

Chapter

1

Political Associations before Indian National Congress

Earlier we have seen that the educated middle class responded to the British rule in two important ways—in the form of literary activities and in the form of organisations and associations. One of the consequences of the spread of Western culture in India was the growth of modern political concepts like nationalism and political rights. The 19th-century India witnessed the growth of political ideas and political organisations hitherto unknown to the Indians. And it was these political organisations which ushered India into the era of modern politics. Moreover, while the earlier organisations were formed along religion or caste lines, the new organisations were formed along secular lines for promoting secular interests of the Indian people.

It does not matter to what extent the early political associations directly contributed to the national movement, they definitely contributed to political awakening and formed the substratum for political evolution much needed for national movement. Even though they were localised in their approach, their significance cannot be overlooked and the beginning of organised political activity in India is generally traced back to the formation of Landholders' Society in 1838.

POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS IN BENGAL PRESIDENCY

Role of Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774–1833)

Rammohan Roy, the Morning Star of reform movement in the country, was the first great leader of modern India, who contributed to nearly every aspect of Indian life. He was also the **pioneer of the political movement in India**. He was a well-read man and was deeply influenced by Western ideas. He is considered to be the first to focus the attention of the Englishmen on the grievances of the Indian people. He demanded liberty of press and appointment of Indians to higher posts. It is believed that some of the beneficent provisions of the **Charter of 1833** were due to his efforts in England. He acted as a catalyst in political awakening not only in Bengal but in the entire country as well.

Bangbhasha Prakashika Sabha (1836)

The Bangbhasha Prakashika Sabha was a political association formed by the associates of Raja Rammohan Roy in 1836 with the aim of discussing government policy and seeking redressal through petitions and memorandums.

Landholders' Society (1838)

In July 1838, the Zamindari Association or the Landholders' Society (Calcutta) was founded by Dwarkanath Tagore, Radhakanta Deb and others to safeguard the interests of the landlords of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. This organisation is credited with the **launching of organised political activity in India** and the use of constitutional methods for grievance redressal. In July 1839, the Landholders' Society cooperated with the British India Society founded by William Adam in London.



Dwarkanath Tagore, grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore

Bengal British India Society (1843)

In April 1843, the Bengal British India Society was founded with the wider objective of protecting and promoting general public interests. It aimed at disseminating information related to the actual condition of the people in British India and advancing the interests of all classes of Indian subjects by lawful and peaceful means.

British Indian Association (1851)

On 29th October 1851, Landholders' Society (representing aristocracy of wealth) and Bengal British India Society (representing aristocracy of intelligence) were merged into one and named the British Indian Association as the two did not flourish well individually. In 1852, its branches were also established in Bombay and Madras and were known as the **Bombay Association** and the **Madras Native Association** respectively.

When the time came for the renewal of the East India Company's Charter, the three Presidency associations sent petitions suggesting changes in the Company's Charter. In general, the petitions prayed for a separate popular legislature, bigger share for Indians in administration of their country, separation of judicial from executive functions, reduction in the salaries of higher officials, abolition of taxes such as salt, stamp and abkari (excise) duties and aid to indigenous industry. Even as a desire was expressed for preserving existing interests in land, the petitions also prayed for the need of improving the condition of peasants. Many of these demands were later taken up by the Congress.

British Indian Association: Stated in one of its petitions, "while Indians acknowledged the blessings of an improved form of government, they could not but feel that they had not profited from their connection with Great Britain to the extent which they had a right to look for".

The prayers of the Association were partially met and the **Charter of 1853** provided for the addition of six members in the Governor General's Council for legislative purpose. The British Indian Association continued to function even after the formation of the Indian National Congress.

Associations before 1858: The 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 people became dissatisfied with many of them for various reasons. For instance, all these associations were dominated by wealthy landed gentry. The annual subscription fee for British India Association was ₹50 per annum 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.

Associations after 1858: However, those formed after 1858 were dominated by the educated middle class and had a larger agenda. The period after 1858 saw a gradual widening of the gulf between the educated Indians and the British government. By 1870s, a new elite had emerged in the Presidency towns, sharing a similar educational background and aspirations. Ideas of nationalism moved in the air and individuals belonging to this class now began to form popular, mass-based associations to promote political consciousness among various sections of Indian people. Thus, during the period 1875–85, political thrust came from younger, more radical nationalist intellectuals.

Indian League (1875)

In September 1875, **Sisir Kumar Ghosh** founded the India League with the objective of stimulating nationalism among the people and of promoting political education. Ghosh himself was a noted journalist and founder of *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* (1868, a noted Bengali newspaper).

