
UNIT 9 INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS FORMATION

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9.0 OBJECTIVES

In the previous Unit you have seen how the formulation and spread of modern ideas led to an intellectual awakening in India in the 19th century. One of its major consequence was the formation of the Indian National Congress, which has played a very important role in the history of modern India. This unit deals with its background and focus on the factors responsible for its formation. After reading this Unit you will:

- get an idea of the milieu in which the Indian National Congress was founded,
- understand the role played by the educated Indians in its formation,
- get some details about the first congress meeting, and
- became familiar with some of the controversies surrounding its origin.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

On Monday, 28 December 1885 seventy-two persons met in the hall of Gokuldas Tejpal Sanskrit College in Bombay. They were attending the inaugural session of the Indian National Congress. Since then this body went on to play a pivotal role in India's struggle for liberation from British rule.

You have already been told about the establishment of the colonial state in India and also about the factors responsible for the rise and growth of national consciousness in India. This unit follows logically from the earlier Units you have read and deals with the formation of the Indian National Congress, as the political organisational consequence of the spread of national consciousness in India.

9.2 MILIEU

As the British extended their sway over India, a sullen feeling of a resentment grew amongst the people. It was based on their perception that the new rulers were responsible for their economic hardships. They also felt that they were being looked down upon in their own country and their way of life was being threatened. The opportunities available to them for advancement were insufficient. The lower strata of social and economic hierarchy expressed their resentment by sporadic uprisings. These were often directed against immediate exploiters—the zamindars, moneylenders and tax collectors. But, broadly speaking, these were protests against the system built by the British. The intensity of discontent against foreign rule became visible through these uprisings. The great Revolt of 1857 itself, in a way sprang up as an outburst of accumulated discontent of masses in different parts of the country.

9.2.1 The New Leaders

The failure of this Revolt revealed the inadequacy of the traditional method of protest. It also showed that the old aristocratic classes could not be the saviours of Indian society. The English educated middle class seemed to be the hope of the future. The agitation carried on by this class was of a completely different character. As you can see from the details given in Unit 3, this class was conscious of the benefits India had derived from the British connection. It was also familiar with European liberal ideas of that period. At the same time it had a sense of pride in the country's glorious past and gradually developed the conviction that foreign domination was inherently opposed to the fulfilment of legitimate hopes and aspirations of the Indian people. A perception of identity in the interests of people inhabiting different parts of the Indian sub-continent was also growing. The educated Indians believed for some time that their grievances would be redressed by the benevolent rulers if they could draw their attention to them. Therefore, in the beginning, the middle class agitation was confined to ventilation of some specific political and economic grievances and demands. This stage was, however, to be left behind after some time.

9.2.2 Art and Literature

During this period, ideas of nationalism and patriotism were given popular form in songs, poems and plays. Many of the songs were composed for the Hindu *Mela* which was organised for some years from 1867 onwards by a group of Bengali leaders. The purpose was to spread nationalist ideas and promote indigenous arts and crafts. In the process British policies were blamed for deteriorating the economic conditions of the people. The need to use *swadeshi* goods was also emphasised. These ideas found expression in some drama performances also. In a play that became popular around 1860s entitled *Neel Darpan* (see Unit 7 Section 7.5.1), atrocities committed by indigo planters were highlighted. The most important name in this context is that of Bankim Chandra Chatterji who wrote historical novels highlighting the tyranny of the rulers. His most well known work is *Anandmath* (1882) which also contains his immortal song 'Bande Matram' composed a few years earlier (1875). Similar patriotic feelings can be found in the literature in other languages. Bhartendu Harishchandra, who is regarded as the father of modern Hindi, in his plays, poems and journalistic writings, put forward a plea for using *swadeshi* things. Similar trends can be seen in Marathi literature also where there was tremendous increase in the number of publications—from three between 1818-1827 to 3,284—between 1885-1896.

9.2.3 Newspapers and Journals

The newspapers and journals played a creditable role in building up public opinion in favour of Indian national interests and against the excesses and inequities of the colonial administration. Some well-known English language papers of this period were *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Hindoo Patriot* and *Som Prakash*, published from Calcutta, *Indu Prakash* and *Native Opinion* from Bombay and *The Hindu* from Madras. Some important papers published in Hindi were *Hindustan*, *Bharat Mitra* and *Jagat Mitra*. *Jam-e-Jahan Numa* and *Khushdil Akbhar* were well known Urdu newspapers.

