

The Role of Indian National Congress in the Fight for Independence

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Abstract

The Indian National Congress (INC) was established in 1885 as the leading body against British colonial rule for the Indians and finally gained independence in 1947. This paper argues that the Congress went from being a small group of English educated professionals seeking constitutional reform to becoming a mass movement which brought together the peasants, workers, women and students across the subcontinent. It covers Moderate and Extremist politics, the Swadeshi Movement, Home Rule Movement, and the change it brought about in the India with the arrival of Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement by Mahatma Gandhi. The paper also gives a critical evaluation of the role of leaders like Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Subhas Chandra Bose and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad in the country and a study of the involvement of Congress in constitutional changes and negotiations with the British. Last but not least it takes into account the constraints on the organisation, such as its ideological divisions within itself, its tense relationship with the Muslim League and its involvement in the Partition of India. The paper, based on research carried out from 2012 to 2020, argues that the Congress played an essential role in the freedom movement by creating the large, inclusive national platform, and its unique tactics of non-violent mass resistance despite never being able to stop the country's division.

Keywords: Indian National Congress, nationalism, Gandhi, mass mobilisation, non-violence, Partition, independence

1. Introduction

On 15th August 1947, India gained its independence, ending a period of nearly two hundred years of British control, and the establishment of the world's largest democracy. In fact, among the various factors which brought this about the Indian National Congress has a prominent place. The Congress was the primary voice of the Indian national movement, with Congress leaders making demands, leading protests, and negotiating with the colonial state, before eventually coming to power from the British through a government formed by the Congress (Chandra et al., 2016).

The Congress was for all intents and purposes not a static body. It was started by a group of lawyers, journalists and teachers who felt that petitions and logic can make Britain realize and release Indians to more governance powers, in 1885, as annual gathering once a year (Bayly, 2012). It gradually became more assertive in its ideas, progressively expanded its network of provincial and district committees and by the leadership of Gandhi after 1919, evolved into a movement that could involve millions of ordinary people in politics (Guha, 2018). Its history, therefore, reflects the overall course of Indian nationalism.

This role has been interpreted in various ways in history. Nationalist historians have painted the Congress as a symbol of a people united in the struggle against imperialism (Chandra et al., 2016). Other scholars underscore that it was dominated by the interests of the elite, regional differences, strong internal divisions and that it did not secure the trust of significant segments of the Muslim population (Anderson, 2013; Bose & Jalal, 2018). In this paper, both these are taken on board.

This paper aims at describing the history of the Congress, exploring the major leaders and movements of the Congress, examining the role of Congress in the constitutional negotiations and appraising the Congress limitations. The paper is based on secondary sources, mainly scholarly books written in the period from 2012 to 2020, and is a chronological and thematic paper.

2. Historical Background of the Indian National Congress

2.1 Formation and early objectives of the Congress

Indian National Congress got its initial shape and form in December 1885 at Bombay with its first session presided over by W. C. Bonnerjee and attended by 72 delegates. Allan Octavian Hume, a veteran British civil servant, was a significant organiser, and this later morphed into what was known as the "safety valve" theory, that Congress was founded to divert Indian discontent harmlessly. This viewpoint is popularly dismissed by most contemporary historians as the Indian political associations in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras had already been progressing towards an all India association with Hume more of an enabler than a founder (Bandyopadhyay, 2015, Chandra et al., 2016).

The early Congress was a body that was in an early stage trying to forge a national unity among Indians from various parts of the country and different beliefs and trying to construct a political programme and educate public opinion. Its demands were for a widening of the legislative councils, Indianisation of the civil services by holding Indian exams in India and English exams at the same time, reduction of military expenditure and safeguarding of Indian industry (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012).

2.2 Role of the Moderates

The figures of the first two decades from Dadabhai Naoroji to Pherozeshah Mehta, Surendra Nath Banerjee and Gopal Krishna Gokhale are generally called Moderates. They had a faith in British liberal values and wanted to bring about reform through constitutional channels (petitions, resolutions, speeches. But their belief in liberalism was paired with a critical assessment of colonial rule (Bayly, 2012).