Indian Association (1876)

Indian Association was the most important of the pre-Congress organisations and was founded in July 1876 by **Ananda Mohan Bose** and **Surendranath Banerjee**. The people of Bengal were getting discontented with the narrow class interests of the British India Association and wanted a sustained political agitation on wider issues. They found a leader in Banerjee who had been ejected from the ICS on 'insufficient grounds' and was embittered with the British in India. He had declared that the new association was based on the concept of **United India derived from the inspiration of Mazzini**.

With the hope of attracting the masses, the Indian Association kept its annual subscription low at ₹5 as opposed to ₹50 charged by British Indian Association (It is noteworthy that according to Lord Curzon's estimate, per capita income in British India in 1898 was ₹30 per annum). Its aims included establishing contact with the masses, spreading awareness among them, developing a strong public opinion on political questions, promoting Hindu-Muslim unity and uniting the Indian people on a common political programme. The Indian Association certainly showed all signs of a broad-based nationalist movement.

Soon the Indian Association became the leading representative of the educated community of Bengal as well as a major force in Indian politics. When in 1876, Lytton reduced the maximum age



Surendranath Banerjee

for appearing in the ICS to 19 years from 21 years, the Indian Association took up this issue and organised a pan-India agitation, also known as the **Indian Civil Service Agitation**.

POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS IN BOMBAY PRESIDENCY

Bombay Association (1852)

Bombay Association was founded on the lines of British Indian Association of Calcutta and its objective was sending prayers and petitions to the government to advance Indian interests. This association did not survive for long.

Poona Sarvajanik Sabha (1870)

Poona Sarvajanik Sabha was formed in Poona by **MG Ranade**, **Ganesh Vasudeo Joshi** and **SH Chiplunkar** with the aim of serving as a bridge between the government and the people. It worked in close association with the Bombay Presidency Association and played an important role in arousing political consciousness. This body is considered as a **precursor to the Indian National Congress** which was also formed in Maharashtra. The Sabha produced many of the early leaders of the national movement including Bal Gangadhar Tilak.

Bombay Presidency Association (1885)

Bombay presidency association was formed by popularly called brothers-in-law—**Pherozeshah Mehta**, **KT Telang** and **Badrudin Tyabji**, representing the three communities of Bombay.



Pherozeshah Mehta (a leading lawyer of Bombay and a political activist)



Badrudin Tyabji (a leading lawyer, served as third President of INC)



Kashinath Trimbak Telang (a judge at Bombay High Court)

POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS IN MADRAS PRESIDENCY

Madras (Native) Association (1852)

A branch of the British Indian Association of Calcutta was set up at Madras under the name of the Madras Native Association. This body faded into obscurity after 1857.

Madras Mahajan Sabha (1884)

Madras Mahajan Sabha was formed by a group of younger nationalists of Madras such as **M Viraraghavachariar**, **G Subramaniya Iyer**, **P Ananda Charlu** and others to coordinate the activities of local associations. It also demanded reforms in legislative councils, viz. expansion of councils and greater representation for Indians.

POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS IN ENGLAND

East India Association (1866)

East India Association was formed in **London** by some Indian students like **Pherozeshah Mehta**, **Badrudin Tyabji**, **Dadabhai Naoroji** and **Manmohan Ghose** to carry on political propaganda in England, discuss the Indian question and work for the interest and welfare of the Indians.

Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917)- Born in 1825, he devoted his entire life to the creation of a national movement in India and soon came to be known as the 'Grand Old Man of India'. He was a Parsi intellectual, cotton trader and early nationalist leader and also the first economic thinker of India. He is credited with the founding of the INC along with AO Hume and DE Wacha. He served as the President of the INC three times. He was the **first Indian to become a British MP** in the British House of Commons during 1892–95. He was also the first to give the theory of Drain of Wealth in his book *The Poverty and Unbritish Rule in India*, and showed that India's poverty was due to British exploitation and drain of wealth.



Dadabhai Naoroji

In this way, many political bodies were established in different parts of India with branches in mofussil towns, thus setting the stage for the emergence of a national body. After the formation of Indian National Congress in 1885, these local bodies became the regional arms of the Congress.

TRENDS TOWARDS AN ALL-INDIA POLITICAL ORGANISATION

With nationalism in the air, the need was thus felt for an all-India association. By 1885, the formation of a national level body had become a political necessity. Nationalists all over the

country had begun to feel the need to unite politically against the common enemy—the British rule.

