

## **MOOC ON HISTORY OF INDIAN INDEPENDENCE (1857-1950)**

### **MODULE 11**

#### **POLITICAL IDEOLOGY & ORGANIZATION: FORMATION OF INC**

##### **Academic Script**

This backdrop to the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 is a significant chapter of Indian history. The Congress came to symbolize the rise and consolidation of modern nationalism in India. To the extent that the Congress in its early days was dominated by the leading professionals in the major cities of India, it was a continuation of the politics of associations which had already emerged as a distinctive modern feature in Indian politics since the mid-nineteenth century. The decade of the 1870's was an important turning point when associations under the leadership of the middle class professional groups began to replace the earlier ones, dominated by the urban notables. There was indeed a good deal of continuity between the middle class provincial associations of the 1870s and the Congress. These provincial associations which included, for example, the Indian League and the Indian Association in Calcutta, the Bombay Presidency Association, Madras Mahajan Sabha or Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, represented a process of political change in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when the emergence of a modern public sphere made it easier for the nationalist intelligentsia to disseminate the message of nationalism to wider spheres.

The nationalist public sphere in the latter half of the nineteenth century was constituted of the print media, besides the organizations of professional groups which increasingly started acquiring the character of quasi-political associations. The Bar-Associations in the small towns were of course the more powerful organizations of the professional classes. The consolidation of the professional classes, especially members of the legal profession, in terms of social power and influence remained one of the main preconditions for the development of the public sphere. The judicial and educational institutions which the colonial state had created for its own self-perpetuation became the breeding ground for a

dissident intelligentsia which began to look upon British Rule as an illiberal state. The liberal education had taught them that parliamentary representation was the basic feature of a civilized government. The experience of British rule for its essentially despotic character contributed to the emergence of a liberal critique of British rule by early nationalists. This was also the time when the sense of an overarching national unity began to emerge among the educated classes outgrowing the essentially provincial identities nurtured by a long history. Increasingly the Indian intelligentsia had to reconcile their provincial identities with the newly emerging sensibility about a national identity. At times it was assumed that it was possible to establish a unified state in India, while the nation-state based on a common national identity was a difficult proposition in a land divided by myriad little nations. Rabindranath later tried to resolve this problem by enunciating the idea of a Great Indian nation (Bharatbarshiya Mahajati) incorporating within its body the many little nations. Surendranath Banerjee, one of the earliest nationalist leaders, in his autobiography, *A Nation in Making* written during the 1920's touched on the political processes through which the nation was emerging in the course of the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

The politics of association was certainly an important factor in this development. The provincial elites, who were forming political associations at the regional levels, responded to the demand for a national organization when they came together and formed the Indian National Congress. Besides the provincial political associations which preceded the Congress, the other important medium through which the dissident nationalist intelligentsia managed to create a certain kind of nationalist consensus on important political issues was the print media. There was an increasing proliferation of vernacular newspapers in the small towns all over India. The politics of associations went hand-in-hand with the extensive use of this new mode of public expression, especially, the vernacular newspapers on which Lord Lytton imposed rigorous censorship by the Vernacular Press Act of 1878, in order to contain the percolation of anti-British sentiments to the localities where such newspapers had circulation.

### ***The myths surrounding the origin of the Congress***

The rise of a modern public sphere in which the politics of associations began to thrive suggests a process wise explanation for the origin of the Congress. It indicates the different stages through which the nationalist intelligentsia gathered experience in the varied methods of public expression in order to forge the much desired unity among the provincial associations. The rise of the Congress from this standpoint was the culmination of a process that had begun earlier. Such interpretations come as correctives to the untenable version of the Congress as a 'safety valve' planted into Indian politics by the high functionaries of the British Imperial state through the command performance of Allan Octavian Hume. The contention is that Hume found among certain government reports at Simla evidence of an impending rebellion. In an effort to avoid such an eventuality, he wished to channelize popular grievances through a constitutional movement. Before he established contacts with some of the Indian leaders with whom he had friendly terms, he consulted the Viceroy Dufferin who apparently endorsed this proposal. The story about an impending rebellion against which Hume apparently wished to create a 'Safety Valve' reduces the history of the inception of the Congress to the level of detective fiction. Despite the claim of Hume's biographer, A. W. Wedderburn, that Hume had seen such papers, they could never be traced. On the other hand, Hume's liberalism made him an unpopular figure among the British civil servants of the time. It was likely that Hume had a sincere ideological motivation for initiating a process of liberal political development in India using his connections among the leading professional figures in the main cities of India. Already in 1883 he had made an attempt to organize a constitutional party in India. Later when Lord Ripon who had become popular among Indian leaders for some of his liberal measures left Madras for England, Hume along with his Indian friends organized farewell demonstrations. It is also likely that Indian leaders found Hume's connection with the bureaucracy useful in order to achieve direct access to the government to open a dialogue with them. But such considerations, on the part of the Indian leaders, do not support the view that Congress was a handiwork of the British ruling class. Nor should its emergence be attributed to the personal initiatives of Hume alone.

