

# GS Foundation 2024: Modern India

## Handout 33: Swarajists, Simon Commission

### Swarajists

Ours is a purity movement, and as such is above diplomacy. To enter the Councils with the object of making them a failure is not only diplomacy, but it is also diplomat's duplicity which every non-cooperator should disdain.

Sardar Patel

The Council's entry is and can be thoroughly consistent with the principle of non-cooperation as we understand that principle to be.

CR Das and Motilal Nehru

The Swaraj Party was formed by leaders like Motilal Nehru, C.R Das and their supporters in 1923 to participate in forthcoming general elections that were scheduled to be held in 1923.

### **Circumstances leading to the formation of Swaraj Party**

Swaraj Party was outcome of atmosphere of disillusionment post-NCM

- The sudden withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement by Mahatma Gandhi, in the wake of the Chauri Chaura incident, created a crisis of confidence among the leaders of the movement.
- The arrest, trial, and imprisonment of Mahatma Gandhi for a period of six years further deepened the crisis.

The country was caught in a mood of despair and dilemma and was clouded with indecisiveness.

Serious strategic differences developed among the members of Congress over the issue of participation in forthcoming general elections. **Congress was divided on the issue of council-entry.**

	<b>No Changers</b>	<b>Pro Changers</b>
<b>Elections</b>	Favour of boycott of forthcoming elections as continuation of Gandhian policy of non-cooperation	Participate in elections to extend the Non-cooperation to the Legislature.
<b>Constructive Program</b>	Greater emphasis of constructive program among the people	Not opposed, but no fetish.
<b>Arguments</b>	(a) Legislative work would lead to the neglect of constructive work among the people. (b) Constructive work would prepare the organization and people for	The Council entry was needed: (a) To prove their popularity with the masses. (b) To wreck this citadel of bureaucracy from within. Thus, extension of non-cooperation.

	the next round of struggle in future	(c) Enthuse the masses, to keep up morale, during the political vacuum. (d) To deter govt from filling the councils with undesirable elements and get legitimacy to its rule.
<b>Leaders</b>	C Rajagopalachari, Rajendra Prasad, Vallabhbhai Patel, MA Ansari, and S Kasturiranga Iyengar	Motilal Nehru, CR Das, Ajmal Khan and Vithalbhai Patel

The entire leadership got divided on the issue. The Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee, set up by the Congress in June 1922, and which submitted its report in October 1922, could not settle the issue. The Committee was evenly divided between two groups.

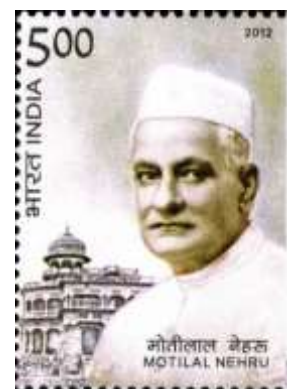
### Annual Congress Session at Gaya (Dec 1922)

President: CR Das

It was with such a divided house that the Congress met at Gaya. CR Das pleaded for the Council entry. But ultimately the no-changers led by C Rajagopalachari had their way. C Rajgopalachari became successful in getting the proposal accepted against the council entry. CR Das resigned from the office of the president of the Congress.

At this, Pro-changers formed Swaraj Party on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1923 to participate in coming elections. It was formally called as **The Congress-Khilafat Swaraj Party**. C.R. Das was the President of the Party and Motilal Nehru was one of the secretaries.

They neither repudiated the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, nor did they go in for a total break up with the Congress. It accepted the Congress programme except in one respect-it decided to participate in council election. They did not repudiate the policy of non-cooperation in totality. CR Das in his presidential speech at Gaya had explained his stand that through the Council entry they wanted to extend the principle of non-cooperation to the councils and expose the sham character of the reforms from within and tear off 'the mask' from the face of the British 'steel frame'.



## The Aims and Objectives of the Swaraj Party

The party reiterated its faith in the basic political goal of the Congress: the attainment of Swaraj by all legitimate and peaceful means. Like the Congress, Swaraj for them meant dominion status within the British empire.

But the Council Entry was an **extension of the principle of non-cooperation** to the very citadel of bureaucracy. Their policy had both constructive and destructive planks. They would work for 'ending' or 'mending' the Act of 1919.

