

**INDIAN INDEPENDENCE:
THE IMMEDIATE NEED**

**BY
C. F. ANDREWS**



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INDIAN INDEPENDENCE: THE IMMEDIATE NEED.

I

We are living in strenuous days, wherein we are being taught more and more, through sacrifice and suffering, to face realities, and not to acquiesce in that which destroys manhood and self-respect.

We do not want pleasant things said to us: we need the truth. It is in the sense of the awakening of these days and of the need of facing unflinchingly the facts, that I shall try to write, at a time when writing is very difficult on account of illhealth. I wish to go down to foundations, to ask ultimate questions. Why are we seeking suddenly to-day independence, with such

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desperately earnest haste? Why do we feel to-day, as we never felt before, that other things may be postponed, but this struggle for freedom cannot be postponed even for one single hour?

There are many answers which I might give to these questions; but I shall give one answer, which has forcibly appealed to me for many years and has shaped my intellectual thinking about India. It appears to me to go to the root of the whole problem.

There is a book called 'The Expansion of England,' by Sir John Seeley which, if possible, every Indian student should read for himself. First of all, notice the title,—'The Expansion of England'. The book records the expansion of England; and yet more than half the book is about India. That fact itself should make us pause and think. To Sir John Seeley, India during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is regarded as an instrument in the expansion of England. India is the passive, pliable material by means of which England was

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able to stretch out her Empire over the rest of the world ! What a fate ! What a destiny ! What a lasting indignity for three hundred million souls, to be made an appendage to the expansion of a small island called England seven thousand miles away in the North Sea

This book of Sir John Seeley's is a blunt and plain-spoken book. Otherwise I should not trouble about it, or wish Indians to read it. Here is one of the things he says. It is a very famous passage. I will quote it in full. Remember he is writing in 1882, —nearly forty years ago. He had not witnessed the world-shaking events of the twentieth century :—

“There is then,” he says, “no Indian nationality, though there are some germs out of which we can conceive an Indian nationality developing itself. It is this fact, and not some enormous superiority on the part of the English race, that makes our Empire in India possible. If there could arise in India a nationality movement similar to that which we witnessed in

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Italy, the English power could not even make the resistance that was made in Italy by Austria, but must succumb at once. For what means can England have, which is not a military state, of resisting the rebellion of two hundred and fifty millions of subjects? Do you say, as we conquered them before, we could conquer them again? But I explained that we did not conquer them. I showed you that of the army which won our victories, four-fifths consisted of native troops. That we were able to hire these native troops for service in India, was due to the fact that the feeling of nationality had no existence there."

So far Sir John Seeley has made clear the point (which has often been emphasised since) that England did not *conquer* India, but only holds sway in India on account of India's acquiescence. Mark then, very carefully what follows. Sir John Seeley continues: "Now if the feeling of a common nationality began to exist there only feebly, if without inspiring any active desire to drive out the

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foreigner, it only created a notion that it was shameful to assist him in maintaining his dominion, from that day almost our Empire would cease to exist. For of the army by which it is garrisoned, two-thirds consist of native soldiers. Imagine what an easy task the Italian patriots would have had before them, if the Austrian government which they desired to expel had depended ~~not upon~~ Austria but upon Italian soldiers! Let us suppose—not even that the native army mutinied—but simply that a native army could not any longer be levied. In a moment the impossibility of holding India would become manifest to us. For it is a condition of our Indian Empire that it should be held without any great effort. As it was acquired without much effort on the part of the English state, it must be retained in the same way. We are not prepared to bury millions on army upon army in defending our acquisition. The moment India began really to show herself what we so idly imagine her to be, a conquered nation, that moment we

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should recognise perforce the impossibility of retaining her."

I shall leave this passage to speak for itself. Does it not explain the psychology of the present movement? For what have we seen, on every side, as Mahatma Gandhi has gone from place to place and province to province? Have we not seen just that very "feeling of a common nationality," on which Sir John Seeley lays so much stress? Have we not seen the "notion created," as Seeley says, "that it was shameful to assist the foreigner in maintaining his dominion?" Have we not begun to realise, in our humiliation, that we *are* regarded as a *conquered nation*? Surely, all these things have come to pass. May we not then hope that the end is not far distant; that Swaraj may be even now knocking at our very door, seeking to enter, and that it is we ourselves, and not the British, who are shutting it out?

