

Congress Rule in Provinces

Congress ministries were formed in Bombay, Madras, Central Provinces, Orissa, United Provinces, Bihar and later in the NWFP and Assam also.

Gandhi's Advice

Gandhi advised Congressmen to hold these offices lightly and not tightly. The offices were to be seen as 'crowns of thorns' which had been accepted to see if they quickened the pace towards the nationalist goal. Gandhi advised that these offices should be used in a way not expected or intended by the British.

Gandhi urged Congressmen to prove that the Congress could rule with least assistance from the police and the Army.

Work under Congress Ministries

There was great enthusiasm among the people; suppressed mass energy had got released. There was an increase in the prestige of the Congress as it had showed that it could not only lead people but could also use State power for their benefit. But the Congress ministries had some basic limitations: they could not, through their administration, change the basic imperialist character of the system and could not introduce a radical era.

In the 28 months of Congress rule in the provinces, there were some efforts made for people's welfare.

■ Civil Liberties

The Congress ministries did much to ease curbs on civil liberties:

- Laws giving emergency powers were repealed.
- Ban on illegal organisations, such as the Hindustan Seva Dal and Youth Leagues, and on certain books and journals was lifted.
- Press restrictions were lifted.
- Newspapers were taken out of black lists.
- Confiscated arms and arms licences were restored.
- Police powers were curbed and the CID stopped shadowing politicians.
- Political prisoners and revolutionaries were released, and deportation and internment orders were revoked.
- In Bombay lands confiscated by the government during the Civil Disobedience Movement were restored.
- Pensions of officials associated with the Civil Disobedience Movement were restored.

But there were certain blemishes in the performance of the Congress ministries regarding civil liberties. Yusuf Maherali, a socialist, was arrested by the Madras government for inflammatory speeches and later released. S.S. Batliwala, a socialist, was arrested by the Madras government for seditious speech and given a six months' sentence. Then, K.M. Munshi, the Bombay home minister, used the CID against communists and leftists.

■ Agrarian Reforms

There were certain basic constraints due to which the Congress ministries could not undertake a complete overhaul of the agrarian structure by completely abolishing zamindari. These constraints were:

- (i) The ministries did not have adequate powers.

(ii) There were inadequate financial resources as a lion's share was appropriated by the Government of India.

(iii) Strategy of class adjustments was another hurdle since zamindars, etc., had to be conciliated and neutralised.

(iv) There was constraint of time since the logic of Congress politics was confrontation and not cooperation with colonialism.

(v) War clouds had started hovering around 1938.

(vi) The reactionary second chamber (Legislative Council) dominated by landlords, moneylenders and capitalists in United Provinces, Bihar, Bombay, Madras and Assam had to be conciliated as its support was necessary for legislations.

(vii) The agrarian structure was too complex.

In spite of these constraints, the Congress ministries managed to legislate a number of laws relating to land reforms, debt relief, forest grazing fee, arrears of rent, land tenures, etc.

But most of these benefits went to statutory and occupancy tenants while sub-tenants did not gain much. Agricultural labourers did not benefit as they had not been mobilised.

■ Attitude Towards Labour

The basic approach was to advance workers' interests while promoting industrial peace. This was sought to be achieved by reducing strikes as far as possible and by advocating compulsory arbitration prior to striking before the established conciliation machinery. Goodwill was sought to be created between labour and capital with mediation of ministries, while at the same time efforts were made to improve workers' condition and secure wage increases for them.

The ministries treated militant trade union protests as law and order problems, and acted as mediators as far as possible. This approach was largely successful but not so in Bombay. Also, leftist critics were not satisfied by this approach. Generally, the ministries took recourse to Section 144 and arrested the leaders.

Nehru was unhappy about these repressive measures, but in public supported the ministries to protect them from petty and petulant criticism. Although Gandhi was against militant and violent methods, he stood for political education of the masses. He felt that the popular base of the Congress should not erode. He appealed to Congressmen against frequent resort to colonial laws and machinery.

■ Social Welfare Reforms

These included the following—

- Prohibition imposed in certain areas.
- Measures for welfare of Harijans taken—temple entry, use of public facilities, scholarships, an increase in their numbers in government service and police, etc.
- Attention given to primary, technical and higher education and to public health and sanitation.
- Encouragement given to khadi through subsidies and other measures.
- Prison reforms undertaken.
- Encouragement given to indigenous enterprises.
- Efforts taken to develop planning through National Planning Committee set up under Congress president Subhash Bose in 1938.

Extra-Parliamentary Mass Activity of Congress

Such activities included—

- launching of mass literacy campaigns,
- setting up of Congress police stations and panchayats,
- Congress Grievance Committees presenting mass petitions to government, and
- states peoples' movements.

Evaluation

Though by 1939 internal strifes, opportunism and hunger for power had started surfacing among Congressmen, yet they were able to utilise council work to their advantage to a great

extent. The 28-month Congress rule was also significant for the following reasons.

- The contention that Indian self-government was necessary for radical social transformation got confirmed.
- Congressmen demonstrated that a movement could use state power to further its ends without being co-opted.
- The ministries were able to control communal riots.
- The morale of the bureaucracy came down.
- Council work helped neutralise many erstwhile hostile elements (landlords, etc).
- People were able to perceive the shape of things to come if independence was won.
- Administrative work by Indians further weakened the myth that Indians were not fit to rule.

The Congress ministries resigned in October 1939 after the outbreak of the Second World War.

The huge Congress victory in the elections had aroused the hopes of the industrial working class; there was increased militancy and industrial unrest in Bombay, Gujarat, the United Provinces and Bengal at a time when the Congress was drawn into a closer friendship with Indian capitalists. This resulted in what appeared to be an anti-labour shift in Congress attitudes that led to the Bombay Traders Disputes Act in 1938. The Congress leadership was also faced with another dilemma: how to react to the situation in the princely states—should the Congress support the Prajamandal movement for greater democracy or not.

In the meanwhile, the All India Muslim League, annoyed with the Congress for not sharing power with them established the Pirpur Committee in 1938 to prepare a detailed report on the atrocities supposedly committed by the Congress ministries. In its report the committee charged the Congress with interference in the religious rites, suppression of Urdu in favour of Hindi, denial of proper representation and of the oppression of Muslims in the economic sphere.

The Congress was forced to realise that being in power

and actually running the administration was not easy, and all sections of populations had such high expectations as could not be fulfilled all at once.

Summary

- **Gandhi's Advice to Office Bearers**

Offices should be used in a way not expected or intended by the British.

Hold offices lightly, not tightly.

- **Work Under Congress Ministries**

Eased curbs on civil liberties.

Restrictions on press lifted.

Political prisoners and revolutionaries released.

Lifted ban from several illegal organisations, books and journals.

Restoration of pensions of officials associated with the CDM.