

Formation of the Indian National Congress

The 19th-century reform movements had led to an intellectual awakening in India. A major consequence of this was the emergence of various political organisations in different parts of the country. But their influence remained limited to their provinces or certain classes of people. The need was felt for a common political organisation for the whole country and it was finally met in 1885 with the formation of the Indian National Congress (INC). With the foundation of INC, India's struggle for freedom from British rule was also launched. Henceforth, the national movement was to grow and it was to know no rest till the freedom was won.

It will not be an exaggeration to say that the formation of INC marked the beginning of a movement, not just a body. INC opened a new chapter in Modern Indian History. Its development was closely linked with the development of the National Movement and consisted of three broad phases:

1. 1885–1905: This phase is also known as the Moderate Phase. During this period, the vision and activities of the Congress were dim and vague.
2. 1905–18: This phase is also known as the Extremist Phase. Swaraj or self-government was adopted as the political goal.
3. 1919–47: This period is known as the Phase of Mass Mobilisation under Mahatma Gandhi. Purna Swaraj or complete independence was the goal.

BACKGROUND TO THE BIRTH OF INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

Accumulated dissatisfaction against the British Rule

With the spread of the foreign rule in India, the people had begun to feel the unpleasantness of the British Raj. They felt that they were being insulted and subordinated in their own country, with their religion and way of life threatened. The opportunities available for their progress were limited in all facets of life and this had begun to suffocate them. The people belonging to the lowest rung of society, the peasants and the tribals, started to rebel in the form of uprisings in various parts of the country. The great Revolt of 1857 was also an outburst of the accumulated grievances of the masses.

Emergence of the educated Indians as new leaders

The failure of the Revolt of 1857 had exposed the inadequacy of traditional leadership. The raja-maharajas and the landlords had all been defeated by the British. The new English educated middle class now emerged as the new leaders. They are also described by the historians as the 'professional classes' or the 'English educated elite' or the 'intelligentsia'. Their struggle against the British rule was of a completely new character. With their minds, full of modernity and their hearts full of pride for their glorious past, they had begun to understand the evils of imperialism. In the beginning, these early leaders adopted moderate ways of agitation, which became more radical with time.

What was meant by educated Indians? Broadly speaking, it referred to Indians who had the knowledge of English language and were professionals such as lawyers, journalists, teachers and government servants. They first emerged in the presidencies of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras and gradually spread out thinly over the whole country. This section formed the middle class, i.e. above the toilers but below the landlords and they normally belonged to the higher castes. This section was also called elite in the sense that it was the select group which knew the English language.

During the 19th century, the educated middle class in India played the same role that was played by the middle class in the West—that of spearheading the Renaissance and Reformation

Role of nationalist art and literature

This was the period when nationalist ideas had begun to emerge in people's songs, poems and plays.

1867 onwards, some Bengali leaders organised the **Hindu Mela** for some years to promote indigenous art and craft. During this time, British policies were blamed for Indian poverty and need for **Swadeshi** goods emphasised.

In 1860s, a Bengali play called **Neel Darpan** (Dinbandhu Mitra) became popular which reflected the plight of indigo farmers.

Among writers, the most outstanding was **Bankim Chandra Chatterjee** who described British oppression in his historical novels. **Anandamath** is his most celebrated work which also contains the immortal song '**Bande Matram**' (1875). **Bhartendu Harsihchandra**, the father of modern Hindi, also urged his countrymen in his plays and poems to buy Swadeshi things.

Many newspapers and journals of this period also played a significant role in building up public opinion against the excesses of the British rule. These included English language newspapers such as **Amrit Bazaar Patrika**, **Som Bazaar** and **The Hindu**. Some important Hindi language newspapers were **Bharat Mitra** and **Jagat Mitra**.

Role of Political Associations prior to INC

This chain of political activity was first triggered in 1838 with the formation of **Landholder's Society** in Bengal. One by one, several political associations emerged in different parts of the

country. They did a good job in stirring political momentum but soon, for various reasons, people became dissatisfied with many of them. For instance, the annual subscription fee for British India Association was ₹50 p.a. which was too high for the middle class. Another drawback was that such associations tended to promote their class interests. They were also found to be active in their own provinces and had little influence over the rest of the country.

With nationalism in the air, the need was thus felt for an all-India association. During 1883–84, various local associations had already begun to move towards union. For instance, two sessions of the **INC** had been held in 1883 and 1885 with representatives drawn from all major parts of India. **Surendranath Banerjee** and **Anand Mohan Bose** were the main architects of the INC. Two other conferences were held during the same time—one by Eurasians at Jabalpur and the other by Prayag Central Hindu Samaj at Allahabad.

