

Block

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Expert Committee

Prof. Mridula Mukherjee
Professor of History
Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, New Delhi

Prof. Aditya Mukherjee
Professor of History
Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, New Delhi

Prof. Aparna Basu
Former Professor of History
University of Delhi

Prof. K.L. Tuteja
Former Professor of History
Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra

Prof. Sucheta Mahajan
Professor of History
Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, New Delhi

Prof. G.P. Sharma
Department of History and Culture
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Dr. Visalakshi Menon
Jesus and Mary College
University of Delhi

Prof. Salil Misra
Department of History
Ambedkar University, Delhi

Prof. Kapil Kumar
Faculty of History
IGNOU, New Delhi

Prof. Ravindra Kumar
Faculty of History
IGNOU, New Delhi

Prof. A.R. Khan
Faculty of History
IGNOU, New Delhi

Prof. Swaraj Basu
Faculty of History
IGNOU, New Delhi

Mr. Ajay Mahurkar
Faculty of History
IGNOU, New Delhi

Prof. S.B. Upadhyay
(Course Coordinator)
Faculty of History
IGNOU, New Delhi

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Course Coordinator

Prof. S.B. Upadhyay

Programme Coordinator

Prof. Swaraj Basu

Block Preparation Team

Unit No(s)	Resource Person
Unit 15-16	Prof. Chandi Prasad Nanda Department of History Ravenshaw University, Cuttack
Unit 17	Prof. Kapil Kumar Faculty of History IGNOU, New Delhi
Unit 18-19	Prof. Shri Krishan Department of History Indira Gandhi University, Rewari

Print Production

Mr. Manjit Singh
Section Officer (Pub.)
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BLOCK 4 NATIONAL MOVEMENT – THE MASS PHASE-II

A new phase of nationalist mass mobilisation began in the late 1920s with the arrival of the all-White Simon Commission in 1927 without any representation of the Indians. It was, therefore, boycotted by the Congress, and people all over the country protested against it. Anti-imperialist sentiments intensified in the subsequent period with urban crowds participating in various demonstrations and protests. Working-class militancy also increased significantly with the Bombay textile workers effecting one of the longest industrial strikes lasting for about six months. A radical shift was noticeable within the Congress also resulting in the declaration of the demand for complete independence in 1929. The situation seemed quite ripe for another phase of mass struggle. The Civil Disobedience Movement was launched when Gandhiji, along with a group of chosen volunteers, began the Dandi March to break the Salt Law. Following him, people all over the country broke salt laws and courted arrests. Besides breaking of the salt laws, no-tax and no-revenue campaigns were also launched in certain areas. There was also defiance of the forest laws which prohibited the use of forests by the locals. Noticing the gravity of the situation, the British government called a Round Table Conference and invited the Congress for talk. Gandhiji represented the Congress and the movement was temporarily withdrawn to facilitate the talk. However, the talk proved to be a failure due to the divisive policies of the colonial rulers. This led to the resumption of the movement which, however, failed to acquire its earlier intensity. All these developments have been discussed in **Unit 15**.

Unit 16 discusses the constitutional developments during this period culminating in the Government of India Act, 1935 which allowed substantial autonomy to the provinces. The resentment against the insufficiency of the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms prompted the British Indian government to institute the Simon Commission in 1927. All the members of the Commission were Whites and no Indian was represented on its board. This led to its boycott by the Congress. The arrival of the Commission in India in early 1928 was greeted with massive protests and demonstrations wherever it went. The recommendations of the Commission were also rejected by the Congress which presented its alternative model in the Nehru Report. It demanded a dominion status for India with fully responsible government and a strong Indian-controlled centre. The Congress gave ultimatum to the colonial government to accept the Nehru Report or face another mass movement. It was, however, not accepted by the government and rejected by Muslim League. It was also questioned by the radicals within the Congress who pitched for complete independence. Ultimately the goal for the Congress-led nationalist movement was declared to be complete independence in 1929. Meanwhile, the British government parleyed with loyalist non-Congress organisations to frame constitution for India through a Round Table Conference in 1930-31. However, without the participation of the Congress it did not succeed. Congress participated in the next Round Table Conference in 1931, but it did not succeed in getting its views accepted. The grant of communal award offering separate electorate on caste basis was rejected by Gandhi who went on indefinite fast. The subsequent Poona Pact modified this aspect of the communal award. Finally, the Government of India Act, 1935 was passed by the British Parliament.

It kept the colonial structure intact maintaining the supremacy of the British in Indian affairs. However, it granted large provincial autonomy and substantially extended the electorate. Despite disagreeing with various provisions of the Act, the Congress decided to participate in subsequent elections which led to the formation of Congress ministries in various provinces.

The Congress succeeded tremendously well in certain provinces such as Madras, U.P., Bihar, Orissa and Central Provinces. It did reasonably well in Bombay and Assam. However, it failed in Bengal, Sindh and Punjab. In terms of reserved seats, its failure was very obvious, though its huge success in general seats was quite evident. It formed governments in several provinces. The Congress governments undertook various steps to address the problems of the people. Political prisoners were released and civil liberties were granted to the people, peasants' grievances were redressed in several provinces, certain labour laws were enacted to give relief to the workers particularly in Bombay, and various constructive programmes such as promotion of village industries and education were undertaken to help people. However, the Congress ministries resigned in 1939 in protest against the inclusion of India in World War without consulting the Indians. All these developments are discussed in detail in **Unit 17**.

Various ideologies and approaches, ranging from the right to the left, were represented in the nationalist movement. Even within the Congress, sharp differences of opinion on different issues surfaced time and again. The Gandhian core was surrounded by left-leaning leaders such as Nehru, Bose, Narendra Dev and Jayprakash Narayan, by right-wing leaders such as Rajagopalachari, Vallabhbhai Patel and Rajendra Prasad, and by liberals such as Tej Bahadur Sapru, V. S. Srinivasa Sastri and C. H. Setalvad. Then there were revolutionary militants inspired by Marxism and other ideologies. Besides, the communists were also making their presence felt particularly in labour movement. All these trends within the nationalist ideological spectrum have been discussed in **Unit 18**.

Finally, in **Unit 19**, you will learn about the processes of political democratisation in the princely states which covered about two-fifth of the area of Indian subcontinent and which had about one-third of the population of the British India. These states were ruled by autocratic princes under the watchful paramountcy of the British. The exploitation and oppression of the subject population in these states were quite intense, while they had no representative forum to express their grievances. Even in some rare instances where there were representative assemblies, their scope was extremely restricted. The partial democratisation in princely states occurred at various stages, but its extent remained rather limited.

UNIT 15 CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT*

Structure

- 15.1 Introduction
- 15.2 Background
- 15.3 The Lahore Session
- 15.4 Spread of the Movement: Popular Response and Regional Pattern
- 15.5 Social Base of the Movement
- 15.6 Gandhi-Irwin Pact and the Second Round Table Conference
- 15.7 Back to Agitation
- 15.8 Critical Assessment of the Civil Disobedience Movement
- 15.9 Summary
- 15.10 Exercises

15.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims at critically analysing and locating the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34) and evaluating its significance in the context of the broader anti-imperialist movement coordinated under the leadership of Gandhi since 1920s in India. The Civil Disobedience Movement, considered as the second major Gandhian mass movement, popularly labelled as the Salt Satyagraha, made a distinct advance in broadening the social reach of the anti-imperialist struggle compared to the Non-cooperation Movement, launched during the early 1920s. In this Unit, we shall discuss the backdrop under which the movement was launched, the issues addressed in its programme, the pattern and trend of popular response at various regional levels and thereby mapping its achievements and limitations.

15.2 BACKGROUND

The Indian National Congress suffered a sharp decline in its membership soon after the suspension of Non-cooperation Movement by Gandhiji in 1922. It also made a large section of the people feel let down and demoralized. Many in the Congress lost faith in the efficacy of the Gandhian strategy and a section of the youth turned to revolutionary violence to achieve their political objectives. The 'No-changer' group focused on the Gandhian constructive programme in rural areas whereas the 'Pro-changers', especially the Swarajists, got involved in council politics. Significantly, the mid-1920s also witnessed the alienation of the Muslims from the national movement and the resultant occurrence of communal riots at several places, such as Calcutta, Dacca, Patna, Delhi, United Provinces and the North Western Frontier Province. The perceptible demoralisation within the anti-imperialist movement however sought to be overcome with the revival of momentum for evocative nationalist politics around 1927.

* Resource Person: Prof. Chandi Prasad Nanda

The immediate cause was the announcement and formation of an all-White Simon Commission in November 1927, tasked with the responsibility to decide and recommend whether India was ready for further measure of constitutional progress or not. Being an emotive issue, this radically affected the political mood of the country. The Commission had already become a suspect in the eyes of the people by not representing a single Indian and this had the opposite effect to the one intended. Therefore its arrival in India during February 1927 proved to be a political disaster. It was subjected to hostile demonstrations and boycotts, wherever Congress influence was strong enough.

This period also saw the Hindu-Muslim chasm grow as the Hindu critics of nationalism's espousal of Khilafat on the one hand, and the Muslim leaders' outcry against the alleged betrayal of the same Khilafat, on the other, undermined the platform of communal unity which the Non-Cooperation Movement in early 1920s had so splendidly built up.

The anti-Simon boycotts heralded the revival of anti-imperialistic movements from 1928 onwards. Middle-class students and youth dominated the urban demonstrations during the years 1928 and 1929. This period also witnessed student and youth conferences and associations, raising demands for complete independence and socio-economic change. Bombay and Calcutta witnessed militant communist-led workers movement, which alarmed Indian businessmen and British officials alike. Bhagat Singh's Hindustan Socialist Republican Association introduced a new secular and socialistic tone, leading to a revival of revolutionary groups in Bengal and Northern India. Added to these developments, Vallabhbhai Patel's Bardoli Satyagraha in Gujarat in 1928 against the enhancement of land revenue spawned peasant movements in various regions. This was also the time when Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Bose, strongly influenced by socialist ideas and a politically restive population, raised the demand for Purna Swaraj or Complete Independence replacing the usual demand for Dominion status. Simultaneously the rise and impact of left wingers within the Congress led Gandhiji to support the demand for complete independence at Lahore session of the Congress in 1929.

In the meantime, the popular resentment against Simon Commission made it apparent that the future constitution of India should be framed by the Indians themselves. The Congress convened an all-party conference in February 1928 and constituted a committee to draft a constitution under Motilal Nehru in May 1928. In fact, the Nehru Committee was the nationalists' response to the appointment of Simon Commission. Lord Birkenhead, the Secretary of State, had challenged the Indians asking them to frame a constitution acceptable to all political groups in the country. The Indian opinion on this vital issue was united. The Nehru Committee Report suggested a constitution based on the principles of dominion status. The Congress, which met in December 1928, declared that if the British government did not accept the Nehru Report by the end of 1929, it would give a call for a new civil disobedience campaign at its next session to be held at Lahore.

Another development that had far-reaching effects on the national movement was the World Economic Depression of 1929-33. Political and economic tensions steadily aggravated under the British colonial setup as it failed to accommodate emerging Indian interests during the late 1920s and early 1930s. British tariff

policy was lopsided and led to large scale discontent amongst the various business groups. Textile imports from Lancashire increased the anxiety and concerns of the local manufacturers; the British jute interests and the Birlas were at loggerheads in Calcutta; while in Bombay coastal shipping was a source of friction. Large scale retrenchment of the workers spawned agitations with unprecedented virulence and organisation.

15.3 THE LAHORE SESSION

The launch of a programme of civil disobedience including non-payment of taxes was the tactic the Congress authorized at the Lahore session in 1929 along with a request to all members of legislatures to resign their seats. Although Gandhi was empowered to launch the agitation at a time and place of his choice, he was desperately in search of an effective formula. He submitted a minimum demand of 11 points among which the major ones were: the demand for the reduction of rupee-sterling ratio to 1s4d, reduction of agricultural tax by 50% and making it a subject of legislative control, abolition of salt tax and salt monopoly of the government, reduction of military expenditure and salaries of highest grade services, release of all political prisoners, protection for Indian textiles and reservation of coastal shipping for Indians and so on. The demands were ignored. Jawaharlal Nehru regarded these demands as ‘a climb down from *Purna Swaraj*’ and Gandhi was still in two minds.

It was in February 1930 that Gandhi began to talk about salt: ‘There is no article like salt outside water by taxing which the State can reach even the starving millions, the sick, the maimed and the utterly helpless. The tax constitutes therefore the most inhuman poll tax the ingenuity of man can devise.’ He informed the Viceroy Irwin that on the 11th of March he would proceed with the co-workers of his Ashram at Sabarmati to violate the salt law. It was a brilliantly conceived plan though a few could grasp its significance when it was announced. With seventy-eight members, among whom were men belonging to almost every region and religion of India, Gandhi decided to march from Ahmedabad to Dandi through the villages of Gujarat for about 240 miles. He declared that upon reaching the Dandi coast, he would break the salt laws. It was, as turned out later, a deceptively innocuous and devastatingly effective move. As people began to converge at Sabarmati Ashram in thousands, before the movement began, to witness the dramatic events that would unfold. Gandhiji painstakingly explained his plans, gave directions for future actions, impressed on the people about the necessity for non-violence and prepared them for the Government’s response. Gandhiji said ‘Wherever possible, civil disobedience of salt laws should be started... Liquor and foreign cloth shops should be picketed. We can refuse to pay taxes if we have requisite strength. The lawyers can give up practice; the public can boycott the courts by refraining from litigation. Government servants can resign their posts... I prescribe only one condition, viz., let our pledge for truth and non-violence as the only means for the attainment of Swaraj be faithfully kept.’

The proposal of making the issue of salt central to the launching a mass civil disobedience movement proved quite decisive. ‘You planned a fine strategy round the issue of salt’, Irwin told Gandhi later. A concrete and universal grievance of the rural poor, the salt laws had no socially divisive implications. The breaking of the salt law by Gandhi meant a rejection of the government’s claim on the allegiance of the people. Furthermore, in coastal areas, illegal manufacture of

salt could provide the people with a small income which was no less significant. Above everything, the Dandi March and the widespread violation of the salt laws over large areas of the country subsequently demonstrated the tremendous power of a non-violent mass struggle. While Gandhi was marching to Dandi his comrades took up the far more difficult task of organisation, fund collection and touring towns and villages to spread the nationalistic message among the people.

15.4 SPREAD OF THE MOVEMENT: POPULAR RESPONSE AND REGIONAL PATTERN

Once the way was cleared by Gandhi's extraordinary political ritual at Dandi, defiance of the salt laws started all over the country. The Satyagrahis held salt marches in Assam, Bengal, and Madras, Sindh, Orissa and at many other places. In Tamil Nadu, C. Rajagopalchari led a march from Tiruchirapally to Vedaranniyam. In Malabar, K. Kelappan led a march from Calicut to Poyannur. Noted Gandhian leader Gopabandhu Choudhury led the first batch of Satyagrahis from Cuttack to Inchudi in Balasore sea-coast in Orissa. In Assam, Satyagrahis walked from Sylhet to Noakhali (Bengal) to make salt. In Andhra, a number of Sibirams (camps) came up in different districts as headquarters of salt Satyagraha.

This period also witnessed a new kind of no tax campaign – the refusal to pay the chowkidari tax. The chowkidars as village guards, supplemented the small contingent of rural police, were paid out of the tax levied specially on the villages. The popular antipathy for chowkidars had continued as they were often perceived as spies acting in favour of the Government and also as retainers for the local landlords. The movement against this tax, calling for the resignation of chowkidars, and of the influential members of chowkidari panchayats first started in Bihar in May 1930, in lieu of salt agitation due to the land-locked nature of the province. The tax was refused in the Monghyr, Saran and Bhagalpur districts: 'Chowkidars were induced to resign, and a social boycott used against those who resisted. The Government retaliated by confiscation of property worth hundreds and thousands in lieu of a few rupees of tax and by beatings and torture. Matters came to a head in Bihpur in Bhagalpur on May 31 when the police, desperate to assert its fast-eroding authority, occupied the Congress ashram which was the headquarters of nationalist activity in the area. The occupation triggered off daily demonstrations outside the ashram. The visit by Rajendra Prasad and Abdul Bari from Patna became the occasion for a huge mass rally, which was broken up by a lathi charge injuring Rajendra Prasad. As elsewhere, repression further increased the nationalist' strength and prevented the police from entering the rural areas.'

In Bengal, as salt manufacturing became difficult with the onset of the monsoon, the shift to anti-chowkidari and anti-Union Board agitation emerged as distinct options. As in other places, villagers here braved and 'withstood severe repression, losing thousands of rupees worth of property through confiscation and destruction, and having to hide for days in forests to escape the wrath of the police.' The non-payment of chowkidari tax and demand for its abolition marked a new high in coastal districts of Orissa particularly in Balasore with the petering out of salt Satyagraha around June in view of advent of rains. People refused to pay the tax under the belief that the very payment of tax had been 'forbidden by the Congress people'. Collective forms of protest as well as assault on police surfaced when

the authorities attempted to attach the property of the people who refused to pay chowkidari tax.

No-tax movement in the shape of refusal of land revenue also surfaced in Kheda, Bardoli taluqa of Surat district, and Jambusar in Broach of Gujrat. It saw remarkable exodus of thousands of people, with family, cattle and household goods, from British India into the neighbouring princely states such as Baroda where they camped for months together in the open fields. On the other hand, the British authorities retaliated by breaking open their houses, destroying their belongings and confiscating their lands. The police did not even 'spare Vallabhbhai Patel's eighty-years-old mother, who sat cooking in her village house in Karamsad; her cooking utensils were kicked about and filled with kerosene and stone.' Vallabhbhai continued to provide encouragement and solace to the hard-pressed peasants of his native land. In the face of terrible oddities compounded by meagre resources and demoralisation, 'they stuck it out in the wilderness till the truce in March 1931 made it possible for them to return to their respective homes.'

