

Elections of 1937 and Congress Ministries

Following the withdrawal of the Civil Disobedience Movement, a major debate arose among the nationalists on what course the national movement should take. Though there was an agreement on the basic issue of fighting British imperialism, Congressmen disagreed on the methods to be adopted. The prominent responses came from-

1. **Gandhi:** He suggested return to constructive work, particularly Harijan work, and also emphasised on the revival of village crafts. Gandhi argued that this would consolidate people's power and facilitate their mobilisation for the next phase of mass struggle.
2. **The New Swarajists:** Another section of the Congress advocated the revival of the constitutional method of struggle and participation in the elections to the Central Legislative Assembly to be held in 1934. This section of men were also known as the 'New Swarajists' and were led by -Dr. MA Ansari, Asaf Ali, Satyamurthy, Bhulabhai Desai and BC Roy. They argued that in a period of political depression, it was necessary to work through the councils to keep up the morale of the people. According to them, it would not amount to cooperating with the government but would only open another political front and would help build up the Congress organisationally and prepare the people for the next mass struggle.
3. **The Leftists:** Yet another section of Congressmen were attracted neither by the Gandhian constructive work nor by the idea of council entry. These were the leftists who advocated continuation of non-constitutional mass movement (You may recall that in the early 1930s, a strong left trend had developed). J Nehru represented the leftist paradigm most coherently and considered the above two alternatives as 'spiritual defeat'. Nehru criticised Gandhian strategy of Struggle-Truce-Struggle (S-T-S) and instead put forward the strategy of Struggle-Victory (S-V), i.e. permanent confrontation with imperialism till victory was achieved.

After a hectic debate, the Congress decided to contest in the Elections of 1937, once again giving up the path of confrontation and taking to constitutional politics. However, unlike the earlier Swarajist phase, its present aim was not to wreck the councils from within but to make them work.

The Congress was successful in forming governments in seven provinces. The victory of the Congress was attributed to its pro-people policies. The formation of Congress Ministries was

perceived by the people as their own Raj and they felt that the days of the British Raj were numbered. The Congress ministries functioned for a little more than two years under numerous constraints but tried their best to give relief to the people.

In September 1939, the Congress ministries resigned, having made significant contribution to the freedom struggle during their short stint in office.

EFFORTS TOWARDS CONSTITUTIONALISM

Efforts to adopt constitutional politics had begun during the Second Phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement itself (i.e. 1932 onwards). The Second CDM had only evoked a lukewarm response and voices had begun to emerge within the Congress advocating a return to constitutional politics.

In 1933, Satyamurti formed the **Madras Swaraj Party**. KM Munshi, BC Roy and Ramaswamy Iyengar wanted to revive the Swaraj Party. Dr MA Ansari and Rajgopalachari were also in favour of council entry. However, the aim of council entry now was different from the earlier Swarajists in two ways.

1. This time, the aim was not to wreck the constitution but to make it workable.
2. In case of obtaining majority, office was to be accepted and ministries formed.

On the other hand, council entry was opposed by some Congressmen with socialist leanings like Acharya Narendra Dev and Purushottamdas Tondon. Each side sought Gandhiji's support and wanted to tilt the Congress opinion in their favor. In order to diffuse the situation and avoid any split, Gandhi gave a free hand to all saying, "I want all sections to work in all directions towards one thing in their own ways without criticising one another."

Congress decides to fight elections

Consequently, in May 1934, at Patna, the AICC meeting was called to set up a parliamentary board to fight elections under the aegis of the Congress. To appease the Left, Gandhi backed Nehru for the presidency of Lucknow Congress (April 1936).

Gandhi's Response

At the same time, Gandhi was convinced that he was out of tune with major trends in the Congress. Fundamentally in disagreement with parliamentary politics, **Gandhi resigned from the Congress** (October 1934) by refusing its four-anna membership. However, this in no way weakened his hold over the party and his domination over Congress policy continued.

Nehru's Response

On the other hand, Nehru wondered "why I should walk out of the Congress and leave the field clear for reactionary elements." He along with the socialists decided to remain with the Congress and give priority to the anti-imperialist struggle for which Congress unity was of utmost importance. They considered it better to gradually radicalise the Congress than to get isolated.

