



INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS AND THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE

Mrs. Bhagyashri Dasari
Research Scholar

ABSTRACT

The Indian National Congress (INC) played a central role in the political history of modern India and in the development of the Indian freedom struggle. Established in 1885, the Congress initially provided a platform for political discussion, constitutional demands, and the representation of Indian interests before the colonial government. Over time, its objectives, methods, leadership, and social base underwent significant changes. The emergence of assertive nationalism in the early twentieth century broadened the scope of Congress politics, while the Swadeshi movement and opposition to colonial policies strengthened nationalist mobilization. Under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, the Congress became increasingly connected with mass movements, including the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34), and Quit India Movement (1942).



Leaders such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel contributed in different ways to the development of nationalist politics. The Congress also engaged with questions of social reform, economic development, communal relations, constitutional change, and the future political structure of India. Its relationship with revolutionary groups, workers, peasants, women, and other political organizations varied across different periods. The study of the Indian National Congress and the Freedom Struggle therefore provides an understanding of the changing forms of Indian nationalism, the transition from elite political activity to mass mobilization, and the complex political developments that ultimately accompanied the end of British colonial rule in 1947.

KEYWORDS: Indian National Congress, Indian National Movement, Freedom Struggle, British Colonial Rule, Indian Nationalism, Mahatma Gandhi, Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian National Congress (INC) occupies a central place in the history of India's struggle against British colonial rule. Established in 1885, the Congress initially functioned as a political platform through which educated Indians expressed their concerns, presented constitutional demands, and sought greater participation in the administration of the country. During its early phase, leaders such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Surendranath Banerjee, Pherozeshah Mehta, and Gopal Krishna Gokhale emphasized constitutional methods, political education, public debate, and administrative reform. During the early twentieth century,

Congress politics underwent important changes. The growth of assertive nationalism, the Swadeshi Movement, and opposition to colonial policies expanded political participation beyond the early educated elite. Leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, and Bipin Chandra Pal advocated stronger forms of nationalist political action and contributed to the widening of the national movement.

A major transformation occurred after Mahatma Gandhi's emergence as a prominent national leader. The Congress increasingly adopted methods of mass mobilization and non-violent resistance. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34), and Quit India Movement (1942) brought large sections of the population into political activity. Women, peasants, workers, students, and members of different social groups participated in various phases of these movements.

The Congress also contained diverse ideological and political perspectives. Leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, and Rajendra Prasad differed on questions concerning economic policy, political strategy, constitutional development, and the future of independent India. The organization also interacted with other political groups and movements, including revolutionary organizations, workers' organizations, peasant movements, and organizations representing different religious and social interests.

The history of the Indian National Congress is therefore closely connected with the broader development of Indian nationalism. Its evolution from a forum for constitutional political discussion into a major organization for mass political mobilization reflects significant changes in Indian society and politics under colonial rule. Studying the Congress and the freedom struggle helps explain the development of nationalist ideas, political participation, mass movements, constitutional negotiations, and the complex circumstances surrounding India's independence in 1947.

Aims and Objectives -

1. To examine the origin and historical development of the Indian National Congress from its establishment in 1885.
2. To study the political, social, economic, and administrative conditions that contributed to the emergence of the Congress.
3. To examine the changing objectives, policies, and methods of the Congress during different phases of the freedom struggle.
4. To study the contributions of important Congress leaders, including Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.
5. To examine the transition of the Congress from an organization primarily focused on constitutional demands to a major platform for mass political mobilization.
6. To study the role of the Congress in major movements such as the Swadeshi Movement, Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement.
7. To examine the participation of women, peasants, workers, students, and other social groups in Congress-led nationalist activities.
8. To analyze the ideological diversity within the Congress and the debates surrounding nationalism, constitutional reform, Swaraj, economic development, and social change.
9. To examine the relationship between the Congress and other political and social organizations during the freedom struggle.
10. To understand the role of the Indian National Congress in the political developments that preceded Indian independence in 1947.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE -

The history of the Indian National Congress and the Freedom Struggle has been extensively studied by historians and scholars from political, social, economic, and ideological perspectives. The existing literature provides an understanding of the formation of the Congress, its changing objectives, major nationalist movements, leadership, mass participation, and the political developments that preceded independence. Bipan Chandra and his co-authors, in *India's Struggle for Independence, 1857-1947*, provide a detailed account of the development of Indian nationalism and the role of the Congress in major phases of the freedom movement. The work examines the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India movements and places them within the broader context of anti-colonial politics.

