

The Indian National Congress: Evolution from a Nationalist Movement to a Contemporary Political Power in Post-Independence India

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Abstract

The Indian National Congress (INC) has experienced an extraordinary journey, evolving from a nationalist movement driving India's freedom struggle to a key political force in modern India. Founded in 1885, the INC united people across diverse backgrounds and played a vital role in ending colonial rule. Post-independence, the party took charge of building a new nation, shaping India's democratic institutions, and launching significant socio-economic reforms that laid the groundwork for industrial and agricultural development.

Over time, however, the INC faced challenges. While it dominated Indian politics in the early years, internal conflicts, the rise of regional parties, and alternative political ideologies started eroding its influence. In recent decades, the party's declining electoral performance has been linked to leadership challenges, corruption allegations, and its struggle to connect with a rapidly changing electorate. Despite these setbacks, the INC remains a significant player in Indian politics, drawing strength from its historic legacy and commitment to ideals like secularism, inclusivity, and democracy.

This paper captures the INC's ability to adapt to India's shifting socio-political landscape, showcasing its pivotal role in shaping the nation's past and its continued relevance in contemporary politics.

Keywords: Indian National Congress, independence movement, modern Indian politics, democracy, reforms, secularism, political challenges.

Introduction

The Indian National Congress (INC) holds a unique and enduring position in the narrative of modern Indian history. Established in 1885, the INC began as a forum seeking reforms within the colonial framework but soon transformed into a powerful movement demanding complete independence from British rule. Over the decades, it became a unifying force for a fragmented and diverse population, fostering a sense of shared national identity and purpose.

The journey of the INC is both dynamic and multifaceted, reflecting the complexities of India's social, cultural, and political landscape. During the struggle for independence, the Congress emerged as the princi

-pal platform for mass mobilization, championing the causes of self-rule and social justice. It brought together leaders and thinkers from various regions, ideologies, and communities, creating a broad-based movement that resonated with millions across the subcontinent.

Following independence in 1947, the INC transitioned from a freedom movement to a governing party, tasked with the monumental responsibility of shaping a newly independent nation. The party played a pivotal role in establishing democratic institutions, drafting the Constitution, and laying the foundation for economic and social development. Under its leadership, India embarked on a path of planned development, aiming to balance growth with social equity.

However, the INC's history is not without challenges. Over time, it has faced internal divisions, ideological shifts, and competition from emerging political forces. Despite these hurdles, the party has continued to adapt, striving to remain relevant in an evolving political landscape. The Indian National Congress (INC) holds a unique and enduring position in the narrative of modern Indian history. Established in 1885, the INC began as a forum for civic dialogue and reform, bringing together educated Indians and British officials to discuss grievances and seek incremental changes within the colonial system. Over the decades, it became a unifying force for a fragmented and diverse population, fostering a sense of shared national identity and purpose.

During the struggle for independence, the Congress emerged as the principal platform for mass mobilization, championing the causes of self-rule and social justice. Leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, and Lala Lajpat Rai, collectively known as the Lal-Bal-Pal trio, introduced a more assertive approach, emphasizing the demand for Swaraj (self-rule) and inspiring widespread political awakening. Their efforts not only galvanized the masses but also set the stage for the INC's evolution into a full-fledged nationalist movement that would ultimately spearhead India's fight for independence.

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The Gandhian Era and the Fight for Independence

The entry of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi into Indian politics marked a transformative phase for the Indian National Congress (INC) and the larger struggle for freedom. Gandhi introduced the philosophy of Satyagraha—a unique form of nonviolent resistance—which became the backbone of the fight against British colonial rule. This approach not only inspired millions but also unified diverse communities across the country under a single banner of peaceful defiance.

Under Gandhi's leadership, the INC launched several groundbreaking movements that captured the imagination of the masses. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22) urged Indians to boycott British goods, institutions, and services, effectively challenging the colonial economy and administration. A decade later, the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34) saw widespread defiance of unjust laws, most famously through the Salt March. Gandhi and his followers walked over 240 miles to the coastal village of Dandi to make salt, defying the British monopoly. Lastly, the Quit India Movement of 1942 called for

an immediate end to British rule, rallying Indians with the slogan “Do or Die.” These movements, though met with harsh repression, stirred the nation and significantly weakened the colonial grip on India. The INC, during this time, transformed into a broad-based organization that represented people from all walks of life. It became a unifying force, breaking down barriers of region, language, and religion. Leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad emerged as key figures in the struggle, each bringing their unique vision and strengths to the table. By the time India gained independence in 1947, the INC had firmly established itself as the country’s leading political organization. It wasn’t just a political party; it was the heart of the independence movement, symbolizing the hopes and aspirations of millions of Indians who had endured decades of colonial rule. The Gandhian era, with its emphasis on nonviolence, mass participation, and unity, remains one of the most defining chapters in India’s journey to freedom.