Forest laws were defied and it assumed mass proportions in Maharashtra, Karnataka and the Central Provinces, 'especially in areas with large tribal populations who had been the most seriously affected by the colonial Government's restrictions on the use of the forest.' At some places, the size of the crowd that broke the forest laws swelled to 70,000 and above. The infamous 'Cunningham circular' evoked powerful agitation led by students in Assam. The circular unjustly had forced students and their guardians to furnish assurances of good behaviour to the colonial government.

The popular response all over the country to Jawaharlal Nehru's message delivered at Lahore in December 1929 has been ecstatic. Nehru had reminded his countrymen: 'Remember once again, now that this flag is unfurled, it must not be lowered as long as a single Indian, man, woman, or child lives in India.' It is in this context, 'attempts to defend the honour of the national flag in the face of severe brutalities often turned into heroism of the most spectacular variety.' The exemplary courage of Tota Narasaiah Naidu who preferred to be beaten unconscious by a fifteen-member police force rather than give up the national flag at Bundur, on the Andhra Coast had an electrifying effect all over the country. This was followed with similar determination displayed by P. Krishna Pillai, a Calicut based nationalist who later on became a prominent communist, in suffering lathi blows. In a novel idea of defying the repeated attempts by police to snatch away the national flag from their hands, a group of children in Surat would stitch khadi dresses in the three colours of the national flag, and thus these little, 'living flags' triumphantly paraded the streets and made the police utterly helpless to snatch the national flag anymore. The national flag which came to be spotted in the nook and corner of the rural India now onward came to symbolise the unprecedented sprit of nationalism.

The Civil Disobedience Movement evoked remarkable response in the initial months in U.P., but got quietened as colonial repression stepped up. But it led to the call for a movement combining both no-revenue, no-rent campaign. The no-revenue part was a call to the zamindars to refuse to pay revenue to the Government, the no-rent a call to the tenants not to pay rent to the zamindars. As the zamindars were largely loyal to the Government, this became primarily a no-rent struggle. Though no-rent was in the air, it was only in October the

campaign picked up again when Jawaharlal Nehru, 'out of jail for a brief period, got the U.P. Congress Committee to sanction the no-rent campaign'. Based on intensive propaganda for two months, the campaign came to be launched in December; by January however, severe repression had forced many peasants to flee the villages. The two districts of Agra and Rae Bareilly remained the nerve centres of this campaign.

A variety of forms of mobilization came to be popularized as Civil Disobedience Movement crystallized as a major nationalist form of anti-colonial politics. For instance, formation of volunteer corps, organisation of *sankirtan* processions to move around towns and villages to popularise the message of *swaraj* or *prabhat pheris*, wherein people including women and children in the villages and towns went around at dawn singing nationalist songs, tours by activists and leaders organizing public meetings in the rural and urban areas, organisation of magic lanterns shows and secret circulation of booklets containing nationalist literature in the villages to spread nationalist ideas amongst people and setting up of underground Congress ashrams became the familiar modes of nationalist activities. Interestingly, rural market places, temples and Gandhian ashrams became significantly new sites of nationalist activities. Besides, widespread circulation of 'illegal' news-sheets or 'congress bulletins' or *patrikas* either handwritten or cyclostyled even sometimes by 'mango sellers and girl inmates of orphanage' not only sought to contest the legitimacy of obnoxious Press Act but also emerged as the innovative ways of mobilizing people. Children volunteered to organise them into *vanara sena* or monkey squads and 'at least at one place the girls decided they wanted their own separate *manjari sena* or cat army!'

Nehru's arrest in April 1930 for defiance of the salt law evoked huge demonstrations in Madras, Calcutta and Karachi. Gandhi's arrest came on May 4, 1930 when he had announced that he would lead a raid on Dharsana salt works on the west coast. Gandhi's arrest was followed by massive protests in Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta and Sholapur, where the response was the fiercest. After Gandhi's arrest, the Congress Working Committee sanctioned three significant measures: (i) Non-payment of revenue in Ryotwari areas; (ii) No-chowkidari-tax campaign in Zamindari areas; and (iii) Violation of forest laws in the central provinces.

Under pressure and social boycott, many lower-level government officials including police men resigned from their services. As the agitation gathered momentum, the government, in retaliation, let loose a reign of brutality, methodically bashing unresisting men to a bloody pulp, as the American journalist Webb Miller observed. Such repression and its heroic defiance evoked admiration and sympathy which quickly turned into active participation, releasing the movement from its initially narrow confines. But then the movement turned violent, weakening the Gandhian restraint because his followers were already behind the bars.

When the Salt Satyagraha attained a critical high, three major developments occurred which went beyond the confines of Gandhian Civil Disobedience. Firstly, Revolutionary nationalism in Bengal considerably deepened British alarm. For example, the Chittagong armoury was captured by the Bengal revolutionaries on April 18, 1930 after which they fought a pitched battle on Jalalabad hill on April 22. Civil disobedience in Bengal was accompanied by revolutionary nationalism,

with 56 incidents in 1930 (as compared to 47 in 1919-29). Secondly, in Peshawar, the arrest of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan on April 23, 1930 gave rise to a massive upsurge when Hindu soldiers refused to open fire on a Muslim crowd in a fine instance of patriotic self-sacrifice, non-violence and communal amity. Thirdly, a textile workers' strike in Sholapur led to attacks on liquor shops, police outposts and government buildings, giving rise to something like a parallel government for a few days in early May. However, illegal salt manufacture became difficult due to the onset of monsoon, and the Congress took to other forms of mass struggle like non-payment of land revenue, refusal to pay *chowkidari tax* and Satyagraha in forest areas. Though the government retaliated with force, the peasants held firm and resorted to violent confrontations with the police in many places.

However, some regional studies on the Civil Disobedience Movement reveals that Gujarat and the Gujarati business-cum-professional community of Bombay city became the classic heartland of Gandhian controlled mass mobilization through Satyagraha. The interests of substantial landholding peasants like the Patidars of Bardoli and Kheda fitted in well with Gandhian strategies and controls, because rent was not much of an issue. In the areas where the Congress was weaker or where internal zamindar-peasant divide was quite pronounced, rural movements tended to be much more uninhibited. This was seen in Central Provinces, Maharashtra or Karnataka, where non-cooperation had little impact and Gandhian ideas came to be associated with a near millenarian flavor and novelty, mostly absent in the well-established strongholds like Gujarat, coastal Andhra or Bihar. This inverse relationship between organization and militancy had been brought out in district-level comparisons in U.P. A strong organisation and a few big zamindars in parts of Agra district followed the Bardoli pattern, while in taluqdar-dominated Rae Baraeli, peasants' exerted pressure. In Bengal, the Congress was weak and faction-ridden, there was a communal divide in the eastern districts and the presence of a left alternative made matters complicated.

15.5 SOCIAL BASE OF THE MOVEMENT

In the urban areas, the support for Gandhian nationalism around 1930 was less than what it had been during the Non-Cooperation Movement and only a few lawyers gave up their practice and a few students joined 'national schools' instead of government controlled institutions. Revolutionary nationalism attracted the educated youth more in Bengal, and for a brief period Bhagat Singh became more popular than Gandhi in the north Indian towns. Muslim participation was low, and there was communal discontent in Dhaka town and Kishoreganj village in May and July 1930. There were frequent hartals in towns, but to the relief of British officials the Congress did not include industrial or communication strikes in its programme. That lacuna was largely made up by the massive peasant mobilization and considerable support from the business groups, at least during the initial stages. As the movement implied violations of law, the number of jail-goers was more than three times the 1921-22 figures. There was solidarity with the nationalist movement by the Calcutta Marwaris headed by G.D. Birla at this stage, and merchants in many towns gave up imports of foreign goods for some months. Due to picketing and the overall impact of the Depression worldwide, there was a spectacular collapse of British cloth imports from 1248 million yards in 1929-30 to only 523 million yard in 1930-31.

Another important feature of the Civil disobedience Movement was the widespread participation of women. Women from socially conservative professional, business or peasant families picketed shops, faced lathis and went to jail. This, however, did not entail any drastic change in the traditional image of women. But women's participation in revolutionary nationalism, especially in Bengal, did come under sharp attack. Even Rabindranath Tagore with his impeccable progressive outlook wrote a novel *Char Adhyay* criticizing such 'unfeminine' behaviour.

15.6 GANDHI-IRWIN PACT AND THE SECOND ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE

Civil Disobedience passed on to an apparently contradictory phase in the last few months of 1930. The effect of the Depression increased the pressures for no rent, which the UP Congress reluctantly sanctioned. Though incidents of peasant and tribal militancy increased, official reports indicated a marked decline of enthusiasm and support among urban traders, many of whom started selling foreign goods on the sly. Industrialists grumbled about the limits of patience while Homi Mody complained of the frequent hartals dislocating trade and industry. The ruthless seizure of property by the government reduced the nationalistic ardour of the rich peasants. Gandhi had to retreat probably due to all this as also owing to the fact that almost all leading congress leaders were in jail. He had a talk with Irwin, ending in the Delhi Pact or Gandhi-Irwin Pact of March 5 1931. The pact proposed another round table conference to discuss the agreements reached in the first; the immediate withdrawal of Civil Disobedience; the discontinuation of boycott of British goods; the withdrawal of ordinances promulgated, release of prisoners and remission of penalties; and with the exception of people living by the seashore, no breach of the salt law. There was feeling of unhappiness all over, more so when Gandhi's request was ignored and three revolutionaries – Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru – were executed on March 23. Nehru wrote that Civil Disobedience had died, 'not with a bang but a whimper'. People felt let down, especially the peasants who had sacrificed their land.

The compromise in the form of Gandhi-Irwin pact has been a subject of debate among some historians. R.J. Moore who first pointed out that bourgeois pressure was a significant factor behind the compromise, a point which Sumit Sarkar developed later to argue that the Indian bourgeoisie played a 'crucial' role both in the initial success of the movement as well as in its subsequent withdrawal. This position has also been accepted by other historians across the ideological spectrum like Judith Brown, Claude Markovits and Basudev Chatterjee. It is argued that the alliance between the Congress and the capitalists was uneasy and vulnerable from the very beginning and now uncontrolled mass movement unnerved the business classes who wanted to give peace a chance. Hence, the pressure was on Gandhi to return to constitutional politics which ultimately resulted in the Gandhi-Irwin pact. But the problem with this thesis is that the business groups hardly represented a homogeneous class in 1931 and did not speak with one voice. As A.D.D. Gordon puts it, the enthusiasm of the industrialists was dampened by the Depression, boycott, hartals and the social disruption, and they wanted either to destroy Civil disobedience or broker a peace between Congress and the Government. But on the other hand, the marketers and the traders still remained staunch supporters of Gandhi, and their

radicalism even increased as Civil disobedience made progress. More significantly, as other critics of this theory point out, although business community supported the movement and could partly claim credit for its early success, they were never in a position to pressurise Gandhi to withdraw the movement. Gandhian Congress was projecting itself as an umbrella organisation, which would incorporate all the different classes and communities. So it was highly unlikely that Gandhi would take such a vital decision only to satisfy the interests of one particular class. However, it is important to remember that the CDM had helped to the growing radicalisation of certain lower classes that often refused to remain under the official control of local congress leaders. Against this larger backdrop, Gandhi had assessed the appropriateness of suspending the movement by agreeing to effect an understanding with Irwin lest the movement should turn violent and thereby spark off colonial repression. But by then the movement had registered remarkable success in terms of moral-ideological victory over the enemy!

The Second Round Table Conference (September-December 1931) proved to be a fiasco with Gandhi squabbling endlessly with Ambedkar and Muslim leaders who had asked for separate electorates, which the British watched with unconcealed glee. The session was a pointless exercise primarily because Gandhi had given up during the Delhi negotiations the demand for majority representation for his party which had led to the rejection of Irwin's offer in December 1929.

15.7 BACK TO AGITATION

The failure of the Second Round Table Conference and the empty-handed return of Gandhiji from it resulted in the resumption of the Civil Disobedience Movement in early 1932. Despite severe repressive measures taken by the British Government to crush the agitation, the movement continued with vigour for about a year and half. In April 1932, Lord Wellington described Bengal and Bombay as the 'two black spots'. In Bengal militant activities increased with vigour along sporadic agrarian unrest. The popular response to Gandhi-Irwin pact in Orissa was remarkably celebratory: the pact was seen as victory for Gandhi and the Congress as well as people in general in many parts of the province. It was this sense of victory that scored against the British rule and emboldened the people to carry forward the struggle in the face of repression and arrest of leaders in the 1932-34 phase. Local-level leaders and Satyagrahis in the coastal Orissa during this phase, tried out diverse and innovative methods of struggle to keep up the movement. These methods included resistance to the police, rescue of arrested Satyagrahis, recapture of the already-seized Congress ashrams (sometimes by women volunteers) and the attempt to sell contraband salt in the court premises.

Attempts at attacking colonial symbols, such as tearing off the uniforms of the policemen and chowkidars, damaging of postboxes and disruption of court proceedings during revenue sales also surfaced. The small traders of Gujarat strongly supported the Congress. However, in rural areas, the movement evoked less enthusiasm than it was in the earlier phase. The rich peasants groups, who had showed greater militancy during the first phase of the Movement (1930-32) felt betrayed by the movement's withdrawal and remained unstirred in many places, such as Coastal Andhra, Gujarat or UP, when the Congress leaders wanted to mobilise them the second time. Some aspects of the Gandhian social

programme such as his crusade against untouchability simply did not appeal to them belonging mostly to the higher caste, and even above hostile response. On the other hand, Gandhiji's Harijan campaign failed to impress the Harijans themselves. In Marathi-speaking Nagpur and Berar, which had been the strongholds of Ambedkar's Dalit (Untouchable) politics, the Untouchables refused to switch their allegiance to the Congress.

In the urban areas, the relationship between the business groups and the Congress was marked by a certain degree of ambivalence. There was an open estrangement between the Congress and Bombay Mill owners, who under the leadership of Homi Mody, asked Gandhiji not to resume the movement. The other sections of the Indian big business were also in a dilemma. As Claude Markovits argues, under the strain of this ambivalence, the unity of the Indian capitalist class broke down. By 1933, the weakening economy and growing violence even crushed the enthusiasm of the staunchest of Gandhian supporters – the Gujarati and Marwari merchants. The urban intelligentsia also felt less inclined to follow the Gandhian path since the picketing of shops was frequently punctuated by the use of bombs which Gandhi failed to stop. The labour remained apathetic and the Muslims often antagonistic. Severe Government repression led to the imprisonment of thousands of Congress volunteers. Under these circumstances, Gandhi who himself was in prison, decided to temporarily suspend the Movement in May 1933. The movement was formally withdrawn in April 1934.

15.8 CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT

The Civil disobedience movement for the Congress was by no means a failure. By 1934, the Congress had mobilised great political support and gained a moral authority, which were converted into a massive electoral victory in 1937. Though the Congress was forced to withdraw the movement, its prestige among the masses remained high. In fact, the vertical and horizontal reach of Congress had grown stronger in 1930s as compared to its position in early 1920s.

From the logic of Civil disobedience itself, many left alternatives emerged which emphasised the need for combining nationalism with radical social and economic programmes. Hereafter, the Congress drifted towards greater radicalisation. For example, the land reforms directed towards curbing and eventually abolishing Zamindari were coming to be included in the official Congress programme by the mid-1930s, in total contrast to its earlier pronouncements. This shift in the orientation of the Congress was earlier indicated in the Karachi Resolution (1931) on Fundamental Rights and Economic Policy that came just after the Gandhi-Irwin pact.

Though some scholars opine that Gandhi's decision to suspend the civil disobedience movement as agreed under the Gandhi-Irwin pact was a retreat, it was not really so. The move was warranted due to some practical reasons. Firstly, it is important to understand that mass movements are necessarily short lived and the capacity of the masses to make sacrifice unlike that of the activists is limited. Secondly, there were clear signs of exhaustions after September 1930 especially among shopkeepers and merchants who had participated so enthusiastically. Besides, the sporadic incidents of anti-police resistance which

continued in Bengal, Bihar, Andhra, and Gujarat or the no-rent campaign which picked up in late 1930s should not be seen as a scenario indicating still a vibrant and energetic mood on the part of the masses all over the country to carry on further with the anti-colonial struggle when Gandhi decided to cry halt to the movement. Gandhi had realised that the 'vast reserves of energy' expected to flow into the movement were instead fast petering out. No wonder the colonial government ruthlessly suppressed the movement soon in 1932. It was against this backdrop, the viable option was to suspend the movement and consolidate whatever gains have been scored so far. In an anti-colonial mass movement what matters most is the 'moral-ideological' victory on the part of the colonised subjects and a resultant hegemonic weight *vis-à-vis* the colonial state.

It is also true that many Congress supporters on the whole, especially the youth were considerably disappointed. Peasants of Gujarat were disappointed because their lands were not restored immediately (they got back their lands during the rule of the subsequent Congress Ministry in the province). But vast masses of people were undoubtedly jubilant that the British Government had to regard their movement as significant and treat their leader as an equal thereby signing a pact with him. In fact, in many parts of the country the political prisoners were given a hero's welcome upon their release from jails.

15.9 SUMMARY

The Civil Disobedience movement was a milestone in India's struggle for independence. It was formally launched in 1930 with the Dandi March by Mahatma Gandhi and his followers. It immediately spread in most parts of the country. The colonial rulers responded by initiating severe police action and by imprisoning a large number of protesters. But they failed to suppress the movement. The movement was temporarily withdrawn in the wake of Gandhi-Irwin pact. However, after the failure of the Second Round Table Conference in 1932, the movement was resumed. It was finally fully withdrawn in 1934.

15.10 EXERCISES

- 1) What were the factors responsible for the launch of the Civil Disobedience Movement?
- 2) Describe the various activities undertaken during the course of the movement.
- 3) Analyse the successes and failures of the movement.