I shall take one other passage in conclusion, which has become almost equally famous. Sir John Seeley has been discussing

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the well-known historical maxim, that revolutions do not occur when people are at the lowest depth of misery, but only when they are looking up and recovering hope. He then goes on as follows ;—

“But if India does begin to breathe as a single national whole—and our own rule is perhaps doing more than ever was done by former governments to make this possible—then no such explosion of despair, even if there was cause for it, would be needed. For in that case the feeling would gain ground in the native army, and on the native army ultimately we depend. We could subdue the mutiny of 1857, formidable as it was, because it was spread through only a part of the army, because the people did not actively sympathise with it, and because it was possible to find native Indian races who would fight on our side. But the moment a mutiny is but threatened which shall be no mere mutiny, but the expression of a universal feeling of nationality, at that moment all hope is at an end, as all desire ought to be at an end, of preserving

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our Empire. For we are not really conquerors of India, and we cannot rule her as conquerors; if we undertake to do so, it is not necessary to inquire whether we could succeed, for we should assuredly be ruined financially by the mere attempt."

I leave these two remarkable passages to be carefully thought over by every student. One thing, I believe, will come out, namely, that the attainment of Indian independence must essentially be based, not on any appeal to arms, nor on any violence, but on a complete realisation by the people as a whole of Indian nationality.

In the light of this fact, cannot we understand what a God-given blessing it has been to India, at such a time as the present, to have Mahatma Gandhi in our midst? In the next chapter I shall try to show still further from Sir John Seeley's book "the immediate need for independence."

II

I now come, to the two historical maxims put forward by Sir John Seeley concerning Indian independence, which long ago attracted my attention. These have seemed to me, the more often I have thought of them, to be profoundly disturbing. They have forced me to see how deep the evil of *dependence* lies, and how hard it is to eradicate it.

The first maxim may be quoted in Sir John Seeley's own words, as follows:—

“Subjection for a long time to a foreign yoke is one of the most potent causes of national deterioration.”

I wish every word of this sentence to be very carefully noted. Not every subjection, but subjection *for a long time*, is one of the most potent causes of national deterioration. One hundred and sixty years have now passed away, during which India has

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come more and more in subjection to the yoke of the British Empire. Such a period is surely 'a long time.' Therefore, if Seeley's maxim is true, every year that India remains in subjection to England in the future will only drive the national deterioration deeper and deeper. How much *longer*, then, is India to go on in this state of dependence? Is not every year that passes, only adding to national deterioration?

There then is one terrible fact of history to be faced. Any further remaining in a state of dependence within the British Empire would appear to mean an increasing measure of national deterioration. We must, therefore, at once awake and shake ourselves free.

The second of the two historical maxims presented by Sir John Seeley forces Indians into a dilemma from which there appears to be no escape. He faces the ultimate question of the withdrawal of the British Government from India. With regard to such a withdrawal, he uses the following

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sentence, which has been one of the most often quoted from his book :—

“To withdraw,” he says, “the British Government from a country like India, which is dependent on it, and *which we have made incapable of depending on anything else*, would be the most inexcusable of all conceivable crimes, and might possibly cause the most stupendous of all conceivable calamities.”

This sentence, which I have italicised, can only have one meaning. It implies that India has no way out of her difficulties. The historian can look forward to no period when India will be able to depend upon herself alone for protection. The rule of the British in India is regarded as parallel to that of the Romans in Britain in ancient times. When the Romans left the shores of Britain, the wretched inhabitants, we are told, gazed longingly after them as the Roman ships departed, being themselves too weakened by foreign government to have any powers of self-defence left. Even so, Sir John Seeley

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appears to think, the people of India have so lost the powers of self-government and self-defence, that it would be a crime to leave them to themselves. This standpoint is taken again and again throughout the book ; and it cannot be lightly treated as though it was of no historical importance. I will give one other passage :—

“India,” says Sir John Seeley, “is, of all countries, that which is least capable of evolving out of itself a stable government. And it is to be feared that the British rule may have diminished whatever little power of this sort India may have originally possessed.”

What a confession is this for an English historian to make ! What an impossible prospect for India herself ! It seems inevitably to imply perpetual dependence and subjection.

Thus we have come to an impasse, in following out Sir John Seeley's closely reasoned argument. The situation is as follows : If dependence and subjection to the foreign rule of the British Empire con-

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tinue, then national deterioration of India is likely to increase. Yet, along with this, withdrawal of India from the British Empire is becoming more and more difficult because the dependence of Indians on the British Empire for support and protection is becoming more and more necessary.

Here we are involved in a vicious circle. Whichever way we turn, the circle hems us in. I have thought over this problem, night and day, for many years: and I confess I could find no solution.

