

Policy of Indian National Congress towards Princely States of India

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Abstract

The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 with a view to highlight the grievances of Indian people before the British Government of India, The attitude of Indian National Congress towards princely states throughout the period was guided by the Mahatma Gandhi. From the beginning Indian National Congress had full sympathy with the people of princely states towards their struggle, but they were not prepared to interfere with the internal affairs of the states. The policy of non-interfere with the internal affairs of the states was considered by the Congress leaders wise and sound. An in-depth study of the Indian National Congress towards the princely states shows that during the five decades it passed through several stages from pre-Ghandian era to Ghandian era. Before 1918 the people of princely states completely ignored by the Congress and it was only at the Nagpur session of Indian national Congress in 1918 that the old policy of Indian National Congress was reversed. And the Congress considers its right to stand for full responsible government and guarantee of civil liberties in the states.

Keywords: *Paramountcy, non-interference, autonomy, legitimate, British Crown.*

The policy of Indian National Congress towards the Princely States from 1918 to 1947 was guided by Mahatma Gandhi. Right from its beginning Indian National Congress had full sympathy with the people of princely states towards their struggle for freedom but were not ready to interfere with the internal affairs of the princely states. The policy of non-interference in the affairs of the princely states was considered by the leaders of Indian National Congress wise and sound. Because they were not ready to fight on two fronts at the same time. They thought that the states were independent entities under British law and also an integral part of the geographic India. But this factor alone did not enable the people living in states to believe outsiders to shape the course of events in princely states. It was sheer weakness which uttered this policy. He regarded the Princes as the trustee of the people over whom they ruled and advised them to grant autonomy to their subjects. The Ghandiji's attitude towards the problem of the states throughout remained the consistent. In 1916 he had said in his speech at the opening of Banaras Hindu University that there was salvation for Indian unless the princes stripped themselves of their Jewellery and held that in trust for the people of their states. In his presidential address at the Kathiawar Political Conference he made it clear that the Congress should adopt the policy of non-interference with regard to Indian states. During the course of fifty years the policy of Congress towards the princely states passed through several stages. Before Gandhiji the attitude of the Congress towards the princes was that of admiration and respectful support. In 1894 on the death of Mysore ruler it had adopted a resolution parsing his wisdom and many qualities of head and heart. It again

passed a resolution two years later that no Indian Prince or chief should be deposed on the ground of maladministration till this charge was established to the satisfaction of a public tribunal. And the tribunal should command the confidence of both the Government and Princes. During those days the Congress ignored the people of princely states completely. It was in the Nagpur Session of Indian National Congress in 1918 the old policy was reversed and the country was divided into twenty one Congress provinces and the Princely States were incorporated in adjoining provinces.

And the people of Princely States could become members of the District Congress Committees and through them they could be returned as members of the All India Congress Committee and as delegates to the Congress. But the inclusion of state people in Congress activities did not mean any interference by the Congress in the internal affairs of the Princely States, in spite of the latter's express disappointment and loud protests. The controversy was once again revived in 1927-28 with the appointment and visit of the Simmon Commission to India. The All Parties Conference met to frame a mutually agreed constitution and the Nehru Report was the result. This was the first occasion that an elaborate elucidation of the relations between the British Crown, the British Parliament, the Indian States and the British India was attempted. The Indian National Congress felt that the princely states formed an integral part of the Indian nation and their existence could not be ignored. It was for the first time in 1928 session of Indian National Congress clause relating to non-interference was deleted and urged the princes to guarantee fundamental rights of citizenship to their subjects and concede responsible government it assured the people of princely states of its sympathy for their legitimate aims. The people of princely states regarded this resolution as the Magna Carta. Mutual understanding between the people of princely states and the Indian National Congress was further evidenced in the country wide non-cooperation campaign launched by The Indian National Congress at the Jabalpur session declared that the interests of the people of British are as that of the interest of the people of princely states and the Indian National Congress assures them of its full responsibility in their struggle for freedom.

