rash Behari Gosh was elected as the President, Saiyid Hasan Imam and Madava Rao were vice-presidents. Mrs.Besant, Justice Sadasiva Iyer, C.P.Ramaswamy Iyer, Kasturiranga Iyengar and others were elected as executive members of the Board.<sup>19</sup>

The reason behind advocating of National education was that it would improve the morals of Hindu students and of engendering a love for Aryan spirituality. She worked for an educational system founded on Indian ideals and enriched but not dominated by the thought and culture of the West. The Benares Hindu College, the Central Girls High School, Benares, and the Adyar National College, were the gains of her crusade for education. Some students from different parts of Tamil Nadu had enrolled themselves in these institutions who were later strong advocates of Indian Independence. She was collecting funds for starting a National College of Commerce in Madras. A summer school for National School teachers was held at Adayar in May, 1917. Two from Madras and one from Coimbatore were trained here. Vernacular language was the medium of instruction in all the National Schools and English was taught as the second language. There was a trend that the students studying in English schools started to join the national schools. The teachers like Rajan Chettiar of Madras, Muthusamy of Kumbakonam, Susai Pillai of Cuddalore carried out an intensive drive to increase student enrolment in national schools.<sup>20</sup>

G.S.Arundale also promoted the cause of national education in Tamil Nadu. He was an educationist in favour of the teaching of civics and of the spirit of patriotism in schools and colleges. He considered that the schools and colleges should be miniatures of India. He contrasted the destructive effects of the prevalent irreligious and anti-national system of education with the system under which he worked and elaborated in the Central Hindu College, Benares. He constituted a team of teachers and educated friends of him with the aim of importing some instruction among the rural people on the importance of health, education, general hygiene etc. Pandit S.Muthusami of Padalam; Kesava Murthi of Kanchipuram; Uppiliyappan of Kumbakonam; Seshadri Iyengar, Chennai were among the members of the team.<sup>21</sup>

## **5. STUDENT VOLUNTEERS IN HOME RULE MOVEMENT**

In June, 1917, 'National Education Week' was celebrated to popularize the concept of national education among the students and parents. These National Schools attracted the attention of the students. In Tamil Nadu alone several such schools were started which taught the spirit of nationalism and patriotism of young students. In western countries patriotism and nationalism were taught to students through Boys Scout and other such agencies. So Mrs.Besant and her League urged the Government to extend to Indian students the benefits of the Boy Scout Movement. *New India* points out that 'the only way of meeting high spirit of the present generation of Indian youth is to treat boys and young men as they are treated in England.

When the demand for Boys Scout became more vocal the Government relented and decided to start Boys Scout Movement in Madras. Arundale who expressed his reservation over the nature of the Boy Scouts proposed by the government said that the movement should be made thoroughly Indian in aspiration. However, under the auspices of the Home Rule League, an Indian Boys Scout Movement was inaugurated in Madras in early, 1917. The scouts were trained by Pearce, the vice-principal of Mahindra College, Galle and Scout Commissioner for Ceylon who was invited specially for this purpose. Scoutmaster T.P.Sinha gave training in drill. The headquarters of Boys Scout Movement was established in a building adjacent to the office of the Madras branch of the home rule league. Arundale instructed the boys in flag signaling and Kamath another instructor taught them dumb-bell exercises. Mrs.Besant advised the student volunteers to paint a large map of India on one of the walls of the home rule office, with the word, "Bande Mataram" and "Be Prepared" written in Sanskrit in the centre. The Boys Scout Movement attracted the attention of the student population and created patriotic feeling among them. The total enrolment till December, 1917 was 1400 in Madras Presidency. It was evident from the fact that after the formation of the Boy Scout the students' participation in Home Rule Movement increased considerably.<sup>22</sup>

The school and college students were in general influenced by home rule advocacy. Hence, they themselves identified with home rule agitations. The students of St.Joseph's College, Trichinopoly and the Government College, Coimbatore pasted posters on the compound walls of the college which read, "Kill the English" and "worship Mrs.Annie Besant". In Madurai the students of American Mission College struck work on 2 June, 1917 and the Principal of that College held Mrs.Besant responsible for the student unrest. In Madras city the students of the Pachaiyappa's College organized a procession on 17 June, 1917 and entered the railway station and damaged the railway property.<sup>23</sup>

In July, 1917 a students' convention was held at Madras under the chairmanship of S.Subramania Iyer, the Honorary President of the Home Rule League. He exhorted the student audience numbering more than 500 to take part in the movement and save their mother land. The above information highlighted the fact that the students were the backbone of the Home Rule Movement in Tamil Nadu.