But quite lately there has appeared to me to be one pathway opened, leading out of this terrible dilemma. It is this. If India could be granted, before it is too late, some God-given genius, who could stir up, not in one province only, but throughout the whole country, the spirit of independence, then there might be hope. If India could produce, out of her own resources, such an inspiring and unifying personality, then all might yet be well.

And surely this is what is happening before our very eyes to-day. At this most

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critical moment in Indian history, when subjection and dependence were becoming unbearable and insupportable, we have been given 'one who has roughly shaken our age-long conventions and has uttered the *mantram*,—"Be free : be slaves no longer !"

It is true that, with such a volcanic force as the personality of Mahatma Gandhi, there will be much destruction. Much pulling down will be witnessed before the building up can be seen. But the essential factor after all is the new atmosphere, the new spirit, the new life-urge from beneath which has forced its way to the surface. This, in the end, will be creative, not destructive. And the creation will go forward, when the new course has been taken, until the whole people is at last awakened to full national consciousness.

Whilst I myself find ground for hope and encouragement in the prospect which I have thus outlined, I can understand the attraction which the picture of gradual development still has for many of the most

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thoughtful and patriotic Indian minds. I have had, myself, in the past, the strongest leaning towards this conservative and gradual ideal of progress.

But I would ask those who hold it,—How can you face the historical facts of an ever-increasing dependence, an ever-increasing deterioration, if the British imperial rule continues? How can you face these terrible sentences of Sir John Seeley which have been quoted above? Granted that the Reform Act has brought a certain measure of responsibility, does not the old fatal *dependence* on England still lurk beneath it? Is there any way of getting rid of the spirit of subjection, except by standing out unmistakably on the side of freedom? Can doles of Home Rule, meticulously meted out at the will of the rulers, create a new inner vital force? Even the British historian can hardly look forward to such a prospect.

This would be my own inner questioning of the conservative process, and the doubt in my own mind has been so great, that I

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have most gladly turned to the other prospect. There, in Mahatma Gandhi, we have a volcanic personality, a moral genius of the first order, who has revealed to us all the hidden power of a living freedom from within, who has taught us to depend, not on any external resources, but on ourselves. My whole heart goes out to his appeal, and I have a great hope that, along this path, independence will be reached at last.

III

I wish to repeat in a somewhat different form, the argument which I have already brought forward. I shall not be afraid of going over the same ground again, because the subject is one of life or death to the nation.

Sir John Seeley has really told us the plain, unvarnished truth: "Subjection," he says, "for a long time to a foreign yoke is one of the most potent causes of national deterioration."

This sentence ought to be written on the heart of every Indian, with all the humiliation it implies. Until the humiliation is more deeply felt there appears no hope of remedy. As my friend, who has been the greatest help to my thinking all these years, Babu Ramananda Chatterji, has well expressed it:--

"A nation-wide movement can be pro-

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duced only by a nation-wide disgrace, disability, indignity and wrong." What is this most humiliating common factor in our lives which can and ought to bring together men and women, the literate and the illiterate, rich and poor, prince and peasant, Hindu, Moslem, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Jew and Parsi, capitalist and labourer, Brahmin and non-Brahmin, "touchable" and "untouchable," "high caste" and "low-caste"? It is foreign rule and foreign exploitation. Whatever our grievances and wrongs and want of opportunity, foreign rule is a common disgrace which we must all feel.

The period of 160 years, since the battle of Plassey, is far too long a time to be in subjection to a band of foreign rulers, who have come from an island 7,000 miles away in the North of Europe. Such subjection, if Seeley's historical maxim is true, cannot but lead to national deterioration. This is why the need for independence is so immediate. This is why it cannot be postponed indefinitely, while other important things

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are being undertaken. God knows, there has been national deterioration enough ! The last thing that we should wish is that it should go on any longer. We cannot sit down at ease, while this root-malady strikes down still deeper into the vitality of the nation.

The other terrible sentence of Sir John Seeley, which must act like a goad in spurring on every Indian, who loves his country, to take action, is contained in the paragraph where the historian declares that India has reached the stage of helplessness, when it would be a cruelty for England to withdraw.

"To withdraw," he says, "the British Government from India would be the most inexcusable of all conceivable crimes." Why ? Because—these are his words—"we (*i.e.*, the British) have made India incapable of depending on anything else. And again, "It is to be feared that the British rule may have diminished whatever little power of this sort India may have originally possessed."

