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## Foundation of Indian National Congress in 1885

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### Abstract

The foundation of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885 marked a pivotal moment in the development of modern nationalism in India. This emergence was rooted in the rise of associations led by middle-class professionals, replacing earlier dominance by urban elites. The 1870s saw a shift towards coordinated political action among provinces, fostering a sense of unity. The nationalist movement thrived through a growing public sphere, encompassing vernacular newspapers and quasi-political professional groups. The INC's formation wasn't a mere British imposition; it stemmed from ideological motivations and Indian leaders seeking a platform for dialogue. Disappointments like failed liberal reforms and the Ilbert Bill controversy drove Indian leaders to recognize the need for a united organization. The INC became a significant symbol of resistance, unity, and collective action, leading India towards eventual independence.

**Keywords:** Indian national congress, modern nationalism, middle-class professionals, provincial associations, public sphere, vernacular newspapers, colonial rule, liberal reforms, Ilbert bill controversy, collective action

### Introduction

The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885, an important moment in Indian history. The Congress represents nationalism in India. In India, the Congress party was initially influenced by urban professionals. This was just part of the captivating dance of associations in Indian politics since the mid-nineteenth century. The 1870's marked a shift in power from urban notables to the middle class professionals. These associations, led by visionary leaders, replaced their predecessors with authority and distinction. There was coherence between bourgeois provincial alliances and Congress in the 1870s. In Calcutta, there are the Indian League and Indian Association in provincial alliances. Don't forget the Bombay Presidency Association, Madras Mahajan Sabha, and Poona Sarvajanik Sabha. These associations symbolise a transformative era in politics in the late 1800s. During that time, the birth of a public sphere helped spread nationalist fervour by intellectuals. Nationalism spread easily through this platform. In the late 1800s, there were many print publications and professional collectives that resembled political unions in the nationalist realm. The Bar-Associations in small towns have a lot of influence as professional organisations. The merging of professionals, especially lawyers, with social influence was crucial for community development. The colonial state's establishments became a breeding ground for rebellious intellectuals who saw British Rule as oppressive and lacking liberal values. They believed in parliamentary representation as the cornerstone of enlightened governance. British rule influenced early nationalists' negative view of governance. This era marked the beginning of national harmony, transcending provincial identities. Indian intellectuals struggled to reconcile their regional identities with a growing sense of national unity. In contemplation, the idea of unifying India seemed possible. Creating a nation-state in a land with many small realms was challenging. Rabindranath aimed to solve this problem by proposing the idea of a Magnificent Indian realm (Bharatbarshiya Mahajati), including all smaller nations. Surendranath Banerjee was a prominent nationalist pioneer. His memoir, A Nation in Making, explored the political changes of the late 19th century. It was written in the 1920s. Affiliation played a key role in shaping this evolution. In a realm of ambitious provincial elites. They formed alliances and called for national unity. They created the Indian National Congress, a symbol of hope and unity for a nation longing to be heard. The provincial political affiliations and print media helped foster agreement for the Congress.

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Small Indian towns saw an increase in vernacular newspapers. These publications spread like wildflowers, colouring the nation. The affiliations and use of communal articulation, including colloquial periodicals, were closely monitored by Lord Lytton through the Vernacular Press Act of 1878. This legislation aimed to limit the spread of anti-British sentiments in newspapers.

