INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

The Indian National Congress is one of the largest and oldest democratic political organizations in the world, and one of two major parties in Indian political life. Middle-class intellectuals and professionals, often journalists, civil servants, lawyers and teachers, founded the Congress in 1885. The most notable early members of the organization included Lala Lajpat Rai, Allan Octavian Hume, Surendranath Banerjea, Dadabhai Naoroji, Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant.

The period of its foundation is characterized as the ‘Moderate Phase’ of emergent Indian nationalism, secular and liberal in character, and critical of racism and discrimination in professional life as well as the economic disempowerment of Indians by the imperial project. The national organization of the Congress hinged on not only the national network of railways—especially vital for campaigning in later years—but also contact between the intelligentsia and commercial communities.

Historians have noted the extent to which the Congress actually functioned to sustain the existing colonial order through winning limited political and electoral concessions (such as the Morley-Minto reform of 1909). The middle-class nationalist supporters of the Congress moderated the speed of reform so as to save India from a violent revolution, perhaps with the hope of preserving their own privileges, making few explicit demands for independence and universal suffrage until 1929. Nevertheless, the universal franchise advocated by the Congress also entailed reaching out to women activists, who were encouraged to form their own organizations and volunteer corps within the Congress.

Mahatma Gandhi’s involvement with the Congress from 1915 transformed it into a truly mass political movement, involving workers and the rural poor in political agitation (*satyagraha*). Gandhi was responsible for large-scale campaigns of nonviolent civil disobedience, using rent strikes and tax resistance (famously in the *Salt Satyagraha* of 1930) to challenge British Rule.

The strictly secular outlook of the Congress opposed it to Islamic communalism, insisting on a narrow public sphere that deliberately excluded questions of race, religion and caste. In the 1930s, this focus was compounded by the left-leaning factions of the Congress, headed by Jawarharlal Nehru, which sought to undercut religious and local loyalties with a language of universal political emancipation.

The Congress facilitated major political transformations in the decades leading up to Partition. The Government of India Act of 1935 devolved electoral powers to individual provinces, and in 1937 the Congress subsequently won a major political victory, effectively taking over the administrative and political responsibilities of the Raj. Following the Partition of India in 1947, Nehru became the first Prime Minister of India and led the Congress to electoral success for nearly two decades, until his death in 1964. The Congress was continually in power until 1977.

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Benjamin Poore

Queen Mary, University of London