The Indian National Congress in Post-Independence India

After India achieved independence in 1947, the Indian National Congress (INC) underwent a significant transformation, evolving from a nationalist movement to the country’s dominant governing party. Under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the INC focused on building a democratic nation, striving to lay the foundation for a modern, self-reliant India. Nehru's vision centered on industrialization, social reforms, and the creation of strong democratic institutions. His policies were aimed at fostering economic growth while ensuring that India’s diverse population could live in harmony and equality.

One of Nehru’s key strategies for national development was the promotion of planned economic growth. He introduced a series of Five-Year Plans designed to modernize the economy, with a particular emphasis on building industries, infrastructure, and scientific research. Nehru’s government also implemented land reforms to improve the livelihoods of the rural population and reduce inequalities. Furthermore, Nehru was committed to secularism, ensuring that the state remained neutral toward religion and fostering a scientific temper to encourage rational thought and progress.

Following Nehru’s death in 1964, his successors continued to shape the INC and its role in post-independence India. Lal Bahadur Shastri, who became Prime Minister in 1964, is remembered for his strong leadership during the 1965 India-Pakistan war, as well as for promoting the slogan “Jai Jawan Jai Kisan” (Hail the soldier, Hail the farmer), which emphasized the importance of both defense and agriculture.

However, it was Indira Gandhi, Nehru’s daughter, who played the most significant role in shaping the INC during the second half of the 20th century. Becoming Prime Minister in 1966, Indira made a profound impact on the country’s development and its political landscape. One of her major achievements was the Green Revolution of the 1960s, which transformed Indian agriculture by introducing high-yielding varieties of crops, improved irrigation techniques, and modern farming practices. This helped increase food production and reduce India’s dependence on food imports.

Indira Gandhi’s leadership also marked India’s triumph in the 1971 war against Pakistan, which led to the creation of Bangladesh. The victory boosted her popularity, solidifying her status as one of India’s most powerful leaders. However, her tenure was also marked by controversy, particularly during the Emergency of 1975-77. Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency, citing internal threats to national security, which led to the suspension of civil liberties and the arrest of political opponents. This period severely tarnished the INC’s reputation for upholding democratic principles, and many criticized her for centralizing power and curbing political freedoms.

Despite these controversies, the INC remained a central force in Indian politics, guiding the country through challenges and striving to achieve Nehru's vision of a modern, secular, and democratic India.

Contemporary Political Power in Post-Independence India

In the years following India's independence, political power has shifted and evolved, reflecting the changing dynamics of the country's society and economy. After the initial dominance of the Indian National Congress (INC) in the post-independence period, India's political landscape became more diverse and complex, with new parties and movements emerging. The INC remained the main political force for several decades, but over time, other regional and national parties began to challenge its supremacy, leading to a more competitive and multi-party system.

One of the key developments in contemporary Indian politics has been the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing party with its roots in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The BJP first gained prominence in the 1990s and became a major player in Indian politics. Under the leadership of figures like Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Narendra Modi, the party has grown into a dominant force, particularly in recent years. Modi, in particular, has led the BJP to sweeping victories in national elections, securing a majority in the 2014 and 2019 general elections. His leadership has seen the implementation of bold economic and social reforms, such as the Goods and Services Tax (GST), the demonetization of high-value currency notes, and the push for a more Hindu-nationalist vision of India.

The BJP's rise has been accompanied by the increasing prominence of regional parties, which represent specific states or communities. In states like West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh, regional parties like the Trinamool Congress (TMC), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), and Samajwadi Party (SP) have played crucial roles in shaping local politics. These parties often form alliances with national parties, including the INC and BJP, to strengthen their influence in Parliament.

Another significant trend in contemporary politics is the growing importance of social movements and protest politics. Issues such as caste discrimination, religious tensions, economic inequality, and the rights of farmers and workers have sparked large-scale movements that challenge the political establishment. For example, the farmers' protests in 2020-2021, which were sparked by controversial agricultural laws, became a major national issue, drawing attention to the concerns of rural India. Similarly, movements advocating for women's rights, environmental justice, and against corruption continue to shape the public discourse.

The Indian political landscape has also seen increasing polarization in recent years, with ideological divides often taking center stage. The rise of Hindu nationalism, championed by the BJP, has deepened religious and social divisions, particularly between Hindu and Muslim communities. This has sparked debates about secularism, democracy, and India's identity as a diverse, pluralistic society. On the other hand, parties like the Congress, as well as several left-wing and progressive groups, continue to advocate for a more inclusive vision of India, focused on social justice, equality, and economic development.