Now, it was only a matter of time before a national body was created and the stage was set for the birth of the INC.

FORMATION OF THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

The first meeting of the Congress was organised by **AO Hume**. He was a retired civil servant who did not go back after retirement. Hume and Lord Ripon were of the view that the educated middle class in India is here to stay, its legitimate aspirations should be met and grievances addressed. Hume worked hard and revived his network of contacts to discuss the political agenda of educated Indians.

For this purpose, it was decided that a conference of '**Indian National Union**' (the name earlier decided) would be convened at Poona in March 1885.

But there was an outbreak of **cholera in Poona** and the venue had to be shifted to Bombay.



Allan Octavian Hume

First Meeting

Date and venue

On **28 December 1885**, at **Bombay**, the first meeting of the INC was held in the hall of a College called **Gokuldas Tejpal Sanskrit College**.

First President

W. C. Banerjee of Bengal was the first Congress President. He was one of the first four Indian Barristers. His election established a convention that the President should be chosen from a province other than the one where the Congress Session was being held.

W. C. Banerjee (1844–1906): He was a lawyer and the first president of the INC. He was also the first Indian to contest the election for the British House of Commons, although he lost the election.

Speech of W. C. Banerjee

In his speech, WC Banerjee clarified the aims, objectives and intentions of the Congress. The **aims and objectives** of the Congress as put forth were as follows:

- Promotion of friendship among the countrymen
- Eradication of all possible prejudices relating to race, creed or province
- Consolidation of sentiments of national unity
- Recording of the opinions of educated classes on pressing problems of the day
- Representation of popular demands before the government
- Laying down lines for future course of action in public interest

In his speech, the President further clarified that the Congress members had immense faith in the British sense of justice. They were loyal well-wishers of the government. Banerjee enumerated the numerous blessings bestowed upon Indians by the British. And that the Congress should not be mistaken as a nest of conspirators.

The President reassured that the purpose of the formation of the Congress was simply to represent the views of the educated Indians to the ruling authorities. All they wanted was that the government should run for the welfare of the Indians. This was possible only when Indians themselves got representation in the government. In this way, the basis of government should be widened. For this, **they demanded greater representation of Indians in government and higher posts.**

Participation

The first meeting was attended by **72 delegates, of whom 39 were lawyers.** This trend continued and in every session of the Congress, more than one-third of the delegates came from legal profession. The old aristocratic class like rajas, maharajas and big zamindars did not participate. At this stage, the Congress relied on **petitions** and discussions and made no attempt to associate with the masses.

Resolutions passed

The proceedings were conducted in **strict parliamentary fashion.** In their speeches, the members expressed moderation and loyalty to the Crown. In all, **nine resolutions** were adopted, for instance,

- One resolution demanded appointment of a Royal Commission to enquire into Indian affairs on which Indians would be adequately represented.
- Another resolution demanded abolition of the Indian Council of the Secretary of State for India.
- Yet another resolution condemned annexation of **Upper Burma.**



W. C. Banerjee

The Congress also decided that attempt should be made to get resolutions passed by the Congress ratified by all other political associations in India. Thus, it is clear that the members did not conceive of Congress as an isolated body but intended it to become the voice of political aspirations of all Indians.

CONTROVERSIES REGARDING THE ORIGIN OF THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

The origin of the Congress has been a matter of controversy and various theories have emerged surrounding its origin. This is particularly because of the role played by A. O. Hume. Had there been an Indian in place of Hume, it would have been considered normal. But Hume was an Englishman and that too a former civil servant. Why should such a person take the initiative for forming an all-India body?

Safety-Valve Theory (or Official Conspiracy Theory)

Hume had himself stated that his aim was to provide a 'safety valve' to control the 'great and growing forces generated by the British themselves'. W. C. Banerjee had also stated that the idea of INC was first suggested to Hume by Governor-General **Lord Dufferin.** These two facts together gave rise to the argument that the Congress was an official conspiracy, idea being to provide a peace and constitutional outlet to the growing discontent among educated Indians, thus securing the British Raj.

Criticism: The critics have given several arguments against this theory. They point out that the aim of Hume was nobler than mere creation of a safety valve. He was an 'enlightened imperialist' and aimed at the genuine regeneration of the Indian people. He had genuine sympathy for Indians and served the Congress tirelessly for many years (**1885 to 1906, Hume was the General Secretary of the Congress.**)

The historians further point out that the credit for survival of a national body cannot be given to one person alone.