- **Destructive side:** They promised to work for the rejection of all anti-people programmes, policies, budgets, and resolutions of the government with the ultimate objective of bringing the government machinery to a standstill. In pursuance of the same goal, they were committed to boycott all government bodies and all official functions. Thus, their primary objective was to expose the 'sham' nature of the reforms offered under the Act of 1919 and make them totally unworkable.
- **Constructive side** of their legislative work, the party was committed to push through proposals and resolutions to further the cause of constitutional development with an ultimate aim of achieving 'self-government' for Indians. They were also in favour of supporting Gandhian constructive programmes without making a fetish of them.

## Swaraj Party and the Indian National Congress

The relationship between the Congress party and the Swaraj Party always remained close, intimate and symbiotic.

- The founders of the party initially called it 'the Congress-Khilafat Swaraj Party' which subsequently came to be known as the Swaraj Party.
- They neither repudiated the basic principle of the Indian National Congress nor the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. All members of the Swaraj Party continued to be active members of the Congress.

## Career of Swaraj Party

1. **Elections in November 1923:** Though Swarajists got little time to prepare for elections, they were quite successful.
  - a. Swaraj party won majority in CP, emerged as dominant party in Bengal and an influential party in UP and Bombay.
  - b. In the Central Legislative Assembly, Swarajists won 45/145 (or 42/141) elected seats.
  - c. In the Central Assembly Motilal Nehru became the leader of the Party and C R Das in the Bengal Assembly.
2. **Centre**
  - a. Motilal Nehru managed to defeat the Government on many occasions in the Central Assembly. He forged an alliance with Madan Mohan Malaviya and Jinnah for that purpose. He managed to secure the support of the Independents and the Nationalists and embarrassed the government on many occasions.

- b. The most historic occasion was when Motilal Nehru managed to get through a resolution in the Assembly in February 1924, calling upon the government **to take steps to amend the Act of 1919**. It further urged the government to hold a **Round Table Conference** to make recommendations for a new constitution of India. This exposed the government's **hypocritical attitude towards the issue of 'self-government' for Indians**, as the government summarily rejected the resolution.
- c. The Swaraj Party managed to get a number of demands, made in the **Finance Bill** of 1924, rejected. This was followed by the rejection of budgets in subsequent years and each time the Governor-General had to use his **extraordinary power of certification**, which was extremely embarrassing for the government.
- d. **Many resolutions** on the initiative of the Swaraj Party were passed even in the face of stiff opposition from the government. It was followed up by a **boycott of government functions and several walk-outs** from the Assembly.
- e. The government tried to pacify the Nationalists and made an announcement in February 1924, regarding appointment of a **committee** to report on the working of dyarchy with Sir Alexander **Muddiman**, as the Chairman. Motilal Nehru, however, refused the offer of the government for membership of the committee.
- f. In September 1924, the **Lee Commission Report** on the Superior service came up for consideration before the Central Assembly. Motilal Nehru got it rejected through moving an amendment to it.

### 3. Bengal

- a. As the leader of the single largest party in the council, C.R. Das was invited to form the ministry in Bengal. But he refused to do so.
- b. In 1925 C.R. Das, who had refused to form a ministry in Bengal, was elected the Mayor of Calcutta.
- c. CR Das managed to create communal harmony and get the support of Muslim members through the **Bengal Pact** and made the working of dyarchy come to a standstill.
- d. Not only that, the Bengal Council passed many resolutions on the issue of the release of prisoners and repeal of repressive laws. Besides, it rejected a number of grants and demands for salaries of ministers. Dyarchy was virtually made unworkable in Bengal.

### 4. Central Provinces

- a. In the Central Provinces the task of the party was much easier as it had the absolute majority. Thus, dyarchy was made totally unworkable there too.

The Swaraj Party played a crucial role in the legislatures both at the central and provincial levels.

### The Work of the Swaraj Party Outside the Legislature

Though the Swaraj Party was founded on the issue of the Council entry, they never rejected the importance of constructive programmes as enunciated by Mahatma Gandhi. In fact, they had faith in major Gandhian programmes.

- Hindu-Muslim unity: Both Motilal Nehru and CR Das had impeccable secular records.
  - Motilal Nehru managed to secure the support of independent members through Jinnah in the Central Assembly.
  - CR Das managed to enter into a pact with Muslim members of the Bengal Council. It came to be called the Bengal Pact which made dyarchy unworkable in Bengal.
- Khadi work
  - Even on the issue of Khadi work, they were not opposed to it in principle. What they were opposed to, was the idea of making a fetish out of it.
  - It was through their effort that spinning qualification for the membership of the Congress was dropped and the old qualification of four annas membership was restored.
- Removal of untouchability
  - They were second to none in commitment. On the initiative of CR Das, Tarakeswar temple in Bengal was handed over to a public trust and its gates were opened for all including the 'untouchables'.
  - They also lent their support to the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924-25) in Kerala, which was launched to get the gates of Hindu temples opened for the untouchables.