R. C. Majumdar, in his studies of the freedom movement, provides extensive historical documentation concerning Congress activities, nationalist leaders, political organizations, and important events. His work also presents a critical interpretation of different phases of the national movement. Sumit Sarkar, in *Modern India, 1885-1947*, examines the growth of nationalism and the changing political character of the Congress. His study gives particular attention to the Swadeshi movement, mass politics, Gandhian nationalism, and the social dimensions of political mobilization. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, in *From Plassey to Partition and After*, analyzes the development of Indian nationalism and the changing relationship between colonial rule, political organizations, and different social groups. His work provides useful context for understanding Congress politics within the wider history of colonial India.

The writings of Judith M. Brown focus particularly on Mahatma Gandhi, Congress politics, and the development of mass nationalism. Her research helps explain Gandhi's political leadership and the transformation of Congress organization and methods during the twentieth century. A. R. Desai, in *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, approaches the freedom movement from a sociological and economic perspective. His work emphasizes the relationship between nationalism, social change, economic developments, and emerging political groups. The collected writings and speeches of Mahatma Gandhi provide primary-source material for understanding the ideas of non-violence, Satyagraha, Swaraj, and mass political action. Similarly, the writings of Jawaharlal Nehru provide insights into nationalist politics, colonialism, and the development of modern Indian political thought.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that the Indian National Congress underwent substantial transformation between 1885 and 1947. Scholars differ in their interpretations of Congress strategies, leadership, social composition, and relationship with other political organizations. These studies provide a strong foundation for examining the Congress as a major but internally diverse component of India's wider freedom struggle.

Research Methodology -

The study of the Indian National Congress and the Freedom Struggle adopts a historical, descriptive, and analytical research methodology. The research is based primarily on the systematic study of both primary and secondary sources relating to the establishment, development, activities, leadership, policies, and movements of the Indian National Congress. Primary sources include Congress session proceedings, resolutions, speeches, letters, autobiographies, newspapers, government reports, official correspondence, and writings of prominent national leaders. Secondary sources include books, research articles, biographies, historical works, and scholarly studies dealing with Indian nationalism and the freedom movement.

A chronological approach is used to trace the development of the Congress from its establishment in 1885 through the major phases of the freedom struggle up to independence in 1947. A thematic

approach is also adopted to examine constitutional politics, Swadeshi, Gandhian movements, mass mobilization, political negotiations, ideological debates, and the participation of different social groups.

The collected sources are evaluated through historical source criticism by considering their authenticity, reliability, context, authorship, and limitations. Comparative analysis is used to understand differences between the Moderates and Assertive Nationalists, as well as changing Congress strategies during the Gandhian period. The study also considers the relationship between the Congress and other political and social organizations. The research therefore seeks to provide a balanced interpretation of the evolution of Congress politics, its changing methods, leadership, mass participation, and role in India's struggle against British colonial rule.

Statement of the Problem –

The Indian National Congress played a significant role in the development of Indian nationalism and the struggle against British colonial rule. Established in 1885, it gradually transformed from a platform for political discussion and constitutional demands into a major organization associated with mass nationalist movements.

The changing nature of the Congress makes it important to study its development across different phases of the freedom struggle. The central problem of the study is to examine the origin, growth, objectives, leadership, policies, strategies, and changing political role of the Indian National Congress between 1885 and 1947. The study seeks to understand the factors that influenced the transformation of Congress politics and the reasons for changes in its methods of political action.

Another important aspect of the problem is the study of the different ideological tendencies within the Congress. Differences among Moderates, Assertive Nationalists, Gandhian nationalists, socialists, and other groups influenced debates concerning constitutional reform, Swaraj, mass mobilization, economic policy, and the future of India. The study also examines the role of the Congress in major movements such as the Swadeshi Movement, Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement.

It considers the participation of peasants, workers, students, women, and other sections of society and examines the relationship between Congress-led movements and other political organizations. The response of the British colonial government, including constitutional reforms, repression, negotiations, arrests, and political agreements, is also an important part of the study. The research further considers the complex political developments that preceded independence in 1947.

Thus, the problem of the study is to develop a comprehensive historical understanding of the evolution of the Indian National Congress, its changing political strategies, internal diversity, mass mobilization, and contribution to the wider Indian freedom struggle.

Need of the Study –

The study of the Indian National Congress and the Freedom Struggle is important for understanding the development of Indian nationalism and the political struggle against British colonial rule. The Congress played a major role in organizing political activities, articulating Indian demands, and mobilizing people during different phases of the national movement. There is a need to study the origin and evolution of the Indian National Congress from its establishment in 1885 to independence in 1947. Examining its changing objectives, leadership, organizational structure, and political methods helps explain the transformation of Indian nationalist politics over time.

