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THE ROUND TABLE

INDIA AND THE IMPERIAL CONFERENCE.

A Quarterly Review of the Politics of the British Empire—Republished Under the Above Heading

IV.

It is time to speak of the part which India has herself played in the war. One of the momentous decisions in her history was taken last year when the Government resolved to send Indian troops to the front in Europe. In the South African War, to the keen regret of many Indians, no Indian troops took part. Now they were to fight side by side with British soldiers against the most redoubtable army in the world. Both Englishmen and Indians perceived at once that an irrevocable step had been taken. As in a flash were disclosed to them the nature of the military need, the confidence felt in the fighting worth of the Indian Army, the great opportunity presented to the Indian soldier, and the probable recoil of an historic event in consequences which, whatever form they took, must be important.

The despatch of the Indian force has been applauded, as if it were the same spontaneous action as impelled the sending of the Australian and Canadian contingents. That interpretation does hardly more than justice to the spirit of the Indian people. But it fails to make it clear that the responsibility for the historic decision rested with the Government of India and the authorities in England. Constitutionally the army in India is under the orders of the Government of India, who are required to obey the directions of His Majesty's Ministers at home. But it is certain that such a weighty resolution could not have been taken without the full concurrence, if not at the positive instance, of the Viceroy and his Council. Nearly all Europeans in India received it with approval, and all Indians with delight. It showed that the Government were confident that India was with England in the war, and that the Indian soldier was good enough to stand the supreme test of a winter campaign in France. For the high state of efficiency to which the army in India had recently been brought and the perfection of its equipment as a fighting force the credit belongs to the Government of India and their military advisers. When the history of the war comes to be written it should be fairly stated that those responsible for the peace of India had their men and material ready and their minds made up. That it was possible to carry out the plans was made clear after a very few days of war, when the temper of the country could be judged. The final test of war was upon India, and she stood to answer an examiner whom there was no evading. Her replies, as we have seen, were given in no faltering terms.

The genuine pleasure with which India learned that her troops were going to Europe found quaint expression in the gossip of the villages. People said that now, indeed, the war would soon be over. Sepoys did not value their lives as Englishmen did, and they could live, if need be, on one meal a day. That great epic, the Mahabharata, was the standard by which the country side commonly judged the European war. The newest devices of lethal science were thought to be foretold in its pages; the German atrocities in Belgium were denounced as a deplorable declension from the chivalry which it inculcated; and men confided that the Indian soldier would emulate his heroes of old and engage and slay the enemy in a series of single combats. If the Germans had not been in retreat from the Marne before the Indian transports reached France, it might have been hard to dissuade India that it was her irresistible troops alone that had turned defeat to victory. Much of this enthusiasm expressed the simple satisfaction that Englishmen and Indians both felt in the fact that brave men were going to get the chance that they deserved. But underlying that feeling in thoughtful minds was the perception that by an Indian army's sharing in the wars of Europe their country was promoted in the world. Fifteen months of war have served to

modify the sanguine expectations entertained at its beginning. Experience has largely increased the respect felt by the sepoy both for the enemy and for the British soldier; but the fact that Indian troops have withstood or even repulsed the pick of the German legions is bound to have far-reaching consequences. What those will be it is idle to predict, for we should remember that the war may bind as well as loose. But what India does see clearly and rejoices to see is that she is acquiring a new self-respect. In particular she is happy to think that her men fight side by side with the Dominion contingents, and that the manhood and virtue of India will be made clear to eyes in the Dominions to which they were previously obscure. To quote the words of one of the Indian members of Council: "Now that Indian troops will fight side by side with the British and the Colonial troops against our common enemy, the whole of India feels that a great pledge of equal citizenship in the Empire has been vouchsafed to her children."

The despatch of Indian armies to Europe and elsewhere, however, is only part of the matter. Out of all question, the co-operation of her chiefs and people in the war has been spontaneous, admirable, and enduring. They have given generously of their means and the acknowledgement should be no less generous. The great chiefs who maintain bodies of Imperial Service troops have offered them for service abroad. Several such corps have gone, and have won praise for gallant actions in Europe, Egypt, and East Africa. Those of the chiefs who are of military race have vied with one another in offers of personal service, and all have striven in chivalrous rivalry to assist the State by contributions of every kind. The offer made by one chief of "all the resources of my State" truly expresses the common impulse. The actual catalogue of names and gifts would be Homeric, and in Homeric spirit most of the offers have been made. Nor has the country as a whole been behind its leaders. Landholders and gentry have helped by collecting recruits and horses, and all classes have given liberally to the funds for dependents and hospitals and comforts for the troops. This is the real measure of India's voluntary contribution to the war. It has surprised even our friends, and it has confounded our enemies by proving to them that they are hers.