UNIT 16 CONSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENTS*

Structure

- 16.1 Introduction
- 16.2 Background
- 16.3 Simon Commission
- 16.4 All-Parties Conference and Nehru Report
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- 16.6 Round Table Conferences
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 - 16.7.1 Evaluation of the Act
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- 16.8 Nationalists' Response
- 16.9 Summary
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16.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit attempts to analyse the political developments between 1927 and 1935 from the visit of the Simon Commission to India to the passage of the Government of India Act, 1935. It shall also deal with the Nehru Committee report, which prepared a detailed constitutional scheme for India in reply to the challenge posed by Lord Birkenhead to Indians, asking them to frame a constitution acceptable to all political parties in India. This Challenge was accepted by the Congress and an All-Parties Conference was called at Delhi on February 28, 1928. As many as 29 organisations were represented.

16.2 BACKGROUND

The Congress declared that the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms (Government of India Act, 1919) was, 'inadequate, unsatisfactory and disappointing' and could not be workable in actual practice. The Congress asked the British to follow the principle of self-determination so as to establish a fully responsible government as soon as possible. Simultaneously, it resolved to work towards that objective. There were, however, many obstacles. Not long back, the Rowlatt Report led to the enactment of two unpopular bills despite stiff opposition. Gandhi's call for Satyagraha against the two iniquitous bills gave rise to *hartals* all over the country and civil disturbances in a number of places. The imposition of martial law in Punjab followed and climaxed into the Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy (1919) where

* Resource Person: Prof. Chandi Prasad Nanda

General Dyer ordered machine gun fire on a peaceful and unarmed crowd, resulting in the death of 400 people, and injuring nearly 1,200. The Muslims were also restive at that time due to the humiliating treatment meted out to defeated Turkey (in the First World War) by the Allied Powers. They launched the Khilafat Movement which had the support of Gandhi. These developments did cause a fundamental shift in the policy of the Congress. It stated in 1921 that the 'object of the Indian national Congress is the attainment of *Swaraj* by all legitimate and peaceful means'. This was a clear shift in perspective. This would mean going beyond the confines of constitutional political discourse. It was a call for active pursuance of the concept of *Swaraj* through legitimate and peaceful means. In consequence, the Montford Reforms introduced earlier had no chance of success either. As the Congress 'attitude towards the Act of 1919 hardened, even the moderates among them who were ready to cooperate with the government found the conditions difficult to bear. This led to the formation of the Swaraj party (1923), notably by Motilal Nehru and C.R. Das, with the explicit objective of 'wrecking the legislatures from within' by following a policy of 'uniform continuous and sustained obstruction with a view to making government through the Assembly and the Council impossible'. The tactics worked, and the hypocrisy behind the dyarchical scheme of government was exposed.

16.3 SIMON COMMISSION

The appointment of the Simon Commission in November 1927, two years before it was due, was an indirect admission by the government of the failure of its reforms. The reason put forward, however, was that unrest was mounting in India. But a private letter of Lord Birkenhead to the Viceroy, Lord Reading, stated that the Conservatives in power apprehended a Labour victory in next general elections in England and did not like to leave the announcement of the Commission to the successors. Furthermore, it was believed that such a move could be used as a bait to ensnare and thereby break the Swaraj Party. The Commission was to look 'into the working of the system of government, the growth of education and the development of representative institutions in British India and matters connected therewith' and to consider 'to what extent it is desirable to establish the principle of responsible government, or to extend, modify or restrict the degree of responsible government existing therein, including the question whether the establishment of Second Chambers of the local legislatures is or is not desirable'. The Commission was composed of seven members of the British Parliament, mostly white, which disappointed the Indian public and led to its total boycott by the Congress. The untenable excuse offered by the British was that, as their Parliament appointed the Commission, its members necessarily had to be from that body. The Commission faced black-flags demonstrations wherever it went in India and had to hear the slogan 'Simon Go Back'. Its offer to form a joint committee with the Central Assembly was also rejected unceremoniously.

The Simon Commission had stated that in order to cope with the diversity of the country the ultimate character of the Indian government had to be federal. It declared that the establishment of responsible government at the centre was to wait indefinitely, which obviously meant that it was to be established somewhere in the distant future. Its observations regarding Dominion status were not very clear. It recommended that a Greater India consisting of British India and the

Princely States as a federal association was to be established in the future but the clause of British Paramountcy (with Viceroy as the agent of Paramount power) was to remain. This was met with great opposition from many political parties, spearheaded by the Congress.

16.4 ALL-PARTIES CONFERENCE AND NEHRU REPORT

At the 1927 Madras Congress Session, a resolution boycotting the Simon Commission was passed. The Working Committee was authorized to prepare a constitution for India in consultation with other organisations. Congress representatives as well as representatives of other organisations such as Muslim League, Hindu Mahasabha, etc. met at a conference in February, 1928. This came to be known as the All Parties Conference. This Conference was presided over by Dr. M.A. Ansari. It was agreed that in framing the Constitution of India, the principle of full Dominion responsible self-government should be kept in mind. After two subsequent meetings of All-Parties, in Bombay and in Lucknow, the Constitution was ratified. It asked for full Dominion Status and had provisions for having responsible governments at Center as well as in the Provinces.

Responsibility of the Cabinets was to be joint or collective, a full-fledged federation for India was considered only as a possibility and defense budgets were subject to approval of the Central Legislature and included provisions for incorporating fundamental rights (nineteen fundamental rights were suggested for inclusion in the proposed statute), though moderately worded. A Supreme Court was to be established, to serve as the final court of appeal and all appeals to the Privy Council were to be stopped.

It also secured the rights of the Native Rulers on the condition that they must allow for establishment of responsible governments in the States. The Nehru report also recommended joint electorates with seats reserved for the minorities on population basis except in Bengal and Punjab. 'Full protection was afforded to the religious and cultural interests of the Muslims, and even new provinces on linguistic basis were to be created with a view to the planning of Muslim-majority provinces.

Therefore, in May 1928, a Committee was appointed with Motilal Nehru as president. The Nehru Committee appointed by the nationalists was a response to the appointment of Simon Commission and the challenge given by Lord Birkenhead thrown to Indians asking them to frame a Constitution on which the Indian opinion was united. At the Calcutta Congress session it was stated that the Report had contributed to a great extent in solving India's political and communal problems.

The committee's report was an outline draft of a constitution which was based on the principle of fully responsible government on the model of the Constitution of self-governing dominions. The establishment of full responsible government was not to be considered as a remote but as an immediate step. Apparently it was different from the principle of gradual advancement as envisaged by the Act of 1919. This draft is commonly known as the Nehru Committee report. It made the following recommendations:

- i) India should have the same constitutional status in the British Empire as other dominions with parliament having powers to make laws and should be known as the Commonwealth of India.
- ii) The Constitution should define citizenship and declare fundamental rights.
- iii) The legislative powers should vest with the King and bicameral parliament, and executive powers with the king exercisable by the Governor-General and the same provisions should be made for the establishment of responsible governments in provinces in respect of governors and executive councils.
- iv) Hierarchy of courts with a Supreme Court as its apex appeal court be established.

16.5 MAIN FEATURES OF NEHRU REPORT

The report suggested that the Indian Parliament should consist of (a) the Senate elected for seven years, consisting of 200 members elected by the Provincial Councils; and (b) the House of Representatives with 500 members elected for five years through adult franchise. The Governor General (to be appointed by the British Government but paid out of Indian revenues) was to act on the advice of the Executive Council which was to be collectively responsible to the Parliament. The Provincial Councils were to be elected, on the basis of adult franchise, for five years and the Governor (to be appointed by the British Government) was to act on the advice of the Provincial Executive Council'.

The Nehru Report contained virtually no federal features. Despite the fact that federal principle was introduced in the composition of the senate, the provinces were not equally represented in it and thus the federal principle was not really put into practice. De-centralisation was carried to the same extent as in the Act of 1919. Residuary powers were vested in the centre. The position of Princely States in relation to Centre was not made clear. The Committee considered the establishment of a federal constitution but it did not take concrete steps to materialize it.

The importance of the Report lay in the fact that it was the first expression of the organised opinion of the majority of the Indian leadership on the communal problem. According to Coupland, 'it embodied the frankest attempt yet made by the Indians to face squarely the difficulties of communalism'. The Report stated that the only method of giving a feeling of security to the minority was to provide for safeguards and guarantees. The Committee in this respect made three distinct proposals:

- i) The proposed Constitution should provide for liberty of conscience and religion.
- ii) On the principle of self-determination the Muslim majority provinces should be given distinct politico-cultural identity i.e., Sind was to be separated from Bombay presidency and N.W.F.P. was to be given full provincial status.
- iii) The principle of separate electorates should be rejected and all elections should be conducted on the basis of joint electorates subject to reservations of seats for Muslims at centre and in provinces where they were in a minority and for non-Muslims in N.W.F.P.

However a little later, the Committee made two additional recommendations relating to the communal problem. Communal representation was to be reconsidered after ten years and Baluchistan was to be given full provincial status.

16.5.1 Muslim Reaction to Nehru Report

At the All Parties Convention held in Calcutta in December 1928, M.A. Jinnah demanded one third representation for the Muslims in the Central Legislature. As this was not accepted, he joined the groups led by Agha Khan and Muhammed Shafi. An All India Muslim Conference was held in Delhi on 1 January, 1929 and it passed a resolution emphasising two principles:

- i) The first principle was that since India was a vast country, with a lot of diversity it required a federal system of government in which the states would have complete autonomy and residuary powers.
- ii) The second principle was that the system of separate electorates should continue as long as the rights and interests of Muslims were not safeguarded in the constitution.

In March 1929 Jinnah put forward before the Muslim League a detailed account of Muslim demands known as the 'Fourteen Points'. These demands suggested a total rejection of Nehru Report because of two reasons. Firstly a unitary Constitution was not acceptable because it would not ensure Muslim domination in any part of India. A federal Constitution consisting of a Centre with limited powers and autonomous Provinces with residuary powers would enable the Muslims to dominate in five provinces, namely NWFP, Baluchistan, Sind, Bengal and Punjab; and, secondly the solution to the communal problem as suggested by Nehru Committee was not acceptable to Muslims. Jinnah was categorical about the inclusion of separate electorates.

16.5.2 Nehru Report and the Native States

A complex problem which confronted the Nehru Committee was regarding the status of princely states. In 1927 the people of Princely states formed the State Peoples Conference with a view to introducing self-governing institutions. This move threatened the interests of princes who sought the help of British in this matter. The result was the appointment of a Committee under the chairmanship of Sir Harcourt Butler which laid stress on preservation of princely states through British Paramountcy. The Nehru Committee criticized the appointment of Butler Committee and stated that the rights and obligations of Paramountcy should be transferred to the government of Commonwealth of India and conflicts between Commonwealth of India and Indian states were to be referred to the Supreme Court.

16.5.3 Internal Opposition to Nehru Report

Within the Congress the younger section led by Jawaharlal Nehru and S.C. Bose criticized the Nehru Report because of its acceptance of dominion Status. They had already stated their inclination towards greater freedom and talking about dominion status was viewed as a limiting Constitutional exercise. This reaction by the younger section within the Congress forced leadership at the Calcutta Congress to pass a resolution that if the British government did not accept the

Nehru Report on or before 31 December, 1929, or spurned it before that date, the Congress would start another mass movement. Since Lord Irwin showed no signs of taking concrete steps in the direction of establishing full Dominion Self-Government, as he had announced in his declaration of 31 October 1929, the Congress declared on 31 December, 1929, that the Nehru Report had ceased to be valid.

16.5.4 Nehru Report's Acceptance

The All-Parties Conference subsequently accepted the report but did not include the three amendments Jinnah had suggested in the meeting. The Congress forwarded the report to the British and set a deadline of one year for its acceptance, failing which they would organise a non-violent campaign in 1930. Three months later the Muslim league rejected the report and came up with Jinnah's famous 'Fourteen Point', their minimum acceptable conditions for a political settlement. Meanwhile, Ramsay MacDonald of the Labour Party had become the Prime Minister of England under whose advice the Viceroy stated that 'it is implicit in the Declaration of 1917 that the natural issue of India's constitutional progress as therein contemplated is the attainment of Dominion Status. So there should be a Conference of the Indians and the British to consider the final proposals of the Simon Commission (in limbo at that time) before they were submitted to the Parliament in England.'

16.6 ROUND TABLE CONFERENCES

Not only did the proposed Round Table Conference have a limited purpose and scope, but the 'Dominion status' referred to as the subject matter was also capable of being interpreted differently. The Congress decided to boycott the Round Table Conference by declaring that the national aim was to attain complete independence and therefore it launched the Civil Disobedience Movement in March 1930.

Gandhi set out on his momentous march to Dandi to prepare salt from the sea accompanied by thousands of followers. There were numerous arrests, lathi-charges by the police (even on women and children), threats to newspapers and journals for publishing the details of such onslaughts on unarmed people, and enactment of a number of ordinances. The gap between the nationalists and the government appeared to be unbridgeable. Amidst such political turmoil the Round Table Conference was convened in London between November 16, 1930 and January 19, 1931.

As many Congress leaders were in jail, 'safe' representatives of other parties, communities and services were nominated by the government as the spokespeople of India. The three basic principles adopted in the conference were: (i) the form of the new government would be an all-India federation; (ii) the federal government, subject to certain conditions, would be answerable to the federal legislature; and (iii) the provinces would be autonomous. The Conference ended with the declaration of Ramsay MacDonald, '... responsibility for the Government of India should be placed upon legislature, Central and Provincial, with such provisions as may be considered necessary ... and also with guarantees... required by minorities'.

To secure the participation of the Congress in the next Conference, the Gandhi-Irwin pact was signed in March 1931 leading to the release of all political prisoners. The Congress in turn terminated the Civil Disobedience Movement. As the sole representative of the Congress to the second Conference (September 1 to December 1, 1931), Gandhi gave wide space to Jinnah to solve the vexed communal problem. In the meantime, M.A. Jinnah, having received secret support from the Secretary of State for India, Sir Samuel Hoare, became too inflexible in his demands, leaving Gandhi with no other option but to return to India without any results. Gandhi was arrested on reaching India. Citing the absence of an agreed settlement as a pretext, the British proceeded to adjudicate on the respective quantum of representation of different communities which led to the infamous 'Communal Award' of 1932.

Gandhi could possibly sense the British game plan of divisive politics. He went on a fast to stop this political fracture between 'Caste Hindus' and the 'Scheduled Castes'. The Poona Pact was signed somewhat modifying the 'Communal Award'. The Third Round Table Conference in London (November 17 to December 24, 1932) was attended by 46 delegates, very carefully invited by the Conservative government in Britain. In the Conference the reports of the Sub-Committees appointed during the Second Round Table Conference were heard and formed the basis of discussions. Some more details about the new constitution were settled. The Indian delegates tried to push through some progressive provisions, which were instantly put into the cold storage. Similarly the question of including a Bill of Rights for the citizens was shelved on flimsy excuses.

In March, 1933 the British Government came out with the White Paper containing the proposals, indicating the line on which the new constitution of India was to take shape. As expected the White Paper introduced some reactionary provisions like recommending the extension of the scope of separate electorates, a provision whereby the representative of the States were to be nominated by the Princes and the power to abolish the second Chambers in the Provinces was given to the Central Legislature. Later on this power was given to the British Parliament. Restrictions on the powers of the Federal Court were increased so as not to make it the final Court of Appeal. This process culminated in the Secretary of State for India placing a Bill in the British Parliament in February 1935, which, on being passed and receiving Royal assent, became the Government of India Act 1935.

16.7 GOVERNMENT OF INDIA ACT, 1935

The Government of India Act was passed by the British parliament in August 1935. Its main provisions were as follows.

- i) **Supremacy of the British Parliament:** The Government of India Act, 1935 was passed without a Preamble. This allowed the Preamble of 1919 Act to continue unhindered. This meant that realisation of responsible government by successive stages was the goal, with British Parliament being the sole judge of the nature and time of each advance. All rights of amending, altering or repealing the Constitution of India remained vested with the British Parliament.
- ii) **Provincial Autonomy:** The whole of the Provincial Executive was now made responsible to or removable by the legislative Assembly of the

Province. The difference between the reserved subjects and the transferred subjects was dropped. All Provincial subjects were placed under the charge of the popular ministries but the Governors still retained their imposing set of powers. This made the application of provincial autonomy incomplete.

- iii) **Dyarchy at the Centre:** It was to comprise all British Indian Provinces, all chief commissioner's Provinces and Indian states. The federation's formation was conditional on the fulfillment of two conditions: (a) states with allotment of 521 seats in the proposed Council of States should agree to join the federation; (b) aggregate population of states in the above category should be 50 per cent of the total population of all Indian states. Since these conditions were not fulfilled the proposed federation never came up. The Central Government carried on up to 1946 as per the provisions of Government of India Act, 1919.

At the Federal Level: a) **Executive:** Governor-general was the pivot of the entire constitution. Subjects to be administered were divided into reserved and transferred subjects. Reserved Subjects- foreign affairs, defense, tribal areas and ecclesiastical affairs-were to be exclusively administered by the Governor-general on the advice of executive councilors. Executive councilors were not to be responsible to the central Legislature. These ministers were to be responsible to the federal legislature and were to resign on losing the confidence of the body. Governor-General could act in his individual judgment in the discharge of his special responsibilities for the security and tranquility of India; b) **Legislature:** The bicameral legislature was to have an upper house (Council of states) and a lower house (Federal Assembly). The council of states was to be a 260-member house, partly directly elected from British Indian provinces and partly (40 per cent) nominated by the Princes. The Federal assembly was to be a 375 members house partly indirectly elected from British Indian provinces and partly (one-third) nominated by the Princes. Oddly enough election to the council of states was direct and that to the Federal assembly, indirect. Council of state was to be a permanent body with one-third members retiring every third year. The duration of the assembly was to be 5 years. The three list for legislation purposes were to be federal provincial and concurrent. Members of federal assembly could move a vote of no confidence against ministers. Council of States could not move a vote of no confidence. The system of religion-based and class-based electorates was further extended. Governor-general had residuary powers. He could (a) restore cuts in grants (b) certify bills rejected by the legislature (c) issue ordinances and (d) exercise his veto. Eighty per cent of the budget was non-votable.