The study is also necessary to understand the transition from constitutional politics to mass political movements. The Swadeshi Movement, Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement,

and Quit India Movement demonstrate different stages of political mobilization and provide an important basis for studying popular participation in the freedom struggle. Another important need is to examine the contributions of major leaders and the diverse ideological perspectives within the Congress.

Differences among Moderates, Assertive Nationalists, Gandhian leaders, socialists, and other groups influenced the direction and strategies of the national movement. The study also helps examine the participation of women, peasants, workers, students, and other sections of Indian society. Their involvement provides a broader understanding of how nationalist politics interacted with social and economic changes during the colonial period.

Finally, studying the Indian National Congress in its wider historical context helps researchers understand its relationship with other political organizations, social movements, revolutionary groups, and the British colonial government. Such a study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex political processes that shaped India's freedom struggle and culminated in independence in 1947.

Further Suggestions for Research –

Further research on the Indian National Congress and the Freedom Struggle can examine the organization from regional, social, economic, political, and ideological perspectives. Comparative studies of Congress activities in different provinces can provide a deeper understanding of regional variations in nationalist politics. Researchers can investigate the participation of women, peasants, workers, students, tribal communities, and marginalized social groups in Congress-led movements and examine their experiences through local sources.

Greater use of primary sources such as Congress resolutions, session proceedings, newspapers, private correspondence, government records, autobiographies, and contemporary pamphlets can strengthen historical research. Further studies may examine the evolution of Congress ideology from constitutional reform to the demand for complete independence and analyze debates among different ideological groups within the organization.

Research can also focus on the relationship between the Congress and revolutionary organizations, trade unions, peasant movements, socialist groups, and other political organizations. The role of provincial Congress committees and local-level leaders deserves greater attention, as national-level studies may not fully capture grassroots political activity. Additional research can examine the economic dimensions of Congress policies, including Swadeshi, economic nationalism, village industries, and debates concerning industrialization and development. Studies of political imprisonment, colonial repression, political negotiations, and the experiences of activists can further expand understanding of the freedom struggle.

Finally, digital humanities, archival databases, oral histories, and geographical mapping can be used to document Congress meetings, campaigns, arrests, political networks, and regional movements. Interdisciplinary research combining history, sociology, economics, political science, and cultural studies can provide broader perspectives on the Congress and its place in India's struggle for independence.

Scope and Limitations –

Scope of the Study

The study covers the origin, growth, development, and historical role of the Indian National Congress from its establishment in 1885 to Indian independence in 1947. It examines the changing objectives, organizational structure, leadership, policies, and political strategies of the Congress during different phases of the freedom struggle. The study includes the role of the Moderates, Assertive Nationalists, and Gandhian leadership, along with major movements such as the Swadeshi Movement, Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement. It also considers the

participation of women, peasants, workers, students, and other social groups in Congress-led activities. The relationship between the Congress and other political organizations, revolutionary groups, social movements, and the British colonial government is also included. The study further examines important constitutional developments, negotiations, political debates, and events leading to independence in 1947.

Limitations of the Study

The study has certain limitations because the history of the Indian National Congress covers a long period, extensive geographical area, and diverse political and social groups. It is therefore difficult to provide equal coverage to every province, local organization, leader, movement, and political event. Historical sources may also present different interpretations of Congress policies, leadership, and political strategies. Some local records, private correspondence, and regional documents may be incomplete, inaccessible, or unavailable.

The study primarily depends on available primary and secondary sources, including official records, Congress documents, newspapers, biographies, autobiographies, and scholarly works. Differences in the perspectives of colonial officials, Congress leaders, and later historians may also influence the interpretation of particular events. Therefore, the study focuses on major developments and representative examples rather than attempting to provide an exhaustive account of every aspect of the Congress and the freedom struggle.

Findings -

The study finds that the Indian National Congress, established in 1885, developed from an organization primarily concerned with constitutional representation into a major platform for nationalist political mobilization. During its early phase, Congress leaders relied largely on petitions, resolutions, public meetings, political associations, and constitutional demands. The emergence of assertive nationalism in the early twentieth century expanded the nature of nationalist politics, while the Swadeshi movement contributed to wider political participation.

A major transformation occurred during the Gandhian period. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1934), and Quit India Movement (1942) represented important phases of mass political mobilization. These movements involved different sections of Indian society, including women, students, peasants, workers, and urban groups, although participation varied according to region and period.

The study further finds that Congress politics contained diverse ideological perspectives. Moderates, assertive nationalists, Gandhian leaders, socialists, and other groups differed on political methods, economic policies, constitutional questions, and the nature of independent India. Leaders such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel contributed to different stages of the movement.