No branch of an administration that is called upon to handle such appalling problems as those presented by the war can hope to escape criticism; and there have been those who questioned whether India's official contribution both in men and money was sufficient. This criticism fails to take account of the full burden of what the Government has undertaken. Not only did India send 100,000 trained soldiers to fight for the King in five separate theatres of war, while keeping the peace along and within her own borders, at a time when the forces of the Dominions, splendid material as they were, were still in training; but over and above the needs of her own contingents she has contributed horses, mules, guns, munitions, clothes, equip-

ment, stores, and food supplies for His Majesty's Government. This she was able to do because for years past, when many parts of the Empire were doing little or nothing in the way of military expenditure, she has been maintaining an army for the defence of India, which she now placed at the Empire's disposal. It is not merely her immediate exertion, but the aggregate of her energies and efforts in the past that stands to her credit. Of the measure of her financial assistance it is too soon to speak. Whatever settlement has been arrived at is a temporary one, and the factors which will enter into a final adjustment are complex, and many of them uncertain. But the Indian leaders' acceptance of the truth that privilege and burden go together encourages the hope that when the settlement is made India will shoulder her share of the load.

When the war is over India expects with confidence that many of her claims will be admitted. It follows from what has been said already that as regards these there is enormous room for difference of view; and to discuss either the specific demands that are likely to be made or the manner and extent to which it may be possible to meet them would take us at once into controversial regions. But a word may be said about the spirit that informs the Indian demand for change, and also about the spirit in which it may be hoped that a decision will be taken. The Indian claim to be granted political advancement after the war will be urged with a seriousness and force that it has heretofore missed. Those who have hitherto been inclined to regard the politicians as constituting a class apart by themselves, as representing limited interests, as concerned with words and phrases rather than hard facts, will be wise if they modify this opinion in the light of the wholly new situation which the war has created. The peasant classes in areas which have given troops to the war, and the middle classes in the towns who have helped with gifts of money, all feel pride in the part they have played, and have now, in measure varying with the extent in which the war has come to them, caught something of the enthusiasm which previously kindled only the intellectuals. They desire changes which will make India, that great amorphous sub-continent which has for two decades now been slowly feeling its way to individuality, a bigger and more striking figure in the world. What exactly they want they hardly know; they will leave the formulation of the demand to the clever men who speak for them in politics. But what the leaders decide to ask for will be supported by thousands who have been previously uninterested. The politicians' claim to speak for the masses in the past has often been questioned. It will gain a new substance now, and the demand, whatever shape it takes, will have a measure of reality that it lacked before.

How far India's new request can safely be granted will depend greatly on the temper in which she herself emerges from the war. The end is not in sight and much may happen before it is discerned. In proportion as the peril to which her political system has been exposed has bred sobriety and public spirit, changes may be possible in future which would not have been possible in the past. The greatest thing of all will be if the new settlement is not expressed wholly in pecuniary or political terms. The war is not going to work miracles in the minds of men, and the races will preserve their individuality. But it is reasonable to hope that both may emerge from the great struggle with a better sense of each other's value. Our Indian critics may come to see in us more than the austere agents in the development of their country's progress, and the Englishman may never forget that Indian soldiers have died in Europe for the sake of his own ideals. In this way may spring into existence a sympathy rooted in common interests and memories, on which an enduring settlement may be built.

It is of good augury that the first request of all which India has put forward is one on which English and Indian opinion in India is not divided. The war, as we have seen, has made India feel that she is of, and not merely in, the Empire; it has given her a new sense of equality with the Dominions, whose labours and perils she has not unworthily shared. She asks for representation at the Council where the Dominions and Great Britain meet. Her Government has cordially supported her request, and it has the voice of all Englishmen in India in doing so.

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