Further, the early nationalists accepted Hume as their leader because firstly, he was an Englishman, and thus capable of providing unbiased leadership, free from regional bias. Secondly, his leadership was less likely to arouse state suspicion. Lastly, historian Bipan Chandra writes that, 'if Hume wanted to use the Congress as a safety valve, the early Congress leaders hoped to use him as a **"lightening conductor"**.'

Ambitions of Indian Elite

Historian Anil Seal has put forth the view that the Congress was a body of self-interested individuals driven by parochial factors and not national interest.



Lord Dufferin (Governor-General of India during 1884–88. Major events— Third Anglo Burmese War and Formation of INC)

Criticism: Though it is true that desire to serve one's self interest and lust for power cannot be totally ignored, such a view belittles the nationalist vision that enthused the founders of the Congress. The memories of 1857 were still fresh, the British rule was firmly established and these leaders were conscious that any attempt for a complete break may result in the premature death of the political movement they envisioned.

Need for an All-India Body

Most historians feel that the need for an all-India body was very much in the air, and the formation of the Congress was nothing but the culmination of a process which had started way back in the 1838 (Landholder's Society).

Most noteworthy fact about the formation of the INC was that both the participants and the observers were conscious of two things—that they were making history and that the Congress was a symbol of feeling of nationhood. And this has been confirmed by the verdict of history.



Previous Years' Questions – Preliminary Exam

- Where was the first session of the INC held in December 1885? [UPSC 2008]

(a) Ahmedabad	(b) Bombay
(c) Calcutta	(d) Delhi



Previous Years' Questions – Main Exam

- Discuss briefly the basic aims with which the INC was founded. When and under what circumstances did it decide to have complete Independence (Purna Swaraj) from the British rule as its goal? [UPSC 1985]
- Trace the emergence of Indian nationalism till the foundation of the INC. [UPSC 1995]



Practice Questions – Preliminary Exam

- The early Congressmen accepted Hume as their leader because-
 - He was capable of providing unbiased leadership, free from regional bias.
 - His leadership was less likely to arouse state suspicion.
 - He aimed at the genuine regeneration of the Indian people
 Select the correct answer from the following options.

(a) 1 and 2	(b) 1 and 3
(c) 2 only	(d) 1, 2 and 3

- Some of the aims and objectives of the INC are mentioned below. Which one of them was not an aim in its early years?
 - Promotion of friendship among the countrymen
 - Consolidation of sentiments of national unity
 - Eradication of all possible prejudices relating to race, creed or province
 - Freedom from British rule
1. The play Neel Darpan reflected the atrocities committed by indigo planters.
2. Surendranath Banerjee composed the song 'Bande Matram'.

Which of the above statements is/are correct? Select the correct answer from the following options.

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|------------|-------------|
| (a) 1 only | (b) 2 only |
| (c) both | (d) neither |
1. The original venue for the first meeting of INC was Pune.
2. The venue was later changed due to the outbreak of plague.
Which of the above statements is/are incorrect? Select the correct answer from the following options.

(a) 1 only	(b) 2 only
(c) both	(d) neither
 - WC Banerjee was the first President of the INC. Which one of the convention was established on his election?
 - the President should belong to the legal profession
 - the President should be an English educated Indian



Practice Questions – Main Exam

- What was the controversy regarding the origin of the INC. Discuss.
- What were the factors that contributed to the birth of the Indian National Congress? Write your answer with special reference to the role of nationalist art and literature.

- the President should be chosen from a province other than the one where the Congress was being held.
- All of the above

- Consider the following statements with regard to the first meeting of the INC-

- The Congress passed a resolution condemning the annexation of Afghanistan.
- 39 out of 72 delegates were lawyers.

Which of the above statements is/are incorrect? Select the correct answer from the following options.

- | | |
|------------|-------------|
| (a) 1 only | (b) 2 only |
| (c) both | (d) neither |

- Who among the following first used the term 'safety valve' with regard to the origin of INC?

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| (a) AO Hume | (b) Bipan Chandra |
| (c) WC Banerjee | (d) Lord Dufferin |

- Consider the following statements.

- The proceedings of the Congress were carried out in strict parliamentary fashion.
- The Congress passed nine resolutions in its first meeting.
- In their speeches, the early Congress members expressed loyalty to the Crown.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct? Select the correct answer from the following options.

- | | |
|-------------|----------------|
| (a) 1 only | (b) 1 and 3 |
| (c) 1 and 2 | (d) 1, 2 and 3 |

6.18 Modern Indian History

Answers

Previous Years' Questions – Preliminary Exam

1. (b)

Practice Questions – Preliminary Exam

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|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1. (d) | 2. (d) | 3. (a) | 4. (b) | 5. (c) |
| 6. (a) | 7. (a) | 8. (d) | | |