At the Provincial Level: Provincial autonomy replaced dyarchy. Provinces were granted autonomy and separate legal identity. They were freed from 'the superintendence, direction' of the secretary of state and Governor-General. Provinces hence forth derived their legal authority directly from the British Crown. They were given independent financial powers and resources. Provincial governments could borrow money on their own security.

- a) **Executive:** Governor was to be the Crown nominee and representative to exercise authority on the king's behalf in a province. He was to have special powers regarding minorities, rights of civil servants, law and order, British business interests, partially excluded areas, princely states etc. They also had the power to take over and indefinitely run administration.

- b) **Legislature:** Separate electorates based on communal award were to be made operational. All members were to be directly elected. Franchise was extended and women got the right on the same basic as men. Ministers were to administer all provincial subjects in a council of ministers headed by a Premier. The Provincial ministers were made answerable to and removable by the adverse vote of the legislature. The Provincial legislature could legislate on subjects in provincial and concurrent lists. Forty percent of the budget was still not votable .

Governor could (a) refuse assent to a bill, (b) promulgate ordinances, (c) enact Governor's acts

16.7.1 Evaluation of the Act

Numerous 'safeguards' and special responsibility of the Governor General worked as brakes in proper functioning of the act. In the Provinces the governor still had extensive powers. This Act enfranchised 14 per cent of British India population. However the extension of the system of communal electorates and representations of various interests promoted separatist tendencies which culminated in partition of India.

The Act provided a rigid constitution with no possibility of internal growth. Right of amendment was reserved with the British Parliament.

The Act of 1935 was based on two basic principles, namely, federation and parliamentary system. Although the federation principle was introduced with a built-in unitary bias yet the provinces were invested with a coordinate and not a subordinate authority. No doubt, the federal character was seriously distorted by the provisions of safeguards and special responsibility which gave extraordinary powers to the executive head at the centre and the provinces. An important point to be noted is that fully responsible government was not introduced at the centre. The provincial autonomy envisaged under the Act was also placed under serious limitations. The Dominion Status for India was still a distant dream. The incorporation of safeguards was a clever constitutional device to delay the introduction of a fully responsible government. Although these provisions were made for the transition period, the extent of the period of transition was not defined.

The Indian National Congress rejected the provision of safeguards and repudiated the idea of transition. It suspected that there were sinister motives behind them and they were found to have an adverse effect on the national movement.

16.7.2 The Long-term British Strategy

Political suppression could only be a short-term tactic. In the long run the strategy was to weaken the movement and integrate large segments of the movement into colonial, constitutional and administrative structure. It was hoped that these reforms would revive political standing of constitutionalist, liberals and moderates who had lost public support during the Civil Disobedience Movement. The Colonial State repression earlier and reforms now would convince a large section of Congressmen of the ineffectiveness of an extra-legal struggle. They British political establishment felt that once Congressmen had tasted power, they would be reluctant to go back to politics of sacrifice.

The Colonial State had planned that these reforms could be used to create dissensions within the Congress. The right-wing political groups were to be placated through constitutional concessions and radical leftists to be crushed through police measures. Provincial autonomy would create powerful provincial leaders who would gradually become autonomous centers of political power. Congress would thus be provincialised and its central leadership would get weakened.

16.8 NATIONALISTS' RESPONSE

The Act was criticized and rejected by the Congress on the ground that in formulating it the people of India were never consulted, and as such it did not represent their will. Congress charged the government of formulating the Act in such a way as to stall the introduction of responsible government and perpetuate their rule and exploit the Indian masses. In spite of its recognition of the aspirations of the Indians to have a responsible government, the Act of 1935 did not fulfill those aspirations. It did not concede the right to vote to all the adults. The property qualifications, the system of separate electorates, the provisions of safeguard were violative of democratic rights of the people. The Act was, therefore, denounced as undemocratic in spirit, offensive to people's sovereignty and institutionally unworkable. The Liberals criticized the Act but were willing to work the reforms as a step towards responsible government. The Muslim League also criticized the Act but was ready to give it a trial. On the whole the Congress condemned the Act but hesitated that they might be prepared to work the provincial part under protest. Thus, the Congress participated in the elections in 1937 and formed provincial ministries. However, the Congress demanded convening of a constituent assembly elected on the basis of adult franchise to frame a constitution for independent India.

16.9 SUMMARY

By the mid-1920s, it had become clear that the working of the Government of India Act of 1919 did not satisfy the Indians leading to resentment. Keeping this in mind, the British government appointed the Simon Commission to recommend framing of new constitutional provisions for India. However, since all the members of the Commission were Whites, this led a lot of resentment and protest in India against it. The various Round Table Conferences held in London were also did not provide satisfaction to the nationalists. Nevertheless, when the Government of India Act, 1935 became operative, the Congress decided to work it despite serious reservations.

16.10 EXERCISES

- 1) How did the Indian nationalists react to the formation of the Simon Commission?
- 2) Discuss the features of the Nehru Report.
- 3) Discuss the provisions of the Government of India Act, 1935. Why did the Congress criticise it?

UNIT 17 CONGRESS MINISTRIES*

Structure

- 17.1 Introduction
- 17.2 Towards Constitutionalism
- 17.3 Towards Elections
 - 17.3.1 Elections to Local Bodies
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17.1 INTRODUCTION

The period between 1936 and 1939 was a period of political transformation for the Congress. It was when the Congress opted for constitutional politics suspending the path of agitation and confrontation. However, unlike the earlier Swarajist phase, its present aim was to give the constitutional methods a trial and the Congressmen worked for their success. There were many differences among the Congressmen regarding the constitutional method. In fact, every decision taken up by the Congress was strongly debated upon before its adoption. Though there was an agreement on the basic issue of fighting British imperialism, Congressmen disagreed on the methods to be adopted. It was during this period that the Left Wing was making its presence felt within the Congress. The Right Wing and the Left Wing discussed and debated on various issues. After a hectic debate the Congress decided to contest the elections in 1937 and was successful in forming governments in seven provinces.

The Congress ministries functioned for a little more than two years. They had to sort out a number of problems during their short tenure in the office. Different social classes had their own expectations from the Congress and accordingly their aspirations went up with the Congress coming into power. The Congress succeeded in implementing certain principles for which it stood. But there were other issue on which the Congress was divided from within. But although the

Congress resigned office in September 1939, its 2 year period in office had been of great significance in the freedom struggle. In fact, this was made clear to the people of India that they can have their own Government

17.2 TOWARDS CONSTITUTIONALISM

After the failure of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact and the Second Round Table Conference, the Civil Disobedience Movement was resumed from 1932. But it did not evoke a similar response from the people as the earlier phase had done. It was becoming clear that the renewed mass movement would not continue for long. Hence, there emerged voices within the Congress advocating a return to constitutional methods. In some quarters the revival of the Swarajist Party was also discussed. Asaf Ali and S. Satyamurti had raised this issue with Gandhi even during the period of the mass movement. Another prominent Congressman, Dr. M.A. Ansari was in favour of council entry. In 1933 Satyamurti formed the Madras Swaraj Party. K.M. Munshi, B.C. Roy and Ramaswamy Iyengar also sought Gandhi's support for the revival of Swaraj Party. Although, at this moment, Gandhi did not favour the idea of constitutional methods, he told them: 'If you believe in the move (return to the constitutional methods) you are free to sponsor it.'

Some Congressmen favoured council entry while a few others like Acharya Narendra Dev and Purshottamdas Tandon opposed it. This reflects the difference of opinion within the Congress with each side eager to influence and tilt the Congress policy but not without Gandhi's consent. As soon as the Civil Disobedience Movement was withdrawn, Gandhi gave a free hand to each side by saying: 'I want all sections to work in all directions towards one thing in their own ways without criticizing one another.'

The section which supported council entry at this time was not exactly following the arguments given by the Swarajists to wreck the constitution from within. Now leaders like Rajagopalachari were advocating council entry which was different from Swarajists in two ways: i) it was not meant to wreck the constitution or put obstacles in its smooth functioning, but aimed at making the constitution workable; and ii) in the event of obtaining majority, office was to be accepted and ministries to be formed.

On the other hand, there were Congressmen with Socialist leanings who opposed council entry and were not in favour of making the Constitution workable. The Socialists had organised themselves by forming the Congress Socialist Party within the Congress. However, the differences in opinions, though governed by ideological leanings, were considered internal matters within the Congress. As far as the Congress position vis-à-vis British imperialism was concerned it was always stated in one voice. For example, the objectionable clauses of Act of 1935 were condemned by the Congress with full support from all of its sections. The issue before the Congress was to decide whether to contest the forthcoming elections and accept office or not.

17.3 TOWARDS ELECTIONS

Before we go on to analyse the elections of 1937 and the events related to them we shall discuss briefly the general political situation and some of the earlier

elections. After a lot of discussion and debate the Congress decided in its Lucknow session of 1936 to contest the forthcoming elections for provincial councils. But earlier in October 1934, Gandhi had withdrawn from the Congress refusing 4-anna membership of the Congress. However, this did not mean that his hold over the Congress had weakened or that he was not guiding the Congress policy any longer.

17.3.1 Elections to Local Bodies

Gandhi had given a free hand to all sections to pursue their methods so long as they worked in one direction i.e., opposing the British. Thus, from 1934 the Congress contested elections to the Assembly and the local bodies as and when they were held. These elections proved useful from the following points of view:

- i) The Congress could test its popular base through election results.
- ii) They gave the Congress tremendous experience in terms of organisation, planning, and managing of elections.
- iii) The Congress could test its allies for funds which were needed for electoral politics.

Here we can give the example of the elections held in the Madras Presidency. In May 1935, a Congress Civic Board was formed for selecting party candidates for local elections. The candidates had to pledge themselves to the programme offered by the Board and this included: i) encouragement to Swadeshi; ii) removing corruption; and iii) improvement in medical and educational facilities. The results of local elections were encouraging for the Congress. In Madurai, the Congress won 21 of the 36 seats in the Municipality (October 1935) and a year later (October 1936) 27 out of 40 seats in Madras. In the elections to the Central Legislative Assembly, the Congress wiped out the Justice Party by capturing all the seven seats it contested in this Province. At the national level out of a total of 76 contested seats, the Congress candidates stood for 55 and won 44. The total polling was 650,000 and the Congress had secured 375,000 votes.

It took the Congress a long time to decide in favour of contesting the Provincial Council elections. The Congress Working Committee in its meeting in August 1935 decided that the election participation issue would be settled in the Lucknow session.

17.3.2 Lucknow Congress

The Congress session at Lucknow (April 1936) was presided over by Jawaharlal Nehru. His presidential speech advocated Socialism which he regarded as ‘the only key to the solution of the world’s problems and of India’s problems.’ He lauded the role of the masses in the direct action struggles of the Congress but as a note of self-criticism he said: ‘Our policies and ideas are governed far more by....middle class outlook than by the consideration of the needs of the great majority of population.’ Nehru also took three Socialists into the Congress Working Committee, Jayprakash Narayan, Acharya Narendra Dev and Achyut Patwardhan. A number of resolutions were passed in this session. Prominent among them were:

- i) The ‘people of the State (princely States) should have the same right of self-determination as those of the rest of India and that the Congress stands for the same political, civil and democratic liberties for every part of India.’ But the Congress pointed out that ‘the struggle for liberty’ was to be carried out by the people of states themselves.
- ii) The provincial units of the Congress were asked to conduct agrarian enquiries, the findings of which would facilitate the work of AICC to form an all India Agrarian Programme.

The most important decision was that the Congress resolved to contest elections on the basis of a manifesto. However, the question of office acceptance was kept pending. This was an issue which generated tremendous debate within the Congress. For example, T. Prakasam and Satyamurti strongly advocated office acceptance, while M.R. Masani dismissing this proposal stated strongly: ‘We are told a Congress Ministry will be able to hoist the National Flag on government schools and institutions. The day on which the National Flag is hoisted under the Union Jack our Flag will be polluted and a new National Flag will have to be invented.’ In fact, the decision of contesting elections and postponing the question of office acceptance was a kind of compromise between those who were for office acceptance and those who wanted to boycott elections.

Still there was a section of leadership which believed that no ban should have been there on office acceptance. Many Congress leaders thought that a declaration in relation to office acceptance would have further brightened the electoral prospects. In certain Congress quarters discussions were already taking place regarding office acceptance and would-be chief ministers. However, as Rajagopalachari put it: ‘The Congress has once again shown its capacity for presenting a united front. The majorities in the debates should not be misunderstood to be any kind of political split. They are the normal machinery for collective thinking.’

17.3.3 Election Manifesto

It was the task of the Parliamentary Committee to draft the Election Manifesto of the Congress. The manifesto aimed at ‘explaining the political and economic policy and programme of the Congress’. We list for you the prominent features of the Election Manifesto adopted by the AICC in August 1936:

- i) It was made clear that the purpose of sending Congressmen to the legislatures was not to cooperate with the Government, but to combat the Act of 1935 and to end it. British imperialism was to be resisted in its ‘attempts to strengthen its hold on India’.
- ii) It highlighted the poverty of Indian masses particularly peasants, workers and artisans, and stated that ‘for the vast millions of our countrymen the problem of achieving national independence can give us the power to solve our economic and social problems and end the exploitation of our masses’.
- iii) The task of the Congress representatives was ‘to take all possible steps to end the various regulations, ordinances and Acts which oppress the Indian people’. They would work for: a) establishment of civil liberty, b) release of political prisoners, and c) undoing the wrongs done to the peasants and others.

- iv) In relation to industrial workers the policy of the Congress would be to secure for them a decent standard of living, regular hours of work, and better working conditions for labour. The promises made included the right to form unions, suitable machinery to settle disputes with employers, and protection ‘against the economic consequences of old age’.
- v) There were many other promises in the Manifesto, such as removal of untouchability, equal status for women, encouragement to khadi and village industries, and satisfactory solution to communal problem.

The question of office acceptance was to be decided after the elections. Thus, the Congress was gearing itself for elections, and trying to reach a decision for the selection of candidates. The Lucknow session was important from another point of view as well. It was during this session that the first meeting of the All India Kisan Sabha was held under the presidency of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati.

17.3.4 Faizpur Congress

The next session of the Congress was held at Faizpur in December 1936, again under the presidency of Jawaharlal Nehru. A variety of issues were raised in this session. These were related to both the international and the internal situation. Nehru attacked Fascism in his presidential speech, and the Congress passed resolutions condemning Italian aggression of Abyssinia and Japanese aggression of China. The Congress warned the people against the resources of India being used by British in the case of a World War. On national issues Nehru made it clear that ‘the only logical consequence of the Congress policy is to have nothing to do with the office and the ministry. Any deviation from this would...mean a kind of partnership with British Imperialism in the exploitation of the Indian people.’

In this session the Congress demanded the formation of a Constituent Assembly to frame a Constitution of their own. The question of office acceptance was deferred again. However, the most important thing which the Congress resolved at Faizpur was the adoption of an agrarian programme. The major features outlined in this programme included 50 per cent reduction in rent and revenue, exemption of uneconomic holdings from rent and land tax, taxation on agricultural income, abolition of feudal levies and forced labour, cooperative farming, wiping out arrears of rent, modification of ejection laws, and recognition of peasant unions (*Kisan Sabhas*).

This programme was however silent on the issue of the abolition of Zamindari and Taluqdari systems. The Kisan Sabha leaders like Sahajanand Saraswati, N.G. Ranga and Indulal Yajnik, though welcoming the programme in general, criticized it on this ground for they felt that these systems were the root cause of peasant exploitation. They were supported by Socialist leaders like Jayprakash Narayan. Here it is worth mentioning that the Right Wing in the Congress was not in favour of Zamindari abolition. But there is no doubt that the Agrarian Programme was a progressive document, and it went a long way in rallying the peasants behind the Congress.

By this time the Congress also went for a mass contact programme and its membership increased tremendously. For example, there were 450,000 members in May 1936 and by December 1936 the number stood at 636,000.

17.4 ELECTIONS OF 1937

Once the Congress decided to contest elections, every Congressman made an all-out effort to ensure the success of Congress candidates.

17.4.1 Selection of Candidates

The general procedure for the selection of candidates was that the Provincial Congress Committee would recommend names to the Congress Parliamentary Board, and the latter would have the final say in the selection. For doing so the PCCs adopted the criteria which specified that the candidate should abide by Congress discipline, and follow and work for the Congress programme. Besides these two basic qualifications, the PCCs also took into account the candidates' services to the Congress, popularity among the people, and ability to bear election expenses on their own. In spite of their sincere efforts to select the best candidates on the basis of above mentioned conditions, in certain cases caste played a role in this process. On being questioned by Maulana Azad about candidate-selection in Bihar, Rajendra Prasad wrote about the role played by caste: 'It is disgraceful for an organisation like the Congress to do so but success in the elections was our first objective, and secondly it should not be overlooked that the Congress is a widespread organisation consisting of people of all castes.'

In certain cases there were disputes over the selection. For example Sahajanand Saraswati was disturbed to see in Bihar that some persons taken in as candidates were in fact opportunists having nothing to do with the Congress earlier. Similarly, in Bombay differences arose between K.F. Nariman and Vallabhbhai Patel. In Andhra, N.G. Ranga, acting on behalf of the Andhra Ryots Association, urged the Congress candidates to sign a pledge. This pledge tied the candidates to work for the peasants' cause inside and outside the legislatures. Many Congress candidates signed the pledge but Vallabhbhai Patel denounced this move. Ranga made it clear that the pledge was in no way against the Congress discipline, rather it strengthened the Congress organisation. Since Patel was adamant, Ranga had to withdraw the pledge.

17.4.2 Election Campaign

The Congress went all out to achieve victory in elections by a vigorous campaigning. Nehru advised the Congress volunteers that the Faizpur Agrarian Programme 'should find a prominent place in our election campaign'. Nehru himself toured throughout the country. Canvassing among the Allahabad villagers, he stated that 'There are only two parties in India-those fighting for the cause of the people and the other against it.... The Congress was going to the Councils to keep out Khan Bahadurs, Raja Bahadurs and Nawabs who sided with Government.' There was a common feeling gaining ground among the people that very soon Congress Raj would replace British Raj.