Signs of growing political awakening and feeling of oneness were obvious to perceptive contemporary British observers. For example, writing confidentially to the Government of India in 1878, W.D. Lusk, the Commissioner of the

“Within the 20 years of my own recollection, a feeling of nationality, which formerly had no existence, or was but faintly felt, has grown up Now we are beginning to find ourselves face to face, not with the population of individual provinces, but with 200 millions of people united by sympathies and intercourse which we have ourselves created and fostered. This seems to me to be the great political fact of the day.”

Check Your Progress 1

1 In the quotation you have just read, what has been described as the great political fact of the day?

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2 Adjust the name of the newspapers against the place of its publication

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| i) Hindu Patriot | a) Bombay |
| ii) Native Opinion | b) Madras |
| iii) Hindu | c) Calcutta |

3 Read the following statements and mark right (✓) or wrong (×)

- i) The revolt of 1857 revealed that the traditional methods of protest could succeed.
- ii) The songs, poems and plays helped in popularising ideas of nationalism in this period.
- iii) Bhartendu Harishchandra made an appeal for using swadeshi things.
- iv) The newspapers and journals helped in spreading imperialist ideas during this period.

9.3 POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS BEFORE 1885

The Indian National Congress was not the first political association to be established in India. Various associations had been established earlier. The beginning of organized political activity in India generally dates back to the establishment of landholders' society in 1837. It was an association of landholders of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and its principal objective was to guard its class interests. In 1843 was formed another association named Bengal British India society. Its objective was wider, i.e. to protect and promote general public interests. The landholders' society represented the aristocracy of wealth, the Bengal British India society represented the aristocracy of intelligence. In 1851 the two associations were merged, giving rise to a new one, named the British Indian Association. This was the time when the Charter of the British East India Company was due for renewal and a need was felt to make the views of Indians known to the authorities in London. Associations were also formed about this time in Bombay and Madras. These were called the Bombay Association and the Madras Native Association respectively and were established in 1852. All these associations were dominated by wealthy landed gentry. Similar, but lesser known associations were established in other parts of India too. Deccan Association can be mentioned as one of them.

The three Presidency associations sent petitions suggesting changes in East India Company's Charter. These suggestions give us a fairly good idea of the attitude of the publically conscious classes in India at that time. Broadly speaking, the petitioners wanted that Indians should be appointed to the legislative bodies. Company's monopoly of salt and indigo should be abolished and the state should give aid to indigenous industry. It was also stated that the local governments should have greater powers and Indians should have bigger share in the administration of their country. So far as agrarian issues were concerned, a desire was expressed for the preservation of existing interests in land. Each petition also expressed concern about the need to improve the condition of peasants. In the petition sent by members of the British Indian Association it was stated that while Indians acknowledged

'the blessings of an improved form of government', they could not but feel that they had 'not profited by their connection with Great Britain to the extent which they had a right to look for'. Many of their demands were later taken up by the Congress.

As has already been mentioned, during the 1860s and 1870s ideas of nationalism and patriotism were very much in the air. A number of political associations were established in different parts of the country during this period to propagate the cause of reform in various spheres of administration and to promote political consciousness among various sections of people. Of these, the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, established by M.G. Ranade, G.V. Joshi, S.H. Chiplankar and his associates in 1870, proved to be the most important. This Sabha brought out a journal from 1878 which did much for arousing political consciousness. To carry on political propaganda in England, some Indian students like Pherozeshah Mehta, Badruddin Tyabji, Dadabhai Naoroji and Manmohan Ghose founded the East India Association in December, 1866.

The half century from the establishment of Landholders society in 1837 was more a period of aspirations than of achievements. But the state was set during this period for the emergence of a national body. The need for a national platform began to be keenly felt. In Calcutta, dissatisfaction with the British Indian Association had been growing. Its subscription was Rs. 50 per annum which was too high for the middle class. (According to Lord Curzon's estimate per capita income in British India in 1898 was Rs. 30 per annum.) Its membership was, therefore, confined to the wealthy people. In 1876 the Indian Association was founded in Calcutta. The membership fee was kept at five rupees, per annum. It soon became very popular amongst the educated people and became a major force in Bengal and subsequently in Indian politics. Surendranath Banerjea, a young member of the middle class who had been ejected from the Indian Civil Service on what appeared to be insufficient grounds was mainly responsible for its establishment. The aims of the Indian Association included developing a strong public opinion, promoting Hindu-Muslim friendship, establishing contact with masses and generating wider awareness amongst the Indian people. These are certainly ingredients of a broad based nationalist movement. Surendranath Banerjea said that the new association was based on the conception of United India derived from the inspiration of Mazzini—the main architect of the *Stehan* Unification.