*New India* which criticized the Government order by pointing out that in England, students were encouraged to discuss and study political problems. It also cited an example from the history of England to substantiate this point. During the suffrage agitations in Great British and Ireland girl students along with their teachers took an active part in it. It further said that "it is infamous that Indian boys should be treated worse than the British girls". The Government order did not alter the situation. The students of Tamil Nadu continued to show keen interest in the movement. On 2 May, 1917, the home rulers organized a workshop at Madurai.<sup>24</sup>

On the same day Gokhale Memorial Day was celebrated by the Madras Students' Association at the Saraswathi Hall, Trichinopoly under the presidentship of K.S.Ramaswamy Sastri. By June 1917, Arundale and Besant attended meetings and conferences organized by the branches of the Theosophical Society at Karur, Lalgudi and Trichinopoly. To suppress students' activities, Madras Presidency Government ordered banning students' organizations. However, amidst the police harassment and repressive measures the students continued to demonstrate against the Government.<sup>25</sup>

In July, 1917 Mrs.Besant, Arundale and Wadia were arrested. This move of the government created strong resentment among the supporters of Mrs.Besant. Prominent members of theosophical societies located in different parts of the world approached the secretary of state for India with a request to cancel the restrictions placed on Mrs.Besant. The students' associations and teachers' guilds in Tamil Nadu also petitioned to release Mrs.Besant and her associates. The government of India at last relented and permitted her to publish or republish purely theosophical or religious literature. The Government of Madras subsequently who removed the restrictions imposed on Mrs.Besant and her two other associates namely Arundale and Wadia. The students of Trichinopoly organized a students' convention on 4 and 5 January, 1918. Arundale who presided over the convention praised the students for their active participation in the movement. In an article which appeared in *New India* Arundale wrote "It is said that the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing field of Eton. The triumph of Home Rule is being won in students' convention."

The students who subscribed to the ideals of the Home Rule Movement demanded the right to wear native dress when they attend schools and colleges. They organized demonstrations to press their Ideas. Rollo, the then

Principal of Pachaiyppa's College, Madras permitted his students to attend the classes dressed in *khadar* dhoti and shirt with cap and coat. Already the students of the Kumbakonam Government College were accorded this privilege by their principal Statham.<sup>26</sup>

The teachers and students protested in Madras, Cuddalore, Tinnelvely, Trichinopoly and other places continued till July-August 1917. Meanwhile in August, 1917, the British Government made its historic announcement that a responsible Government for India was its goal. There can be hardly any doubt that it was the direct results of the Home Rule Movement. At this, Mrs. Besant dropped her movement automatically. Consequently the teachers and students of Tamil Nadu got themselves relieved from politics for a short while until the commencement of Non co-operation Movement by Gandhi in 1920.<sup>27</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

In Tamil Nadu Mrs. Besant was able to influence teachers and students by her charismatic leadership and inspiring home rule ideologists. In the case of students, her aim was to train the students for good citizenship and their responsive role in obtaining home rule for India. Under this line she started the "Orders of Sons and Daughters of India" in 1908 and "Young Men's India Association" in 1914. Her *New India* and *Common Weal* ventilated her aims and shouldered her political cause. To demand from the British the home rule for India, she started the All India Home Rule League in 1916 which dragged almost all the elite sections of the society particularly the teachers and students, towards politics. The home rule volunteer corps formed by her gave training to the students on how to volunteer towards successful conducting of political meetings etc., With the influence of Mrs. Besant, *The New Students* was edited by a teacher of the Madras Christian College assisted by a law student of Madras. Thousands of students subscribed to this newspaper. The students exhibited their affinity to Mrs. Besant by writing on their college walls 'Worship Mrs. Besant'. The increasing political awakening caused much anxiety among the British authorities who sent circulars to the educational institutions to punish student politicians. This made the students and masters to become more furious and ferocious against the British than before. This political change effected in the intermission of anti-British political activities in India for a while.

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