

Indian National Congress: Foundation and the Moderate Phase

Foundation of Indian National Congress

In the later 1870s and early 1880s, a solid ground had been prepared for the establishment of an all-India organisation. The final shape to this idea was given by a retired English civil servant, A.O. Hume, who mobilised leading intellectuals of the time and, with their cooperation, organised the first session of the Indian National Congress at Gokuldas Tejpal Sanskrit College in Bombay in December 1885. As a prelude to this, two sessions of the Indian National Conference had been held in 1883 and 1885, which had representatives drawn from all major towns of India. Surendranath Banerjea and Ananda Mohan Bose were the main architects of the Indian National Conference.

The first session of the Indian National Congress was attended by 72 delegates and presided over by Womesh Chandra Bonnerjee. Hereafter, the Congress met every year in December, in a different part of the country each time. Some of the great presidents of the Congress during this early phase were Dadabhai Naoroji (thrice president), Badruddin Tyabji, Pherozshah Mehta, P. Anandacharlu,

Surendranath Banerjea, Romesh Chandra Dutt, Ananda Mohan Bose and Gopal Krishna Gokhale. Other prominent leaders included Mahadeo Govind Ranade, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Sisir Kumar Ghosh, Motilal Ghosh, Madan Mohan Malaviya, G. Subramaniya Aiyar, C. Vijayaraghavachariar, Dinshaw E. Wacha.

In 1890, Kadambini Ganguly, the first woman graduate of Calcutta University, addressed the Congress session, which symbolised the commitment of the freedom struggle to give the women of India their due status in national life.

Apart from the Indian National Congress, nationalist activity was carried out through provincial conferences and associations, newspapers and literature.

■ Was It a Safety Valve?

There is a theory that Hume formed the Congress with the idea that it would prove to be a 'safety valve' for releasing the growing discontent of the Indians. To this end, he convinced Lord Dufferin not to obstruct the formation of the Congress. The extremist leaders like Lala Lajpat Rai believed in the 'safety valve' theory. Even the Marxist historian's 'conspiracy theory' was an offspring of the 'safety valve' notion. For example, R.P. Dutt opined that the Indian National Congress was born out of a conspiracy to abort a popular uprising in India and the bourgeois leaders were a party to it.

Modern Indian historians, however, dispute the idea of 'safety valve'. In their opinion the Indian National Congress represented the urge of the politically conscious Indians to set up a national body to express the political and economic demands of the Indians. If the Indians had convened such a body on their own, there would have been unsurmountable opposition from the officials; such an organisation would not have been allowed to form. In the circumstances, as Bipan Chandra observes, the early Congress leaders used Hume as a 'lightning conductor' i.e., as a catalyst to bring together

the nationalistic forces even if under the guise of a 'safety valve'.

■ Aims and Objectives of the Congress

The main aims of the Indian National Congress in the initial stage were to—

- (i) found a democratic, nationalist movement;
- (ii) politicise and politically educate people;
- (iii) establish the headquarters for a movement;
- (iv) promote friendly relations among nationalist political workers from different parts of the country;
- (v) develop and propagate an anti-colonial nationalist ideology;
- (vi) formulate and present popular demands before the government with a view to unifying the people over a common economic and political programme;
- (vii) develop and consolidate a feeling of national unity among people irrespective of religion, caste or province.
- (viii) carefully promote and nurture Indian nationhood.

Era of Moderates (1885-1905)

■ Important Leaders

The national leaders like Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozshah Mehta, D.E. Wacha, W.C. Bonnerjea, S.N. Banerjea who dominated the Congress policies during the early period (1885-1905) were staunch believers in 'liberalism' and 'moderate' politics and came to be labelled as Moderates to distinguish them from the neo-nationalists of the early twentieth century who were referred to as the Extremists.

■ Moderate Approach

The moderate political activity involved constitutional agitation within the confines of law and showed a slow but orderly

political progress. The Moderates believed that the British basically wanted to be just to the Indians but were not aware of the real conditions. Therefore, if public opinion could be created in the country and public demands be presented to the government through resolutions, petitions, meetings, etc., the authorities would concede these demands gradually.

To achieve these ends, they worked on a two-pronged methodology—one, create a strong public opinion to arouse consciousness and national spirit and then educate and unite people on common political questions; and two, persuade the British Government and British public opinion to introduce reforms in India on the lines laid out by the nationalists. They used the method of ‘prayer and petition’ and if that failed, they resorted to constitutional agitation.

A British committee of the Indian National Congress was established in London in 1899 which had *India* as its organ. Dadabhai Naoroji spent a substantial portion of his life and income campaigning for India’s case abroad. In 1890, it was decided to hold a session of the Indian National Congress in London in 1892, but owing to the British elections of 1891 the proposal was postponed and never revived later.

The Moderate leaders believed that political connections with Britain were in India’s interest at that stage of history and that the time was not ripe for a direct challenge to the British rule. Therefore, it was considered to be appropriate to try and transform the colonial rule to be as close to a national rule as possible.