Many other political bodies were established in other parts of India, like the Madras Mahajan Sabha, the Bombay Presidency Association, the Allahabad People's Association, the Indian Association of Lahore etc. Many of these bodies had branches in the Mofussil towns. After 1885 these became the regional arms of the Congress.

9.4 IMPERIAL RESPONSE

Needless to say, all these activities of the educated Indians did not go unnoticed. The British Government took a note of the growing political discontact and quickly went on the offensive. This was reflected in the policies pursued by Lord Lytton who came to India in 1876.

9.4.1. Lytton

Lytton followed openly reactionary and anti-Indian policies. These afforded excellent opportunities to the Indian Association to organize a number of all-India political agitations. Lytton sent an expensive expedition of Afghanistan which was financed out of Indian revenues. He removed import duties on cotton textiles to benefit British cloth industry at the cost of the nascent Indian textile industry. These steps were resented by politically conscious Indians. In domestic policy the Viceroy patronised these sections like the ruling princes and landholders who played a vital role in the continuance of the British rule. He viewed the aspirations of educated Indians with contempt. During his period the maximum age for appearing in the Indian Civil Service examination was reduced from 21 to 19 years. Since the examination was held only in London, it was in any case difficult for the Indians to take this examination. The lowering of the age was looked upon as a step calculated to prevent Indians from appearing in this examination. The Indian Association took up the issue and launched an agitation over it in the country. Surendranath himself undertook a tour of different parts of the country in 1877-78 and acquired all India fame. The Association also sent a well-known Bengali barrister, Lal Mohan Ghose, to England to present a memorial.

Public meetings were organised to protest against the passing of the Vernacular Press Act and the Arms Act. The former imposed restrictions on the newspapers and journals printed

in Indian languages. This caused deep resentment among the Indian societies. *Amrita Bazar Patrika* which was published in Bengali till then, changed overnight into an English medium paper so as to escape the restrictions imposed under this Act. Under the Arms Act, Indians were made to pay a license fee in order to possess a weapon but Europeans and Eurasians were exempted from doing so. Special concessions were also given to landholders. During the agitation on these issues huge mass meetings, attended at some places by ten to twenty thousands people were organised in district towns.

9.4.2. Ripon

Lord Lytton was succeeded by Lord Ripon in 1880. Ripon's approach was different. He held that the educated Indians possessed legitimate aspirations in keeping with their education and the pledges given by the British Parliament from time to time in this regard should be honoured. Lytton's administration, he argued, had given the impression 'rightly or wrongly' that the interests of the natives of India were in all ways to be sacrificed to those of England. He wanted to harness the talents of the educated classes for strengthening British Rule. He repealed the Vernacular Press Act, promoted local self-government institutions, encouraged the spread of education and brought the Afghan War to an end. His policy, however, could not proceed beyond certain limits on account of the constraints imposed by the very character of British rule in India.

A bitter agitation directed at Ripon and his pro-Indian policies erupted over the so-called Ilbert Bill among the Anglo-Indians who had been annoyed by him.

The Criminal Procedure amendment Bill, or the Ilbert Bill as it came to be called after the name of the Law Member in Viceroy's Council was in essence a measure putting Indian Judges on the same footing as Europeans in dealing with all cases in the Bengal Presidency. Its purpose was to enable qualified Indians in the mofussil to try Europeans for criminal offences (in Presidency towns they were already allowed to do so). The Bill was brought forward because Indians were now rising in the ranks of the judicial service. It involved the possibility of trial of Europeans by Indian judges for criminal offences without a jury. It also gave right to Europeans to appeal to the High Court if they were not satisfied. But this provoked a storm of angry criticism amongst the Anglo-Indians. Ripon found that even the civil service was in sympathy with the opposition. In the press and in public meetings Indian character and culture were severely criticised. Ultimately the Government had to bow before this hostile opinion and the Bill was amended in such a manner that its very purpose was defeated.