The most enduring contribution of the Moderates was the economic criticism of imperialism. Naoroji's 'drain of wealth' theory pointed out that Britain was systematically

transferring India's resources to the country abroad, leaving it impoverished (Tharoor, 2016). The moral assertion that British rule was beneficial to Indians and provided them with a powerful intellectual tool to British nationalists. The critics have pointed that the Moderates had won only a few tangible concessions (the Indian Councils Act 1892) and that the politics of the Moderates was not beyond the level of the educated middle class (Sarkar 2014).

2.3 Rise of the Extremists and nationalist politics

A younger generation of leaders by the 1890s were disillusioned with the lack of progress in Moderate politics. The trio of Bal Gangadhar Tilak (Maharashtra), Bipin Chandra Pal (Bengal) and Lala Lajpat Rai (Punjab), popularly known as "Lal-Bal-Pal," were preaching the message of freedom being neither handed down nor bargained for, but demanded for. Tilak's assertion that 'Swaraj was my birth right' expressed this sentiment (Chandra et al., 2016).

These symbols of religion and culture were adopted by the Extremists to appeal to wider audiences. Tilak has utilized Ganapati Day, Shivaji Day and interpreted Bhagwad Gita as a document that exhorts righteous activities against injustice (Kapila & Devji, 2013). This wide-spreadened the base of nationalism but also, in some historians' view, gave Indian nationalism a Hindu vocabulary which might offend Muslims (Gould, 2012).

2.4 Surat Split and its consequences

Tension between the two groups came to a head at the Surat session in 1907. The Extremists wanted to spread the Swadeshi and boycott movement throughout India and proposed Lajpat Rai as its president but the Moderates wanted the boycott movement to be limited and preferred to elect Rash Behari Ghosh as president. The session ended in a tumultuous breakup, and the Moderates took over the organisation (Bandyopadhyay, 2015).

The division of the country at this juncture cost the National movement strength. The government responded to the Extremist repression with a policy of "rally the Moderates," which was done by the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, which resulted in imprisonment of Tilak for six years in Mandalay. The reforms also established separate electorates for Muslims, which had long-term ramifications for communal politics (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012). The two groups did not get together again until the Lucknow session of 1916.

3. Congress and the Growth of Nationalist Movement

3.1 Swadeshi and Boycott Movement

On the administrative side, partition of Bengal was officially declared by Lord Curzon in 1905 and was officially justified but to Indians, it was a scheme to divide Bengali Muslims from Bengali Hindus and to destroy the centre of nationalist activity (Bandyopadhyay, 2015). Its response was the Swadeshi movement which called upon the Indians to boycott foreign products particularly Manchester cloth and to use Indian products. In the Congress session held in Calcutta in 1906, chaired by Dadabhai Naoroji, Swaraj, Swadeshi, boycott and national education were formally accepted as aims of the Congress.

This created a cultural outburst, such as Rabindranath Tagore's songs, national schools and enterprise like Textile industries, Soap Industries and Banks (Sarkar, 2014). It also proved to be a case of economic boycott being used as a political device. But it did not take off on a large scale beyond the more educated Hindu population of Bengal, was able to draw few Muslim peasants and was not able to gain strength after 1908 due to repression and the splitting up between the organizations at Surat. This partition was rescinded in 1911.

3.2 Home Rule Movement

Two Home Rule Leagues brought the nationalist movement to life during the First World War: the Tilak league established in April 1916 in Maharashtra and Karnataka, and the all-India league which was started in September 1916 by Annie Besant. The leagues were modeled after the Irish Home Rule movement and sought for self-governance in the British Empire (Chandra et al., 2016).