Thus, the Swaraj party played a creditable role outside the legislatures also.

### **Achievements of Swaraj Party**

1. **Filled political vacuum:** Activities of Swarajists did not allow the atmosphere of passivism to develop in India. They provided an alternative to people to continue struggle even after withdrawal of the NCM.
2. The Swarajists succeeded in **exposing the unresponsive nature of the colonial administration.**
3. Used legislative councils as the platform and **raised nationalist issues.**
  - a. They followed the strategy of blocking anti-national resolutions of government by joining hands with other like-minded parties.
  - b. The pressure brought by Swarajists on government, compelled the British to take steps to protect Indian's Industries and promotion of education.
4. Exposed the hollowness of constant arrangement created by Act of 1919.
  - a. Their activities exposed that the system of diarchy was a complete failure because the real power was still in British hands.
  - b. It was on their persistent demand that the Muddiman Committee and even the Simon Commission was setup to inquire into the inadequacies of the Act of 1919.
5. The Swarajists made an attempt to implement the constructive programme of the Congress. They advocated economic improvement of the country and talked about modern industrialisation, protection of the national industries, improvement of the condition of the working class, reduction of train-fare and taxes.
6. Swarajists were the first to underline and demand the right of the Indian people to make their own constitution. That was a very revolutionary demand which later on became one of the major demands of our national struggle.

7. Swarajists were the first generation of the elected political leaders. Their activities enabled Indians to gain political experience for future.
8. The British decision to review the constitutional reforms of 1919 by sending the Simon Commission could partly be attributed to the pressure exerted by the Swarajists.
9. The sincerity and commitment of the Swaraj Party was also proved by the fact that when the time came for mass struggle in the wake of the Simon Commission, they did join the mainstream of the national struggle.

### **Why did Swaraj Party decline?**

The Swarajists started with great enthusiasm. They were successful as well in the beginning but by 1926 they ran out of steam and their mass appeal got eroded. A number of factors led to the decline and final re-integration of the Swaraj party in the Congress.

1. **Long-term ineffectiveness of the idea:** In the first place, their policy of 'uniform and continuous obstruction' was quite successful in the initial stages and also in establishing the credentials of the members of the Party as the genuine representatives of the people. However, gradually it lost its initial sheen and reached some kind of dead end. The Party members themselves realised its futility.
2. **Temptation of occupying office:** Internal schisms and bickerings in the party.



- a. Acceptance of membership of various government committees by the Swarajists, further complicated the matter.

- i. Some of the Swarajists accepted the membership of the Steel Protection Committee.

- ii. In 1925, Motilal Nehru himself became a member of the Sken Committee, which was

set up to inquire into the possibilities of Indianising the Indian Army.

- iii. Vithalbhai Patel became the Speaker of the Assembly.



In the Old Lok Sabha chamber, facing the Speaker's Chair, was the portrait of Vithalbhai Patel, the first Indian presiding officer of the Central Legislative Assembly.

3. **Spread of communal consciousness:** The Indian political scene was changing fast after withdrawal of NCM; the period of Hindu-Muslim bonhomie was over and communal riots started occurring in the country in 1923.

- a. This led to the breaking up of alliance politics in the Central Assembly. All this weakened the effectiveness of the Swaraj Party led by Motilal Nehru in the Central Assembly.

**4. Internal division:** Amid this communal disharmony even the Swarajists became divided along communal lines.

- a. Responsivists: Madan Mohan Malaviya, Lala Lajpat Rai, N.C. Kelkar and others.
- b. Non-Responsivists: Motilal Nehru, who was ridiculed as 'anti-Hindu' by responsivists.

**5. Leadership vacuum: Death of CR Das** in 1925 was a big setback to Swarajists because he was the main ideologue and the most popular Swarajist leader.

All this weakened the Party, which was reflected in the Council election held in 1926. As compared to the 1923 election, the Swaraj Party lost seats in every Province except in Madras and Bihar. Even in the Central Assembly their strength was reduced as they got only 35 seats as against 45 in the 1923 election.

