

Indian National Congress

The Indian National Congress was the first national organization of Indians to seek a voice in the way India was governed. It brought together representatives from all parts of India and helped them to see themselves as members of a nation. Eventually, the Indian National Congress planted the seeds that resulted in independence for India from Great Britain.



During the 19th century, India formed the richest colony of the British Empire. It was at first under the control of the British East India Company, but prior to that, India's individual states had their own laws and customs and were often at war with each other. While the company brought an enforced peace, it also largely ended the Indian share in government and limited the rights of the Indian people. In 1854, the charter of the East India Company expired, and the British government took direct control over India. Despite the widespread Indian Rebellion of 1857, British control over India remained firm through the 19th century.

With the defeat of the rebellion in 1857, Indians were left without any illusions about their ability to overthrow the British by force. Many leaders decided to avail themselves of the Western-style education that the British offered. Universities based on the English model were created, and Indians were able to travel to Great Britain to study. A small class of educated Indians soon graduated, fluent in English, knowledgeable about European politics, and interested in changing the system. They saw a promise of new opportunities and partnership in the rule of India. They were not interested so much in the removal of British rule as in its modification. English rule also helped create a sense of nation among this educated class. Such improved means of transport and communication as telegraphs, railroads, and newspapers, as well as education in English, helped unite the people across traditional caste and sect barriers. Standardization in administration resulted in uniform laws, courts, schools, and procedures, and these shared experiences helped people from different provinces begin to consider themselves as Indians.

one of the good things the Brits brought to India

The new educated class of Indians were primarily Hindus from coastal cities where British influence was strongest. Their opportunities for political involvement came first at the local level. After the Great Rebellion of 1857, the British introduced greater measures of local self-government in cities and villages. The cost of government expenditures was shifted largely to local taxpayers. Educated Indians led protests against high taxes, citing such justifications as "no taxation without representation." Protests led to the institution of a legislative council in 1861, which had limited power to legislate and which included some Indians. Positions in the government bureaucracy were closed to educated Indians, who turned increasingly to teaching, law, and journalism, professions from which political participation was an easy step. Increasing numbers of protests were organized by Indians who had graduated from universities, causing the British to reconsider the value of higher education for Indians.

In the 1880s, Lord Ripon became viceroy of India. He believed in the value of public opinion and sought to capture its support. He extended local self-government, which was welcomed by many Indians as an opening to representative self-government. Ripon's reforms encouraged educated Indians. In 1882, Surendranath Banerjea suggested convening a "national congress" to strengthen the viceroy by ensuring the availability of Indian opinion to the government. In 1883, the *Voice of India*, a journal of press extracts, revealed a growing sense of unanimity on issues among the educated class. A private network of educated men, known as the Indian National Union, planned to call an all-India "national conference" at Poona in December 1885. To avoid confusion with a similar group, the name was changed to the Indian National Congress.

For Lord Ripon brought public opinion.

The first Indian National Congress met on December 28, 1885. The representatives were all men, university graduates, and Hindus. The other major religious group in India, the Muslims, had few university-educated leaders and were not included in the invitation. The Congress met and debated the issues of the day. The resolutions they passed were couched in terms of loyalty to the British Crown, with a sense of the blessings of British rule. The grievances the Congress raised reflected the concerns of an educated group. They addressed such issues as admission of Indians to the Indian Civil Service, extension of representative government, support for education, and promotion of Indian development.

The Indian National Congress did not represent a party in a traditional sense. It did not have a clear ideology, effective organization and finances, or regular recruitment procedures. It was a loose association of influential, educated men in provincial politics who recognized their common need for a national platform. Activities at first were limited to planning the annual meeting at Christmas time. At the meetings, issues were debated, resolutions were passed, and a committee to plan the next year's meeting was organized. Finances were insecure, and the membership was loose and unstable. Depending on where the annual meeting was held, the attendance varied greatly, ranging from 1,584 in Poona in 1895, to 243 in Lahore in 1909. The members were loyal to the British Raj or system of rule. They sought to modify the system, to allow Indians more voice in how their country was ruled, but they did not seek independence. The Indian National Congress used such English methods and activities as open meetings and publicly published resolutions but did not favor such actions as protests or violence.

The Indian National Congress had its beginnings as an attempt to gain more Indian influence in British rule, not as an independence movement. It was composed of a small group of educated Indian men and although democratic, was not a true popular democratic movement. All that changed in 1913, when Mohandas Gandhi returned to India from South Africa. Gandhi joined the Indian National Congress and insisted on true democratic, not elitist, membership for the Congress. He instituted new methods of action, including non-violent protest against British rule. By 1920, Gandhi had converted the Congress to a program to withdraw Indian support for British rule. The Indian National Congress became the main tool through which independence for India would be won.

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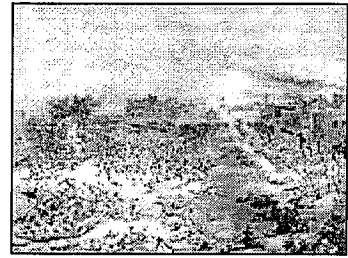
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Amritsar massacre

On April 13, 1919, British troops opened fire on thousands of unarmed people gathered in the Jallianwala Bagh, a walled garden in the city of Amritsar in Punjab, India.



In early April 1919, Mohandas Gandhi started a civil disobedience campaign against the British Rowlatt bills, which empowered the authorities to imprison without trial those suspected of sedition. Despite Gandhi's efforts to prevent the civil disobedience movement from any deviations from the nonviolence strategy, Punjab was on the brink of violence. Gandhi decided to leave for Punjab but was arrested and brought to Bombay. On April 10, a mob killed four Europeans, attacked a woman missionary, and burned property. Meanwhile, the British administration in Punjab proved helpless and called in the troops.

The next day, a detachment consisting of British soldiers and Gurkhas led by Gen. R. E. H. Dyer arrived in Amritsar. Dyer prohibited all public manifestations and imposed a night curfew. However, those measures did not calm the population. On April 13, an estimated 10,000 people gathered in the Jallianwala Bagh, a walled garden. Many of them were celebrating a religious festival and using the garden as a resting place. When a disobedience movement activist made an attempt to address the throng, Dyer, without warning, ordered his troops to open fire. More than 1,200 people were wounded, and 379 people were killed.

The massacre provoked a strong reaction in England. Dyer was ordered to retire, and the British Cabinet approved the decision. However, opinions were divided. Dyer had numerous supporters who considered him a hero. On the other hand, many British Parliament members demanded he be punished for the bloodshed. Winston Churchill delivered a famous speech in Parliament in defense of the Cabinet's decision.

As for the Indian reaction to the Amritsar massacre, it was to become a turning point in the history of Indo-British relations. From that moment on, a rapid radicalization of Indian nationalism began; such moderate leaders of the Indian National Congress as Motilal Nehru (Jawaharlal Nehru's father) changed over to Gandhi's positions. Gandhi's own views radicalized as well: two years later he would openly declare his refusal of loyalty to British authorities.

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