The Home Rule Movement was important as it introduced a new generation into politics, set up branches of the Home Rule in towns around India, and promoted nationalist concepts through newspapers, pamphlets and public meetings. The Congress emerged as a political force in India in the form of leagues, from which many leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru emerged as future leaders of the Congress. (Mukherjee, 2014) This also compelled the British Government to the Montagu Declaration in August 1917 pledging "progressive realisation of responsible government" in India

3.3 Lucknow Pact and Hindu-Muslim cooperation

December, 1916, was a high tide in the unity, it was in Lucknow that the unity reached this peak. The Moderates and Extremists were brought together and Lucknow Pact was signed between Congress and All-India Muslim league. The two groups had identical demands, but the Congress agreed to separate electorates for Muslims and allocations for Muslims in the provincial assemblies (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012). The negotiations were led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah who was then a member of both bodies.

The agreement indicated that unity could still be achieved between the two communities – Muslims and Hindus. Historians have also noted that Congress's acceptance of separate electorates also implicitly acknowledged the notion that Indian Muslims constituted a distinct political community which would be an essential demand of future movement towards Pakistan (Bose & Jalal, 2018).

3.4 Emergence of mass-based nationalism

Several developments in 1919 had paved the way for mass politics. The war had led to high taxation, forced recruitments, and inflation, resulting in hardships in the economy. The Rowlatt Act of 1919, which permitted the detention of individuals without any trial, incited widespread anger among Indians, while on 13 April 1919, General Dyer, commanding the British forces, began the shooting at an unarmed populace in Amritsar; the Jallianwala Bagh massacre sucked the moral legitimacy of British rule to many Indians away (Tharoor, 2016). Indian Muslims were also outraged by the behaviour of the Ottoman Caliph after the war and launched several agitation campaigns, namely the Khilafat Movement. These grievances had made it possible to for a new form of leadership that would unite various communities and classes (Guha, 2018).

4. Gandhian Era and Mass Mobilisation

4.1 Gandhi's emergence in Indian politics

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who had campaigned against racial discrimination in South Africa for over 20 years, developed the idea of satyagraha or the force of truth and non-violence, and took it back to India in January 1915 (Guha, 2013). After a year of traveling throughout India on Gokhale's recommendations, he joined in politics. His first campaigns were local: Champaran (1917), Kheda (1918), and Ahmedabad (1918) where he championed those who were in conflict with the indigo growers and over land revenue with the cultivators and the mill workers, respectively (Guha, 2018).

These campaigns put Gandhi on the political horizon as a man who could resonate with the rural community. He was able to evoke the message of nationalism by focusing on moral values, which he could present to the people in simple language, in their own language (Hindustani), and to those who had not been addressed by the English-speaking elite (Devji, 2012). He emerged as the leader of Congress after the Rowlatt Satyagraha in 1919.

4.2 Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922)

The Congress, in conjunction with the Khilafat leaders, at its special sessions in Calcutta (September 1920) and Nagpur (December 1920), accepted Gandhi's programme of non-violent non-cooperation. The Indians were called upon to cede to the government titles, boycott schools, courts, legislatures and foreign cloth and encourage khadi and national education. Gandhi had assured Swaraj in a year (Chandra et al., 2016).

The Nagpur session also reorganised the Congress. It had set up Pradesh Congress Committees on linguistic basis, drawn a small membership of all four annas and had formed Congress Working Committee for guiding Congress affairs on a day to day basis. The reforms transformed the Congress into a disciplined mass organisation (Bandyopadhyay, 2015). It brought unprecedented number of peasants, artisans, students, women into politics and there was good Hindu-Muslim cooperation during the movement. But in February 1922, in Chauri Chaura, a mob killed 22 police personnel, which eventually ended the movement, much to the dismay of his associates and colleagues, but reflecting his principles of non-violence (Devji, 2012).

4.3 Civil Disobedience Movement and Salt Satyagraha

The protest was rekindled by the appointment of the all-white Simon Commission in 1927, after a period of reorganisation. Under the leadership of Nehru, the Congress declared complete independence (Purna Swaraj) on becoming its new objective during its Lahore session in December 1929 and 26 January 1930 was declared as Independence Day (Mukherjee, 2014).

