

The Birth of the Indian National Congress (1885)

Introduction

The formation of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885 was one of the most important political developments in Indian history. Before this, several local organizations existed, such as the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, the Indian Association, and the Bombay Presidency Association. However, these bodies worked only in specific regions and lacked coordination. Educated Indians had begun to understand the injustices of British rule — political exclusion, economic exploitation, and racial discrimination. They wanted a national platform to express their concerns and demand reforms. The Congress was formed to bring together representatives from all parts of India so that they could discuss common problems and present their views peacefully to the British government. This marked the beginning of organized political life in India. For the first time, Indians united not for regional or religious issues but for national political rights. The Congress became the foundation for India's later struggle for independence.

Background and Need

The late 19th century was a time of growing political awareness in India. British education had produced a class of educated Indians who could understand Western political ideas like democracy and self-rule. However, these educated men found themselves excluded from high positions in the British administration. The government's racial attitude and unfair policies created deep frustration among them. They realized that British rule could not be improved unless Indians organized themselves politically. Although local political groups existed, their voices were weak and scattered. There was a strong need for an organization that could unite all educated Indians on a national level. Improvements in railways and telegraph helped people from distant provinces to meet and share ideas. The Congress was thus seen as a national platform for peaceful political expression. It aimed to unite Indians, promote understanding with the British, and prepare the people for greater participation in governance.

Founders and Leaders

The Indian National Congress was officially founded in December 1885 in Bombay (now Mumbai). The person who played the key role in its formation was **Allan Octavian Hume**, a retired British civil servant who believed that Indians should have a political forum to express their demands. He received support from **Lord Dufferin**, the Viceroy of India, who thought this body would help the British understand Indian public opinion. The first session was attended by **72 delegates** from different provinces. **Womesh Chunder Bonnerjee**, a respected lawyer from Calcutta, was chosen as the first president. Other leading figures included **Dadabhai Naoroji**, **Pherozeshah Mehta**, **Surendranath Banerjee**, and **M.G. Ranade**. These leaders were

educated, moderate, and believed in achieving reforms through peaceful and constitutional methods. They wanted to build understanding between the rulers and the ruled rather than create hostility. Their unity and patience helped shape the early character of the Congress as a respectable and disciplined organization.

Aims and Objectives

The Congress had several important aims which reflected the political conditions of the time. Its first goal was to promote national unity by bringing together Indians from all regions, languages, and religions. Secondly, it wanted to create political awareness among the people — to make them conscious of their rights and responsibilities. The Congress also aimed to provide a platform where grievances could be discussed and presented to the British authorities in a respectful and peaceful manner. Early Congressmen believed that British rule could be improved by persuasion and cooperation, not confrontation. They wanted more Indians in the civil services and legislative councils, better economic opportunities, and protection of the people's rights. Another objective was to train Indians in political activity so that they could one day govern themselves. In short, the Congress aimed to serve as a bridge between the Indian public and the British rulers, promoting gradual reform rather than revolution in its early years.

Impact and Legacy

The formation of the Indian National Congress marked the beginning of a new era in Indian political life. For the first time, India had a national organization representing its people's political interests. The Congress united Indians from different backgrounds — Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, and Christians — under one banner. It gave birth to a new political consciousness and created a sense of belonging to one nation. The early leaders, often called **Moderates**, believed in peaceful means such as petitions, resolutions, and discussions. Their efforts made the British government aware of Indian grievances and forced it to consider some minor reforms. More importantly, the Congress became a training ground for political leaders who would later play key roles in the struggle for independence. Over time, the Congress evolved from a reformist organization to a mass movement demanding complete freedom. Thus, its formation in 1885 was not only the start of Indian nationalism but also the foundation of modern Indian democracy.