### ***Pre-Congress Associations***

The decade of the 1870's was an important turning point when associations under the leadership of the middle class professional groups began to replace the earlier ones, dominated by the urban notables. There was indeed a good deal of continuity between the middle class provincial associations of the 1870s and the Congress. In the earlier decades the associations were dominated by urban notables. The British Indian Association in Calcutta was the preserve of the absentee land-owners settled in the northern part of the city. The Bombay Association and the Madras Native Association was controlled by the merchant princes, the Parsee sethias and the Komati merchant elites, of Bombay and Madras. The new associations which began to grow from the 1870's were in Surendranath Banerjee's words, basically middle-class associations, or the political outfits of the *Madhyabittas* (middle classes), as distinct from the *Avijatas* (aristocrats). Scholars like S. R. Mehrotra and Anil Seal who have worked on this aspect of early nationalist movements have written about the way these early experiments had imparted a measure of political education to the leaders of the incipient nationalist movement. This apart, there was also a direct line of continuity between the pre-Congress associations and the Congress, in the sense that most of its early leaders came from the prominent provincial associations. There was, however, an important point of distinction. The Congress at the time of its inception was conceived by its founders as an annual conference, much in the line of the Bengal based Indian National Conference which preceded it by two years. The organisational structure with a central leadership emerged much later and subsequently grew into a powerful and highly centralized structure in the twentieth century. The original idea, however, was to convene annual national conferences where political leaders from the provinces representing different provincial associations could be brought together to deliberate on national political issues, such as constitutional reforms or civil service. This had been precisely the intention of Surendranath Banerjee as well when he took the initiative to convene the Indian National Conference in 1883. The Indian National Congress which was convened in Bombay in 1885 had a similar orientation. While the former relied mainly on the north Indian network of Banerjee's Indian Association, the conveners of the Congress principally banked on the support of the provincial leaders of Bombay, Pune and Madras. A truly national forum was created in 1886 during the Calcutta session of the Congress when the Indian National Conference decided to merge into the Congress.

### ***A National Conference***

The idea of a national conference was an extremely useful device to solve the problems posed by the provincialism of the regional associations. Most of the provincial leaders had their little gardens in their hometowns in which they were not likely to tolerate any outside interference. In this kind of a situation, they were likely to resent the emergence of a central political leadership who would naturally seek to appropriate the autonomy of the regions. Before the provincial leaders could agree to forego their deeply rooted regional interests and identities, they needed to know each other better. From this standpoint the idea of a conference was very useful. This was particularly ingenious in view of the failures of a few previous efforts to create a Central nationalist organization with branches in different provinces. The initiatives of the British Indian Association and Indian Association in Calcutta in this regard failed to yield the desired results. We know how the Bombay and the Madras branches of the British Indian Association were quickly wound up. Even though Indian Association succeeded in forging links with the nationalist leaders in North India, yet it fell short of a central organization and remained a provincial body mainly. A slightly different kind of initiative with similar objectives came from the East India Association in London which was formed to communicate directly the Indian aspirations to the British Government. The architects of the EIA wanted to create an all India Association with branches in the provinces. But ultimately it was only in Bombay that a branch could be opened. In the light of these failures before 1885, S.R.Mehrotra writes about a third alternative which emerged between 1883-85, with the idea of a national conference as its central focus. In course of time this would allow a national consensus to grow on crucial political issues without affecting provincial interests. This was the initial plan but once the Congress became the focus of nationalist sentiments, a more stable organization slowly evolved.

### ***The Political Experience of the Intelligentsia***

The emergence of the Congress is usually explained by recent works in terms of the political experience of the educated intelligentsia in the preceding decades. Provincial politics prepared the ground for the emergence of the politics of union as the provincial associations came to appreciate the value of an all India agitation and coordination between

the provinces. The effort of the Indian Association of S N Banerjee was a clear indicator of this important trend. Similar impulse to rise above local boundaries towards coordinating political activity of the provinces was noticed elsewhere in Pune and Bombay. It was clear from the Indian press that different provinces of India were evolving a consensus on issues like representative government or economic oppression by imperialism. In the late 1870s, entry into the Civil Service was the issue which first launched the Indian Association into political action outside Bengal. When Salisbury reduced the age limit for the ICS exam, the Indian Association resolved upon a national movement. Lytton's regime took the trend forward by raising new issues like suppression of the freedom of the press. Initially Surendranath Banerjee's travels in the other provinces evoked little enthusiasm. Yet the connections that he had forged in north India, especially, with the Bengali expatriates, proved to be useful when protest meetings were organized against the measure to reduce the age of entry into the Civil Services, depriving Indians of the opportunities for competing with their English counterparts in the recruitment test. A similar impulse towards inter-provincial cooperation came from Poona.