The Dandi march, which Gandhi undertook from Sabarmati Ashram to the coast to make salt in defiance of the government monopoly, marked the beginning of the Civil Disobedience Movement. The beginning of the Civil Disobedience Movement was the Dandi March of Gandhi that he started on 12 March 1930, and finished at the coast on 6 April 1930 to make salt. Shouldering the responsibility of selecting the salt was a stroke of genius, for it came in easy-to-understand terms and impacted each Indian, irrespective of his wealth. The movement took the shape of a movement of salt-making, boycott of foreign cloth and liquor, non-payment of taxes and forest satyagrahas. Thousands of people were jailed. In March 1931, Gandhi-Irwin Pact was implemented, and Gandhi went to the Second Round Table Conference, the movement was suspended; it was revived in 1932, and ended in 1934.

4.4 Quit India Movement (1942)

After the failure of the Cripps Mission and the fear of Japanese attack, on 8 August 1942, the Congress passed a resolution in Bombay calling for the complete withdrawal of the British from the Indian subcontinent, known as the Quit India. Gandhi uttered the slogan of 'Do or Die'. Gandhi and the entire Congress leadership were promptly arrested within a few hours (Raghavan, 2016).

The movement was largely spontaneous and decentralised with its leaders in jail. Crowds stormed railway stations, Telegraph lines, Police stations, and 'parallel governments' were established in some places like Ballia, Tamluk and Satara. According to government estimates, official forces had arrested over 90,000 people by the end of 1943 and there were about a thousand killed (Khan, 2015). While Quit India was defeated in the battle, it did show the intensity of popular resentment against the British and highlight for the British authorities that India should not be held on to for too long (Chandra et al., 2016).

4.5 Role of women, peasants, workers and students

The presence of social groups hitherto not involved in politics was one of the characteristic features of the Gandhian period.

Women also participated in a large-scale manner during the Salt Satyagraha, picketing liquor and cloth shops and plotting arrests. Consequently, Congress leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Aruna Asaf Ali and Sucheta Kripalani rose to prominence and Aruna Asaf Ali raised the Congress flag in Bombay at the beginning of the Quit India movement (Guha, 2018).

Peasants were organised under the no-tax and no-rent movement; they were mobilised in variant ways and in different forms, with the Bardoli Satyagraha of 1928 spearheaded by Vallabhbhai Patel. Kisan Sabhas, some in contact with Congress, demanded for agrarian issues (Sarkar, 2014).

The workers worked through strikes and trade unions although often the leadership of the Congress was not very sensitive to class conflict and many workers were attracted to socialist and communist organisations (Bandyopadhyay, 2015).

This wide-spread participation enabled the Congress to become a truly national organization, though there was a wide spread of depth of involvement in the organization by region and class.

Students abandoned government colleges during Non-Cooperation, entered the underground world in the national institutions like Jamia Millia Islamia and Kashi Vidyapith—which will serve as the backbone of the underground activists in the days of Quit India (Chandra et al., 2016).

5. Congress Leaders and Their Contributions

5.1 Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhi's biggest legacy was to make nationalism what it is today: a mass phenomenon. He gave the Congress a strategy, satyagraha, which enabled the powerless to challenge a powerful state and keep the moral high ground with them (Devji, 2012). He also extended the concept of Swaraj to social reform, that is, the eradication of untouchability, Hindu-Muslim unity, khadi and village industries and the women upliftment. Guha (2018) believes that Gandhi's genius lie in his ability of using constructive work together with a political struggle to build organization among people during the periods of withdrawal. His solution to the caste problem was criticized by some like B. R. Ambedkar, and some had difficulties with his religious idiom and withstanding of the movements at an instant (Anderson, 2013).

5.2 Jawaharlal Nehru

Nehru was a radical and a boyhood of the Congress. He brought a sense of internationalism and connected the fight against anti-colonialism and anti-fascist struggle across the world, and also imparted a socialist economic ideology to the Congress (Mukherjee, 2014). He was the President of Congress in 1929, where he presided over the Purna Swaraj resolution, and founded a socialist organization in the 1930s that advocated for the rights of peasants and workers and economic planning. He disagreed with Gandhi on the issue of industrialisation and modernity, but he remained a faithful follower of Gandhi's leadership and even Gandhi called him his political successor publicly. Nehru became India's first Prime Minister in 1947 (Guha, 2018).