In Bihar the election took the turn of 'Kisan versus Zamindars'. A popular election song in the countryside was '*magar kothri mein badal janyenge*' (we shall change at the polling booth) and it was sung by those who were being forced by non-Congress candidate to vote for them. In Madras, Satyamurti toured almost 9000 miles to canvass for Congress candidates. The propaganda here was to 'vote in the yellow box' as practically all Congress candidates opted for yellow coloured

ballot boxes. It was quite apparent that the Justice party would lose. There was tremendous enthusiasm among the electors all over the country. However, in some regions the Congress was in a weak position as many regional parties were also in the fray. For example, in Bengal, the Praja Krishak Party was quite popular, and in a similar position was the Unionist Party in Punjab. In U.P. the landlords had hurriedly formed the Nationalist Agriculturist Party to contest elections but it could not influence the voters. Beside these regional parties the Congress had to face the challenge of the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha – parties which carried politics on communal lines. The Muslim League was strong in Sindh. In UP the Congress had an understanding with the Muslim League for forming a joint ministry.

17.4.3 Election Results

Elections were held on different dates in different provinces and the results were very encouraging for the Congress. Except Bengal, Punjab, and Sindh, the Congress had fared well in other regions. In five provinces it had clear majority:

Province	Total No. of Seats	Seats won by Congress
U.P.	228	134
Bihar	152	95
Madras	215	159
C.P.	112	70
Orissa	60	36
Bombay	175	87
Bengal	250	60
Sindh	60	8
Assam	108	35
NWFP	50	19
Punjab	175	18

In Bengal, NWFP, Assam, and Bombay Congress emerged as the single largest party, whereas in Punjab and Sindh its performance was poor. The Congress could not do well in the elections to upper houses as the franchise there was limited to the upper strata only. As far as the reserved seats were concerned, we give few examples of Congress performance (in all 11 provinces):

- Out of the 38 seats reserved for labour, the Congress had contested 20 and won 18.
- 482 seats were reserved as Muslim seats. The Congress contested 58 and could win only 26 seats. Out of these 19 were in NWFP. The Congress could not get a single Muslim seat in Bombay, U.P., C.P., Sindh and Bengal. However, it is worth mentioning here that the performance of the Muslim League was no better. It could not get a single seat in NWFP. In Punjab it got only 2 of the 84 reserved seats.
- For commerce and industry 56 seats were reserved. The Congress contested 8 and could win only 3.

- For Landholders 37 seats were reserved. The Congress contested 8 and won 4.

Thus, the performance of Congress in reserved constituencies was not at all satisfactory except in the labour seats. But it did well in general seats. The Congress Working Committee gave to the people the following message on its electoral victory: 'The Congress Working Committee congratulates the nation on its wonderful response to the call of the Congress during the recent elections, demonstrating the adherence of the masses to Congress policy.'

17.5 OFFICE ACCEPTANCE

As we have seen earlier, the decision of office acceptance had been left pending due to differences within the Congress. The AICC met in March 1937 to decide over the issue. Rajendra Prasad moved a resolution for 'conditional acceptance' of office which was accepted. The condition attached was that the governors would not use their special powers to intervene with the functioning of ministries. Here Jayprakash Narain moved an amendment for total rejection of office but this was defeated when put to vote (78 in favour and 135 against). This was considered as a major victory for the Right Wing within the Congress. Gandhi himself was in favour of conditional acceptance of office.

At this time again there were arguments in favour of and against office acceptance. A vocal argument in favour of forming ministries was that by doing so the Congress would be able to give some relief to peasants and workers. But leaders like N.G. Ranga, Sahajanand Saraswati and Indulal Yajnik described office acceptance as a retreat from the basic Congress policy of non-cooperation with imperialism. Sahajanand felt that the advocates of office acceptance felt exhausted and were 'trying to escape on the pretext of peasants'. And as Vallabhbhai Patel put it: 'Parliamentary mentality had come to stay with the people'.

In six provinces where the Congress was in majority its leaders were invited by the Governors to form ministries. However, this offer was turned down due to the refusal of Governors to give assurances on the conditions put forward by the Congress. The next move of the Government was to form 'Interim Ministries' in these provinces. For example Nawab of Chattari formed his ministry in U.P. and Sir Dhunjishah Cooper did so in Bombay. Here it has to be noted that these were ministries which did not command a majority in the legislatures and hence could not continue in office beyond six months. In Bombay most of the Congressmen who favoured office acceptance could not reconcile with this move of the government. Some of them even felt that what genuinely belonged to them had been given to others. Thus, they made strenuous efforts to pressurise the Working Committee in favour of office acceptance. A similar situation arose in Madras under Rajagopalachari, who by this time was the most vocal leader in favour of office. In Bihar the work of the Kisan Enquiry Committee was revived, but what was being preached in the meeting was office acceptance. In U.P. peasants were encouraged not to pay rents on the assurance that when the Congress formed the ministry all arrears of rents would be remitted.

In some case the governors suggested dissolution of legislatures (like Lord Erskine, the Governor of Madras) to the Viceroy. But Linlithgow felt that the Congress would give way soon, and it was only a matter of time. At this same

time he was aware that those Congressmen who were pro-office had shown remarkable discipline in abiding by the decision of the High Command. On June 20, the Viceroy clarified the stance of the Government in relation to special powers of the Governors vis-à-vis ministers. The C.W.C. met at Wardha in the first week of July and permitted office acceptance.

It is worth mentioning here that most of the Indian capitalists were in favour of office acceptance by the Congress. G.D. Birla was consistently making efforts in this direction and was in touch with Congress leaders. When Gandhi finally gave his consent for office, Birla had written to Mahadev Desai: 'My vanity tickles me to believe that perhaps my letters might have made some contribution in influencing Bapu's mind.' Birla had been so eager to bring the Government close to the Congress that he informed Lord Zetland, the Secretary of State, about Gandhi's statement that 'office acceptance was an attempt to **avoid bloody revolution** on the one hand and mass Civil Disobedience on the other'.

The resignation of the interim ministries was followed by the formation of Congress ministries. It was the beginning of the new era in the freedom-struggle.

Province	Congress Prime Ministers
Bombay	B.G. Kher
U.P.	Govind Ballabh Pant
Madras	C.Rajagopalachari
Orissa	Hare Krishna Mehtab
C.P.	Dr. Khare
Bihar	Sri Krishna Sinha
N.W.F.P	Dr. Khan Saheb

In Bengal, Fazlul Huq invited the Congress to cooperate in forming a coalition government. The Congress refused and Huq then joined hands with the Muslim League. In Sindh, Congress supported the ministry of Gulam Hussain Hidayatulla and in Assam of Bardoloi. In Punjab the Congress was not in a position to play a dominant role.

The Congress had delayed the decision of office acceptance by about six months. According to Raini Dhawan Shanker Das (*The First Congress Raj*) the Congress had gained by this delay:

- i) The delay had disproved the election time propaganda against the Congress that they were office hungry and would jump at the first opportunity to form ministries.
- ii) The Congress unity had been maintained and demonstrated.
- iii) It had become clear to Governors and the ministers that the word of the Congress High Command was supreme.
- iv) Governors would think several times before intervening in the work of ministers.

17.6 CONGRESS MINISTRIES AT WORK

The task before the Congress was a tremendous one – particularly in the light of the kind of expectations the people had from the Congress. We will now give you a brief thematic account of what the Congress did during nearly 2 ½ years in office.

17.6.1 Political Prisoners and Civil Liberties

The Congress, through its election manifesto, was committed to the release of political prisoners and detenués. Many among them were in prison even without facing trials. The Andaman prisoners had informed Gandhi that they no longer believed in the cult of violence. The largest number of political prisoners was in Bengal, a non-Congress ruled province. Gandhi went to Calcutta to personally negotiate for their release and after three weeks of long talks he was able to secure the release of 1100 detenués. In U.P. many prisoners were released, prominent among them were the Kakori prisoners. There were massive public demonstrations welcoming these prisoners. But the British Government disliked this. Gandhi, Govind Ballabh Pant and Jawaharlal Nehru, while welcoming their release, condemned ‘welcome demonstrations’. Pant felt that such a response from the people could affect the release of other prisoners. And sure enough the Governors of U.P. and Bihar stopped the release of prisoners. Just before the Haripura Session (March, 1938) the Prime Ministers of these province submitted their resignations over the issue. The Congress position was clearly stated at Haripura that it would not hesitate in taking action in the ‘matter of violent crime’ but as the prisoners had shed violence there was no risk in releasing them. Ultimately the Government had to bow down.

The Congress also worked for lifting restrictions on the return to India of political exiles like Rash Behari Gosh, Prithvi Singh, Maulvi Abdullah Khan, Abani Mukerjee, etc. However, it could not do much in this regard.

The Congress was committed to civil liberties within the confines of non-violence. In September 1938 the AICC resolved that ‘the Congress warns the public that Civil Liberty does not cover acts of violence, incitement to violence or promulgation of palpable falsehoods.’ It was made clear that ‘Congress will, consistently with its tradition, support measures that may be undertaken by the Congress Government for the defence of life and property’. The Left Wing in the Congress was opposed to such an approach and this resolution was termed as a defeat for them in the Congress.

17.6.2 The Peasants’ Question

The peasant problem was a burning issue. Jawaharlal Nehru observed that ‘The outstanding problem of India is the peasant problem. All else is secondary’. He believed that the formation of Congress ministries had generated new hopes amongst the peasants, whereas the big zamindars and taluqdars were ‘organizing to resist this long deferred justice to the peasantry’. He stressed that ‘we must remain true to our pledges and give satisfaction and fulfillment to the hopes of the peasantry’. The Kisan Sabhas welcomed such a statement from the Congress President in 1937.

Tenancy legislation was taken up in all the Congress ruled provinces. The Right Wing did not want to go ahead in this without negotiating with the landlords and the position varied from province to province. For example, in Bihar the Congress signed a pact with the zamindars regarding the provisions of the Tenancy Bill. Rajendra Prasad and Maulana Azad had been instrumental in bringing about this pact. The Bihar Kisan Sabha was totally ignored and the pact was severely criticized not only by the Left Wing but also by those Congressmen who sympathised with the peasants' cause. Prasad had written to the Maharaja of Dharbhanga that he 'shall come in for a great deal of criticism from not only the Kisan Sabha but Congress in general and even perhaps the High Command'. It was at this time that a ban was imposed on the Congressmen for participating in Kisan Sabha activities in Bihar. In Bihar the Congress policy was to an extent pro-zamindari. The zamindars were confident that for their sake 'the Kisan movement was being suppressed by the Congress.' On the other hand, the Kisan Sabha launched a number of struggles at regional levels to remind the Congress for implementing the Faizpur Agrarian Programme.

The situation in U.P. was different from Bihar. The U.P. Congress was dominated more by the Left Wing. The Tenancy Bill which was passed here was not given assent by the Governor even after two years of its passage. In Bombay the Congress was successful in getting those lands restored to their original owners which had been sold to new owners as a result of the no-rent campaign during the Civil-Disobedience Movement.

In all the provinces, efforts were made to protect the peasant from moneylenders and increase irrigation facilities. But in most of the areas the zamindars remained in a dominant position. For example, the zamindar of Kalli Kote in Orissa paraded lorry loads of Reserve Police in his villages to warn the peasants that he was as powerful as ever in the Congress regime, but on the whole, this was a period of tremendous awakening among the peasants, and they stood behind the Congress.

17.6.3 Labour

The Congress had promised better working conditions to the working class. However, its labour policy was influenced by the relations between the Right Wing and the Left Wing. The Right Wing believed that the relations between the labourers and capitalists should be based on the Gandhian principle of Trusteeship, but the Left Wing wanted to deal with them along class lines. In October 1937, the Labour Committee appointed by the Congress, gave a programme which was accepted by the AICC. This included:

- holidays with pay,
- employment insurance,
- leave with pay during sickness,
- to devise way to fix minimum wages, and
- recognition of such Trade Unions by the State which pursued a policy of peaceful and legitimate means.

However, Bombay was the only province to undertake Labour Legislation. The Ministry introduced the Industrial Disputes Bill with the aim to prevent strikes and lockouts as far as possible. According to the workers this only meant a ban

on strikes as a lockout was the most effective ‘weapon in the armoury of Capitalists for the exploitation of workers’ against which the government could do nothing. The workers went on strike which was crushed by the Congress government with the help of the police. About 20 workers were killed in the police action.

This period also saw a massive workers strike in Kanpur where 24,000 workers struck work in August, 1937 demanding higher wages and better living conditions. Here also the strike was condemned by the Congress leaders. When the workers started picketing, Nehru stressed:

‘If violence is resorted to, it cannot be expected that the government will not interfere and the army or police will not be called. The workers should remember that the government is very powerful and will put down violence by violence and that the workers will be subdued in no time.’

Ultimately the dispute was settled by the Ministry. In Bengal the Congress supported the strike in Jute Mills (March- May 1937). The Bengal PCC condemned the repression of Jute workers by the Huq ministry which was a non-Congress government. During the TISCO workers strike at Jamshedpur Nehru and Rajendra Prasad acted as arbitrators between the Tatas and workers. Over all, the left increased its influence over labour during this period.

17.6.4 Constructive Programme

In all the Congress ruled provinces, sincere efforts were made to introduce prohibition, encourage education and give impetus to village industries. These included:

- A vigorous campaign in favour of prohibition,
- A grant of 2 Lakh rupees for Khadi and hand-spinning by the Madras Ministry,
- Honorary medical officers to be appointed in hospitals, and
- Investment on public buildings to be considerably reduced.

An advance was made in the field of education. An All India National Education Conference was held at Wardha (22 and 23 October, 1937). The Conference formulated a scheme which included:

- Free and compulsory education to be provided for seven years throughout the country,
- Mother tongue should be the medium of instruction, and
- Emphasis on vocational and Manual Training.

On the basis of these guidelines Dr. Zakir Hussain submitted a scheme of Basic education to be implemented by the Congress Ministries (2 December, 1937). This scheme included learning of basic crafts; proper knowledge of mother tongue; basic scientific knowledge, etc. In many provinces, attempts were made to put this scheme into action. As a result of the Congress education policy the number of students as well as educational institutions increased. For example, in Bombay province the number of educational institutions was 14,609 in 1936-37 and by 1939-40 it increased to 18,729. Similarly, the number of pupils which was 1,335,889 in 1936-37 increased to 1,556,441 by 1939-40.

Some other major achievements of the Congress Ministries were:

- Reduction in salaries of Ministers,
- The declaration of Fundamental Rights,
- Welfare Schemes for Tribals,
- Carrying Jail Reforms,
- Repeal of Moplah Outrages Act, and
- Carrying out commercial and economic surveys.

A very important feature of this period was the change in the attitude of government officials. They had to work under those very leaders who were earlier arrested by them.

17.6.5 Some Problems Faced by Congress

There was a malicious propaganda carried out against the Congress by the Communal parties. They accused the Congress of discrimination against the minorities, but such propaganda was carried out due to political and communal overtones, rather than on factual basis.

At the same time, many opportunists joined the Congress during this period in order to seek advantages of office. The Congress was aware of such characters, and Gandhi wrote frankly about corruption in the Congress in his paper *Harijan*. In many regions a drive was made to free the Congress from such elements.

During this period, the Congress held two sessions. The Fifty First session was held at Haripura in February, 1938 under the presidentship of Subhas Chandra Bose. This session passed a number of resolutions related to international affairs as well as on the internal situation in India. However, it was at the next session (Tripuri) that the Congress faced a major crisis. This time an election was held for the President and Bose defeated Pattabhi Sitaramayya by 1580 to 1377 votes. This was regarded as a victory of the Left Wing, as the Right Wing had solidly supported Sitaramayya. Even Gandhi regarded this defeat as his own defeat. There were problem in the formation of the working committee and ultimately Bose resigned from the Presidentship.

The Congress Ministries resigned office in November, 1939 on the ground that the Viceroy on its own had made India a participant in the imperialist war without consulting the Congress. The Muslim League under Jinnah celebrated this as ‘deliverance day’ whereas the nationalists stood behind the Congress and the subsequent events led to the individual Satyagraha in 1900 and the Quit India movement in 1942, besides Bose going aboard and leading the Azad Hind Fauj.

17.7 SUMMARY

In this Unit we have seen how the Congress after a long debate decided to contest the elections and emerged victorious in five provinces. The victory of the Congress was attributed to its pro-people policies particularly the agrarian programme. In most of the cases the Zamindars and communal forces opposed the Congress. Though there was difference of opinion among the Congressmen in relation to participation in elections and then for office acceptance, once a decision was

taken everyone stood solidly behind it. The Ministries functioned under certain limitations, but tried their best to give relief to the people. The constructive programme got a boost during this period. The formation of Congress Ministries was perceived by the people as their own Raj, and they firmly believed that the days of the British Raj were numbered. Though the Left Wing was very vocal, it was the Right Wing which dominated in the Congress in decision-making in view of the fight against colonialism.

17.8 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the ways in which the Congress prepared for the elections in 1937.
- 2) How do you perceive the election results in 1937? Was it a success or failure for the Congress? Give reasons for your answer.
- 3) Discuss the achievements of the Congress ministries.
- 4) What do you think were the problems in running a nationalist government under colonial dispensation?