Congress Contests Elections to Local Bodies

Thus from 1934 onwards, Congress contested elections to the Assembly and local bodies as and when they were held. For instance, when elections were held in Madras Presidency, a **Congress Civic Board** was formed (May 1935) for selecting party candidates for local elections. The candidates were asked to take a pledge of encouraging Swadeshi, removing corruption and improving medical and educational facilities. In November 1934, the elections to Central Legislative Assembly were held and out of a total of 76 contested seats at the national level, Congress candidates stood for 55 and won 44. When Municipality elections were held in October 1935 in Madurai, Congress won 21 of 36 seats.

These elections proved useful as the Congress gained tremendous experience in terms of organising and managing elections. The Congress was also able to test its popular base and also test the support of its allies for funds. However, the Congress took a long time to decide in favour of contesting provincial elections and it was decided that the election participation issue will be settled during the Lucknow session.

Lucknow Congress Session (presided by J. Nehru, April 1936)

In his presidential speech, Nehru advocated socialism which he regarded as "the only key to the solution of the world's problems and of India's problems". **Nehru also took three socialists into the Congress Working Committee** namely Jayprakash Narayan, Acharya Narendra Dev and Achyut Patwardhan.

Prominent resolutions passed included-

1. "The people of the States should have the same right of self-determination as those of the rest of India and that the Congress stands for the same political, civil and democratic liberties for every part of India". But it was also pointed out that "the struggle for liberty" must be carried out by the people of states themselves.
2. The provincial units of the Congress were asked to conduct agrarian enquiries and assist in the **formulation of an All India Agrarian Programme**.
3. The Congress also **resolved to contest elections** on the basis of a manifesto.

However, the **question of office acceptance was kept pending**. In this way, the resolution to contest elections while keeping the question of office acceptance pending was a kind of compromise between those who wanted to contest elections and those who wanted to boycott them. It is worth mentioning here that such differences in opinions were considered internal matters within the Congress. As far as the Congress position vis-à-vis the British was concerned, it always put up a united front.

Election Manifesto of the Congress

It was drafted by the parliamentary committee and aimed at explaining the political and economic programme of the Congress. It was adopted by the AICC in August 1936.

- The manifesto reaffirmed the **total rejection of the Act of 1935** by the Congress.

- The manifesto clarified that the aim of sending Congressmen to the legislatures was not to cooperate with the Government but to combat the Act of 1935 and to end it.
- It declared that national independence could give Indians the power to solve their socio-economic problems and end exploitation of the masses.
- It declared that the task of Congress representatives was to end all oppressive Acts and regulations.
- It made the following promises-
 - Political-Establishment of civil liberty, release of political prisoners, undoing wrongs done to the peasant.
 - Social-removal of untouchability, equal status for women, encouragement to khadi and village industries, satisfactory solution to communal problem.
 - Promises made to industrial workers included-a decent standard of living, regular hours of work, better conditions of labour, right to form unions, suitable machinery to settle disputes with employers and protection against the "economic consequences of old age".

Note: the Lucknow session was significant also because it was during this session that the **first meeting of the All India Kisan Sabha** was held under the presidentship of **Swami Sahajanand Saraswati**.

Faizpur Congress Session (presided by J. Nehru, December 1936)

During the session, the Congress passed several significant resolutions. These were as follows:

- It passed resolutions condemning Italian aggression on Abyssinia and Japanese aggression of China.
- It demanded the formation of a **Constituent Assembly** to frame a constitution for India.
- The **Congress also adopted an agrarian programme** which included the following features:
 - 50 per cent reduction in rent and revenue
 - Exemption of uneconomic holdings from rent and land tax
 - Taxation of agricultural income
 - Abolition of feudal levies and forced labour
 - Cooperative farming
 - Wiping out arrears of rent
 - Modification of ejectment laws
 - Recognition of peasant unions

It is noteworthy that the above programme was silent on the issue of the abolition of zamindari and taluqdari systems (as the Right wing in the Congress was not in favour of zamindari abolition). The Kisan Sabha leaders, though welcomed the programme in general, also criticised it on this ground.

However, the Agrarian Programme was a progressive document and a significant achievement of the Faizpur Congress. It went a long way in rallying the peasants behind the Congress.

ELECTIONS OF 1937

The names of the Congress candidates were recommended by the Provincial Congress Committees to the Congress Parliamentary Board, which had a final say in selection of candidates. While recommending the names, the PCC considered criteria such as-abiding by Congress discipline and following its programme, service to the party, popularity among people and ability to bear election expenses. Despite sincere efforts to select candidates on merit, caste also played an important role in certain cases.