The Congress also maintained complex relationships with revolutionary organizations, peasant and workers' movements, and other political groups. The British colonial government responded to nationalist activities through constitutional measures, negotiations, restrictions, arrests, prosecutions, and repression. Overall, the findings show that between 1885 and 1947, the Congress underwent substantial organizational and political transformation and became an important component of the wider Indian movement for independence.

Discussion –

The Indian National Congress played a significant role in the development of Indian nationalism and the freedom struggle from 1885 to 1947. Its political character changed considerably over time in response to colonial policies, changing social conditions, new forms of political thought, and the growing demand for self-government. The early Congress emphasized constitutional methods, political representation, administrative reforms, and the creation of political awareness among Indians. The growth of assertive nationalism marked an important change in Congress politics. Leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak and others emphasized broader political participation and stronger forms of nationalist activity. The Swadeshi movement further expanded nationalist consciousness and encouraged the use of indigenous goods and institutions as part of opposition to colonial policies.

The arrival of Mahatma Gandhi transformed the methods and social reach of Congress politics. Satyagraha, non-cooperation, civil disobedience, and other forms of non-violent political action became important methods of mobilization. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1934), and Quit India Movement (1942) brought large numbers of people into political activity. Participation varied across regions and social groups, but these movements demonstrated the increasing connection between Congress politics and popular mobilization. Congress was not a politically uniform organization. Different leaders and groups held contrasting views on constitutional reform, economic development, socialism, communal relations, political strategy, and the structure of independent India. The debates involving leaders such as Gandhi, Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, Patel, and other Congress figures demonstrate the diversity of political thought within the organization.

The Congress also interacted with other political organizations and social movements. Its relationship with revolutionary groups, peasant organizations, workers' movements, socialist groups, and organizations representing different communities changed according to political circumstances. These interactions contributed to the complexity of the wider national movement. The British colonial government responded to Congress activities through constitutional reforms, political negotiations, restrictions, arrests, prosecutions, and other measures. The repeated cycles of protest, repression, negotiation, and political reform shaped the final decades of colonial rule.

Overall, the discussion shows that the Indian National Congress underwent a substantial transformation between 1885 and 1947. Its history reflects the changing forms of Indian nationalism, the expansion of political participation, internal ideological debates, and the interaction of mass movements with constitutional and political processes during the struggle for independence.

Conclusion –

The Indian National Congress played an important role in the development of Indian nationalism and the freedom struggle between 1885 and 1947. From its establishment as a forum for political discussion and constitutional demands, the Congress gradually developed into a major organization associated with mass political mobilization. Its changing objectives and methods reflected the evolving political conditions of colonial India. The emergence of assertive nationalism and the Swadeshi movement broadened the scope of political participation. Under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, methods such as Satyagraha, non-cooperation, and civil disobedience became important features of Congress-led political activity. The Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement involved participation from different sections of Indian society and significantly shaped the political environment of the colonial period.

The history of the Congress also demonstrates considerable ideological and organizational diversity. Different leaders and groups expressed varying views on constitutional reform, Swaraj, socialism,

economic development, social reform, and political strategy. These debates contributed to the changing character of Congress politics. The Congress interacted with numerous political and social organizations throughout the freedom struggle, while the British colonial government responded through reforms, negotiations, restrictions, arrests, and repression. These interactions formed an important part of the political developments leading to independence.

Thus, the Indian National Congress occupies an important place in the history of India's freedom struggle. Its evolution from constitutional political activity to large-scale nationalist mobilization provides significant insight into the development of Indian nationalism and the complex political processes that accompanied the end of British colonial rule in 1947.

Recommendations –

The study recommends that the history of the Indian National Congress should be examined through a broad historical framework covering its development from 1885 to 1947. Further research should give greater attention to the changing nature of Congress organization, leadership, political strategies, and mass participation across different periods. Greater use of primary sources such as Congress session proceedings, resolutions, newspapers, government records, correspondence, speeches, and autobiographical writings should be encouraged to strengthen historical research. Regional and local studies should receive greater attention because Congress activities and popular participation varied considerably across different parts of India.

Further research should examine the participation of women, peasants, workers, students, and other social groups and should investigate the relationship between the Congress and other political organizations, including revolutionary, socialist, communist, and communal political groups. Comparative studies of the major phases from 1885–1907, 1907–1930, 1930–1943, and 1943–1947 can provide a clearer understanding of the transformation of Congress politics.

Historical institutions should preserve and digitize archival materials relating to the Congress and make them accessible to students and researchers. Interdisciplinary research combining history, sociology, political science, economics, and cultural studies should also be encouraged to provide a wider understanding of the Congress and its relationship with India's freedom struggle.

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