In 1878 the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha sent a deputation to Bengal to interact with political leaders in Calcutta over such issues, such as the draconian measures against the native press and the refusal on the part of the government to protect local industries by imposing tariff duties on imported items, especially textiles. The Poona delegates wanted to work together with their Bengali counterparts to strengthen the demand for an increase in the number of non-official Indian members in the legislative councils. In 1880 Poona Sarvajanik Sabha and Indian Association in a joint statement appealed to the British electorate to support the Liberal Party in Britain in the parliamentary elections, obviously, with expectations of a more positive response from the British liberals towards the Indian demand for the reform of the legislature.

### ***The 1880s***

The standard narrative on the rise of the Congress draws attention to the political experience of the intelligentsia during the preceding decades particularly during the 1880s. In 1880 Indian politics witnessed a brief liberal interregnum with the appointment of Lord

Ripon as the Governor-General. Ripon's appointment created considerable enthusiasm in India since his mentor William Gladstone, who had become the Prime-minister of Britain as a liberal party candidate after the British election of 1880 had been an avowed critic of the conservatism that his predecessor Benjamin Disraeli of the British Conservative Party and Lord Lytton, the conservative Viceroy had adopted in their Indian policy. Lytton was responsible for imposing strict censorship rules on the vernacular press in order to suppress the nascent liberal movement in India. The Gladstonians on the other hand, who were followers of John Mill's liberal vision, felt the need for the gradual introduction of liberal institutions in India. The liberal project included introduction of elective institutions at the level of local government and a certain allowance to the freedom of the press.

Whatever enthusiasm such liberal projects had created, was dampened by the failure of each of these liberal schemes, due to stiff resistance by the racist and paternalist imperial bureaucracy. In India during that time, Ripon seemed to be the lone liberal. The disappointment that resulted from the failure of some of Ripon's schemes of reform made the Indian leadership more acutely conscious about the need for an organization which would be able to negotiate with imperial bureaucracy from a position of strength. The Local Self-Government Act, for example when it was initially planned by Ripon, provided for a truly representative government, managed by elected members, even though at the local level. This was a standard formula for European liberals who looked upon local self-government as a part of an initial training in the art of self-government. It was largely due to the intransigence of the White ruling class that bureaucratic control persisted over institutions of local government when the reform was finally enacted in 1885.

### ***Ilbert Bill Controversy***

Far more disappointing was the Indian experience during the Ilbert Bill agitation. Courtney Ilbert, the liberal law member in the Viceroy's Council introduced a legislation to remove judicial discrimination between Indians and Europeans on racial grounds by abolishing the right of Europeans to evade trial by Indian subordinate judges. The measure aroused the hostility of British business interests who had the tacit support of the imperial bureaucracy. The British business houses, especially the Planters, saw in this measure a threat to their

social control over the plantation labour. The judicial immunity resulting in leniency shown to them by European judges remained a protective cover for them in many of their misdeeds. Not unnaturally, they raised the battle cry of Europeans in danger. Successfully mobilizing the Eurasian communities in the main cities, they organized an agitation against this measure. In Calcutta the Bengal Chamber of Commerce sponsored a public meeting in which the European population was present. In the meeting the Viceroy was violently attacked and abused. The agitators went to the extent of forming the Anglo-Indian Defence Association and started raising funds. Ultimately, the Viceroy had to work out a compromise sensing that the agitators had support in the bureaucracy as well. It was agreed that only the Indian members of the covenanted Civil Service would be entitled to try European offenders.

### ***The Indian Response***

The experience of the Ilbert agitation apart from creating a long-lasting racial estrangement between Indians and the Europeans, taught the Indian political leaders a few basic lessons in political mobilization. They felt that under pressure the government had buckled. And the Indian leadership was required to bear upon the government similar kinds of pressures to achieve their objectives. The opportunity came immediately after the Ilbert bill controversy when the leaders of the Indian Association moved in the direction of a counter-agitation against a judgment pronounced by Justice Norris of the Calcutta High Court. Norris apparently had a role to play in the Ilbert bill agitation and in this particular case forced a family deity to be brought to the court to settle a property dispute. Surendranath Banerjee criticized Norris's conduct as an affront on Hindu religious sentiment. In a case of contempt, he was served a prison sentence by the Calcutta High Court with the Indian Judge Sir Romesh Chandra Mitter giving a dissenting judgment. The popular reaction against this judgment was expressed through a student agitation in Calcutta. What was even more important was the impact of this event. Cutting across provincial barriers, public meetings and demonstrations were held all over north India against what was looked upon as a racially inspired judgment. During the agitation a fund known as National Fund was formed.



After his release from prison following a two-month prison sentence Banerjee convened the Indian National Conference. The initiative was supported by the British Indian Association and the Mohammedan Literary Society of Syed Amir Ali. Two years later the Conference was reconvened around the same time that the Indian National Congress was convened by Hume and his associates the emergence of the Congress is usually explained by recent works in terms of the political experience of the educated intelligentsia in the preceding decades. Provincial politics prepared the ground for the emergence of the politics of union as the provincial associations came to appreciate the value of an all India agitation and coordination between the provinces.