5.3 Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel

Patel was the brain behind the organisation of Congress. He participated in the Bardoli Satyagraha (1928) as also Kheda Satyagraha (with Gandhi) leading to the overturning of a government revenue hike, for which Gandhi dubbed him "sardar" (Candra et al, 2016). He was president of the Karachi session of 1931 where the resolution on Fundamental Rights and Economic Policy was passed. He ran the party machine and had the supervision of Congress ministries in the 1930s and 1940s. He was Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister during the post-independence era, and guided the integration of over 560 princely states into the Indian Union (Bandyopadhyay, 2015).

5.4 Subhas Chandra Bose and his relationship with Congress

Subhas Chandra Bose was one of the most popular and dynamic Congress leaders of 1930s. In 1938 he topped Haripura election for the Congress Presidium and in 1939 he topped the Tripuri election over the Gandhi-backed Pattabhi Sitaramayya. The ensuing battle with the Gandhian leadership led Bose to resign, and he formed the Forward Bloc (Mukherjee, 2014).

Bose thought that the Second World war was an opportunity to eliminate the British rule from India with the help of foreign assistance. He fled from house arrest in 1941, went in search of assistance from Germany and Japan and in 1943 became the commander of the

Indian National Army (INA) in Southeast Asia. The INA lost the battle, but the trials of INA officers in the Red Fort, Delhi in 1945-1946 created a surge of public sympathy and the Congress defended them (Raghavan, 2016). Bose's interaction with the Congress thus included relations of sharp differences of method with a common objective, independence.

5.5 Maulana Abul Kalam Azad

One of the substantial Muslim leaders in Congress, Maulana Azad was an Islamic scholar and journalist. He spread his message of joining the national struggle through his two dailies, *Al-Hilal* and *Al-Balagh*. He was elected as the youngest Congress president in 1923 and then again in 1940 and led the Congress through the Cripps and Cabinet Mission negotiations till 1946 (Bose & Jalal, 2018). Azad was an opposed of two-nation theory and Partition; a symbol to the Congress that it represented all communities. He is the first Education Minister of independent India.

5.6 Other regional and grassroots leaders

Many other Congress leaders played a key role in building the Congress. Rajendra Prasad was the organiser of Bihar and, subsequently, presided over the Constituent Assembly. The leadership of the Salt Satyagraha in Tamil Nadu was taken by C. Rajagopalachari who also became the head of the Madras ministry. The non-violent movement 'Khudai Khidmatgars' was set up by 'Frontier Gandhi' Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan among the Pathans. In 1925, Sarojini Naidu became, the first Indian woman Congress president, besides Jayaprakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohia and Aruna Asaf Ali, who led the underground activities during Quit India (Quit, 2016). The Congress message was propagated in the countryside by thousands of district and village workers, who have not been named in several accounts of history and are often ignored by historians (Sarkar, 2014).

6. Congress, Constitutional Developments and Negotiations

6.1 Government of India Acts and Congress response

Dyarchy was implemented in the provinces through the Government of India Act of 1919 based on the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, which meant that some subjects were handed over to elected Indian ministers and certain departments were kept by officials. The Congress did not accept the changes made as satisfactory and boycotted the 1920 elections after the Rowlatt Act and Jallianwala Bagh. (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012). Following the movement of Non Cooperation, C R Das and Motilal Nehru started the Swaraj Party in 1923 to fight elections and to block government action within council chambers, dividing the movement between the "pro-changers" and "no-changers".

The most elaborate constitutional step taken during colonial period was Government of India Act 1935. It was a policy of provincial autonomy, suggested an all-India federation, and did not exclude the princely states from it; it increased the electorate to approximately 35 million. The Congress had criticised the Act since it gave undue weightage to the princes and the Governor-General had far-reaching powers, but it resolved to challenge the provincial elections of 1937 (Bandyopadhyay, 2015). The same Act became the blueprint for the Indian Constitution which became independent.