Thereafter, the Party which had already begun to break up into factions, collapsed quickly. By March, 1926 the party disintegrated and dashed out of history.

**6. New of appointment of all-white Simon Commission** in Nov 1927 changed the direction of political activities in India. Swarajists abandoned their line of action and joined hands with the rest of the Congress.

In a word, at a very critical junction of our national movement, the Swarajists played a crucial and constructive role.

**Prelims Facts: During this period, the following Satyagrahas took place.**

- Nagpur flag Satyagraha, 1923
- Guru Ka Bag Satyagraha (1922-23)
- Tarkeshwar movement, 1924
- Borasad Movement (1923-24)
- Vaikom Satyagraha (1924-25)
- Mahad Satyagraha, 1927
- Parvati Satyagraha, 1929
- Kalam Temple Satyagraha, Nashik, 1930

**1926: Gandhi's Year of Silence**

He spent the entire year in silence working on Harijan welfare. He withdrew from active politics to the Ashram work at Sabarmati, and vowed not to leave Ahmadabad for one year. He spend time in editing newspapers Young India and Navajivan and also in teaching and correspondence.



## Simon Commission (1927)

Despite certain signs of political resurgence, the general condition of the country in 1927, was by and large, not very promising. The communal gulf between the Hindus and the Muslims had widened, the Swaraj Party had collapsed, and Gandhi had retired from active politics. Amid this situation came Simon Commission.

According to Indian Act of 1919 a commission had to be set up to look into the working of diarchy after 10 years, i.e. in 1929. In November 1927, the British government set up the Indian Statutory Commission, known as the Simon Commission. The job of the Commission was to enquire and recommend whether India was ready for further constitutional progress and to what extent and in which direction.

Its sudden appointment created a deep sense of doubt regarding the very motive of the British Government.

### **The British attempt to justify the composition of the Simon Commission**

The Simon Commission consisted of seven British MPs. Apart from Sir John Simon, one of its members was the future leader of the Labour Party, Clement Attlee.

The fact that no Indian was considered good enough to be associated with the Commission, which was to decide the political fate of India, was too much of a national insult to be taken lightly.

- The government tried to justify its composition by saying that only the members of the British parliament could become its members. The Nationalist leadership countered it by pointing out the **eligibility of Lord SP Sinha and Sir Naoroji Satkatwala** in joining Simon Commission the Commission as they were already a member of the British Parliament at that time.
- Another argument advanced by the Government was that in view of **divisions and fissures in the Indian national movement**, it was not possible to associate any Indian without offending another section of the Indian public opinion. If this was so, our leadership argued, then why was no attempt made to find a consensus candidate/s from among the Indian people.

### **Deeper Reasons for Rejecting Simon Commission**

However, for Indian leadership, apart from its all-white composition, there were other deeper reasons to reject and boycott the Simon Commission. It was seen as a violation of the principle of self-determination and a deliberate insult to the self-respect of the Indians.

- Indian leaders were of the view that **only an Indian institution can draft the constitution**. The Indian National Congress took its well-known stand that the people of **India had a right to make their own constitution**.
  - This was a consensual national viewpoint as evidenced by the passage of two resolutions (February 1924 and September 1925) by the Central Assembly, reiterating the same demand.



- Besides, as the Congress president, S Srinivasa Iyengar argued **any enquiry to the fitness of the Indian people for self-government was nothing but a direct affront to our national respect**. All that was needed, he further argued, was a direct negotiation between the people of India and the British with a view to grant self-government to us.

### Condemnation of the Commission by Indian political leadership

There was an unprecedented unity among the Indian political leadership leading to universal condemnation of the Commission. Apart from the Indian National Congress, other parties, and groups, viz., the Indian Muslim League, Liberal Federation of India, Hindu Mahasabha, and Khilafat Conference, also joined the chorus of the national condemnation of the Commission.

- Jinnah described it as 'butchery of our soul.'
- Tej Bahadur Sapru called it 'the worst challenge to Indian nationalism'.
- On the initiative of Lala Lajpat Rai, on 16 February 1928, a resolution was passed by the Central Assembly expressing its lack of confidence in the Parliamentary Commission.