The entire controversy has an important place in the circumstances leading to the emergency of an All-India body. It is often said that Indians learnt their first lesson in political agitation from Anglo-Indians on this occasion. This is not really true. Indians had already realised the importance of this method and had organised an all-India agitation on the question of Civil Service Examination. In fact they had already learnt from experience that Anglo-Indians would not make a common cause with them in their demands for more power and better privileges. The reaction of Indians throughout the country on the issue of agitation against the bill was the same. The Indian press made it clearly known that educated Indians valued the principle underlying the bill and would bitterly resent its abandonment. After the main principle was abandoned, the Indian press began to talk of an urgent need for national unity, greater organisation and self-reliance.

During the early 1880s the idea of a national organisation had become an important topic for discussion in the Indian press. The Ilbert Bill controversy seemed to reinforce this need. In July 1883, the Indian Association held a meeting which was attended by some 10,000 persons. Here it was decided that 'a national fund' with the aim of securing the political advancement of the country by means of agitation in England and in India, should be created. This proposal was widely acclaimed. However, in some quarters there was criticism on the ground that the Indian Association had failed to secure the support of other political associations in the country. The drive for national fund yielded only Rs. 20,000. But it sparked off widespread debate in the press. It was repeatedly pointed out during this debate that coordinated political action was called for and representatives of different political associations should meet annually in big cities of the country. In December 1883 an International Exhibition was scheduled to be held in Calcutta. The Indian Association decided to take advantage of this event and invited prominent public men and associations in different parts of the country to meet and discuss questions of general concern. Such a Conference was held from 28 to 31 December 1883 and was called the National Conference.

It was not a very representative or influential gathering. But it is significant that the programme adopted here was very similar to the one adopted by the Indian National Congress later. It provided an opportunity to educated Indians from about forty -five different places to meet and exchange views. It has rightly been described as the precursor of the Indian National Congress of 'the dress rehearsal' for it.

Check Your Progress 2

1 Make a list of five steps taken by Lord Lytton which tended to offend the Indians.

- i)
- ii)
- iii)
- iv)
- v)

2 Which of the following statements are right (✓) or wrong (×)

- i) Lord Ripon followed an approach, different from Lytton.
- ii) The Ilbert Bill enjoyed the support of the Anglo-Indians.
- iii) It is true that the Indians learnt the first lesson of political agitation from the Anglo-Indians.
- iv) The Indian National Congress has been rightly described as the precursor of the National Conference.

3 What do you understand by the Ilbert Bill controversy? Write on the space given below.

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9.5 THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATED INDIANS

Here an obvious question arises: which sections of the society were taking the initiative in organizing political activities during this period? We shall now take up this question.

Lead in organising political activities was taken by what historians have described as the 'educated middle classes', the 'professional classes', the 'English educated elite' or the 'intelligentsia'. It is important to indicate some of the traits and attributes of this section of Indians. Broadly speaking, reference here is to those people who had acquired knowledge of English, had grown under the impact of British rule and who had taken to professions like law, teaching and journalism or had secured government jobs. Originating in Presidency towns of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, they had spread like a thin covering over the whole country.

Inspired by national consciousness and a pride in the glory of the past, the middle class started constitutional agitation for political rights. Its growth was so gradual that it was hardly noticed at the initial stages. Its social and economic roots did not lie in industry or commerce, instead this class had its roots in tenurial landholding, government service or professions. This section took pride in calling itself the middle class, i.e. a section of society which was below the zamindars but above the toilers. It looked forward to playing the same role which the middle class had played in the west—that of spearheading the transition from the feudal to a 'modern' society through Renaissance, Reformation, democratization of political institutions and rapid industrialisation.

The members of the middle class belonged to that section of society which could not be called poor and they were normally from higher castes. It should, however, be noted that all high caste people did not enjoy a high economic status in society. For example, in Bengal and many other parts of India it was customary for well-to-do families to employ *Brahmins* as cooks. Similarly in Bombay, according to figures collected in 1864, 10,000 beggars were listed as *Chitpavan* or *Saraswat Brahmins*.

