
UNIT 17 CONGRESS MINISTRIES*

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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?