Jawaharlal Nehru with Mahatma Gandhi and Abdul Gaffar Khan (Delhi, 1937)

Election Campaign

The Congress undertook a vigorous election campaign. J Nehru undertook a country-wide election tour, travelling 80,000 kilometres in less than five months. **Gandhiji did not address a single election meeting**, though he was very much present in the minds of the voters. The Congress also faced challenges in the form of regional parties and parties formed along communal lines like the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha.

Election Results

Elections were held in 11 provinces and the results were very encouraging for the Congress. It won 716 out of 1161 seats it contested. It obtained clear majority in five provinces, namely **U.P., Bihar, C.P., Orissa and Madras**; it emerged as the single largest party in **Bombay, Bengal, Assam and NWFP**. Its performance was poor in Sind and Punjab (in Punjab, Unionist Party obtained clear majority).

Congress Performance in Upper House

The Congress did not perform well in elections to upper house as the franchise was limited to upper strata only. The upper strata, comprising of landlords and moneylenders, had begun to shift their support to the communal parties, since the Congress had adopted a radical agrarian programme (From this time onwards, communal parties began to gather strength).

Congress Performance in reserved constituencies

The results in reserved constituencies were not at all satisfactory for the Congress except in the labour seats. Some examples of Congress performance are as follows (in all 11 provinces):

- For commerce and industry 56 seats were reserved. Congress contested 8 and won only 3.
- For Landholders 37 seats were reserved. Congress contested 8 and won 4.
- For labour 38 seats were reserved. Congress contested 20 and won 18.
- For Muslims 482 seats were reserved. Congress contested 58 and won only 26 (19 from NWFP alone). It could not get a single Muslim seat in Bengal, Bombay, UP, CP and Sind. However, it is worth mentioning here that the performance of **Muslim League was no**

better. It did not win a single seat in NWFP. In Punjab, it won only 2 of 84 reserved seats. It was not in a position to form a government in any of the provinces.

Message of Congress to the people on the eve of its electoral victory: "the Congress Working Committee congratulates the nation on its wonderful response to the call of the Congress during recent elections, demonstrating the adherence of the masses to Congress policy."

S. No	Province	Seats won by Congress/Total No. of Seats
1	UP	134/228
2	Bihar	95/152
3	CP	70/112
4	Orissa	36/60
5	Madras	159/215
6	Bombay	87/175
7	Bengal	60/250
8	Assam	35/108
9	NWFP	19/50
10	Sind	8/60
11	Punjab	18/175

Office Acceptance

We have earlier seen that the decision on office acceptance was kept pending. In March 1937, the AICC met to decide over the issue. The basic question was whether office acceptance would lead to co-option by the colonial state or whether ministries could be used to defeat the colonial strategy.

Argument against office acceptance

Left leaders like J Nehru, S Bose, NG Ranga, Sahajanand Saraswati and Indulal Yagnik saw office acceptance as cooperation with imperialism. It would take away the revolutionary character of the national movement as constitutional work would side track the main issues of freedom and socio-economic justice.



Nehru and Gandhi at the opening of the Congress in 1937

Argument in favour of office acceptance

Right wing leaders like C. Rajagopalachari were in favour of office acceptance. They argued that they will not allow councils to lead them into constitutionalism but will lead the councils and use them for Revolution. They argued that they were equally committed to combating the Act of 1935 and council entry was only a short-term strategy since the option of mass movement was not available. The most vocal argument put forth in favour of forming ministries was that it would enable the Congress to work in favour of peasants and workers.

Finally, Rajendra Prasad moved a resolution for "conditional acceptance" of office, the condition here was that the governors would not use their special powers to intervene with the functioning of the ministries. The resolution was accepted and was also approved by Gandhi. But when the Congress leaders were invited by the Governors to form ministries in six provinces where the Congress was in majority, the offer was turned down as the Governors refused to give assurances on the condition put forth by the Congress. The government now went ahead and formed "Interim Ministries" in these provinces. These did not command a majority and hence could not continue in office beyond six months.

Strenuous efforts to pressurise the CWC in favour of office acceptance were now made by Congressmen like Rajagopalachari as well as Indian Capitalists like GD Birla. Accordingly, in the first week of July, the CWC met at Wardha, Gandhi finally gave his consent for office and a decision was taken in favour of office acceptance.

Gandhi on office acceptance: "Office acceptance was an attempt to avoid bloody revolution on the one hand and mass Civil Disobedience on the other."

The resignation of Interim Ministries was now followed by the formation of Congress ministries, thus inaugurating a new era in India's Struggle for independence.