This section of society may be called an elite in the sense that it seemed to be the select part or pick of the society. But unlike an 'elite', the ideology of this class was not one of defending its own privileges either in terms of education or in terms of social status. Their one great asset was English education. Far from confining English education to themselves, many of the educated Indians devoted themselves to spreading this type of education. Later they were to take up with great zest the demand for the introduction of compulsory elementary education. Similarly they did not hesitate to take up such social reforms which could affect their privileges adversely.

In the Indian context, during our period of the term 'educated middle class' stood for groups which acquired western education and began to assert some kind of regional or national leadership. The social composition and outlook of these groups was significantly different from those of the princes, chiefs and zamindars who had earlier led resistance movements against the British. During the nineteenth century this class made a significant contribution to Indian life by championing the cause of religious and social reforms, writing patriotic songs, plays and novels, preparing economic critique of British rule and establishing political organizations.

Lord Dufferin, the Viceroy, once remarked that it was 'a microscopic minority'. This remark has been quoted time and again by different historians. It was a minority no doubt. But it was a minority which could not be ignored, as Dufferin himself knew. It was a minority that had common ideals and used similar idiom and could take a broad all-India view. It should also be remembered that in history it is the dynamic minorities which have usually determined the shape of nations. Here a reference may be made to another saying that had gained some currency. British officials used to argue that this class did not represent the masses and it were the British who looked after their interests or were the '*ma Bapp*' of the Indian masses. This argument was advanced because it served the imperial interest of justifying the perpetuation of British Raj. To a certain extent educated people in all countries are cut off from the masses. In India this alienation was compounded by the foreign medium of modern education. But knowledge of English did not mean that people ceased to know their own language. It is significant that as a class the educated Indians could never be bought over by the Government.

9.6 FOUNDATION OF THE CONGRESS

In this section we shall take up some relevant issues related to the foundation of the Congress, its initial scope and activities, resolutions passed and the extent of the participation by various sections.

9.6.1. First Meeting

The credit for organizing the first meeting of the Indian National Congress goes to A.O. Hume. He was a retired Government servant who had chosen to stay back in India after retirement. He was on very good terms with Lord Ripon and shared his view that the emergence of the educated class should be accepted as a political reality and that timely steps should be taken to provide legitimate outlets to the grievances of this class and efforts be made to satisfy its ambitions. He laboriously consolidated the network of contacts that he

had established. Early in December 1884 he reached Bombay to bid farewell to Ripon. He stayed on there for three months and during this period he discussed with the leaders who were influential in the Presidency, the programme of political action to be adopted by the educated Indians. In March 1885 it was decided that a conference of the Indian National Union (initially it was this name that was adopted) would be convened at Poona during the Christmas week. Initially Hume and his group considered Calcutta as the most likely place for the conference. But later they decided upon Poona, because it was centrally located and the Executive Committee of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha expressed readiness to make arrangements for the conference and provide necessary funds.



The First Indian National Congress, 1885

However, fate deprived Poona of the opportunity to host the first session of the Indian National Congress. The venue had to be shifted to Bombay because of the outbreak of cholera in Poona. The first meeting was held on Monday, 28 December 1885 in Gokaldas Tejpal Sanskrit College, Bombay. It was attended by 100 men of whom 72 were non-officials and were recognized as members. The honour of being the first ever Congress President belonged to W.C. Bonnerjee of Bengal. He was one of the first four Indian Barristers and one of the foremost legal luminaries in his day. His election established the healthy precedent that the President should be chosen from a province other than the one in which the Congress was being held.

9.6.2 Presidential Speech

The Presidential Speech of the first Congress President was aimed at stating explicitly the scope, character and objectives of the Congress. Moreover, the presidential speech also sought to remove many apprehensions and misgivings which might have arisen in the mind of the people about the exact intentions of the Congress.

The aims and objects of the Congress were defined very clearly by the President. He described the objectives as:

- Promotion of personal intimacy and friendship amongst the countrymen,
- eradication of all possible prejudices relating to race, creed or provinces;
- consolidation of sentiments of national unity,
- recording of the opinions of educated classes on pressing problems of the day, and
- laying down lines for future course of action in public interest.