6.2 Round Table Conferences

In 1930-32 three Round Table Conferences were held in London on the subject of constitutional reform. The Congress boycotted the first (1930-1931) as the Civil Disobedience movement was in progress. Post-Gandhi-Irwin Pact, Gandhi attended the Second conference (1931) as the sole Congressman and construed that the Congress represented the voice of all Indians. The conference got deadlocked on the issue of minority representation, with the delegates from the Muslim community and the depressed classes also seeking separate electorates from Guha (2018).

Separate electorates were instituted to the depressed classes in India by the British government in Communal Award 1932. Gandhi started a fast in Yerwada jail, resulting in

the Poona Pact with B. R. Ambedkar for which separate electorates for depressed classes were to be replaced by reserved seats in the joint electorates. The third conference (1932) was not attended by the Congress (Chandra et al., 2016).

6.3 Congress ministries (1937–1939)

The Congress party gained a resounding victory in five provinces (Madras, Bihar, Orissa, the Central Provinces and the United Provinces) and came out as the largest party in Bombay in the 1937 elections, and later it formed ministries in eight out of eleven provinces (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012). The ministries enacted tenancy and debt relief laws, freed political prisoners, increased primary education and advocated for prohibition.

This time yielded mixed results. It provided Congress leadership with hands-on experience in administration and provided the party with some credibility. But Congress was unwilling to make coalition governments in the United Provinces with the Muslim League and the League blamed Congress ministries for neglecting Muslim interests. Jinnah used these grievances to build support for the League (Dhulipala, 2015). The ministries resigned in protest, in October–November 1939, in view of the Viceroy's decision to put India in the war without consulting Indian leaders; the League celebrated a "Day of Deliverance".

6.4 Cripps Mission and Cabinet Mission

In March 1942, the British government dispatched Sir Stafford Cripps to India in response to the Japanese advances in Asia. He had promised dominion status following the war and a constituent assembly, plus the option for provinces to remain outside of the new union. The Congress did not accept it as it did not confer any meaningful power on it during the war and it paved the way for partition through the process of opting out in the provinces and Gandhi described it as a post dated cheque (Raghavan, 2016).

During the war, the Cabinet Mission was sent by the labour government in 1946. It had made a plan on May 1946 that proposed a weak federal centre for handling defence, foreign affairs and communications and provinces of three categories, two of which would have been Muslim majority. The plan was initially accepted by both the Congress as well as the League, but once again they differed in opinion on the matter of grouping. In July 1946, Nehru declared that the Congress was going to enter into the Constituent Assembly unafraid of any compromises, thus prompting the League to withdraw its acceptance and to demand 'Direct Action'. (Khan, 2017)

6.5 Negotiations leading to independence

In September 1946, an interim government led by Nehru formed and even in October 1946, when the League joined, cooperation could not be achieved. In 20 February 1947, the prime minister Clement Attlee declared Britain would leave India by June 1948. Lord Mountbatten in March 1947 as Viceroy, was convinced that partition was inevitable. The Congress and the League, the Sikh leaders, accepted the Mountbatten Plan of 3 June 1947 and the date of transfer was advanced to August 1947 (Hajari, 2015).

7. Challenges and Limitations of the Congress

7.1 Internal ideological differences

The Congress was an amalgamation or a combination of different groups but was not of a single ideology. It consisted of secularists and Hindu traditionalists, liberals and radicals, and peasant activists and landlords, and Gandhians and socialists. The result of these differences, led to several conflicts such as the Moderate-Extremist division in 1907, the Swarajists vs. the no-changers in the 1920s, the Bose crisis of 1939, and the establishment of the Congress Socialist Party in 1934 (Bandyopadhyay, 2015). The ability to keep these groups united was also a force for the Congress as it acted as a national platform, Chandra et al. (2016) claim. However, critics counter that the Congress party was not prepared for radical social transformation as it was dominated by conservative and propertied interests (Sarkar, 2014).