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I have quoted these blunt, harsh and unpalatable sentences, again and again, because I want to drive home to the mind the degradation which India has reached by tamely submitting to a foreign rule all these years, without making any united effort to throw off the yoke of subjection. Sir John Seeley, the historian, was looking at the problem from a detached and scientific point of view, as a curiously interesting phenomenon in history. But to Indians themselves, his words about national deterioration and national defencelessness ought to burn like fire. The inevitable result of the present state of things, according to Seeley, is that India is becoming every year more and more helpless, more and more unable to defend herself, more and more unable to evolve out of her own resources a stable form of government, more and more incapable of depending on anything else except the British power. I remember vividly even to-day, how I went to my friend, Mr. Humphreys, the Deputy Commissioner of Delhi, in 1907, at the

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time of Lala Lajpatrai's arrest, and protested that this arrest was the very way to drive Indians to despair. He used, at that time, in the very kindest way, the argument of Seeley. Indians were defenceless and they must be protected even against themselves. The one thing needed was the Pax Britannica. Anything else could only end in the Pathans and Afridis and Afghans coming over the frontier. I remember the despair in which I went away after the conversation.

And, in very truth, though in many directions progress has been made since Sir John Seeley's days, and even since the year 1907, yet in one direction no improvement whatever has taken place. *National* India is as defenceless as ever she was before. And, I am afraid, an impartial historian would have to relate that national deterioration has been going on apace, in spite of Indian awakening and in spite of Indian progress in certain directions. I, for one, have come to believe that the state of the peasantry in India, under the

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crushing burden of military expenditure, is growing steadily worse. The Esher Report, which is already being acted upon in important details, shows the limit of Indian helplessness. A military budget which exhausts nearly half the national income in a country so desperately poor as India, reveals still further the deadlock reached in Indian affairs.

I have confessed that, for very many years, I had still kept fast, as an anchor to my mental thinking, the belief in a purely normal and gradual process of development,—a belief which might be taken as coinciding with that of the Indian National Liberals to-day. I have had sympathy with those thoughtful and patriotic Indian leaders, whose courage and integrity I had learnt deeply to respect,—men like Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Mr. Paranjpye, Mr. Śastri, Mr. Jinnah and Dr. Sapru, to mention a few names only,—who maintained the belief that regeneration could come slowly to India, step by step, chiefly by appeals to

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England and at the hands of the English people. But now, at last, experience itself has taught me that this way of thinking suffers from one fatal defect. There is no inner strength in it, no inner resource, by appeal to which India may be brought out of the vicious circle that Seeley so terribly depicts. Desperate diseases demand desperate remedies, not poultices and bandaging. Even if the dependence on England became more and more attenuated as year after year went slowly by, even if the reforms gave certain privileges which had not been given before, these things would be a *gift*, a boon, an act of patronising condescension, and thus a weakness, not a strength; all the while the *spirit* of dependence would remain. And, if Seeley's diagnosis of the malady which afflicted India was true, then we had no time to wait. For while doles of Home Rule were being niggardly meted out with the one hand, independence itself was being undermined, and the fatal habit of looking to England, in a defenceless sort of way, was

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continuing. The disease within was still active

Thus I came to realise, by the force of sheer practical experience, that the process of passive acceptance of gifts from England could not be relied on. Such an evolutionary process did not evolve, it only wandered round and round in a vicious circle, from which there was no escape. It therefore appeared to me more and more certain that the only way of self-recovering was through some vital upheaval from within. The explosive force needed for such an upheaval must be generated within the Soul of India itself. It could not come through loans and gifts and grants and concessions and proclamations from without. It must come from within.

Therefore, it was with the intense joy of mental and spiritual deliverance from an intolerable burden, that I watched the actual outbreak of such an inner explosive force, as that which actually occurred when Mahatma Gandhi spoke to the heart of India the *mantram*,—"Be free! Be slaves

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no more!" and the heart of India responded. In a sudden moment her fetters began to be loosened, and the pathway of freedom was opened.

IV

I have to enter on some personal details in my own life, in order to make my own position absolutely clear. I had felt, with an ever-growing conviction, since I came out to India and was brought under the influence of Indian religious thought, the need of following quite literally Christ's words concerning non-violence, and about loving even one's enemies. During the later years, this inner conviction was put to the hardest test of all, because I had to determine whether I would take up arms in defence of my own country. After long months of doubt and questioning, I decided that, even though my own home in England were attacked, I must not defend it by any act of counter violence. It was this inner conviction in my own life,—a conviction, which has now become to me the very soul and centre of religion,—that prevented me from regarding with approval the attempted armed revolution—

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ary movement in Bengal which followed the Swadeshi movement; although the courage of those who threw away their lives so fearlessly for the sake of their country won my unstinted admiration. It must be obvious from what I have said that I could not personally countenance any violent revolution, even though it led directly to Indian independence. I have never swerved for one moment from this principle of non-violence in later years. I have made it as clear as possible to Maulana Shaukat Ali to-day, and he fully understands my position.