UNIT 18 THE IDEOLOGICAL SPECTRUM IN THE 1930s*

Structure

- 18.1 Introduction
- 18.2 The Gandhian Core
 - 18.2.1 Anti-Imperialist Non-Cooperation Campaign
 - 18.2.2 The Preparation for the Dandi March
 - 18.2.3 The Dandi March
 - 18.2.4 The Aftermath of March and its Consequences
 - 18.2.5 Karachi Session, Internal Debate and the Congress Ministries
- 18.3 The Liberals as Negotiators
- 18.4 The Left-Turn and Radical Alternatives to the Congress
- 18.5 The Revolutionaries on the Fringes as the Commandos of Nationalism
- 18.6 Summary
- 18.7 Exercises

18.1 INTRODUCTION

There are some core debates which permeate the study of nations and nationalism. These centre on the question of how to define the terms ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ and when nations first appeared. Are the nations timeless phenomena? Did man climb out of the primordial slime and immediately set about creating nations. Or did nations take different shapes at different points in history. The modernisation school see nations as entirely modern and constructed. Then the major question is how nations and nationalism developed. If nations are naturally occurring, then there is little reason to explain the birth of nations. On the other hand, if one sees nations as constructed, then it is important to be able to explain why and how nations developed. Nation, nationhood and nationalism are subject to a variety of morphologies. Nationalism is not a homogeneous ideology and means different things to different people. One way is to see it as a political-ideological spectrum. What is a political-ideological spectrum? A **political spectrum** is a way of modeling different political positions by placing them upon one or more geometric axes symbolizing independent political dimensions. Most long-standing spectra include a right wing and left wing, which originally referred to seating arrangements in the 18th century French parliament. According to the simplest left-right axis, communism and socialism are usually regarded internationally as being on the left, opposite fascism and conservatism on the right. Liberalism can mean different things in different contexts, sometimes on the left, sometimes on the right. However, others have frequently noted that a single left-right axis is insufficient in describing the existing variation in political beliefs, and often include other axes. The nature of spectrum depends on what is the focus of political concern: the community or the individual.

* Resource Person: Prof. Shri Krishan

18.2 THE GANDHIAN CORE

Ever since the emergence of Gandhi, even though elected as the Congress president only once in Belgaum Session (1924), Gandhi combined a strange mixture of western notion of equality, rights and citizenship with an equally strong millenarian appeal to become the unofficial, spiritual and mass icon of the Congress from early 1920s to the end of British rule. The Congress was under his shadow all these long turbulent years. Gandhi combined democratic-participative leadership style with autocratic-charismatic style with such an ease that there was no escape from him. He transformed the organisational structure of the Congress, which it follows almost to this date and also tried to shape it in his own ideological mould which he succeeded only partially because the Congress attracted people from different ideologies in the pre-independence era and became a kind of umbrella organisation. In the beginning of 1930, Gandhi reasserted his leadership after a gap in which Congress was internally divided into Swarajist and No-changers after the collapse of the Non-Cooperation. He launched his second major 'non-violent' offensive against the British rule.

18.2.1 Anti-Imperialist Non-Cooperation Campaign

The Satyagraha march, which triggered the wider Civil Disobedience Movement, was an important part of the Indian independence movement. It was a campaign of non-violent protest against the British salt tax in colonial India which began with the Salt March to Dandi on March 12, 1930. It was the most significant organised challenge to British authority since the Non-cooperation movement of 1920-22, and the *Purna Swaraj* declaration of independence by the Indian National Congress on December 31, 1929. Mahatma Gandhi led the Dandi march from his Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi, Gujarat to produce salt without paying the tax, with growing numbers of Indians joining him along the way. When Gandhi broke the salt laws in Dandi at the conclusion of the march on April 6, 1930, it sparked large scale acts of civil disobedience against the British Raj salt laws by millions of Indians. We will discuss it in some detail to show you the anti-imperialist mass character of the Congress.

18.2.2 The Preparation for the Dandi March

As with his other movements, Gandhi conceived of a brilliant plan to begin the Civil Disobedience with defiance of salt laws. The issue selected was such that it was a concern of every poor man and Gandhi was also aware that non-violent method ensured mass-participation which could not have been possible if the movement had been violent type. Choosing the salt tax as an injustice to the people of India was considered an ingenious choice because every peasant and every aristocrat understood the necessity of salt in everyday life. It was also a good choice because it did not alienate Congress moderates while simultaneously being an issue of enough importance to mobilize a mass following.

On February 5, newspapers reported that Gandhi would begin civil disobedience by defying the salt laws. The Salt Satyagraha would begin on March 12 and end in Dandi with Gandhi breaking the Salt Act on April 6. Gandhi chose April 6 to launch the mass breaking of the salt laws for a symbolic reason—it was the first day of 'National Week', begun in 1919 when Gandhi conceived of the national *hartal* (strike) against the Rowlatt Act. Gandhi prepared the worldwide media

for the march by issuing regular statements from Sabarmati, at his regular prayer meetings and through direct contact with the press. Gandhi prepared the worldwide media for the march by issuing regular statements from Sabarmati, at his regular prayer meetings and through direct contact with the press. For the march itself, Gandhi wanted the strictest discipline and adherence to Satyagraha and ahimsa. For that reason, he recruited the marchers not from Congress Party members, but from the residents of his own *ashram*, who were trained in Gandhi's strict standards of discipline. The 24-day march would pass through 4 districts and 48 villages. The route of the march, along with each evening's stopping place, was planned ahead of time based on recruitment potential, past contacts, and timing. Gandhi sent scouts to each village ahead of the march so he could plan his talks at each resting place, based on the needs of the local residents. On March 2, 1930 Gandhi wrote to the Viceroy, Lord Irwin, offering to stop the march if Irwin met eleven demands, including reduction of land revenue assessments, cutting military spending, imposing a tariff on foreign cloth, and abolishing the salt tax. His strongest appeal to Irwin referred to the salt tax: 'I regard this tax to be the most iniquitous of all from the poor man's standpoint. As the Independence movement is essentially for the poorest in the land, the beginning will be made with this evil.'

18.2.3 The Dandi March

On March 12, 1930, Gandhi and approximately 78 male Satyagrahis set out, on foot, for the coastal village of Dandi some 240 miles from their starting point in Sabarmati, a journey which was to last 23 days. According to *The Statesman*, the official government newspaper which usually played down the size of crowds at Gandhi's functions, 100,000 people crowded the road that separated Sabarmati from Ahmedabad. The first day's march of 21 kilometres ended in the village of Aslali, where Gandhi spoke to a crowd of about 4,000. At Aslali, and the other villages that the march passed through, volunteers collected donations, registered new Satyagrahis, and received resignations from village officials who chose to end cooperation with British rule. As they entered each village, crowds greeted the marchers, beating drums and cymbals. Gandhi gave speeches attacking the salt tax as inhuman, and the Salt Satyagraha as a 'poor man's battle'. Each night they slept in the open, asking of the villagers nothing more than simple food and a place to rest and wash. Gandhi felt that this would bring the poor into the battle for independence, necessary for eventual victory. Thousands of Satyagrahis and leaders like Sarojini Naidu joined him. Every day, more and more people joined the march. At Surat, they were greeted by 30,000 people. When they reached the railhead at Dandi, more than 50,000 were gathered. Gandhi gave interviews and wrote articles along the way. Foreign journalists made him a household name in Europe and America. Near the end of the march, Gandhi declared, 'I want world sympathy in this battle of Right against Might.' On April 6th he picked up a lump of mud and salt (some say just a pinch, some say just a grain) and boiled it in seawater to make the commodity which no Indian could legally produce salt.

He implored his thousands of followers to begin to make salt wherever, along the seashore, 'was most convenient and comfortable' to them. A 'war' on the salt tax was to be continued during the National Week, that is, up to the thirteenth of April. There were also simultaneous boycotts of cloth and khaddar. Salt was sold, illegally, all over the seacoast of India.

18.2.4 The Aftermath of March and its Consequences

What Gandhi did at Dandi was only a ritual beginning. It was followed by the defiance of Salt laws all over country. In Tamil Nadu, C. Rajagopalachari, led volunteers in a salt march from Trichinopoly to Vedaranniyam on the Tanjore coast. In Malabar, K. Kelappan, the leader of famous Vaikom temple entry Satyagraha, walked from Calicut to Pyannur to break the salt laws. Similar mobilizations of people were happening all over coastal area. Gandhi's announcement that he would lead a raid of volunteers on the Dharsana salt works, compelled the Government to arrest him on 4 May. The arrest of Gandhi sparked off a massive wave of protests all over India.

On May 21, with Sarojini Naidu and Gandhi's son Manilal in front ranks, a band of 2,000 volunteers marched towards the police cordon that had sealed off the Dharsana salt works. The volunteers were brutally beaten by the police with many of them suffering fatal injuries in the incident. In many places, salt Satyagraha assumed mass dimension. At Wadala, a suburb of Bombay, the raid on salt works culminated on 1 June in mass action of a crowd of 15,000 who broke the police cordon to carry away salt. In Karnataka, about 10,000 people marched in a similar action at Sanikatta salt works defying police *lathis* and bullets. From Midnapore in Bengal to the extreme South Tamil Nadu, people violated salt laws on the entire eastern coast in large numbers.

But salt Satyagraha was only a beginning for varied forms of defiance of British authority that it brought in its wake during the Civil Disobedience. From boycott of foreign clothes to boycott of liquor and from non-payment of *Chowkidari* tax (*Chowkidars* or guards in villages were paid out of taxes levied on villages and who acted as a supplementary police force in rural areas) to defiance of forest laws, it marked a new stage in the anti-imperialist struggle of Indian people.

Gandhi signed a temporary 'truce' popularly known as the Gandhi-Irwin Pact on March 5, 1930. The political prisoners were to be released under the terms of this agreement, except those convicted for violent acts. The fines that had not been collected so far were to be remitted, the confiscated lands of peasants not yet sold to the third parties were to be returned and government servants who had resigned during the movement were to be treated leniently and the congress was to withdraw its Civil-Disobedience movement and would participate in the Round Table Conference. The Congress endorsed the pact subsequently in its Karachi Session in March, 1931.

18.2.5 Karachi Session, Internal Debate and the Congress Ministries

Karachi Session was also an ideological milestone for Gandhi's politics as it reiterated the goal of complete independence or *Purna Swaraj*. It also passed the outstanding resolution on Fundamental Rights and the National Economic Programme. Gandhi had expressed doubts about the parliamentary form of democracy but the resolution demonstrated the commitment of the Congress to the civil and political rights of people. The resolution guaranteed the basic civic rights of free speech, free press, and free assembly; equality before law irrespective of caste creed or gender; neutrality of the state in regard to religious matters; elections on the basis of universal adult franchise etc.

An internal debate on the question of strategy emerged within Congress after the withdrawal of the Civil Disobedience. Gandhi stressed constructive work in the villages centring on the revival of village crafts. Another section led by M. A. Ansari, Asif Ali, Bhullabhai Desai advocated revival of constitutional method. The third alternative was suggested by the left-minded intellectuals and leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru who wanted to broaden the anti-imperialist struggle by taking up day-to-day class and economic demands of workers and peasants, organising them in trade unions and *kisan sabhas*.

In August 1935, the British Parliament passed the Government of India Act of 1935. The provinces were to be governed under a new system of provincial autonomy under which elected ministers controlled all provincial departments. After the elections to provincial legislatures in early 1937, there were sharp differences between the left and right within Congress over the question of assuming ministries in the provinces. Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Bose, the Congress Socialists and Communists opposed office acceptance in the provincial governments. However, finally Congress formed ministries in the provinces where it had gained majority. Apart from providing a space for civil liberties, removing psychological fear of bureaucracy, the Congress ministries also tried to provide temporary economic relief to peasants by taking up agrarian legislation.

18.3 THE LIBERALS AS NEGOTIATORS

The main trend of 1929 was the deepening crisis in which the British Government through its new Viceroy Lord Irwin offered a Round Table Conference but refused to offer more, while the Indian National Congress moved toward the movement of 1930. Among the Liberals, Sapru in particular tried to avert the crisis by mediating between Congress leaders and the Viceroy. He ultimately failed, due to forces beyond his control, but he made a reputation as a freelance negotiator. His other major crusade, next to the quest for a Dominion constitution, was for a settlement of the communal problem. In this also he would ultimately fail, but it remained true that in this sphere of negotiation the Liberal spirit of dedication to compromise was especially needed. Next to M. K. Gandhi, Sapru was probably the Indian leader most devoted to mediation in this cause. It is ironic that Sapru's pragmatic, individualistic approach to negotiation may have marked both the highest refinement and the worst vice in Indian Liberalism. In fact, the time had passed when the Liberals had much power as an organised group.

The year 1930 began with the launching of the second great movement by Gandhi and the Indian National Congress. Yet the Indian Liberals fixed their hopes on the first official Round Table Conference scheduled for the fall of the year. A number of Liberals attended the first Round Table Conference (November 1930 to January 1931). Sapru, ably seconded by V. S. Srinivasa Sastri, made it his task to rally the Indian Princes to the idea of an all-India federal union, recognising that Dominion status would be a frail thing unless it embraced both the British Indian provinces and the princely Indian States. Yet nothing was permanently settled, and the communal negotiations had become deadlocked. Sapru had difficulty getting other Liberals such as C. Y. Chintamani and C. H. Setalvad to join in a conciliatory approach to either the Princes or the Muslims. It is clear, however, that princely and Muslim demands were being pitched so high as to make ultimate agreement unlikely. When Sapru publicised his estrangement from most other Liberals at the conference by announcing his withdrawal from their

ranks, it served as a milepost in their continuing decline as an organisation, and it weakened not only the Liberal Party's position but, ultimately, Sapru's.

Both Sapru and the other Liberals were determined, in spite of their internecine troubles, to use the positive results of the conference to bring together the Government of India and the Congress radicals. Returning to India, Sapru and Sastri hurried to act as intermediaries between Lord Irwin, the Viceroy, on one hand and imprisoned Congressmen, but especially Gandhi, on the other. Irwin's move of releasing Congress leaders and the amenability of Gandhi to negotiation were no doubt the principal factors in the Irwin-Gandhi pact of March 1931 and in the uneasy truce which led to Congress participation in the second Round Table Conference. The Indian Liberals and their ally Sapru were themselves divided over the extent to which princely and Indian minority demands should be accepted. Despite Liberal negotiations with all factions, the result was failure. The position of the Indian Liberals as mediators reached a new low in 1933, leaving a disillusioned fragment of the old Liberal Party which talked fitfully of disbanding altogether. It remained only for Sapru and a fraction of the remaining Liberals to exert what limited efforts their individual prestige allowed them. The Liberal Party did not dissolve itself but struggled on, meeting in formal session almost every year up to 1945; thereafter its executive council met from time to time. As a party, however, the Liberals had lost all their influence. This was demonstrated by the elections of 1936 under the Reform Act of 1935, which gave Indians the opportunity at least of erecting cabinet-style governments in the Indian provinces. The Liberal Party contested the elections, but the Congress dominated the polls almost everywhere. Most of the Liberals then fumed on the sidelines until the Congress ministries resigned in 1939.

Looking back over the history of Indian Liberalism, it is possible to see that the causes of Liberal decline were already present in the rise and the basic character of this school of thought. The Indian Liberals had developed into intermediaries in two senses by 1900. First, they had purposely assumed the role of representatives of Indian interests and the Indian people at the bar of British political opinion. Then, gradually, they had been drawn by circumstances into a mediating position between the aggressive nationalism of the Indian radicals and the entrenched imperialism of the British power structure. The new role also marked an essential weakness of the Liberals as a group almost from the beginning of their history. Their strain of individualism not only weakened party discipline but was capable of breaking across party lines altogether. They lacked the backing of a large unified party with significant popular support, and thus, had poor credentials even as mediators and negotiators.

The failure of Liberal efforts to get a really advanced set of constitutional reforms for India, or to bring about a lasting truce between either the Congress and the British government or the Hindus and the Muslims, demonstrated this basic problem of the Liberals both as a group and as individuals. They lacked the sanctions which the backing of numbers alone could provide. They could reason and cajole all they might, whether collectively or individually, but they could nevertheless be ignored with impunity by the major parties to the disputes which they attempted to mediate. The Round Table Conferences demonstrated that they could not persuade any of the major combatants, government, Congress or Muslim League to take them seriously. The Indian Liberals can be credited with having had the courage to persevere in an unpopular position and the honest desire to avoid extremes that assume only one's own position to be the true one.

18.4 THE LEFT TURN AND RADICAL ALTERNATIVES TO THE CONGRESS

There were many left groups which provided different viewpoints from the official Congress position. The main among them were the Congress Socialist Party, the Forward Bloc and the Communist Party.

The **Congress Socialist Party (CSP)** was founded in 1934 as a socialist caucus within the Indian National Congress. Its members rejected what they saw as the anti-rational mysticism of Mohandas Gandhi as well as the sectarian attitude of the Communist Party of India towards the Congress Party. Influenced by Fabianism as well as Marxism, the CSP included advocates of armed struggle or sabotage (such as Jayprakash Narayan and Basawon Singh (Sinha)) as well as those who insisted upon ahimsa or nonviolent resistance (such as Acharya Narendra Deva). The CSP advocated decentralised socialism in which co-operatives, trade unions, independent farmers, and local authorities would hold a substantial share of the economic power. As secularists, they hoped to transcend communal divisions through class solidarity. Some, such as Narendra Deva or Basawon Singh, advocated a democratic socialism distinct from both Marxism and reformist social democracy. During the Popular Front period, the communists worked within CSP. Basawon Singh, along with Yogendra Shukla, was among the founder members of Congress Socialist Party from Bihar.

Jayprakash Narayan and Minoo Masani were released from jail in April 1934. Narayan convened a meeting in Patna on May 17, 1934, which founded the Bihar Congress Socialist Party. Narayan became general secretary of the party and Acharya Narendra Deva became president. The Patna meeting gave a call for a socialist conference which would be held in connection to the Congress Annual Conference. At this conference, held in Bombay, on 22-23 October 1934, they formed a new All India party, the Congress Socialist Party. Narayan became general secretary of the party, and Masani joint secretary. The conference venue was decorated by Congress flags and a portrait of Karl Marx. In the new party the greeting 'comrade' was used. Masani mobilised the party in Bombay, whereas Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and Puroshottam Trikamdas organised the party in other parts of Maharashtra. Ganga Sharan Singh (Sinha) was among the prominent leaders of the Indian National Congress Party as among the founders of the Congress Socialist Party. The constitution of the CSP defined that the members of CSP were the members of the Provisional Congress Socialist Parties and that they were all required to be members of the Indian National Congress. Members of communal organisations or political organisations whose goals were incompatible with the ones of CSP, were barred from CSP membership. The Bombay conference raised the slogan of mobilising the masses for a Constituent Assembly.