Congress Prime Ministers (Premiers) in various Provinces

(The head of the Provincial ministry was then known as premier and not Chief Minister as is the case now)

S. No	Province	Congress Prime Minister
1	U.P	GB Pant
2	Bihar	Sri Krishna Sinha
3	C.P	Dr. Khare
4	Madras	C. Rajgopalachari
5	Orissa	Hare Krishna Mehtab
6	Bombay	BG Kher
7	NWFP	Dr. Khan Saheb

In Sind- Congress supported the Ministry of Gulam Hussain Hidaytullah.

In Assam- Congress supported the Ministry of Bardoloi.

In Bengal- Fazlul Haq invited the Congress to cooperate in forming a coalition government but the Congress refused and Haq then joined hands with the Muslim League.

In Punjab- The Congress was not in a position to play a dominant role.

By about six months, the Congress had delayed the decision of office acceptance. As per the author Raini Dhawan Shanker Das (the First Congress Raj), this delay proved advantageous to the Congress in the following ways-

1. The delay had disproved that the Congress was office hungry.
2. It proved Congress unity and discipline that the word of Congress High Command was supreme.
3. The Governors would think several times before intervening in the work of the Congress.

Parliamentary Sub-Committee

With the aim of demolishing British hopes of provincialisation of the Congress, a central control board known as the Parliamentary Sub-Committee was formed with Sardar Patel, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Rajendra Prasad as members.

Gandhi wrote in Harijan on office acceptance: "these offices have to be held lightly, not tightly. They should be crowns of thorns. They have been taken to quicken the pace at which we are moving towards our goal."

CONGRESS MINISTRIES AT WORK

The formation of Congress Ministries drastically changed the psychological atmosphere in the country. People felt they were breathing the fresh air of victory. Khadi clad men and women were now seen in the Secretariat, ordering about officials who had earlier put them in jails. It was difficult to distinguish between members of legislatures and peasants who came in large numbers.

Formation of Congress ministries led to an immense increase in the prestige of the party and it was now seen as an alternative state power.

Hence, the responsibility was now tremendous. The Congress faced tremendous challenge of living upto the expectations of the people on one hand, and limited powers on the other. It did make an effort to give people a glimpse of the future Swaraj. It did **set an example in plain living**—the Congress ministers reduced their salaries drastically from ₹2000 to ₹500 per month and travelled second or third class in the railways. They made themselves easily accessible to the common people and set up new standards of honesty and public service.

A brief account of Congress' work during its nearly two and a half years (28 months) in office is as follows:

Defence of Civil Liberties

Congress had been committed to the defence and extension of civil liberties since its origin and it is not surprising that the Congress ministries made special efforts in this regard.

- Emergency powers acquired by the provincial governments during 1932 (e.g. through Public Safety Acts) were repealed.
- Bans on nationalist organizations and literature were lifted.
- Communists now functioned openly in congress provinces even though ban on CPI remained as it was imposed by the Central government.
- Restrictions on press were removed, confiscated arms were returned.
- Power of the police, the most hated of all British functionaries, were curbed
- Shadowing of political workers by CID (Central Investigation Department) was stopped.
- Thousands of political prisoners and detainees were released.

The release of political prisoners had been a part of Congress manifesto. Many were in prison without trial. The largest number of political prisoners were in Bengal—a non Congress ruled province. Gandhi went to Calcutta to himself to negotiate for their release and was successful in securing the release of 1100 detainees. In UP also many prisoners were released including the Kakori case prisoners.

However, prisoners remained in UP and Bihar who had previously served terms in Kala Pani (Cellular jail in Andamans). The Ministries of both provinces were determined to release them and resigned on the issue (15th Feb 1938), finally leading to their release by end of March. The Congress also worked for the return of political exiles like Rash Bihari Gosh, Abani Mukerjee, Maulvi Abdullah Khan, Prithvi Singh, etc., however, it could not do much in this regard.

All the same, there were certain blemishes in the performance of Congress government regarding civil liberties- Yusuf Meherally and SS Batliwala, both socialist leaders, were arrested by the Madras government for inflammatory speeches. KM Munshi, the Bombay Home Minister used the CID against communists and leftists.