But the more deeply I studied the history of India, and went to impartial historians, like Seeley, for my information, the more I found out that a violent revolution was not needed. India had not been conquered by British arms, but by the employment of Indian mercenary troops under British direction. Therefore, the complete reversal of this process of conquest did not need an appeal to military violence. It demanded simply a psycholo-

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gical revolt in the minds of the Indian people. To repeat the passage from Sir John Seeley :—"If the feeling of a common nationality began to exist in India only feebly; if, without any active desire to drive out the foreigner, it only created a notion that it was shameful to assist the foreigner in maintaining his domination, from that day, almost, our Empire would cease to exist."

There is another passage written by an Englishman, whose name I have failed to discover, which expresses the same sentiment in a different form. "Indians," he says, "have only to refuse to work for Europeans, and the whole White Empire would be brought to an end within a month."

Thus the verdict of the most sober English historians is this, that India, without a single hand being lifted to strike a single blow, can determine her own destiny. The sheer weight of numbers,—three hundred and twenty millions against a few thousands,—is so great that if these numbers

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could once speak with one mind, their will must be carried out.

Thus one of my own earlier difficulties in taking an active part in the struggle for Indian freedom was automatically removed. And in these later days, I have known that Mahatma Gandhi's religious convictions concerning non-violence are even more deep and fundamental than my own. It was not, then, a question of violent revolutionary propaganda as contrasted with a non-violent programme. Non-violence is the underlying principle which has been put forward by Mahatma Gandhi in the clearest possible manner and with the clearest possible conviction. It is the very essence, the very centre of the whole movement.

But how to create a psychological revolution? How to bring about an entire reversal of Indian sentiment from dependence to independence? How to get rid of the inveterate fear of the Englishman among the common people? How to create among the masses "the notion that

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it was shameful to assist the foreigner in maintaining his domination"—These were the questions that haunted me for years, after I had once for all realised how deep the iron of subjection had entered into the soul of India. I hoped against hope, year after year, that the mentality of India would change, but until a short time ago I confess that there was little to give me confidence.

I disliked from the very first the preposterous and bombastic pronouncement of August, 1917, which arrogated to the British Parliament the right to judge the time and manner of each advance towards full responsible government. This pronouncement was vitiated again by the fact that India was permanently to remain an integral part of the British Empire. As the president of the Nagpur Congress rightly observed, "this kind of thing is nothing short of a pretension to a divine right to absolute rule over India". So then, I felt that there was but little hope of India's independence of soul being built up on this governmental basis.

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Furthermore, the camouflage of equal seats for India, along with Australia, etc., on the Imperial Conference, and on the League of Nations, was too thin to deceive anybody. The one instance of Sir Arthur Hirtzel, of the India Office, signing the preliminary draft of the Treaty of Sevres, on behalf of the Indian Nation, is sufficient to show the depth of humiliation to which India has sunk under British rule owing to such hypocrisies.

Again, in spite of Australian 'white race' policies, South African Indian ghettos, and every other Indian racial degradation within the British Empire, according to this governmental theory of progress Indians are forced to remain in the Empire as an integral part of the Empire, whether they wish it or not.

So then, in the atmosphere of August Proclamations, Reform Councils, Imperial Conferences and Esher Reports, I have had none of my doubts answered. These things only appear to me to prolong indefinitely the dependence of India upon Great

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Britain. Indeed, they seem deliberately intended to do so. No. No. Along this path, which has been tried, generation after generation, along this pathway of Reform Councils,—which is strewn with Proclamations and promises unfulfilled,—there appears to me to be but little hope of final deliverance. Independence will be undermined as often as it is built up.

On the other hand, I come back from this method of doubtful evolution to the more incisive method of Mahatma Gandhi. I can see that he cuts at the very root of the disease. He is like a surgeon performing an operation, rather than a physician administering soothing drugs. And, as his surgeon's knife cuts deep, we can see at once the recovery of the patient beginning to take place—the recovery of self-respect and manhood and independence. Seeley's own words are coming true at last. It is being realised by the Indian people, that "it is shameful to assist the foreigner in maintaining his domination."

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