In 1936 the Communists joined CSP, as part of the Popular Front strategy of the Comintern. In some states, like Kerala and Orissa, communists came to dominate CSP. In fact communists dominated the entire Congress in Kerala through its hold of CSP at one point. In 1936, the CSP began fraternal relations with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party of Ceylon. In 1937 the CSP sent Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya on a speaking tour of the island. The CSP had adopted Marxism in 1936, and in their third conference in Faizpur they had formulated a thesis

that directed the party to work to transform the Indian National Congress into an anti-imperialist front.

During the summer of 1938 a meeting took place between the Marxist sector of the Anushilan movement and the CSP. Present in the meeting were Jayprakash Narayan (leader of CSP), Jogesh Chandra Chatterji, Tribid Kumar Chaudhuri and Keshav Prasad Sharma. The Anushilan Marxists then held talks with Acharya Narendra Deva, a former Anushilan militant. The Anushilan Marxists decided to join CSP, but keeping a separate identity within the party. The non-Marxists (who constituted about a half of the membership of the Samiti), although not ideologically attracted to the CSP, felt loyalty towards its Marxist sector. Moreover, around 25% of the membership of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association joined the CSP. This group was led by Jogesh Chandra Chatterji. The Anushilan Marxists were however soon to be disappointed by developments inside the CSP. The party, at the time Anushilan marxists had joined it, was not a homogeneous entity. There was the Marxist trend led by J.P. Narayan and Narendra Deva, the Fabian socialist trend led by Minoo Masani and Asoka Mehta and a Gandhian socialist trend led by Ram Manohar Lohia and Achyut Patwardan. To the Anushilan Marxists differences emerged between the ideological stands of the party and its politics in practice. These differences surfaced at the 1939 annual session of the Indian National Congress at Tripuri. At Tripuri, in the eyes of the Anushilan Marxists, the CSP had failed to consistently defend Subhas Chandra Bose. Jogesh Chandra Chatterji renounced his CSP membership in protest against the action by the party leadership.

Soon after the Tripuri session, Bose resigned as Congress president and formed the **Forward Bloc**. The Forward Bloc was intended to function as a unifying force for all left-wing elements. It held its first conference on June 22–23, 1939, and at the same time a Left Consolidation Committee consisting of the Forward Bloc, CPI, CSP, the Kisan Sabha, League of Radical Congressmen, Labour Party and the Anushilan Marxists. At this moment, in October 1939, J.P. Narayan tried to extend an olive branch to the Anushilan Marxists. He proposed the formation of a 'War Council' consisting of himself, Pratul Ganguly, Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee and Acharya Narendra Deva. But few days later, at a session of the All India Congress Committee, J.P. Narayan and the other CSP leaders pledged not to start any other movements parallel to those initiated by Gandhi. The Left Consolidation Committee soon fell into pieces, as the CPI, the CSP and the Royists deserted it. The Anushlian Marxists left the CSP soon thereafter, forming the Revolutionary Socialist Party.

The **Forward Bloc of the Indian National Congress** was formed on 3 May 1939 by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, who had resigned from the presidency of the Indian National Congress on April 29 after being outmaneuvered by Gandhi. The formation of the Forward Bloc was announced to the public at a rally in Calcutta. Initially the aim of the Forward Bloc was to rally all the leftwing sections within the Congress and develop an alternative leadership inside the Congress. A Forward Bloc Conference was held in Bombay in the end of June. At that conference the constitution and programme of the Forward Bloc were approved. In July 1939, Subhas Chandra Bose announced the Committee of the Forward Bloc. It had Subhas Chandra Bose as president, S.S. Cavesheer from Punjab as its vice-president, Lal Shankarlal from Delhi, as its general secretary and Pandit B Tripathi and Khurshed Nariman from Bombay as secretaries. Other prominent

members were Annapurniah from Andhra Pradesh, Senapati Bapat, Hari Vishnu Kammath from Bombay, Pasumpon U Muthuramalingam Thevar from Tamil Nadu and Sheel Bhadra Yajee from Bihar. Satya Ranjan Bakshi, was appointed as the secretary of the Bengal Provincial Forward Bloc. In August the same year Bose began publishing a newspaper titled *Forward Bloc*. He travelled around the country, rallying support for his new political project.

The **Communist Party of India**, founded in 1920s, had tried to work through the Workers and Peasant Parties (as a kind of mass-front for the Communists). All open communist activities were carried out through Workers and Peasants Parties. The Colonial theses of the 6th Comintern congress called upon the Indian communists to combat the ‘national-reformist leaders’ and to ‘unmask the national reformism of the Indian National Congress and oppose all phrases of the Swarajists, Gandhists, etc. about passive resistance’. The Congress also denounced the WPP. The Tenth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, July 3, 1929 – July 19, 1929, directed the Indian communists to break with WPP. When the communists deserted it, the WPP fell apart. Then most of the Communist leaders were arrested and charged under the famous Meerut Conspiracy Case in 1929. The party was reorganised in 1933, after the communist leaders from the Meerut trials were released. A central committee of the party was set up. In 1934 the party was accepted as the Indian section of the Communist International. When Indian left-wing elements formed the Congress Socialist Party in 1934, the CPI branded it as Social Fascist.

In connection with the change of policy of the Comintern toward Popular Front politics, the Indian communists changed their relation to the Indian National Congress. The communists joined the Congress Socialist Party, which worked as the left wing of Congress. Through joining CSP the CPI accepted the CSP demand for Constituent Assembly, which it had denounced two years before. The CPI however analysed that the demand for Constituent Assembly would not be a substitute for soviets. In July 1937, the first Kerala unit of CPI was founded at a clandestine meeting in Calicut. Five persons were present at the meeting, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Krishna Pillai, N.C. Sekhar, K. Damodaran and S.V. Ghate. The first four were members of the CSP in Kerala. The latter, Ghate, was a CPI Central Committee member, who had arrived from Madras. Contacts between the CSP in Kerala and the CPI had begun in 1935, when P. Sundarayya (CC member of CPI, based in Madras at the time) met with EMS and Krishna Pillai. Sundarayya and Ghate visited Kerala at several times and met with the CSP leaders there. The contacts were facilitated through the national meetings of the Congress, CSP and All India Kisan Sabha.

In 1936-1937, the cooperation between socialists and communists reached its peak. At the 2nd congress of the CSP, held in Meerut in January 1936, a thesis was adopted which declared that there was a need to build ‘a united Indian Socialist Party based on Marxism-Leninism’. At the 3rd CSP congress, held in Faizpur, several communists were included into the CSP National Executive Committee. In Kerala communists won control over CSP, and for a brief period controlled Congress there. Two communists, E.M.S. Namboodiripad and Z.A. Ahmed, became All India joint secretaries of CSP. The CPI also had two other members inside the CSP executive. On the occasion of the 1940 Ramgarh Congress Conference, CPI released a declaration called *Proletarian Path*, which sought to utilise the weakened state of the British Empire in the time of war and

gave a call for general strike, no-tax, no-rent policies and mobilising for an armed revolution uprising. The National Executive of the CSP assembled at Ramgarh took a decision that all communists were expelled from CSP.

18.5 THE REVOLUTIONARIES ON THE FRINGES AS THE COMMANDOS OF NATIONALISM

Dissatisfied with slow nature of mass mobilization, sections of educated youth turned towards revolutionary methods and armed overthrow of the British regime. There were basically two strands of revolutionaries, one working in the northern India, especially in Punjab and UP, and the other one in Bengal. The striking feature of revolutionaries in late 1920s and early 1930s were the direct and indirect influence of working class movement and the Socialist and Marxist ideas on them. In September, 1928, revolutionaries in northern India forged links among themselves and founded the famous Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (Army). Gradually the leadership was also moving away from politics of individual assassination and 'heroic actions' but the death of Lala Lajpat Rai, as a result of a brutal lathi-charge, once again forced them to attempt 'revenge' by killing Saunders, the police official involved in the lathi-charge. Then Bhagat Singh and Batukeswar Dutt threw a bomb, not to kill or harm any individual but to oppose the passage of the Public Safety Bill and Trade Disputes Bill in the Central Legislative Assembly. These measures would have curtailed the civil liberties of the citizens and workers. Later Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru were tried and sentenced to death in March, 1931. They won the sympathy and admiration of people and became the icons of sacrifice and national self-determination. A similar mass sympathy was evoked by the death of Jatin Das, another revolutionary who died in Lahore Jail after fasting for 64 days. People flocked in thousands at every station when his body was carried from Lahore to Calcutta. At Calcutta, a two mile long procession of about 6 lakh people carried his body to cremation ground.

In Bengal too there was some reorganisation and ideological tilting of the revolutionaries. Some even participated in the Congress mass activities. After the death of C. R. Das, the Congress leadership got divided into Subash Chandra Bose and J. M. Sengupta factions. The revolutionaries of Yugantar helped the former and those of Anushilan the latter. Surya Sen had participated in the Gandhian Non-Cooperation, and was the secretary of the Chittagong District Congress Committee in 1929. He later became a teacher in a national school in Chittagong, attracted a large band of dedicated revolutionaries, and tried to overcome factionalism of the existing groups. Surya Sen and his group decided to organise an armed insurrection to demonstrate the possibility of such a course of action. Their action plan was to raid and loot the two main armouries of Chittagong and dislocate the railway communications so that local British troops did not receive timely outside military help. The action took place on 18 April, 1930. Subsequently they left Chittagong and a clash with British troops took place on Jalalabad hills with casualties on both sides. However, Surya Sen and his group managed to escape and carried on a guerilla fights from the villages till 1933. Surya Sen was captured on 16 February 1933 and hanged on 12 January 1934 and many of his co-fighters were sentenced to long-term of imprisonment.

18.6 SUMMARY

We have seen that Indian nationalism was not a homogeneous movement and represented a complex phenomenon. This Complexity of national movement shows that though the Gandhian core remained on the centre stage and launched a massive anti-imperialist struggle in the form of Civil Disobedience in the beginning of 1930s, it was still flexible enough to accommodate within its organisational structure and ideology a wide range of political perspectives ranging from liberals like Tej Bahadur Sapru to people belonging to radical left. As a result of this, the social base of the movement also got widened. A variety of political and ideological currents co-existed and worked together, while contending to establish their respective domains of influence. This diversity and spirit of debate was not its weakness but its strength.

18.7 EXERCISES

- 1) What were the various trends within nationalist movement? Discuss the reasons for the failure of the Liberals.
- 2) Discuss the ideas of and relationship between Socialists and Communists.
- 3) Write a note on the Dandi March and its impact on nationalist movement.

UNIT 19 POLITICAL DEMOCRATISATION IN THE PRINCELY STATES*

Structure

- 19.1 Introduction
- 19.2 The Evolution of Princely Order
- 19.3 Basic Features of Autocracies in the Princely States
- 19.4 Initiatives for Democratisation from Above
- 19.5 Political Mobilisation in Princely States as a Tool of Democratisation
- 19.6 The Praja Mandals in Orissa Garjat States in 1930s
- 19.7 Democratic Aspirations of the Masses in States on the Eve of Independence
 - 19.7.1 Democratic Struggle in Hyderabad
 - 19.7.2 Democratisation in Jammu and Kashmir
- 19.8 Summary
- 19.9 Exercises

19.1 INTRODUCTION

The patterns of the British conquest and the methods of creating an empire resulted in the emergence of princely order in India. The princes ruled over about 2/5th of the Indian subcontinent which had about 1/3rd the population of the British Empire in India. Some of these states were as big as some European countries while we also had many very small principalities or feudal estates. The one common feature of these states was that they all recognized the paramountcy of the British Crown. They enjoyed little independence in relation to that paramount power and were treated as subordinate or feudatory states. But the rulers of these states enjoyed full autocratic powers over their subjects. The British protected the autocracies of the princes from both internal and external dangers and threats. It was under the umbrella of British protection that these autocratic princes walked with all their grandeur and dignity. The princes were a useful tool in the over-all imperial design and as the natural allies of the British rulers; they willingly supported their patrons in times of crisis either because of war or the intense nationalist mobilisation.

19.2 THE EVOLUTION OF PRINCELY ORDER

The form of government in these states was monarchical and the general perception of the British administrators as well as their nationalist opponents was that they were tradition-bound, unchanging, disinterested in progress where 'oriental despots' stood in the way of modernisation and social change. Prior to the revolt of 1857, many British administrators, under the influence of evangelical and utilitarian ideas, were disdainful of the princes. These 'feudal remnants' were seen as a hindrance in the reform of indigenous society and institutions. They were not more than a cesspool of corruption and socio-economic stagnation and symbols of 'oriental despotism'. However, after the revolt, their timely support

* Resource Person: Prof. Shri Krishan

(especially by the rulers of Mysore, Patiala and Hyderabad strengthened their claims as the trusted and faithful military, administrative and political allies of the British rule. The perception of British administrators underwent a shift, and the princes became the 'natural leaders' of Indian society. They were also rewarded in the form of ceremonial rewards and even material treasure in the form of additional territories in some cases. The British rulers solemnly affirmed their protection and the right to perpetual existence. Assurances were given to the princes that their dynasties would not be allowed to lapse for want of the natural heirs. Queen Victoria proclaimed that 'all Treaties and Engagements made with them by or under the authority of the Honourable East India Company are by us accepted and will be scrupulously observed' and further that 'We desire no extension of our present Territorial Possessions' and 'We shall respect the rights, dignity and honour of the native princes as our own'.

19.3 BASIC FEATURES OF AUTOCRACIES IN THE PRINCELY STATES

The princely states were vast assortment of states differing in size, composition and resources. A popular perception about them, reinforced by the colonial stereotypes, is one of elephant-riding *maharajas* enjoying the company of dancing girls. However, a basic aspect of their autocracy was existence of feudal order within all of them. The colonial ethnographic accounts depicted India as a society that privileged the traditional and rustic over urban and modern. As the East was seen as a storehouse of ancient traditions, colourful rites, majestic spectacles and archaic knowledge, if it had any knowledge at all, so also the princes were seen as representing an old clan-based polity. There were hardly any princes who fit into this kind of stereotype. The sovereignty of the princes was not autonomous as there was constant imperial surveillance, interference and pressures from the paramount power, the British, which determined the form this autocracy was to take and how the old *darbari* system will work in a princely state. The princes no longer enjoyed the old, traditional social protective role without the mediation of the paramount power. The autocracy of the prince was indirectly despotism of the British officials who controlled the state apparatus through many ingenious devices and mechanisms. If at all the prince had power, it was to patrol the hunting range, or the *sikargah*.

Most of the princely states had autocratic rule where powers was concentrated in the hands of rulers or their favourites appointed in the patrimonial administration. The burden of land revenue was generally much higher in the princely states compared to British administration and this was linked to their administrative machinery. The rulers generally enjoyed supreme control over the state revenues for their own personal use, often leading to ostentatious living. In some states, the rulers shared powers with the *jagirdars* or feudal aristocrats, who controlled the landed resources because they were relatives and supporters of the rulers or both. These feudal elements enjoyed varying degree of authority and power and the ordinary peasants and cultivators had no voice in the administration. The feudal lords not only collected and retained the land revenues from their respective estates but also had limited police and magisterial powers within their estates. In Alwar state, for instance, the *jagirdars*, who had kinship relations with the ruler, controlled about 1/3rd fertile lands in the Southern parts of the state. The *jagirdars* also held administrative positions. The ruler and these feudal chiefs reinforced

each other's position. During Raja Banni Singh's rule (1815-57) in Alwar, outside Muslim officials trained in British method of administration were appointed, leading to a conflict between the *jagirdars* and this new class of administrators. In Hyderabad, the Nizam's own estate or *sarf khas* comprised of about 10% of the total area of the state and income from this was used to meet the expenses of the royal house. Another major chunk of land-resources (about 30%) was under the control of *jagirdars* of various categories. Oppressive practices like *vethi* (a kind of *begar* or unpaid labour service) and illegal *abwabs* or illegal taxes of many kinds were quite common in many of the princely states.

The feudal chiefs and the landed magnates were the main supporters of the princely autocracies who shored up the authority and powers of the princes, although some 'enlightened' rulers and their ministers did try to introduce reform in the administration and system of taxation. Such reforms too were basically more concerned about efficient handling of governmental functioning like collection of taxes, the maintenance of law and order and the provision of some limited public services like transportation, communication and education. There was hardly any attempt to introduce democratic accountability in the functioning of the government.

The princely states were generally run on laws that were a combination of enactment based on the British Indian legal codes and personal decrees and orders of the rulers. The element of arbitrariness was so significant that such decrees could be withdrawn or modified at the discretion of the prince any time. There was no institutional check on the arbitrary powers enjoyed by the princes within their own territories. They could freely use whatever force the British allowed them to keep against their subjects. The coercive apparatus of the state was generally small but quite effective in the circumstances where people were disarmed. To give you an idea of the strength of a ruler's police and military apparatus, we can see the figures for the Patiala state. It had a territory of about 5,412 square miles and its armed police, trained by a British police officer, had 1,600 men. Its small army consisted of about 1,200 infantry soldiers, 450 cavalymen and another 210 men in command of artillery.

19.4 INITIATIVES FOR DEMOCRATISATION FROM ABOVE

Some princes introduced representative assemblies in their states, although these were not truly speaking modern democratic institutions with accountability. Mysore was the first princely state to inaugurate a representative assembly in 1881. Subsequently a legislative council or upper house was added in 1907. Similarly Travancore launched a similar nominated legislative council in 1888 and created an elective consultative assembly (although with a majority of appointed official members) in 1904. Baroda also had a representative assembly from 1907. Most of these bodies, however, lacked a real popular representative character and even did not had a modicum of accountability as the majority of members of these bodies were the trusted officials appointed by the rulers. The other states with such bodies were Bhopal, Gwalior, Hyderabad, Cochin, Datia and Pudukkottai. Such assemblies were basically advisory in functions. In states with a reputation of being modern, the *diwan* or the chief minister of the state chaired their sessions. In others, the ruler moderated, as occurred in Datia in

1929 or Gwalior where, the *maharani*, a regent for the minor heir, assumed control. Where the ruler presided over the assembly, it resembled a medieval *darbar* in which the elites presented their grievances but had no legal authority to influence the outcome of the policy. Some states introduced a limited franchise. During 1930s, for example, in Travancore and Cochin, about 5% of the population could vote for the assemblies. Most of these assemblies, however, did not control the budgets or have the right to initiate legislation. In exceptional cases when an assembly acquired such restricted powers to influence budget and legislation, as was the case in Mysore in later years, the ruler could still authorize expenditures or legislation in ‘emergencies’. As the resources they managed were so restricted, these assemblies never became the focus for popular political activity.