Besides these demands the President enumerated the blessings conferred by the British on India. He assured that the educated Indians were thoroughly loyal and consistent well-

wishers of the Government. He clarified that their purpose in organizing the Congress was to represent their views to the ruling authorities and it was wrong to condemn them as a nest of conspirators and disloyalists. They accepted Hume's leadership because most of the members of the British community in India distrusted educated Indians. Finally, the President specified in cautious words what the Congress wanted. All that it wanted was that the basis of the Government should be widened. Such a policy would help not just the Government but also 'the people at large'. This also shows that the Congress was demanding a share in the government not to serve the interest of its own class but thought of the interests of all Indians in this context. In fact no aspiration was more keenly expressed than the one for national unity.

The Congress leaders had tremendous faith in what they described as the British sense of justice. They were not thinking in terms of expelling the British. All they wanted was that the policies adopted by the Government of India should aim at the welfare and good of Indians which meant really the advancement of their interests. For this purpose they wanted greater share in running the government. This was to be done through the development of representative institutions and appointment of Indians to higher posts.

9.6.3 Participation

It is often argued that the lawyers predominated in the Congress. For example, a noted historian Anil Seal points out that over half the delegates at the first Congress—39 out of 72—were lawyers and that during the decades to come, more than one-third of the delegates to every Congress session belonged to the legal professions. The old aristocracy—people like *rajas*, *maharajas*, *big zamindars* and very wealthy merchants were conspicuous by their absence. Nor did the peasants or artisans feel attracted towards it. The fact that the lawyers predominated cannot be denied. But this is more or less true of political organisations and legislatures everywhere. In India the problem became compounded by the fact that very few careers were open to educated Indians. Therefore, a very big number adopted the legal profession. The old aristocratic class did not participate in the Congress proceedings because it felt threatened by new liberal and nationalist ideas. Though the question of poverty of India had been discussed for sometime by various leaders, especially Dadabhai Naoroji, no attempt was made to associate the masses with the movement at this stage. When the Congress came to discuss the condition of the people, it resolved that the first step should be the granting of representative institutions. Given the tactics adopted by the Congress—that of petitioning and drawing attention to grievances by public discussions, this was natural.

9.6.4 Proceedings and Resolutions

The proceedings of the Congress were conducted in the most orderly and efficient manner. The resolutions were moved, discussed and passed in accordance with strict parliamentary procedure. Each resolution was proposed by a member belonging to one province, then seconded by a member belonging to another province and was supported by members from other provinces. The speeches were marked by moderation, earnestness and expressions of loyalty to the Crown. Historian Briton Martin (*New India*: 1885, Delhi 1970) comments that the first Congress was 'a distinctly professional affair, which would have been the envy of any comparable political meeting held in England or the United States at that time'.

The first congress adopted nine resolutions:

- In one resolution demand was put forward for the appointment of a Royal Commission for enquiring into Indian affairs on which Indians would be adequately represented.
- The other resolution demanded the abolition of the Indian Council of the Secretary of State for India. The Congress wanted that the Secretary of State should be responsible directly to the British Parliament. This demand was based on the idea that the British people were just and fair and, if properly informed, they would never deviate from the right path.
- There was also a resolution on foreign policy which condemned the annexation of Upper Burma.
- Other resolutions covered subjects such as liberalising the Constitution and functions of the Central and Provincial Legislative Councils, holding of simultaneous examination for the Civil Service in Britain and India and the need to reduce expenditure on the army, etc.

Before dispersing, the Congress took two more decisions:

- i) first was that an attempt should be made to get the resolutions passed at the Congress session ratified by political associations throughout the country.

ii) second, the next Congress would meet at Calcutta on 28 December, 1886. .

These decisions are important. These show that the leaders did not look upon the Congress as an isolated event but as the beginning of a movement.

In the above discussion you might have noticed that the question of social reforms was not touched upon. Some of the members insisted that it should be taken up. But in view of the fundamental differences of opinion on this issue, this was not done. However, some members took advantage of the presence of so many people to discuss issues like infant marriage and enforced widowhood at a public meeting which was held at the same venue after the formal Congress session was concluded.

Check Your Progress 3

1 Which sections of the society did the educated Indians come from? Write in five lines.

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2 List the aim and objectives of the Congress as defined by its first President.

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3 Mention four resolutions passed by the first Congress.