Pre-Congress Political Work (1875–1885)

Indians gained tremendous experience and confidence through the political work carried on during this decade. For instance:

- The **Indian Mirror** of Calcutta was carrying out a continuous campaign on the need for an all-India association.
- There were protests all over India over imposition of **License Tax** (1878) and abolition of **Cotton Import Duties** (1879).
- A massive campaign had been organised during 1877–88 around the demand for Indianisation of government services.
- Indians also opposed the **Afghan war** of Lord Lytton.
- Major campaigns were waged against the **Vernacular Press Act**, the **Arms Act** (aimed at disarming the Indians) and the **Plantation Labour and the Inland Emigration Act** (during 1881–82 which condemned plantation labourers to serfdom) were also opposed.
- During 1883, a major agitation was organised in favour of the **Ilbert Bill** which aimed at bringing the Indian magistrates at par with the European magistrates.
- In 1885, a massive all India campaign was organised to raise a **National Fund** to promote political agitation in India as well as in England.
- Indians also appealed to the British voters to elect candidates who were friendly towards India.
- In December 1883, the Indian Association organised an **All India National Conference** and gave a call for another one in December 1885. **Surendranath Banerjee** and **Anand Mohan Bose** were the main architects of the All India National Conference (this was the reason why Banerjee could not attend the founding session of the INC in December 1885).
- 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. The stage was set for some basic objectives to be struggled for and the founders of the INC were inspired by these basic objectives. India had begun to enter the process of becoming a nation, and the first major objective of the founders of INC was to weld India into one nation. The Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, thus emerged as the first organised expression of the Indian national movement on an all-India scale.

In 1878, the Commissioner of Berar wrote, “within the 20 years of my own recollection, a feeling of nationality, which formerly had no existence...has grown up. Now we are beginning to find ourselves face to face, not with the population of individual provinces, but with 200 millions of people united by sympathies...which we have ourselves fostered. This seems to me the great political fact of the day.”



Previous Years' Questions – Preliminary Exam

1. His principal forte was social and religious reform. He relied upon legislation to do away with social ills and worked unceasingly for the eradication of child marriage, the purdah system.... To encourage consideration of social problems on a national scale, he inaugurated the Indian National Social Conference, which for many years met for its annual sessions alongside the Indian National Congress.

Who is being referred to in this passage? Select the correct answer from the following options.

[UPSC 1996]

- (a) Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar
- (b) Behramji Merwanji Malabari

- (c) Mahadev Govind Ranade
- (d) B. R. Ambedkar

2. Consider the following pairs:

[UPSC 2017]

1. Radhakanta Deb - First President of the British Indian Association
2. Gazulu Lakshminarasu Chetty - Founder of the Madras Mahajan Sabha
3. Surendra Nath Banerjee - Founder of the Indian Association

Which of the above pairs is/are correctly matched? Select the correct answer from the following options.

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



Practice Questions – Preliminary Exam

1. Examine the following statements with regard to the Bangbhasha Prakashika Sabha-

1. It was founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy.
2. The association was formed with the aim of promoting Bengali literature.

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

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

2. Examine the following statements with regard to the Zamindari Association of Calcutta-

1. It was founded to safeguard the interests of the landlords of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Assam.
2. This organisation is credited with the launching of organised political activity in India and the use of constitutional methods for grievance redressal.

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

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

3. Which of the following were characteristics of all pre-Congress associations?

1. Nationalism
2. Promotion of public interests
3. Organised political activity
4. Use of constitutional methods

Select the correct answer from the following options.

- (a) 1 and 2
- (b) 1, 2 and 3
- (c) 2 and 3
- (d) 3 and 4

4. Which of the following is/are true regarding British India Association?

1. It was founded in 1843
2. It was formed by the merger of Landholders' Society and Bengal British India Society

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3. Addition of six members in the Governor General's Council for legislative purpose in the Charter of 1853 was among its important achievements.

Select the correct answer from the following options.

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

5. Which of the below are true regarding the Indian Association?

1. It was formed in 1875.
2. It was the most important of the pre-Congress organisations.
3. It was inspired by the ideas of Mazzini.

Select the correct answer from the following options.

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



Practice Questions – Main Exam

1. Pre-Congress Organisations played an important role in awakening national consciousness and fostering the growth of national movement. Evaluate.
2. How were pre-Congress organisations lacking in their ideology and approach towards freedom struggle? Discuss.

Answers

Previous Years' Questions – Preliminary Exam

1. (c) 2. (b)

Practice Questions – Preliminary Exam

1. (d) 2. (b) 3. (d) 4. (c) 5. (c)