Peasant Protection

J Nehru had observed that **"the outstanding problem of India is the peasant problem. All else is secondary."** However, the Congress could not attempt a complete overhaul of the agrarian structure or abolish zamindari owing to several constraints-

- The provincial ministries did not have enough powers or financial resources.
- The Congress was faced with the task of winning over the zamindari classes so as to isolate the colonial enemy and deprive him of all social support within India.
- The Congress leadership worked under the constraint of time. A sense of impending crisis was always present as they were to continue in office only so long as their logic of politics permitted them.
- By 1938, war clouds had started hovering over Europe.
- Nearly all Congress-run states—UP, Bihar, Bombay, Madras and Assam had reactionary second chambers in the form of legislative councils. These were dominated by landlords, capitalists and moneylenders.

- Lastly, the agrarian structure existing in India was extremely complex and varied making any structural reform formidable and time consuming.

Despite these constraints, the Congress ministries went a long way in addressing peasant problems.

- In Bihar, a tenancy legislation passed in 1937-38 abolished all increases in rent made since 1911. Existing arrears of rent were reduced and rate of interest on arrears was reduced from 12.5 to 6.25 per cent. Landlords were forbidden from charging illegal dues. Landlord's share in case of share cropping was not to exceed 9/20 of the produce.
- In UP, a tenancy act was passed in October 1939 giving all statutory tenants in Agra and Awadh full hereditary rights in their holdings. A tenant could no longer be arrested for non-payment of rent. All illegal exactions like nazrana and begar were abolished.
- In Orissa, similar Tenancy bill was passed by the Legislative but the bill could not receive Governor's assent as it reduced the zamindars' income by 50 to 60 per cent.
- In Madras, a committee under the chairmanship of T. Prakasam, the Revenue Minister, was formed which recommended provisions which would have meant virtual liquidation of zamindari system. But before the legislature could draft the bill, the ministry resigned.
- In Bombay, Central Provinces and NWFP, tenancy reforms extending security of tenure to tenants were carried out.
- Congress government also passed a series of debtors' relief acts which provided for regulation of moneylenders' business. Accumulated interest on debt was cancelled or reduced.
- In Bombay, 40,000 'dublas' or tied serfs were liberated. Congress was successful in returning lands that had been confiscated at the time of no-rent campaign during Civil Disobedience Movement.
- Grazing fees in forests was abolished in Bombay and reduced in Madras.

Thus, the Congress Ministries secured the status of millions of tenants in zamindari areas. Efforts were made to protect the peasants from moneylenders and increase irrigation facilities. Even though the interests of sub-tenants and agricultural labourers were overlooked, it cannot be denied that this was a period of tremendous awakening among the peasants who rallied behind the Congress.

Labour Welfare

In its election manifesto, the Congress had made several promises to the working class and in general, the Congress governments adopted a pro-labor stance. Basic approach of the Congress towards labour issues included the following:

- Advancing workers' interests while promoting industrial peace.
- Reducing strikes as far as possible by establishing conciliation machinery.
- Advocating compulsory arbitration before resorting to strikes.
- Creating goodwill between labor and capitalists.
- Striving to improve the conditions of the workers and securing wage increases.

Accordingly,

- In Bombay, **Textile Enquiry Committee** was appointed which recommended among other things, increase of wages amounting to crore of rupees. Its recommendations were implemented despite protests by mill owners.
- In November 1938, the Congress governments passed the **Industrial Disputes Act** which emphasised on conciliation, arbitration and negotiations in place of direct action. It had provisions to prevent lightening strikes and lock-outs.
- In U.P, Kanpur emerged as the seat of serious labour unrest and a major strike occurred in May 1938. A **Labour Enquiry Committee**, headed by Rajendra Prasad was set up which recommended, among other things, increase in workers' wages with a minimum wage of ₹15 per month, maternity benefits to women and recognition of Left-dominated Mazdur Sabha. Under immense pressure from the government, the employers finally adopted the main recommendations.
- In Bihar too, a similar Labour Enquiry Committee was set up under Rajendra Prasad.

Social Reform Measures

Various other social reform measures were also introduced by the Congress government. These included-

- Gandhian constructive programme received great impetus in all Congress ruled provinces. Efforts included-
 - Various measures for advancement of Harijans or untouchables were adopted, such as laws enabling Harijans to enter temples, access to public sources of water, access to public offices, hospitals, education institutions, etc. Efforts were made to increase number of Harijans in government services.
 - Prohibition was introduced in selected areas.
 - Support and subsidies were given to khadi and village industries. A grant of Rs. 2 lakh for Khadi and Handspinning by the Madras Ministry.
 - Appointment of honorary medical officers in hospitals.
 - Reduction in investment on public buildings.
- Schemes of prison reforms were introduced.
- Indigenous industrial expansion was promoted such as automobile manufacture.
- Planned development was encouraged and the National Planning Committee (1938) was appointed by the then Congress President Subhas Bose.
- Other measures included Declaration of Fundamental Rights, Welfare schemes for tribals, Reduction in salaries of ministers and repeal of Moplah Outrages Act.
- Congress ministries paid special attention to education, health and sanitation. Special attention was paid to primary, technical and higher education and the education of girls and Harijans. Mass literacy campaigns were organised.