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

The emergence of a contemporary communal realm, where the dynamics of alliances flourished, hints at a sagacious narrative behind the genesis of the Congress. It signifies the diverse phases wherein the patriotic intellectuals acquired wisdom in the myriad ways of public articulation, all in pursuit of crafting the greatly yearned-for harmony among the regional alliances. The majestic ascent of the Congress from this vantage point was the glorious culmination of a captivating journey that had commenced in the bygone days of yore. These intriguing interpretations emerge as necessary adjustments to the implausible portrayal of the Congress as a 'safety valve' ingeniously implanted into the intricate tapestry of Indian politics by the esteemed dignitaries of the British Imperial state, orchestrated with the utmost finesse by the illustrious Allan Octavian Hume. The argument goes that Hume stumbled upon a treasure trove of government reports in the enchanting city of Simla, wherein he discovered compelling indications of an imminent uprising. In a valiant endeavour to steer clear of such an ominous outcome, he yearned to channelize the collective discontentment of the masses through a resolute constitutional movement. In his quest to forge connections with esteemed Indian leaders, our protagonist ventured forth, seeking out those with whom he shared a warm camaraderie. But before embarking on this noble endeavour, he sought counsel from none other than the illustrious Viceroy Dufferin, who, it seems, wholeheartedly embraced this audacious proposition. The tale of an imminent uprising, against which Hume seemingly yearned to forge a 'Safety Valve,' diminishes the genesis of the Congress to the realm of captivating detective literature. Contrary to the assertion made by Hume's esteemed biographer, A. W. Wedderburn, who professed that Hume had indeed laid eyes upon these elusive documents, their ethereal existence remained an enigma, forever eluding detection. Contrariwise, Hume's penchant for liberalism rendered him a rather unpopular character amidst the ranks of the British civil servants during that era. It is highly probable that Hume harboured a genuine and heartfelt ideological impetus to kickstart a transformative journey of liberal political advancement in the vibrant land of India, leveraging his extensive network among the eminent intellectual luminaries residing in the bustling metropolises across the subcontinent. Back in the year 1883, he had already embarked on a valiant endeavour to assemble a constitutional party in the vibrant land of India. In the twilight of days, as the esteemed Lord Ripon, known for his enlightened policies, bid adieu to the vibrant city of Madras and embarked on a voyage back to his homeland, a symphony of emotions swirled in the hearts of the Indian leaders. Driven by admiration and gratitude, Hume, accompanied by his loyal comrades from the Indian realm, orchestrated a grand spectacle of farewell, a tapestry woven with reverence and camaraderie. It is highly probable that the esteemed Indian leaders discovered Hume's invaluable

affiliation with the bureaucracy to be quite advantageous in their noble quest to establish a direct conduit to the government, thereby facilitating a harmonious and fruitful discourse with the esteemed officials. However, these contemplations, emanating from the astute minds of Indian visionaries, do not lend credence to the notion that the Congress was a mere creation of the British ruling elite. Nor should the birth of this phenomenon be solely ascribed to the individual endeavours of Hume in isolation.

### **Pre-Congress Associations**

The splendid era of the 1870's marked a momentous juncture, where the reins of power gracefully shifted from the urban notables to the esteemed middle class professional groups. This transformative period witnessed the rise of associations, guided by the sagacious leadership of these learned individuals, as they gracefully took centre stage, replacing their predecessors. Undoubtedly, a remarkable amount of coherence existed betwixt the bourgeois provincial affiliations of the 1870s and the esteemed Congress. In the bygone eras, the fraternities were predominantly governed by distinguished denizens of the metropolis. Nestled within the vibrant city of Calcutta, the esteemed British Indian Association stood as a sanctuary for the illustrious absentee land-owners who had found solace in the enchanting northern reaches of this bustling metropolis. The illustrious Bombay Association and the esteemed Madras Native Association were under the astute guidance of the visionary merchant magnates, the illustrious Parsee sethias and the distinguished Komati merchant elites, hailing from the vibrant cities of Bombay and Madras. The burgeoning affiliations that sprouted forth from the 1870's were, according to the eloquent Surendranath Banerjee, essentially assemblages of the bourgeoisie, or the political ensembles of the Madhyabittas (the betwixt-and-between classes), set apart from the Avijatas (the highborn elite). Distinguished intellectuals such as the esteemed S. R. Mehrotra and the brilliant Anil Seal, who have delved into the depths of this fascinating facet of the nascent nationalist movements, have eloquently penned their thoughts on how these pioneering endeavours bestowed upon the emerging leaders a valuable dose of political enlightenment. In addition to this, there existed a splendid thread of unbroken connection between the pre-Congress alliances and the Congress itself, in the sense that a majority of its initial pioneers emerged from the illustrious provincial associations. Nevertheless, there existed a pivotal aspect of differentiation. The majestic Congress, born from the depths of inspiration, was envisioned by its visionary founders as a splendid gathering, akin to the illustrious Bengal-based Indian National Conference that had graced the world stage a mere couple of years prior. The magnificent tapestry of organisational structure, adorned with a majestic central leadership, gracefully unfurled its vibrant colours in the annals of history, but only in the later epochs did it truly blossom into a formidable and exquisitely centralised entity, casting its influential aura over the vast expanse of the twentieth century. The initial concept, nonetheless, entailed orchestrating yearly nationwide gatherings wherein esteemed political figures hailing from diverse provincial associations would converge to engage in profound discussions concerning paramount national matters, be it the intricate realm of constitutional reforms or the intricate workings of the civil service. Surendranath Banerjee, with