7.2 Communal tensions and political disagreements

The Congress's official policy was secular one, but communal tensions escalated over time after the breakup of Khilafat alliance in 1922. The riots of the 1920s, the operations of groups like the Hindu Mahasabha and the presence of a few Congress leaders in such groups stoked into Muslims fears (Gould, 2012). The nationalist slogan of 'sarvo dharma samartam' and the use of Hindu religious icons in the organisation of nationalistic movements—from festivals organised by Tilak to Gandhi's vocabulary of Ram Rajya—was supposed to be 'inclusive' to Muslims yet could be interpreted as a sign of 'Hindu dominance' (Kapila & Devji, 2013).

7.3 Congress-Muslim League relationship

The Congress and the Muslim League had been working together in 1916 but by the 1940s, the rivalry had turned bitter. Nehru Report of 1928 called for the abandonment of separate electorates and the Jinnah amendment drove him away from the Congress. In 1937 the refusal of the United Provinces to share the power with the League and the confidence of the Congress leaders that the Congress was the sole representative of India further estranged the League (Dhulipala, 2015).

The Lahore Resolution was passed by the League in March 1940 which called for the creation of independent states in Muslim majority areas. The significance is quite controversial amongst historians. In a highly influential interpretation, discussed in Bose and Jalal (2018), Jalal argues that the Pakistan demand was based on two considerations: first, to secure the parity at the centre, and second, to command new levels of respect in India. Devji (2013) and Dhulipala (2015), in contrast, believe that Pakistan was a political proposition that had traction among the people, among the Muslim minorities in particular. The League's victory in the reserved Muslim seats in the 1945-1946 elections exposed the Congress's ability to represent Muslims.

7.4 Criticism of Congress strategies

There have been several challenges to Congress strategy. The revolutionaries and the left said that action and popular energy was wasted when Gandhi suspended the movements (after Chauri Chaura). Ambedkar had denounced Congress for its lack of serious consideration to the issue of caste oppression. After the Soviet Union's entry into the war against the Axis forces, communists were against Quit India, whereas a few historians start to question Congress leadership's resolve on the acceptance of partition in exchange for a powerful central government by 1947 (Anderson, 2013). Others note that the Congress bourgeois leadership was often a check to the peasant and labour militancy (Sarkar, 2014).

7.5 Partition and its consequences

The biggest one among the failures of the Independence Movement was Partition of India. Congress leaders such as Nehru and Patel, driven by the fear of a weak centre under the Cabinet Mission Plan, took to acceptance of partition as the cost of freedom and the Indian state's establishment of a strong central government in the face of communal violence that erupted in August 1946 following the Great Calcutta Killings (Khan, 2017). Gandhi had objected to it but had not stopped Congress Working Committee and All India Congress Committee from approving the June 3 Plan.

The ramifications were devastating. Several hundred thousand to two million people may have died, at least 10 and possibly 15 million were displaced, and it was one of the largest migrations in history (Hajari, 2015; Khan, 2017). There was a division of Punjab and Bengal and the Kashmir dispute made the India and Pakistan a nation of belligerents.

8. Congress and the Achievement of Independence

8.1 Events of 1945–1947

The Second World War had ended and the balance of power had shifted as a result. Britain was "financially beaten," and the Labor Party elected in the July 1945 elections was

determined on Indian self-government (Raghavan, 2016). In June 1945 Congress leaders were released and they could not attend Simla Conference which was a failure when Jinnah demanded that Congress members of the Executive Council of the Viceroy must be nominated by the League.

Popular unrest grew to a crescendo in the winter of 1945–1946. The INA trials led to demonstrations all over India; in February 1946, the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) ratings mutinied in Bombay and Karachi and with sympathetic strikes in the city (Khan, 2015). These events revealed that the allegiance of the armed forces which was the backbone of British rule was not to be relied on. The Congress captured the overwhelming number of general seats in the 1945–1946 elections and the League took over all the Muslim seats, giving a communal polarisation to politics. The Great Calcutta Killings were set off by the League's Direct Action Day on 16 August 1946, which was followed by killings in Noakhali, Bihar and in Punjab (Hajari, 2015).