Wardha Scheme of Basic Education

Special advance was made in the field of education. On 31st July 1937, Gandhi had published an article in the *Harijan*. Based on this article, an All India National Education Conference (Wardha Educational Conference) was held during 22-23 October 1937 at Wardha. The conference was presided by Gandhi himself and it formulated a scheme including-

- Free and compulsory education to be provided for seven years throughout the country
- Mother should be the medium of instruction
- Emphasis on vocational and manual training, production of handicraft
- This would generate the remuneration of teachers

Taking the above as guidelines, a Committee on Basic Education headed by **Dr. Zakir Hussain** then submitted a scheme of basic education to be implemented by Congress Ministries. The aim was to develop ideal citizens more importance should be given to Indian culture than literacy. There was no place for English and religious education in the scheme. The scheme was opposed by Muslim League.

Congress education policy resulted in an increase in the number of students as well as educational institutions. However, the Scheme could not be further developed on account of resignation of Congress Ministries.

USE OF OFFICES TO PROMOTE MASS POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Using offices to promote mass political activity and bring about popular mobilisation was a part of office-acceptance strategy of the Congress. On 10th July 1937, J Nehru, as president of the Congress, sent a circular to all Congressmen reminding them that organizational and other work outside the legislature was to remain their major occupation.

The work of the Congress outside the legislatures (i.e. the extra-parliamentary mass mobilisation programmes) took diverse forms-

- Congress committees were organised in villages.
- Congress grievance committees were set up in the districts to hear local grievances and report them to the MLAs.
- Congress police stations and panchayats were set up for dispensing justice.
- Mass petitions to officials were organised.
- States Peoples' movements
- Mass literacy campaigns

Negative Outcomes

The strategy of using offices to promote mass political activity created new dilemmas. How could a party running a government simultaneously organise popular protests against its own self?

The Congress ministries promoted civil liberties and allowed trade unions and kisan organizations to grow. Left parties began to operate freely:

- The Communist Party brought out its weekly organ '**The National Front**' from Bombay.
- The CSP brought out its journal '**The Congress Socialist**'.
- The Kirti Communists of Punjab brought out '**Kirti Lehar**' from Meerut (U.P) as they could not do so in Unionist Party led Punjab.

A section of Congressmen such as the Communists, Socialists, Royists and Revolutionary Terrorists felt that the expanded civil liberties should be used to stir militant or even violent forms of protest.

Due to the above, popular agitations began to clash frequently with the Congress governments, which treated all militant protests as a law and order problem. For instance, in Bihar the kisan movement came in conflict with the Ministry when the kisan Sabha asked the peasants to forcibly occupy the landlords' lands. It was during this time that the relationship between the Bihar kisan Sabha and Congress leadership became strained and a ban was imposed on Congressmen from participating in kisan Sabha activities in Bihar. For how could governance and violent forms of protest coexist?

The Left became highly critical of government's handling of popular protests and accused it of suppressing peasants' and workers' movements. **R. Palme Dutt** summed up the communist criticism of the Congress Ministries in the following words- "The dominant moderate leadership was in practice developing an increasing cooperation with imperialism, was acting more and more openly in the interest of upper-class landlords and industrialists and was showing increasingly marked hostility to all militant forms of struggle."

Thus, the policy of ministry formation led to a new crisis in the national movement. **Both Gandhi and Nehru began to feel that the positive role of the Ministries was getting exhausted.**

TRIPURI CRISIS (MARCH 1939)

In 1938, Subhas Bose had been unanimously elected as Congress President. In 1939, he decided to stand again for Presidential election, but this time as representative of militant and radical groups.

This was objected to by some members of the CWC including Sardar Patel, Rajendra Prasad and JB Kriplani who declared that the position of Congress President was like that of a constitutional head who represented the unity of the nation. With the support of Gandhi, these leaders put up Pattabhi Sitaramayya as their candidate.