utmost determination, embarked on a noble quest to orchestrate the grand Indian National Conference in the year 1883. His visionary spirit and unwavering resolve propelled him to take the helm and gather the minds of the nation together. The illustrious gathering of the Indian National Congress, held in the vibrant city of Bombay in the year 1885, exuded an air of shared purpose and vision. In the realm of political dynamics, Banerjee's Indian Association, rooted in the enchanting network of northern India, served as a steadfast pillar for the former. On the other hand, the Congress conveners, with their eyes set on victory, placed their trust in the unwavering backing of the provincial leaders hailing from the vibrant cities of Bombay, Pune, and Madras. In the grand year of 1886, a momentous occasion unfolded during the illustrious Calcutta session of the Congress. It was then, amidst a symphony of fervour and unity, that a truly magnificent national forum was birthed. The Indian National Conference, in a stroke of brilliance, made the resolute decision to merge seamlessly into the Congress, forever intertwining their destinies.

### **A National Conference**

The concept of a grand national conference proved to be an exceedingly ingenious mechanism in resolving the quandaries presented by the parochialism of the regional associations. The majority of the provincial leaders possessed their quaint gardens nestled within their beloved hometowns, where they harboured a strong aversion towards any unwelcome external meddling. In such a peculiar predicament, it was highly probable that they would harbour a deep-seated aversion towards the rise of a central political authority, which would inevitably endeavour to seize the self-governance of the various regions. In order for the provincial leaders to willingly relinquish their firmly entrenched regional interests and identities, it was imperative for them to delve deeper into the realm of mutual understanding. From this vantage point, the concept of a symposium proved to be exceedingly advantageous. This endeavour showcased remarkable ingenuity, especially considering the shortcomings of previous endeavours aimed at establishing a unified nationalist entity with branches spanning various provinces. The valiant efforts of the esteemed British Indian Association and the illustrious Indian Association in the vibrant city of Calcutta, in their noble pursuit, unfortunately fell short of attaining the coveted outcomes. We are well aware of the swift and efficient dissolution of both the Bombay and Madras branches of the esteemed British Indian Association. Despite the valiant efforts of the Indian Association to establish strong bonds with the fervent champions of nationalism in the northern realms, alas, it failed to transcend its provincial boundaries and attain the stature of a unified and all-encompassing entity. A refreshingly unique endeavour, bearing resemblances to its counterparts, emerged from the esteemed East India Association nestled in the heart of London. This distinguished association was established with the noble purpose of bridging the gap between Indian aspirations and the discerning ears of the British Government. The ingenious masterminds behind the EIA aspired to forge an extraordinary pan-Indian alliance, adorned with splendid branches that would gracefully sprawl across the provinces. However, in the grand scheme of things, it was solely in the bustling city of Bombay that the opportunity to establish a new branch presented itself. In

the radiant glow of these previous misfortunes prior to the year 1885, the esteemed wordsmith S.R. Mehrotra eloquently expounds upon a novel and audacious proposition that sprouted forth between the years 1883 and 1885. This groundbreaking notion, which captivated the minds of many, revolved around the concept of convening a grandiose national conference, serving as the very nucleus of their aspirations. Over the passage of time, this would enable a harmonious convergence to flourish among the nation's populace regarding pivotal political matters, all the while safeguarding the diverse interests of each province. This grand scheme was the original blueprint, but as the Congress emerged as the epicentre of fervent patriotic emotions, a gradually maturing and steadfast establishment took shape.