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9.7 CONTROVERSIES RELATING TO ITS ORIGIN

Since the Indian National Congress has played an important role in India's history, it was natural that contemporary opinion as well as subsequent historians should have speculated about the reasons which led to its establishment. In fact this question has been discussed ever since the congress was founded. Many scholars have made diligent attempts to identify the efforts of an individual or individuals or the particular circumstances which can be considered as the principal immediate factors behind the event. But the evidence is conflicting. The issue continues to be discussed among historians, a hundred years after the event. We shall see how far the foundation of the Indian National Congress can be explained in terms of the alternative positions of:

- official conspiracy theory
- ambitions and rivalries of Indian elites
- growth of feeling that there should be an all-India political body. We shall now take them up separately

9.7.1 Official Conspiracy Theory

If a body like the Indian National Congress had been founded by an Indian, it would have been accepted as something normal and logical. But the fact that the idea of an all-India political organisation was given concrete and final shape by an Englishmen —A.O. Hume— has given rise to many speculations. Why should an Englishman take the initiative?

Moreover, Hume was not just any Englishman: he belonged to the Indian Civil Service. It is said that while in service he had come across a mass of material which suggested that as a result of the sufferings of the masses and alienation of intellectuals, much discontent had accumulated and this could pose a threat to the continuance of British rule. The memories of the great revolt of 1857 were still fresh. Moreover, Hume himself had said that his aim was to provide, to use his own expression, a 'safety valve' providing control to the "great and growing forces generated by" the British themselves. This has been juxtaposed with W.C. Bannerjee's statement that Hume was acting under the direct advice of Dufferin. These two facts studied together gave rise to the argument that the Indian National Congress grew out of the British conspiracy, the aim of which was to provide a peaceful and constitutional outlet to the discontent amongst the educated Indians and thus provide against the threat to the *Raj*.

But historians are now disinclined to accept this view and several reasons are offered for this. People had exaggerated ideas about the influence which Hume was supposed to wield in official circles. Private papers to Lord Dufferin, the Governor-General, are now available and they show that Hume's views were not taken very seriously by British officials. Secondly, Hume's motives were nobler than just creation of a 'safety valve' with a view to provide safe outlets to educated Indians' discontent. He possessed a genuine human sympathy for India, and worked tirelessly for many years to make the Congress a viable and continuing organisation. From 1885 to 1906 he was the general secretary of the Congress and helped in guiding, shaping, coordinating and recording its activities. For Hume there was nothing inconsistent in working for the regeneration of the Indian people and at the same time accepting an 'enlightened' distant imperialism from which Indian people could substantially benefit for their social and cultural regeneration. Finally, because of other developments to which a reference has been made, the need for establishing an all-India organisation was being keenly felt and some efforts had in fact been made in this direction. Hume was by no means responsible for bringing about changes in the social and political milieu, which, in a broader sense, made the foundation and survival of a national organisation possible. The formation of the Congress cannot be described only to the initiative of an individual. There were other factors, as has already been pointed out. Hume was only a strong means for the realisation of the aspirations of the fairly large, and articulate middle class that was clamouring for sharing positions of responsibility with the British in the running of administration in the country.

In this context a question can arise. Why is it that educated Indians accepted Hume's leadership? Considering that some of them had been very active in their field for almost a decade, this question becomes all the more relevant. One reason could be that being an Englishman he was free from regional prejudices. But it seems that the more important reason was that Indian leaders wanted to proceed cautiously lest their efforts invite official wrath. Coming from a British ex-civil servant, such an effort was less likely to arouse hostility in official circles. They had a fairly correct and realistic estimate of what was possible. Under the circumstances, they wanted to consolidate and ventilate their views without arousing suspicion in the minds of their rulers. In his speech the President mentioned this in clear terms. He remarked: 'On more than one occasion remarks have been made by gentlemen', who should have been wiser, in condemning the proposed Congress as if it were a nest of conspirators and disloyalists'. If the founder was an Englishman, there was less likelihood of inviting distrust. In this context a remark of the great Moderate leader G.K. Gokhale is often quoted:

No Indian could have started the Indian National Congress If the founder of the Congress had not been a great Englishman and a distinguished ex-official, such was the distrust of political agitation in those days that the authorities would have at once found some way or the other of suppressing the movement.