During the election propaganda, Bose openly accused the "Gandhists" as compromisers who were working for a compromise on the question of federation and were opposed to any national struggle that disturbed their parliamentary work.

In January 1939, Bose won the election and Gandhi declared **Pattabhi's defeat as "more mine than his"**. The CWC members felt that they could not work with a president who had publicly accused them and doubted their patriotism. Accordingly, 12 CWC members resigned. Jawaharlal

was also unhappy about Bose's aspersions on his colleagues but he did not want to bring out the differences in open and therefore did not resign.

Tripuri Congress Session (8–12th March 1939)

Internal strife within Congress reached its helm at Tripuri Session. It appeared as if Bose had completely misjudged the meaning of his victory in the presidential election. Congressmen had voted for him for his militant politics and not to have him as their supreme leader, replacing Gandhi. Consequently, Govind Ballabh Pant moved a resolution during the Tripuri Congress, expressing full faith in Gandhi's leadership and the old CWC and asking Subhas to nominate his Working Committee with Gandhi's consent.

This resolution was passed by a huge majority, leaving Subhas Bose in an embarrassing situation and he was left with no option but to resign. Jawaharlal tried to mediate between the two sides but in vain and quickly afterwards Rajendra Prasad was elected as the new President. Henceforth, Bose lost the support of the Communists as well as the Congress Socialists for they were not willing to divide the national movement of which Congress was the main organ and Gandhi, the main leader.

PC Joshi of CPI declared in 1939, "the greatest class struggle today is our national struggle".

Thus, in May 1939, Subhas Bose and his followers founded the Forward Block as a new party within the Congress. On 9th July, he gave a call for an all India protest against an AICC resolution, instigating disciplinary action by the CWC against him. He was removed as president of the Bengal PCC and was also debarred from holding any Congress office for three years.

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE CONGRESS

During its tenure, the Congress faced several challenges, for instance:

- **Surfacing of party weaknesses**-The period saw the emergence of serious weaknesses in the Congress party. Personal as well as ideological strife and bickering became commonplace.
- **Bogus membership**- During this time, many opportunists and office hungry men joined the Congress and the party faced severe threat from indiscipline and corruption.
- **Communist critique**-A malicious campaign was carried out against the Congress by communal parties. Congress was accused of discrimination against minorities, an accusation motivated more by political reasons rather than facts.
- **Tripuri Crisis and Resignation of Bose**- During this period, two sessions of the Congress were held—51st session of the Congress was held at **Haripura**, Gujarat (Feb 1938) under the presidentship of Subhas Chandra Bose. However, crisis erupted in the next session held at **Tripuri**. Bose defeated Pattabhi Sitaramayya (Gandhi's candidate) in the presidential election in what was regarded as a major victory of the Left wing.

However, Bose was later compelled to resign from the presidentship. Thus, Congress weathered another and a split was averted.

RESIGNATION OF CONGRESS MINISTRIES (OCTOBER 1939)

On 1st September 1939, the Second World War broke out with the German invasion of Poland in pursuance of Hitler's policy of German expansion. On 3rd September 1939, Britain and France were forced to go for Poland's aid and enter the war. On 3rd September itself, India was dragged into the war with Britain, without its consent. Neither the National Congress nor elected members of central legislature were consulted. In October 1939, the Congress Ministries resigned office in protest. (Read in detail about Congress attitude towards Second World War in the upcoming chapter).

Gandhiji welcomed the resignation calling it a "bitter pill" which needed to be swallowed to cleanse the Congress of the rampant indiscipline and corruption. Another positive effect of the resignation was that it brought together the Left and the Right wings of the Congress on the question of participation in the War. The resignations also proved to its critics that the Congress was not out for power but for the freedom of the Indian people from foreign yoke. The Acceptance of Office thus proved to be just one phase in the freedom struggle. When the time came to leave office, the Ministries promptly resigned.

EVALUATION OF CONGRESS MINISTRIES

On the whole, the Congress Ministries succeeded in making some important advances during the brief period of 28 months, despite limited powers given to them under the Act of 1935.

- Even though the left was critical, its expectations were fulfilled in a large measure.
- The Congress Ministries succeeded in firmly handling communal riots.
- The Congress leaders successfully foiled British attempt of 'divide and rule' by offering constitutional concessions. They successfully used offices to further their own aims, without getting assimilated in the colonial fold.
- Fears of provincialisation of Congress were also disproved as Ministers succeeded in presenting a common front before the Centre.
- The morale of the ICS reached a new low and they began to feel that the days of British rule in India are numbered.
- Congress influence extended to all sections of the people, including the lower bureaucracy.
- Congress Ministries emerged as an alternative to imperialist government and eroded yet another moral basis of British rule in India—that Indians were not fit to rule.
- The biggest gain was psychological and the people felt they were breathing the fresh air of victory and self-government. The formation of Congress Ministries had changed the balance of power in India in relation to the British rulers.