Contributions of Moderate Nationalists

■ Economic Critique of British Imperialism

The early nationalists, led by Dadabhai Naoroji, R.C. Dutt, Dinshaw Wacha and others, carefully analysed the political economy of British rule in India, and put forward the “drain theory” to explain British exploitation of India. They opposed

the transformation of a basically self-sufficient Indian economy into a colonial economy (i.e., a supplier of raw materials and food stuff, an importer of finished goods and a field of investment for British capital). Thus, the Moderates were able to create an all-India public opinion that British rule in India was the major cause of India's poverty and economic backwardness.

To mitigate the deprivation characterising Indian life, the early nationalists demanded severance of India's economic subservience to Britain and development of an independent economy through involvement of Indian capital and enterprise. The early nationalists demanded reduction in land revenue, abolition of salt tax, improvement in working conditions of plantation labour, reduction in military expenditure, and encouragement to modern industry through tariff protection and direct government aid. (Also refer to chapter on Economic Impact of British Rule in India.)

■ **Constitutional Reforms and Propaganda in Legislature**

Legislative councils in India had no real official power till 1920. Yet, work done in them by the nationalists helped the growth of the national movement. The Imperial Legislative Council constituted by the Indian Councils Act (1861) was an impotent body designed to disguise official measures as having been passed by a representative body. Indian members were few in number—in the thirty years from 1862 to 1892 only forty-five Indians were nominated to it, most of them being wealthy, landed and with loyalist interests. Only a handful of political figures and independent intellectuals such as Syed Ahmed Khan, Kristodas Pal, V.N. Mandlik, K.L. Nulkar and Rashbehari Ghosh were among those nominated.

From 1885 to 1892, the nationalist demands for constitutional reforms were centred around—

1. expansion of councils—i.e., greater participation of Indians in councils; and

Indian Councils Act 1892**Main Provisions**

- Number of additional members in Imperial Legislative Councils and the Provincial Legislative Councils was raised. In Imperial Legislative Council, now the governor-general could have ten to sixteen non-officials (instead of six to ten previously).
- The non-official members of the Indian legislative council were to be nominated by the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and provincial legislative councils. The members could be recommended by universities, municipalities, zamindars and chambers of commerce. So the principle of representation was introduced.
- Budget could be discussed.
- Questions could be asked.

Limitations

- The officials retained their majority in the council, thus making ineffective the non-official voice.
- The 'reformed' Imperial Legislative Council met, during its tenure till 1909, on an average for only thirteen days in a year, and the number of unofficial Indian members present was only five out of twenty-four.
- The budget could not be voted upon, nor could any amendments be made to it.
- Supplementaries could not be asked, nor could answers to any question be discussed.

2. reform of councils—i.e., more powers to councils, especially greater control over finances.

The early nationalists worked with the long-term objective of a democratic self-government. Their demands for constitutional reforms were meant to have been conceded in 1892 in the form of the Indian Councils Act.

These reforms were severely criticised at Congress sessions, where the nationalists made no secret of their dissatisfaction with them. Now, they demanded (i) a majority of elected Indians, and (ii) control over the budget, i.e., the power to vote upon and amend the budget. They gave the slogan—"No taxation without representation". Gradually, the

scope of constitutional demands was widened. Dadabhai Naoroji (1904), Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1905) and Lokmanya Tilak (1906) demanded self-government on the lines of the self-governing colonies of Canada and Australia. Also, leaders like Pherozshah Mehta and Gokhale put government policies and proposals to severe criticism.

The British had intended to use the councils to incorporate the more vocal among Indian leaders, so as to allow them to let off their “political steam”, while the impotent councils could afford to remain deaf to their criticism. But the nationalists were able to transform these councils into forums for ventilating popular grievances, for exposing the defects of an indifferent bureaucracy, for criticising government policies/proposals, raising basic economic issues, especially regarding public finance.

The nationalists were, thus, able to enhance their political stature and build a national movement while undermining the political and moral influence of imperialist rule. This helped in generating anti-imperialist sentiments among the public. But, at the same time, the nationalists failed to widen the democratic base of the movement by not including the masses, especially women, and not demanding the right to vote for all.

■ Campaign for General Administrative Reforms

The Moderates campaigned on the following grounds:

(i) Indianisation of government service: on the **economic grounds** that British civil servants got very high emoluments while inclusion of Indians would be more economical; on **political grounds** that, since salaries of British bureaucrats were remitted back home and pensions paid in England (all drawn from Indian revenue), this amounted to economic drain of national resources; and on **moral grounds** that Indians were being discriminated against by being kept away from positions of trust and responsibility.

(ii) Call for separation of judicial from executive functions.

(iii) Criticism of an oppressive and tyrannical bureaucracy and an expensive and time-consuming judicial system.

(iv) Criticism of an aggressive foreign policy which resulted in annexation of Burma, attack on Afghanistan and suppression of tribals in the North-West—all costing heavily for the Indian treasury.

(v) Call for increase in expenditure on welfare (i.e., health, sanitation), education—especially elementary and technical—irrigation works and improvement of agriculture, agricultural banks for cultivators, etc.