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

The birth of Congress is explained by scholarly works that explore the political wisdom of past intellectuals. Provincial politics set the stage for union politics as associations realised the importance of a nationwide movement and unity among provinces. The Indian Association of S N Banerjee's effort was a remarkable trendsetter. Similar desires for political unity beyond regional boundaries were seen in cities like Pune and Bombay. Indian press reports provinces uniting for representative governance and economic liberation from imperialism. In the late 1870s, the Indian Association gained political influence through the Civil Service gateway, expanding beyond Bengal. Salisbury lowered the age threshold for the ICS examination. This act sparked the Indian Association's journey towards a national movement. Lytton's reign further propelled concerns like curtailing press liberty. Surendranath Banerjee's ventures into other provinces failed to ignite excitement. His relationships in northern India, especially with Bengali expatriates, helped when organising protests. The gatherings opposed lowering the age requirement for Civil Services entry. This move threatened Indian's chances to compete equally with English counterparts in the recruitment examination. Poona sparked a desire for inter-provincial collaboration.

In 1878, Poona Sarvajanik Sabha went to Bengal. They aimed to have meaningful discussions with Calcutta's political luminaries. The purpose of this meeting was to address concerns about the native press and local industries. The Sabha strongly supported imposing tariffs on imported goods, especially textiles that could overshadow local craftsmanship. The Poona representatives wanted to work with the Bengali counterparts to increase the number of non-official Indian members in the legislative councils. In 1880, the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha and the Indian Association collaborated on a statement. They urged the British electorate to support the Liberal Party in the parliamentary elections. They hoped British liberals would support Indian legislative reform.

### **The 1880s**

The Congress's rise in the 1880s highlights the political actions of the educated elite. In 1880, Indian politics had a brief liberal period. Lord Ripon was the Governor-General during this enchanting period. Ripon's appointment excited India. The news spread quickly, igniting people's hearts with passion. Ripon's mentor, William Gladstone, became Britain's Prime Minister. Gladstone, a liberal candidate, won



the 1880 British election. He opposed the conservatism of Benjamin Disraeli and Lord Lytton in Indian policy. Lytton enforced strict regulations on the press to suppress the liberal movement in India. The Gladstonians supported John Mill's liberalism and wanted to integrate liberal establishments in India gradually. The liberal endeavour introduced local elective institutions and respected press freedom. The enthusiasm for liberal endeavours was quickly extinguished by opposition from the imperial establishment, which was steeped in racism and paternalism. In India, Ripon stood out as a beacon of liberalism. The disappointment from Ripon's failed reform efforts made Indian leaders realise the need for a strong institution to negotiate with the imperial bureaucracy. The Local Self-Government Act, created by Ripon, gave us a democratic system where elected individuals had power at the grassroots level. This recipe was important for European liberals who valued local autonomy in their education on self-governance. The White ruling elite's stubbornness contributed to bureaucratic control after the reform in 1885.

### **Ilbert Bill Controversy**

The Indian encounter with the Ilbert Bill agitation was disheartening. Courtney Ilbert, a member of the Viceroy's Council, has proposed groundbreaking legislation. This proposal aims to end judicial discrimination in India. Ilbert wants to remove racial barriers and end the privilege of Europeans evading trial under Indian subordinate judges. Ilbert is paving the way for a more equitable legal system. The measure caused anger among British businesses, who felt supported by the imperial bureaucracy. British business magnates, especially the Planters, saw this as a threat to their control over plantation workers. The cloak of judicial immunity protected them from consequences for their misdeeds. Instinctively, they chanted the endangered Europeans' war cry. They rallied Eurasian communities in cities to protest the decree. In Calcutta, the Bengal Chamber of Commerce organised a public gathering. The event had a cosmopolitan European community, adding an international touch. During the assembly, the Viceroy faced aggression and maltreatment. Passionate instigators formed the Anglo-Indian Defence Association to gather resources and support. The Viceroy had to find a middle ground due to the instigators' strong support within the bureaucracy. Only Indian members of the Civil Service can preside over trials of European transgressors.

### **The Indian Response**

The Ilbert agitation created a divide between Indians and Europeans and taught Indian leaders about political mobilisation. Under pressure, the government crumbled like a sandcastle. The Indian leadership pressured the government to achieve their goals. After the Ilbert bill controversy, Indian Association leaders launched a counter-agitation. This move was in response to a judgement by Justice Norris of the Calcutta High Court. Norris played a key role in the Ilbert bill controversy. In an intriguing incident, he brought a revered ancestral deity to court to settle a property dispute. Banerjee strongly criticised Norris's disrespectful behaviour towards Hindu religious sentiment. He was imprisoned by the Calcutta High Court after Judge Sir Romesh Chandra Mitter delivered a dissenting verdict, tarnishing his reputation. There was a strong student uprising in Calcutta against the ruling. What