From the Authors

The period between 1935 and 1939 witnessed several other important political developments (in addition to the Government of India Act 1935 and Formation of Congress Ministries) which brought about a new turn in the Congress as well as the national movement. These developments included:

- The Growth of the Left Movement
- The Peasants' and Workers' Movements
- The State's Peoples' Movements
- The Growth of Communalism

Please refer to Chapters 6.11 to 6.15 for relevant developments for the period 1935–39.



Practice Questions – Preliminary Exam

1. Consider the following responses, once Congress decided to contest elections-

1. Gandhi resigned from the Congress as he disagreed with parliamentary politics.
2. J Nehru welcomed the decision as he believed in continuing the struggle inside the legislatures.

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

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

2. Which of the following resolutions were passed during the Lucknow Session of Congress?

1. Congress resolved to contest elections on the basis of a manifesto and accept office.
2. Congress resolved to formulate an All India Agrarian Programme.
3. That the people of Princely States have the same right for self-determination as the rest of India.

Choose the correct answer from the following options.

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

3. Which of the following are correct regarding the Election Manifesto of the Congress?

1. It declared that the aim of sending Congressmen to the legislatures was to cooperate with the Government.

2. It reaffirmed the Congress acceptance of the Act of 1935.

3. It reaffirmed Congress commitment towards removal of untouchability and equality for women.

Choose the correct answer from the following options.

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

4. At the Faizpur Session of the Congress in 1936, the Congress-

1. Adopted an agrarian programme
2. Demanded the formation of a Constituent Assembly
3. Passed resolution condemning Italian aggression on Abyssinia
4. Resolved to abolish zamindari and taluqdari systems

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

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

5. Examine the following statements with regard to the Elections of 1937-

1. Nehru and Gandhi undertook a vigorous election campaign.

2. Congress emerged as the single largest party in Bombay, Bengal, Assam and NWFP.

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

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

6. Which of the following were among the consequences of the Elections of 1937-

1. The Congress formed ministries immediately after the declaration of election results.

2. Interim governments were formed since Congress Ministries refused to accept office.

3. Congress Ministries were formed after a delay of nearly six months, after the results were announced.

Choose the correct answer from the following options.-

- (a) 1 only
(b) 2 and 3
(c) 3 only
(d) None of the above

7. 1. Congress Ministries were formed without Gandhi's consent.

2. Both Gandhi and J Nehru opposed the formation of Congress Ministries.

Examine the above statements with regard to the Formation of Congress Ministries.

Which of the above is/are true? Choose the correct answer from the following options.

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

8. Examine the following statements with reference to the Scheme for Basic Education formulated by the Congress Ministries-

1. It was based on an article published by Gandhi in the Harijan.

2. Mother tongue was to be the medium of instruction while English was to be taught as additional language.

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

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

9. Which of the following is incorrectly matched?

- (a) Dr. Khare- Central Provinces
(b) Hare Krishna Mehtab-Orissa
(c) BG Kher-United Provinces
(d) Sri Krishna Sinha-Bihar

10. 1. After the formation of Congress Ministries, the Congress party brought all mass political activity to a temporary halt.

2. The left parties operated freely and fearlessly during the 28 month- Congress rule.

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

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



Practice Questions – Main Exam

1. What was the role played by Congress Ministries in the national movement? Evaluate.

2. Write Short Notes on the following:

- (a) Congress Manifesto of 1936.

- (b) Faizpur Agrarian Programme.

3. "These offices have to be held lightly, not tightly. They should be crowns of thorns. They have been taken to quicken the pace at which we are moving towards our goal." Critically analyse.

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4. Give an account of the Extra-Parliamentary work of the Congress during 1937-39. How far was it responsible in leading the national movement to a new crisis?
5. Who were the "New Swarajists"? In what ways were they different from the earlier Swarajists?

Answers

Practice Questions - Preliminary Exam

- | | | | | |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| 1. (a) | 2. (c) | 3. (c) | 4. (c) | 5. (b) |
| 6. (b) | 7. (b) | 8. (a) | 9. (c) | 10. (b) |