The success of Indian National Congress in the 1937 general elections in six provinces opened a new era in the relationship between the people of princely states and Indian National Congress. Because the success in the 1937 general elections encouraged the people of princely states to agitate for responsible government and civil liberties. The resolution adopted by the Indian National Congress at Haripura in February 1938 is of much basic importance for determining the relationship between the Indian National Congress and the freedom struggle in princely states. The resolution passed reads as, "The Indian National Congress stands for the same political, social and economic freedom in the princely states as in the interest of rest of India and considers the states as integral parts of India which cannot be separated. The Purana Swaraj is the objective of the Congress is for the integrity and unity of India must be maintained in freedom as it has

maintained in subjection. The only kind of federation that can be accepted to the Congress is one in which that can be acceptable to the Congress is one in which the states participation as free units, enjoying the same measurable of democratic freedom as the rest of India. The Congress, therefore stands for full responsible government and the guarantee of civil liberties in the states and deplors the present backward conditions and utter lack of freedom and suppression of civil liberties in many of these states. The Congress considers it its right and privilege to work for the attainment of this objective in the states. But, under existing circumstances, the congress is not in a position to work effectively to their end within the states and circumstances, the Congress is not in a position to work effectively to this end within the states and numerous limitations and restrictions imposed by the rulers or by British authority working through them, hamper its activities. The hope and assurance which its name and prestige raise in the minds of the people of the states find no immediate fulfilment and disillusion results. It is not consonance with the dignity of the Congress to have local committees which cannot function effectively or to tolerate indignity to the national flag. The inability of the Congress to give protection or effective help when hopes have been raised produced helplessness in the people of the states and hinders the development of their movement for freedom.”

Keeping in view of the different conditions prevailing in both British India and Princely States, the policy of Indian National Congress is often unsuited to the states and may result in preventing or hampering the natural growth of the freedom movement in a state such movements are likely to develop more rapidly, if the people of princely states draw their strength from themselves and did not rely on extraneous help and assistance. The Indian National Congress welcomes such movements and the congress will always extend support and good will to such struggles carried on in a peaceful manner and individual congressmen however will be free to render further assistance in their personal capacities.

In view of the different circumstances prevailing in the princely states and in the rest of India, the general policy of Indian National Congress is often unsuited to the princely states and may result in preventing or hampering the natural growth of the freedom movement in a state such movements are likely to develop more rapidly and to have a broad basis, if they draw their strength from the people of Princely States, produce self-reliance in them, and are in tune with conditions prevailing there, and do not rely on extraneous help and assistance or on the prestige of the Congress name. The Indian National Congress welcomes such movements, but in the nature of things and under present conditions, the burden of carrying on the struggle for freedom must fall on the people of the Princely States. The Indian National Congress will always extend its support to such struggles carried on in a peaceful and legitimate manner, but that organisation help will unavoidably be under existing conditions, moral support and sympathy. The

members of the Indian National Congress however will be free to render further assistance in their personal capacities. In this way the struggle can develop without pledging the Congress organisation, and thus unimpeded by external considerations.

The Indian National Congress therefore, directs that for the present Congress Committees in the states shall function under direction and control of the Congress Working Committee and shall engage in parliamentary activity nor launch on direct action in the name and under the auspices of the Indian National Congress. Internal struggle of people of the states must not be undertaken in the name of the Indian National Congress. For this purpose independent organisations should be started and continued where they exist already within the states. The Congress desires to assure the people of the states of its harmony with them and of its active and attentive interest in and kindness with their movement of freedom. It hopes that the day of their liberation is not far distant. Referring to the Haripura resolution of Indian National Congress on Princely States, Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramayya says in the History of Indian National Congress that a section of the Indian National Congress and Gandhiji did not see eye to eye with each other on the problem of the states and the attitude of the Indian National Congress towards the political awakening in them. As early as in 1934 when Gandhiji published a statement on the 6th of April, he made a reference to socialism and the states as well as the constitution of the Indian National Congress as the points to those entertained by one wing in the congress., “Part of the difficulty arose from the fact that the people of the states were thought to be demanding external aid for internal agitation. They too put their house in order and organised their committees and met in an all Indian National Conference in July in 1936 at Karachi. This was the beginning of a new chapter in the process of the state’s peoples politics on lines closely analogous to those adopted by the Congress Associations sprang up everywhere and many of them affiliated to the All India Body the Praja Mandals of certain states preferred to remain unconnected without organisation. In some states there were Indian National Congress Committees side by side with the State Peoples Organisation. Having gained an inch in Calcutta the people of the states wanted the Indian National Congress to bear the burden of the people in the states or at any rate taken the responsibility for the political organisations of the state’s people. The Indian National Congress on the contrary had its own difficulties to contend against the issue that arouse at Haripura was whether Indian National Congress Committees should be permitted in the states and whether Indian National Congress Committees should be constitution of India’s provinces should not be equally acceptable to the people of the Princely States. An easy way out of the difficulty was considered by the State Peoples Organisation which had just met at a convention at Navsari prior to the Haripura session to be to make one change in Article 1 of the constitution by stating that India means the people of India including the people of the Indian states. It will also be remembered that the resolution

on Mysore passed by All India Congress Committee in Calcutta in October, 1937, did not command itself to Gandhiji who criticised it in severe terms.