19.5 POLITICAL MOBILISATION IN PRINCELY STATES AS A TOOL OF DEMOCRATISATION

The political mobilisation in the princely states passed through three distinct phases. In the first stage, the mobilisation was centred on some specific local grievances such as employment of too many ‘foreigners’ or outsiders in the administrative services of the state and a lack of freedom of press and assembly. The newly emergent urban literate groups were behind this kind of demands and petitioning was the principal mode of the articulation of the demands at this stage. This phase is discernible in Travancore in late nineteenth century although in other states its visibility is seen in 1910s and 1920s. During the 1910s the urban educated subjects of the princely states formed the *praja mandal* or *lok parishads* in some states. Generally the persons educated in British India were behind such moves. The princely states generally lagged behind the British territories in post-secondary education and sometimes these political agitators were based in British territories if the repression of the prince on the political activities was severe. The main demands of these early agitators were greater recruitment of the state’s subject in government employment, the guarantee of civil liberties especially the freedom of press, assembly, an association, and in a few instances even the establishment of representative assembly in the state. Seldom did they question the legitimacy of the princely order or demand its outright abolition. *Praja mandal* leaders usually attributed political oppression in the states not to the princes but to the authoritarian or corrupt officials, frequently outsiders or sometimes the scheming *zenana* women or their advisors. Praja Mithra Mandali (1917) of Mysore was perhaps the first such early organisation. Others of similar kind soon emerged in other states such as Baroda, Bhor, and Indore. The Kathiawad Rajkiya Parishad (1921) and the Deccan State Subject’s Conference were also similar organisations.

The second stage emerged in the late 1920s and first half of the 1930s. Now the petitioning leads to direct confrontation and public protests in the form of street demonstrations by the literate urban class of people. The main demand now is greater popular representation and the legal right to form political associations. Such organisations emerged in Bhavanagar, Gondal, Junagarh and most Rajputana states in 1920s and 1930s. In Punjab, The Punjab Riyasati Praja Mandal was formed. By the second half of the 1920s, a more active phase of agitation begun in many states. There were demonstrations and public protests in the form of marches. The educated groups demanded now representative and increasingly responsible government that would diminish princely autocracy but not deny

princely authority. They also asked for widening of franchises for the representative assemblies; and selection of elected members of the legislative councils as ministers. This clearly was an indication of rising democratic aspiration of people in the states after the experiment of Popular Congress Rule in nine British provinces (1937-39). Another major demand was privy purses to check arbitrary expenditure of the rulers and increased funding of social infrastructure especially in the field of education and health. Such organisations further demanded recognition of *praja mandals* as legitimate organisations and release of political prisoners arrested during public protests in the states.

In the third phase, peasant mobilisation emerged and became the prominent feature of second half of 1930s and 1940s on the whole. In fact peasant based movements developed simultaneously. They went side by side with the urban educated middle class mobilisation but there were not much direct organisational linkages of the peasant protests with the urban politics. In the rural areas, middle caste peasants generated the most vocal supporters of the protest movement. There were peasant and tribal movements against the *jagirdars* of Bijolia in 1920s in Udaipur. The main issues were the arbitrary taxes, feudal cesses and *begar* or unpaid labour service. The Jat Kisan sabhas of 1930s in Rajputana states, however, also focussed their attention apart from economic grievances, on the questions of ritual status and challenged the Rajput's prerogatives of riding on elephants, horse and camels. The major challenge for the political leadership in the princely states was to broaden its popular base, coordinate their efforts with the political associations in British India and to achieve some leverage with the rulers. It was also a major challenge for them to bridge the gap between the urban and rural movements and to overcome the narrow exclusive boundaries of caste and religious communities in their mobilisation so as to forge the people as citizens.

One thing has to be made clear here. The Indian National Congress, representing the broad democratic spectrum of opinion in the country, after a brief flirtation with the princes as their financial benefactors during the 1880s, had consciously distanced itself from the princes as well as from the political mobilisation in the princely states. This strategy of non-interference continued even with the coming of spectacular mass mobilisation in the early Gandhian phase. There were perhaps some weighty issues that were responsible for such an approach of non-interference in the politics of princely states. First were the constraints of resources at the disposal of Congress. Secondly, the nationalist leadership did not want to fight simultaneously at two fronts because it was aware that princes existed only due to protection of the paramount power of the British. Thirdly, Congress leadership was aware that the movements in princely states were linked to the appeals based on class, religious and linguistic identities and could result in more regional and religious fragmentation. However, while generally not allowing strife around class issues, Gandhian leadership permitted 'constructive work' such as anti-untouchability in the states. Gandhi actively supported the Vaikom Satyagarha in Travancore in 1925, where the demand for the opening of the road around Vaikom temple for the use of 'untouchables' was raised.

The advance of national movement in British India and resultant increase in the political consciousness of the people also had its share of impact on the princely states. From the very beginning, national movement became synonymous with the march of democracy and demand for a responsible government. The impact of Non-Cooperation movement in the beginning of 1920s was felt in the states

when *praja mandals* (states' people's conferences) appeared in some of them. The democratic aspirations of people in princely states assumed a concrete organisational form in December, 1927, when at the initiative of leaders from states like Balwantrao Mehta, Maniklal Kothari and G. R. Abhyankar, the All-India States' People's Conference was convened. It was attended by 700 activists from the various states. The Congress had passed a resolution at Nagpur Congress Session (1920) asking the princes to grant democratic government to their subjects. The Congress also allowed persons from states to join the Congress organisation as its primary members. But Congress also made it conditional with rider that Congress members in the states could not take part in any political activity in the states as Congressmen or in the name of Congress but only in either in their private capacity, as individuals, or as members of the local political associations. The stress was that the state subjects should develop their own organisations and should not look to outside support. However, the informal relation between nationalist organisation and local *praja mandals* existed and paved the way for more intense mobilisation patterns in the states in subsequent phases. Nehru, representing a leftward shift in the priorities of Congress declared in Lahore Session of the Congress (1929) that the fate of states was linked with the rest of India and that only the people of states would have right to determine the political future of the states.

The situation in the princely states was changing dramatically in the 1930s. Firstly, the Government of India Act (1935) conceived of a plan of federation in which the Indian states were to be brought into a direct constitutional relationship with the British India and the states were to send representatives to the Federal Legislature. The Scheme was undemocratic as it had provision that states' representatives would be nominated by their rulers, not democratically elected. This was to ensure that nationalist representatives would be always in minority. Although this part of the Act was never implemented, both Congress and the All-India States' People's Conference opposed the move and demanded that all representatives for the Federal Legislature should be on the basis of a popular elective principle. Secondly, the assumption of offices by the Congress in the majority of provinces of British India in 1937 had an electrifying impact on the popular participation in the political processes, both in British Indian territories and the states. Thirdly, the left-oriented Congress was under the spell of radical leaders such as Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose in the 1930s and the Congress Socialist Party was demanding a more radical policy in the princely states. The *praja mandal* movements mushroomed in most states as we illustrate with example of Orissa *garjat* states below.

19.6 THE PRAJA MANDALS IN ORISSA GARJAT STATES IN 1930s

The *praja mandal* movement in the *garjat* states was basically a peasant movement which was an epoch-making struggle that considerably influenced the politics of the province as well as the nation. There were 26 *garjats* or, feudatory states of Orissa and it took twelve years after the formation of the province to merge those states with Orissa. The movement, which initially was directed against the misrule and autocracy of the rulers, subsequently demanded responsible government and the merger of the states with Orissa. The attempt to organize the people of the feudatory states took real shape during the Civil

Disobedience Movement, when the First All Orissa States People Conference was organised at Cuttack in 1931. The organisation that went into hibernation soon after its formation was revived again in 1937, with the efforts of Sarangadhar Das, known as 'Garjat Gandhi' in the *garjats*. The second session of the All Orissa States People's Conference was held at Cuttack on 23rd June 1937. The conference declared its objective as the attainment of responsible government. It also exposed the exploitative character of the *garjat* administration and urged upon the rulers to remove the grievances of the people. The conference provided the impetus to the people of the *garjats* and thus in almost all the states the people formed *praja mandals*. Through this organisation, they put up before the rulers their demand lists, which included the abolition of numerous feudal exactions and restoration of civil liberties. The feudatory rulers saw the *praja mandals* as real danger to their authority. They not only refused recognition to this organisation but adopted several repressive measures to restrict their activities. The first popular agitation against the *garjat* administration was witnessed in the state of Nilgiri, a small state in the border of Balasore. The punitive action of the ruler of Nilgiri on the people of the villages incited the people and on 2nd May 1938, disturbances started in Nilgiri. The people under the leadership of Kailash Chandra Mohanty and Banamali Das pressed the ruler to yield to their demands, which included the recognition of their civil liberties and removal of unjust laws. Brutal and repressive measures adopted by the ruler to calm down the agitation failed to dislodge the people. Ultimately a compromise was made through the mediation of H.K. Mahtab.

Talcher and Dhenkanal were the two other *garjat* states, where the activities of the *praja mandal* created troubles for the ruling chiefs. The Talcher *praja mandal* movement attracted the attention of national leaders, for it adopted a novel measure to fight against the ruler. The repressive measures of the ruler compelled the people of Talcher to adopt a new form of passive resistance and they left their homes and moved to the neighbouring areas of Angul, in British Orissa. It was estimated by the *praja mandal* leaders that about 60 thousand people out of the total population of 86 thousand had left their homes and taken shelter in the temporary camps. The mass migration of the people, their plight in the camps, who stayed there for long 8 months, was an innovative way of getting into the political arena. In the state of Dhenkanal, a reign of terror was instituted by the ruling chief to suppress the *praja mandal*, which had started its agitation against the reign of tyranny in Dhenkanal. However, the most tragic incident that shocked the people and represented the police repression in severe form was committed in the villages of Bhuban and Nilakanthapur at the night of 10-11 October 1938. There, the police party attacked the innocent villagers and killed six persons. This sort of wanton repression not only invited condemnation but it also strengthened the determination of the people to fight for the fulfilment of their just demands. In the *garjat* states of Athagarh, Baramba, Narsinghpur, Nayagarh and Tigiria the people raised their voice under the aegis of their *praja mandal* units. The popular agitation in Ranpur assumed a violent character. On 5th June 1939, the people gheraoed the royal palace and pressed for the release of their arrested leaders. Major R.L. Bazelgette, the political agent, who was present on the spot, without heeding to the people's demands, ordered the crowd to disperse. To frighten the crowd he fired a few shots. This infuriated the crowd and in their retaliatory attack Major Bazelgette was killed. In the wake of this, police repression started in Ranpur. Many people were arrested, some fled to the

neighbouring areas. Finally two persons Raghunath Mohanty and Dibakar Parida were hanged and others suffered exile and life imprisonment.

Such development brought about a sea-change in Congress policy towards these movements. The Congress at its Tripuri Session (1939) passed a resolution enunciating new tactics. It removed the earlier restraint on the Congress activities in the states. Now there was greater identification between the Congress and the *praja mandals*. In 1939, Jawaharlal Nehru was elected as the president of the All-India States' People's Conference, a step that marked the merger of the two streams of democratic movement in princely states and British India. As a result of this, unlike previous movements, the impact of Quit India movement was felt more uniformly in the princely states and the British Indian territories.

19.7 DEMOCRATIC ASPIRATIONS OF THE MASSES ON THE EVE OF INDEPENDENCE

It appears on surface that Indian states were merged in the Indian Union after 1947 using coercive means by Sardar Patel. But the coercion was often backed by popular democratic aspirations of the masses as we will see in the case of Hyderabad and Kashmir, the states where force was used.

19.7.1 Democratic Struggle in Hyderabad

Congress had launched a Satyagraha in Hyderabad in 1938 under the leadership of Swami Ramtirth. It was not much successful. Around the same time, The Communists entered the Andhra Maha Sabha and using the linguistic identity demand and agrarian anti-feudal reforms, gained some influence. The Communal organisations, Itihad-ul-Muslimin and the Hindu Maha Sabha, both tried to polarize people along religious lines around the same period. Gandhi had asked Swami Ramtirth in 1942 to begin a Satyagraha as soon as a similar struggle was launched in British Indian territories by the Congress. While Congress tried to widen the social base of its movement in Hyderabad through State Peoples' Conference, the Communist used the Andhra Maha Sabha as their front organisation and made use of Telugu language question and land-reform, simultaneously demanding end of Nizam's autocratic rule. Nizam tried to curtail any kind of democratic and civil rights in their state in 1940s. The State also tried to portray the genuine democratic demands of State Congress as those of 'Hindus' in order to get the sympathy of Muslim masses and there were communal conflict on some occasions. Realising that it was not possible to merge with Pakistan, due to geographical reasons as well as political disliking of Nizam for Jinnah, the state's ruler was dreaming of keeping Hyderabad a separate sovereign state.

Swami Ramtirth and other Congress leaders began a Satyagraha in August 1947 for the merger of Hyderabad in India. The Communists had organised an anti-landlord and anti-Nizam campaign in Telangana region since 1944. Ravi Narayan Reddy played a crucial role in this popular struggle as the leader of Andhra Maha Sabha. Nizam tried to suppress it but it assumed mass dimension by 1946 and despite a ban on the Communist organisation by the Nizam's Government in December 1946, there was an informal and temporary alliance between State Congress and Communists, although it contained seeds of an ideological conflict as well. The armed takeover of Hyderabad through 'Operation Polo' by the Indian

troops in September 1948 was celebrated as a democratic step by the people of Hyderabad state.

19.7.2 Democratisation in Jammu and Kashmir

In October, 1932, a Muslim Conference was established in Srinagar under the leadership of Sheikh Abdullah. Its aim was to fight for the democratic rights of Muslims, their socio-economic and cultural progress, lowering of land revenue demand, and adequate representation to Muslims in state services etc. Maharaja Hari Singh had established a legislative assembly known as the '*Praja Sabha*' in the state in 1934. It was not a truly representative assembly and in no way created a democratic and accountable system of government in Jammu and Kashmir. There was provision of separate Communal electorate in the elections to the assembly and elected members were always in a minority. Only about 3% people got franchise under this constitution. The assembly could legislate only on subjects allowed by the autocratic Maharaja and although it could discuss and put resolution on budget, it had no power to alter budget proposals. Sheikh Abdullah renamed his organisation as National Conference. It was more than a symbolic gesture as he was moving towards secular democratic ideology. He was close to local Congress leader Premnath Bajaj. He also came in contact with Jawaharlal Nehru and started stressing social and economic issues like agrarian reforms more than religious issues.

Under the pressure of democratic demands of National Conference, Maharaja Hari Singh amended the constitution of legislative assembly in 1939. Now the elected members could be in majority in the assembly, although the separate communal electorates and system of nominated membership in assembly were retained. Meanwhile the communal polarisation became sharper in the state with revival of conservative, and communal based Muslim Conference. In 1944, Maharaja included two members of the assembly in his ministry, one Hindu and One Muslim. Mirza Afjal Beg, the deputy leader of National Conference in assembly became the minister of Public Works department but it was a short lived arrangement. Mirza Beg resigned from his post in March, 1946. National Conference launched a 'Quit Kashmir' Movement in 1946 with a demand to end the autocratic rule of Maharaja in Kashmir and to include peoples' representatives in the constitution-making process. For this National Conference gave a petition to the Cabinet Mission to give right to the people of Kashmir to send delegates to Constituent Assembly. Many leaders of the National Conference including Sheikh Abdullah were arrested and sent to jails. The main demands of National Conference at this juncture were:

- 1) Right to frame Constitution for the autonomous socio-political units of federal Indian Union.
- 2) Right of the people of the states to self-determination on the basis of nationality.
- 3) Recognition of the right of people of a state to cultural identity.
- 4) Right of people of a state to merge or stay away from Indian Union in future.
- 5) Right to a state to leave the Federation even after merging with it.

However, main contention of Sheikh Abdullah at this point of time was that it should struggle against the proposal of Cabinet Mission to leave right to send representatives in the Constituent Assembly to the rulers. He argued that

democratic struggle of people against state's autocracy was part of anti-imperialist struggle because the princely order was a creation of British rule and it must end with the coming of Independence. There were protests in many parts of Jammu and Kashmir against the arrest of leaders of National Conference. Nehru and All-India States' peoples' Conference supported the movement in Kashmir. Contrary to this the Muslim Conference had started supporting the creation of Pakistan and weaning away Muslim people for a communal agenda. The influence of Muslim Conference grew in the absence of National Conference leaders and when they were finally released, armed intrusion of Pakistan had already begun. It was under these circumstances that Maharaja Hari Singh asked for Indian help and decided merger with India. The merger paved the way for establishment of a democratic government for which Congress and National Conference has been struggling for long.

19.8 SUMMARY

We have seen how the princely states came into being as feudal appendage of an Imperial design. Initially Congress did not intervene in the political processes within the states. However, mass democratic associations of people developed in the states in the form of *paraja mandals* and they expanded their influence by advocating democratic reforms and civil liberties in the states that were governed by autocratic rulers. By late 1930s Congress supported the democratic aspirations of the people in princely state and *praja mnadals* organised a number of anti-feudal agitations in many of the states and simultaneously demanded creation of representative assemblies and a responsible government. The process of democratisation gained momentum in 1940s when it became clear that country was moving towards Independence. The ease of integration and merger of the states into Indian Union, with minimal use of coercion in the process, was due to fact that political mobilisation had already been under way in most of the states.

19.9 EXERCISES

- 1) Describe the nature of the princely states in British India.
- 2) Discuss the various forms of democratisation movement undertaken by people in the princely states.

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