### Annual Madras Congress (December 1927)

President: Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari

It took a strong stand against the Commission by passing a resolution:

- Calling on the people of India to **boycott the Commission by organising demonstrations** against it on its arrival in India.
- All members of Indian legislatures, including the non-official members, **not to associate with the Commission's work in any manner**.
- Mahatma Gandhi called for befitting 'action' and not mere 'declaration' and 'speeches' against it.

A faction of the **Muslim League**, led by Mohammed Ali Jinnah, also decided to boycott the commission. Even Surendra Nath Banerjee's Indian Liberal Federation participated in boycott. The NC Kelkar, who had joined Hindu Mahasabha, also supported the Boycott.

However, the support for co-operation came from some members of the Muslim League under Muhammad Shafi, Justice Party, All India Federation of Untouchables and Unionist Party of Punjab, some sections of Hindu Mahasabha and Central Sikh League. Leaders like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, MC Rajah, C Shankaran Nair, and Chaudhary Chhotu Ram supported Simon Commission.

## Boycott of the Commission: The People's Action

There was a groundswell of opposition when the Commission landed at **Bombay** on 3 February 1928. An all-India strike was observed on its arrival.

There were protests all over India and the sky echoed with the slogan of '**Simon! Go back**'. Mass rallies, black flag demonstrations, and processions became the order of the day. There was hardly any town in India where anti-Simon Commission demonstrations were not held.



- **Madras:** the situation took an ugly turn when there was police firing resulting in the death of three people. Madras also witnessed a death-defying act on the part of **T Prakasam**-a prominent Congress leader, who bared his chest for being shot, on being prevented from reaching the place of police firing.
- **Calcutta:** there was a similar confrontation between students and the police.
- **Delhi:** The Commission was greeted with hostile demonstrations. Placards and banners carrying the slogan 'Go Back, Simon', flooded its streets.
- **Patna:** Over 50,000 people gathered to demonstrate against it and even when the entire city was invaded by the police force, the people refused to be cowed down.
- **Lucknow**, even **Jawaharlal Nehru** and **Govind Ballabh Pant** were subjected to lathi-blows.
  - There was also a more innovative and comic scene: thousands of **black kites** carrying slogans of 'Simon! Go Back', flooded the sky of Lucknow city.
- **Lahore:** **Lala Lajpat Rai** was showered with lathi-blows on 30 October 1928, while demonstrating against the Simon Commission.

The year 1928 was marked by political agitations against the Simon Commission. Demonstrations, burning of foreign clothes, strikes, and mass processions became the order of the day. It amply demonstrated people's readiness for a new mass movement. It also marked the return of Mahatma Gandhi to active politics.

## The Report of the Simon Commission

1. **No drastic change at the central level:** it favoured a federal government, including Princely India.
2. It recommended **scrapping of the dyarchy at the provincial level** as provided under the 1919 Act, to be replaced by a responsible government within a **federal framework with provincial autonomy**.
  - a. But there was a rider to the general principle of provincial autonomy: the Governors had to have some special powers to safeguard the interests of the minorities and to maintain peace and tranquility.
3. **Enlargement of franchise:** Though it did not favour general adult franchise at that point of time, it assented to raising of franchise from 3% to 15% of the population.
4. It favoured the **system of communal representation**.

5. **State reorganization:** Separation of Sindh from Bombay, Orissa from Bihar, and Burma from India.
6. The Commission stood for the framing of a **really elastic constitution** which would develop in course of time and thus avoid periodical parliamentary enquiries.

### **Appraisal of the Simon Commission**

- Neither did it seriously consider the question of self-government for the Indian people, nor did it favour Dominion Status as the future political goal of India.
- It favoured a fully non-responsible government at the centre with a non-representative central legislature which looked like being 'retrogressive' and 'anti-people'.
- Even the provincial autonomy was hedged by the special powers of the Governor.
- Its recommendation for a meager expansion of franchise did not give a big push to democratisation of Indian polity.
- Its recommendation favouring communal representation was a replica of the old policy of 'divide and rule'.

In fact, by the time the Commission made its recommendations, a lot of political change had already taken place both in India as well as in England. By the time the Simon Commission made its recommendations, they had lost all their practical utility due to the change in the political environment.

In retrospect, it appears that the Commission and its recommendations had only twofold practical utilities.

- Some of its recommendations worked as building blocks of the Act of 1935.
- It gave a big fillip to the national movement as the opposition to it became a rallying point for the national movement.

Thus, though inadvertently, it contributed to the strengthening of the national movement and prepared the ground for the next British experiment of parliamentary federalism in India.