stole the spotlight was the extraordinary occurrence. Protests and gatherings bloomed across northern India. These events were sparked by a verdict seen as discriminatory, leading to a collective outcry against racial prejudice. Amidst fervour and commotion, the National Fund emerged as a beacon of hope and unity. After being released from prison, Banerjee organised the Indian National Conference, a significant event in his journey. The endeavour was supported by the British Indian Association and the Mohammedan Literary Society, led by Syed Amir Ali. After two years, the Conference reconvened alongside the Indian National Congress gathering organised by Hume and his comrades. The Congress's birth is often explained by the political actions of intellectuals in the past. Provincial politics led to unity and collaboration among regions.

### **Conclusion**

In a grand finale, the establishment of the Indian National Congress in the year 1885 stands as a momentous landmark in the annals of Indian history, encapsulating the dawn and solidification of contemporary patriotism within the nation. During this remarkable epoch, the Indian political landscape underwent a magnificent metamorphosis, as the reins of power shifted from the hands of urban elites to the forefront of middle-class professionals. These newfound associations, brimming with vitality and vision, rose to prominence, heralding a new era of influence and authority. The splendid decade of the 1870s emerged as a pivotal juncture, where provincial associations ingeniously paved the way for synchronised political endeavours on a grand national canvas.

The fervent nationalist uprising flourished within a blossoming realm of public discourse, adorned with an abundance of colloquial periodicals and guilds metamorphosing into quasi-political alliances. The enchanting ambiance of this splendid environment served as a catalyst for the widespread propagation of fervent nationalist notions, which surged forward with unwavering force. As the erudite intelligentsia, disenchanted with the shackles of British colonial dominion, yearned to forge a harmonious alliance among the myriad provincial identities, they fervently rallied beneath the resplendent flag of a shared national destiny.

The birth of the Indian National Congress sprouted forth as a grand culmination of these intricate processes, intertwining like the delicate threads of a vibrant tapestry. In its embryonic stages, the Congress sprouted as a yearly gathering, brimming with potential and ideas. But as the sands of time trickled through the hourglass, this humble assembly underwent a metamorphosis, blossoming into a formidable and consolidated entity. The Congress served as a magnificent conduit, a grand avenue for provincial leaders to engage in profound dialogue, construct a harmonious consensus on paramount political matters, and gracefully transcend the confines of regional boundaries.

Contrary to the myriad of mythical tales circulating, the formation of the Congress was not merely a byproduct of cunning British manoeuvrings. The notion that it served as a "safety valve" enforced by the British authorities oversimplifies the intricately woven tale. In the grand tapestry of history, luminaries such as the illustrious Allan Octavian Hume, driven by their profound ideological convictions, joined forces with visionary Indian leaders who yearned for a fertile ground to foster meaningful dialogue.

Together, their collective efforts breathed life into the very fabric of the Congress, shaping its inception and purpose. The majestic Congress embodied a magnificent fusion of endeavours by diverse provincial associations, showcasing a remarkable path of inter-provincial collaboration and resolute national harmony.

Inspired by the heartaches and letdowns of the 1880s, specifically the letdown of progressive reforms and the uproar caused by the Ilbert Bill controversy, the visionary Indian leadership acknowledged the imperative need for a cohesive entity that could skillfully engage in negotiations with the colonial administration. In the face of these formidable challenges, the Congress gracefully emerged as a formidable force, donning the mantle of a resolute response. It bestowed upon the Indian leadership the power to deftly exert pressure and wield influence over the intricate tapestry of governmental decisions.

The Congress holds immense importance, not solely in its inception, but in its remarkable metamorphosis into a powerful emblem of defiance, harmony, and synchronised endeavour. As the fiery flames of the nationalist movement blazed brighter with each passing day, the illustrious Congress emerged as a mighty stage where visionary leaders could unleash the symphony of their grievances, passionately vocalise their demands, and ardently strive towards the noble pursuit of a political system that was not only representative but also infused with the sweet nectar of justice. In the grand tapestry of history, the inception of the Indian National Congress in the year 1885 marked the dawning of a new era, igniting the flames of change that would guide India on its remarkable odyssey towards liberation and the pursuit of self-rule.

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