8.2 Transfer of power

The Constituent Assembly, which was majority Congress started its deliberations in December 1946, though the League boycotted it. Attlee's announcement of February 1947 imposed a time limit on withdrawal and Mountbatten's 'Plan for June 3' included partition and referendums in the North-West Frontier Province and Sylhet (Khan, 2017). In July 1947, the British Parliament passed the Indian Independence Act that established the two Dominions of India and Pakistan. The Congress leadership also negotiated the accession of nearly all the princely states with the accession day of 15 August, via the Instruments of Accession (IOAs), under the leadership of Patel and V. P. Menon (Bandyopadhyay, 2015).

8.3 Independence and Partition

India gained Independence at midnight on 14–15 August 1947 and Nehru addressed the assembly with his 'Tryst with Destiny' speech. Nehru was appointed Prime Minister and Patel was made the Deputy Prime Minister while Mountbatten continued as the Governor-General. Gandhi was not present at the celebrations as he was in Calcutta trying his best to quell communal violence (Guha, 2018). The Radcliffe Commission's boundary awards, made two days after independence, exacerbated the tension and uproar in the province of Punjab and Bengal. Gandhi was assassinated on 30th of January 1948 by a Hindu extremist named Nathuram Godse who opposed his attempts to resolve the issue of reconciliation of the Hindus and Muslims.

8.4 Contribution of Congress to the independence struggle

There are a number of points on which the contribution of the Congress can be summarised:

1. National platform: it established an organisation pan-India, that gathered people from different regions, languages, religions and classes (Chandra et al., 2016).
2. A critique of imperialism that was economic, the drain theory was exposed by the Moderates by exposing the exploitative nature of colonial rule (Tharoor, 2016).
3. Mass Mobilisation: It brought millions of peasants, workers, women and students into the political under Gandhi (Guha, 2018).
4. Non-violent satyagraha was a unique technique that enabled an unarmed nation to oppose the empire and secure international sympathy (Devji, 2012).
5. Democratic training: internal elections, debates and the 1937 ministries prepared leaders for self-government (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012).
6. Independent India vision: Congress resolutions like the A. Karachi Resolution of 1931 were built around the fundamental rights and principles of secularism, universal adult franchise and social justice, which found reflection in the Constitution (Bose & Jalal, 2018).

However, it has to be noted that there were other factors that played a role in the attainment of independence—revolutionary movements, the INA, the peasant and worker movements outside Congress, the Royal Indian Navy mutiny, and the decline of Britain after World War II (Khan, 2015; Raghavan, 2016).

9. Conclusion

Indian National Congress was the front runner in the freedom movement of India. It was initiated as a small organization of educated middle class professionals who wanted to make some changes in the system by petitioning, then as the Extremist assertive nationalism, then as the Swadeshi and Home Rule agitation, and then as a mass movement led by Gandhi and finally as the largest anti-colonial movement in the world (Chandra et al., 2016). Its success was in establishing a unified “nationality” from a very different and vast population and creating a non-violent resistance technique that was both moral and mass-based (Guha, 2018).

Even the Congress had its own definite restrictions. Communal politics came into being due to the internal divisions, influence of the propertied classes, use of religious jargon and its failure to find a permanent settlement with the Muslim League (Dhulipala, 2015, Anderson, 2013). Thus, the Congress' idea of a united and secular India was with some measure unfulfilled by the Partition of 1947 which had caused a massive human toll.

Overall, it was a vital Congress contribution. But it did not win independence by itself; it gave the organisation, the leadership, the ideas and the popular base, without which the British withdrawal would have been much slower, and a lot less democratic. The principle of civil liberties, representative government and social justice that it stood for came to be articulated in the Constitution of India, and the spirit of the freedom movement continues to influence Indian democracy at present (Bose & Jalal, 2018; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012).

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