People of the princely states and leaders of the freedom struggle in those territories did not generally speaking react favourably to this resolution. Though none questioned the solicitude of the Indian National Congress for the welfare of princely states, they could not help feeling firstly that it was they and not Indian National Congress leaders who felt the pinch of oppressive rule, and secondly, that the Indian National Congress attached greater importance to the fortunes of the struggle it was waging against the British authority than to the unequal fight that Praja Mandals were giving to the rulers in the states. Gandhiji's writing on the resolution and clear statements by Congress leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, however somewhat soothed the feelings of the state's people. Meanwhile the Praja Mandals and the All India States Peoples Conference were discovering new sources of strength and their following was increasing every day. A radical left wing had developed within the Indian National Congress; which started advocating more active support for Satyagraha movements in the States. Jawaharlal Nehru, Jaya Prakash Narayan, Acharya Narendra Dev, Yousf Mehrali and a few others in the Indian National Congress misused no opportunity to uphold the cause of the State people. Jawaharlal, who was fore most among them, came out with clear and effective statements denouncing the chaotic conditions prevailing in states. These pronouncements had the effect of committing the Indian National Congress, at least in the view of the people, to a most radical policy towards the agitation going on in several states.

The Congress ministries in the provinces also took up an approach which lent support to the protestors in the Princely States. Gandhiji again declared in December, 1938 that there was no intermediate house between total annihilation of the Princely States and responsible government. The simultaneous awakening in the states he attributed to the time spirit. He also put a new explanation on the responsibilities and duties of provincial governments' vis-à-vis the agitation for responsible government in the Princely States. He held that ministers in the provinces had the moral right and duty to take notice of gross misrule in the Princely States and to advise the paramount power on what should be done. Gandhiji went to the extent of announcing that unless the substance of the demand for responsible government was conceded voluntarily by the rulers, the policy of non-interference of Indian National Congress might be abandoned. He also advised the rulers to cultivate friendly relations with an organisation which bids far in the future, not very distant, to replace the paramount power-let me hope, by friendly arrangement.

These words of Gandhiji have prophetic thought at the time they were uttered perhaps no state ruler took them seriously. Addressing the Princes some months later the Mahatma posed the question what is the minimum that all states should guarantee in order

to come in line with the enlightened opinion in what is called British India. Answering it himself he laid down the following as the minimum that all states, big or small, must do-

1. The Privy Purse should be limited so as not to exceed one-tenth of the income where it ranges between Rs 10 and Rs 15 lakh per year, and in no case should the purse exceeded Rs 3 lakhs per year and it should include all the private expenses of the ruler (e.g. palace expenses, cars, stables, the rulers guests) except those which have reference to the performance of public duty which should be clearly defined.
2. Judiciary to be independent and permanent and free of all interfere. In order to ensure uniformity of practice and strict impartiality there should be an appeal to the high court of the province within which the state in question is situated. This may not be possible without a change in the law governing the high courts. It can I imagine, be easily altered if the state agree.
3. Full civil liberty, so long as it is not used to promote violence directly or indirectly. This includes freedom of the press and freedom to receive newspapers which do not promote violence.
4. Freedom to the people of the states to form associations and educate public opinion in favour of establishing government in their own states.
5. Freedom for Indians outside particular states to enter them without let or hindrance so long as their activities are not directed towards the destruction of the states in question.

In the same article in which he posed this question and answered it, Gandhiji addressed a few words to the Princes. Concluding his article he asked the princes not to underrate the Congress as a force in the country. If these developments were giving a new slant to the Congress as a force in the Country

If these developments were giving a new slant to the Indian National Congress policy on non-interference in the internal affairs of the states, the happenings in Rajkot leading to Mahatma Gandhi's fast and the subsequent intervention by the viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, confirmed the change that circumstances had brought about in the Congress policy on the one hand and the attitude of the Paramount power on the other, at any rate so far as the smaller states were concerned. It also served to prove that the Indian National Congress had gained in prestige since taking up office in the provinces, so that even the viceroy was not impervious to its wishes. When the agitation developed, Rajkot was inundated by volunteers from Bombay Presidency which was under Indian National Congress administration. The Provincial government was unwilling to interfere with the agitators based in Bombay. Unable to cheek the spate of agitators coming from outside and finding its appeal for help to the paramount power unavailing, The Thakur and the Dewan of Rajkot had to succumb eventually.