9.7.2 Ambitions and Rivalries of Indian Elite

During the last two decades many historians, mainly centred at Cambridge, have argued that the Indian National Congress was, in some ways, not really national, that it was a movement of self-interested individuals and that it functioned as a vehicle for the pursuit of their material interests and parochial rivalries. (Anil Seal has been the most influential historian to express this view). But this view has been challenged in India. It is true that lust for power or desire to serve one's interests cannot be totally ignored. But at the same time the general factors cannot be brushed aside. Such an explanation ignores the feeling of hurt caused by racial discrimination, feeling of pride in the achievements of fellow-countrymen and also the

slowly growing perception that interests of their countrymen would be better served if relations between Britain and India were restructured. The feeling that Indians shared common culture and fundamental economic and political interests had been growing. Identity in aspirations and frustrations under an alien rule had strengthened these bonds. The founders of the Indian National Congress and various other organizations were inspired by idealism and loftiness of a nationalist vision because of which the interests of self, family, caste and community were subordinated to the interests of the Indian nation. They continued to look for ways of translating this national vision into a reality. The first generation of Congress leaders remained extremely conscious of the fact that they were being ruled by the British who had brought to India many liberal values and a complete break with them might not be in the interest of their countrymen. On the other hand, they thought of ways of making this structure serve the interests of their countrymen.

9.7.3 Need for an All-India Body

Viewed in a larger context, the founding of the Indian National Congress was a response to the then existing political and socio-economic conditions which had resulted from long subjection to the alien rule. During the 1880s, as we have seen, the idea of a national organisation was very much in the air. In fact, during the last ten days of 1885 as many as five conferences were held in different parts of the country. The Madras Mahajan Sabha held its second annual conference from 22 to 24, December. It was so timed as to enable the members of the Sabha to attend the Congress at Poona. The Second Indian National Conference, convened by the Indian Association, met at Calcutta. Early in December 1885 when the plan to hold a conference at Poona was announced, an attempt seems to have been made to persuade Surendranath Banerjea to cancel his conference. But he expressed his inability to do so at that stage. It merged with the Indian National Congress in 1886. Two other conferences held during the same period were the conferences organised by Eurasians at Jabalpur and by Prayag Central Hindu Samaj at Allahabad. Given the emergence of a countrywide educated class, the ideas they expressed and the organisational developments that had taken place, it was only a matter of time before a national body was created. The Indian National Congress represented the culmination of an awareness amongst educated groups of the need to work together for political purposes. It marked the culmination of a long process of evolution of political ideas and a process of organisation which had started from 1830s onwards.

It is interesting to note that the contemporaries—both participants and observers—showed a consciousness about two things. One was that they were making history and second that the Congress was a symbol of the growth of feeling of nationhood. The verdict of history has confirmed their opinion.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1 What do you understand by Safety Valve Theory? Write in about a hundred words.

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- 2 Which of the theories regarding the origin of the Congress, mentioned above, do you find acceptable? And why?

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9.8. LET US SUM UP

The establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885 thus marked the advent of a new era destined to see the fulfilment in a little over sixty years of the nation's urge for liberation, sovereignty and self-reliance. It was a visible symbol of the growing sense of unity amongst the Indian people. It is true that in the beginning Congress was not a well-knit political organisation, it had no regular membership or a central office, its views were very mild and moderate. But as someone has rightly said, great institutions have often had small beginnings.

9.9 KEY WORDS

Elite: The section belonging to the upper stratum of the society.

Mofussil: A sub-division of a district.

Presidency Towns: Centres of initial British occupation like Calcutta, Madras and Bombay.

Renaissance: A process of cultural awakening, and social transformation having occurred in Western Europe between the 14th and the 16th centuries.

Reformation: Religion reforms; an important step in the process of modernisation; followed Renaissance in Western Europe in the 15th century.

9.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1 Read Section 9.2
- 2 i) c ii) a iii) b.
- 3 i) × ii) √ iii) √ iv) ×

Check Your Progress 2

- 1 See Sub-sec. 9.4.1
- 2 i) √ ii) × iii) × iv) ×
- 3 See Sub-sec. 9.4.2

Check Your Progress 3

- 1 Write your answer from section 9.5
- 2 See Sub-sec. 9.6.2
- 3 See Sub-sec. 9.6.4

Check Your Progress 4

- 1 See Sub-sec. 9.7.1
- 2 Read the entire Section 9.7 and write your own answer.