Despite the challenges, India's democratic framework remains strong, with regular elections and peaceful transfers of power. The Election Commission of India has played a crucial role in ensuring free and fair elections, while the judiciary and civil society organizations continue to uphold the principles of democracy and human rights.

In summary, contemporary political power in post-independence India is marked by a shift from one-party dominance to a more fragmented and competitive multi-party system. The rise of the BJP, the strengthening of regional parties, the increasing role of social movements, and the growing ideological

divide have all shaped the political landscape. As India moves forward, its political environment will continue to evolve, reflecting the aspirations and challenges of its diverse population.

The Challenges, Decline, and Adaptation of the Indian National Congress

The Indian National Congress (INC), once the dominant force in India's political landscape, began to experience a gradual decline in the latter half of the 20th century. Several factors contributed to this erosion of power, including the rise of regional parties, the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a formidable competitor, and internal divisions within the INC itself. The party's long-standing leadership crises further compounded its electoral challenges. In the 1980s, Rajiv Gandhi sought to modernize India's economy through technology and infrastructure initiatives, but his tenure was marred by scandals, most notably the Bofors scandal, which severely tarnished the party's image. These controversies, combined with growing dissatisfaction among the electorate, led to a significant erosion of public confidence in the Congress party.

Entering the 21st century, the INC faced even greater difficulties. While the party continued to pursue progressive initiatives such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Right to Information (RTI) Act during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) governments between 2004 and 2014, it struggled with mounting criticism regarding corruption scandals, policy paralysis, and governance issues. The 2008 Mumbai attacks, the 2G spectrum case, and the Commonwealth Games scam further dented the party's credibility, and the INC's inability to counter these allegations eroded its political capital.

Simultaneously, the BJP, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, began to consolidate its position as the primary political rival. Modi's rise to prominence, particularly in the 2014 and 2019 national elections, marked a decisive shift in the political balance, with the BJP emerging as a more dominant force. The INC, which had once been the unquestioned leader in national politics, found itself marginalized and eclipsed by the BJP's growing popularity and political maneuvering. The BJP's ability to connect with a younger, more urban electorate, combined with a well-organized campaign and a strong ideological narrative, left the INC grappling to regain its relevance.

However, despite its electoral setbacks, the INC remains a significant entity in Indian politics. The party continues to advocate for its core values of secularism, social justice, and democratic principles. The INC has sought to redefine its approach by addressing contemporary issues such as unemployment, farmer distress, and social inequality. Yet, questions about leadership and internal unity persist, with the party struggling to present a unified vision and viable leadership to challenge the BJP's dominance.

The INC's historical legacy, however, remains one of its greatest assets. Its pivotal role in India's independence movement and its contributions to the nation's post-independence development are still recognized and respected by large sections of the Indian population. This legacy continues to offer the party a platform through which it can attempt to regain its lost political footing. Recent efforts to engage with grassroots movements, strengthen alliances with regional parties, and refine its political narrative signal a potential revival strategy. The party's future relevance will depend on its ability to reconcile internal differences, reclaim its traditional support base, and adapt to the changing political landscape of India.

Conclusion

The Indian National Congress has been a cornerstone in the shaping of modern India, playing a pivotal

role not only in securing the nation's independence but also in laying the foundation for its democratic institutions and social framework. As the driving force behind the struggle for freedom, the INC spearheaded the movement that led to the dismantling of colonial rule and the establishment of a sovereign republic. In the years following independence, the party guided the nation through its nascent stages of development, formulating policies that aimed to modernize the economy, promote social justice, and uphold the values of secularism and democracy.

However, in the contemporary political arena, the INC has encountered significant challenges, ranging from the rise of competing political forces such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to internal fragmentation and questions regarding leadership. Despite these obstacles, the party's historical legacy remains a powerful asset, offering a platform for its revival and continued relevance. The INC's adaptability to shifting political dynamics, coupled with its enduring commitment to the ideals of social equity, democratic governance, and national unity, provides a solid foundation for its renewal in the face of evolving political realities.

In understanding the trajectory of the INC, one gains invaluable insights into the complexities of India's political system—its strengths, vulnerabilities, and the intricate balance between tradition and transformation. The party's evolution mirrors the broader narrative of India's democratic journey, underscoring the challenges inherent in maintaining a pluralistic, inclusive polity in the context of a rapidly changing global and domestic environment. Ultimately, the future of the Indian National Congress will depend on its ability to reconcile its historical legacy with the demands of contemporary politics, ensuring its continued contribution to India's democratic discourse.

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