(vi) Demand for better treatment for Indian labour abroad in other British colonies, where they faced oppression and racial discrimination.

■ Protection of Civil Rights

Civil rights included the right to speech, thought, association and a free press. Through an incessant campaign, the nationalists were able to spread modern democratic ideas, and soon the defence of civil rights became an integral part of the freedom struggle. It was due to the increased consciousness that there was a great public outrage at the arrest of Tilak and several other leaders and journalists in 1897 and at the arrest and deportation of the Natu brothers without a trial. (Also refer to chapter on Development of Press in India.)

Views

You don't realise our place in the history of our country. These memorials are nominally addressed to the Government. In reality they are addressed to the people, so that they may learn how to think in these matters. This work must be done for many years, without expecting any other results, because politics of this kind is altogether new in this land.

—Justice Mahadeo Govind Ranade to Gokhale (1891)

An Evaluation of the Early Nationalists

The early nationalists did a great deal to awaken the national sentiment, even though they could not draw the masses to them.

(i) They represented the most progressive forces of the time.

(ii) They were able to create a wide national awakening of all Indians having common interests and the need to rally around a common programme against a common enemy, and above all, the feeling of belonging to one nation.

(iii) They trained people in political work and popularised modern ideas.

(iv) They exposed the basically exploitative character of colonial rule, thus undermining its moral foundations.

(v) Their political work was based on hard realities, and not on shallow sentiments, religion, etc.

(vi) They were able to establish the basic political truth that India should be ruled in the interest of Indians.

(vii) They created a solid base for a more vigorous, militant, mass-based national movement in the years that followed.

(viii) However, they failed to widen their democratic base and the scope of their demands.

■ Role of Masses

The moderate phase of the national movement had a narrow social base and the masses played a passive role. This was because the early nationalists lacked political faith in the masses; they felt that there were numerous divisions and subdivisions in the Indian society, and the masses were generally ignorant and had conservative ideas and thoughts. The Moderates felt that these heterogeneous elements had first to be welded into a nation before they entered the political sphere. But they failed to realise that it was only during a

Views

We cannot blame them for the attitude they adopted as pioneers of Indian political reform any more than we can blame the brick and mortar that is buried six feet deep in the foundation and plinth of a modern edifice. They have made possible the superstructure, storey by storey, by colonial self-government, home rule within the empire, swaraj and on the top of all, complete independence.

—**Pattabhi Sitaramayya**

The period from 1858 to 1905 was the seed time of Indian nationalism; and the early nationalists sowed the seeds well and deep.

—**Bipan Chandra**

It was at best an opportunist movement. It opened opportunities for treacheries and hypocrisies. It enabled some people to trade in the name of patriotism.

—**Lala Lajpat Rai**

freedom struggle and with political participation that these diverse elements could come together.

Because of the lack of mass participation, the Moderates could not take militant political positions against the authorities. The later nationalists differed from the Moderates precisely on this point. Still, the early nationalists represented the emerging Indian nation against colonial interests.

■ **Attitude of the Government**

The British Indian Government was hostile to the Congress from the beginning despite the latter's moderate methods and emphasis on loyalty to the British Crown. The official attitude stiffened further after 1887 when the government failed to persuade the Congress to confine itself to social issues when the Congress was becoming increasingly critical of the colonial rule. Now, the government resorted to open condemnation of the Congress, calling the nationalists "seditious brahmins", "disloyal babus", etc. Dufferin called the Congress "a factory of sedition". Later, the government adopted a 'divide and rule' policy towards the Congress. The

Views

The Congress is tottering to its fall, and one of my great ambitions while in India is to assist it to a peaceful demise.

—Lord Curzon (1900)

officials encouraged reactionary elements like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Raja Shiv Prasad Singh of Benaras to organise the United Indian Patriotic Association to counter Congress propaganda. The government also tried to divide the nationalists on the basis of religion, and, through a policy of 'carrot and stick', pitted the Moderates against the Extremists. But the government failed to check the rising tide of nationalism.

Summary

- **Foundation of Indian National Congress**

First session held in 1885 (Bombay).

Indian National Union, formed by A.O. Hume, became Indian National Congress.

Foundational theories of INC and prominent believers:

Safety Valve Theory —Lala Lajpat Rai

Conspiracy Theory—R.P. Dutt

Lightning conductor Theory—G.K. Gokhale

Important leaders of Moderate Phase: Dadabhai Naoroji, Badruddin Tyabji, Pherozeshah Mehta, P. Ananda Charlu, Surendranath Banerjea, Romesh Chandra Dutt, Ananda Mohan Bose, G.K. Gokhale, etc.

- **Early Nationalist Methodology**

Constitutional agitation within four walls of law

Create public opinion in India and campaign for support to Indian demands in England

Political education of people

Political connections with Britain in India's interests at that stage

Time not ripe for direct challenge to colonial rule

- **Contributions of Moderate Nationalists**

Economic critique of British imperialism

Constitutional reforms and propaganda in legislature

Campaign for general administrative reforms

Defence of civil rights