The Whole matter settled into a major catastrophe which neither the Paramount Power nor the Government of Bombay could overlook. This was a clear sign for the people of Princely that the Indian National Congress was fully at their back in their demand for accountable government in the Princely States. There is indication to show that some of the Princes also saw the writing on the wall, just as lord Linlithgow himself saw that if some radical reforms were brought about in the Princely States, it would only be a question of time before they surrendered to Indian National Congress agitation. The Congress administration in the provinces had continued for another few years. The move to consolidate the Princely States with British India which the Sardar Patel stated in 1947 after independence, would almost certainly have begun at least seven years earlier if the World War-II had not intervened.

Indian National Congress by virtue of power in eight provinces had become a force to reckon with the Crown Representative and Political Department were forced to pause before they did anything on the Princely States front which the Indian National Congress as an organisation might dislike. This healthy trend was interrupted by the declaration of war in Europe in September, 1919 led to resignation of the Indian National Congress ministers in the provinces and a free hand to the paramount power to own up the provinces once again by assuring them of full protection. The Princely States, in turn reverted to their earlier attitude as regards their people and their demand for responsible government. The emergency created by the war situation came handy to them to go back on whatever assurances they might have given to people and to jog on mersily as hitherto fore.

When the negotiations for Princely States representation were picked up in Constituent Assembly in 1946 threads were picked up. Earlier at the Udaipur session of All India State Peoples Conference Nehru had made a remarkable speech. He had also presided over the Ludhiana session of All India State Peoples Conference in 1939 and taken active part in the Karachi Session held in the previous year. The speeches he had made on those occasions were no less memorable. But at Udaipur he spoke not merely as a politician and public leader but as a statesman and a practical administrator, since a few months earlier he had joined the Viceroy's Executive Council as its vice-chairman. He pleaded for responsible government in all Princely States. Such Princely States as could not possibly form economic units, he thought, should be absorbed in the neighbouring provinces and not with other states.

The question of Political reforms in India with the labour government coming into power in the United Kingdom, the question of the Indian States was always taken up by the Congress in all discussions, we have already seen that the Cripps Mission reference to states was rather brief and sketchy. The Cripps plan merely stated, "whether or not an independent state elects to adhere to the constitution, it will be necessary to negotiate a revision of its treaty arrangements so far as they may be required in the new situation. "The states were to send their representatives to the constitution making body in

proportion to their population. It was also made clear that the British Government would not transfer the paramountcy of the crown to any other party. One thing was made by the Cripps Mission clear to the Princes though it failed; and that was in the event of a conflict between the interests of the princely states and British India, the British Government would care more for the latter would not mind leaving the states and the Princes high and dry. Efforts were made in 1944-1945 at forming a separate union of all the Princely States, but it was so impracticable that not only the Indian National Congress and the Princely States rejected it. Even the viceroy was known to have disfavoured it. Lord Linlithgow, instead launched his attachment scheme under which certain semi jurisdictional states in Kathiawar and Gujarat were attached to the neighbouring states. A similar treatment he suggested for the Orissa States. When war ended emphasis shifted to internal problems, and the constitutional questions again came to the forefront. The negotiations which the labour Government in Britain initiated were followed by a visit of the Parliamentary Delegation and later of the Cabinet Mission to India. In his statement of March 15, 1946, the British Prime Minister, Mr. Atlee, made it plain that there can be no positive veto on advance and I do not believe for a moment that the Indian princes would desire to be a bar to the forward march of India. There was chaotic activity during the stay of the Cabinet Mission in the country. There were endless rounds of conferences meetings and interviews, but the mission did not interview the people of the states. The mission was, however quite clear in its mind that with the attainment of independence by British India whether within or outside the British Common wealth, the relationship which had hitherto existed between the states and the British Crown would no longer be possible. It, recommended the states to seek new connection with the successor government of India and in case India was partitioned to accede to one of the Dominions. They also advised them to join the constituent assembly, for which a negotiating committee had been set up. In the memorandum on states treaties and paramountcy, The Cabinet Mission said that with effect from the date of the transfer of power, His Majesty's Government would cease to exercise the power of Paramountcy. The Congress stand throughout had been that in the Constituent Assembly representatives of the people rather than nominees of the rulers should be sent. This view was supported by Gandhiji personally and also the Congress Working Committee. The arrangement made eventually did give some say to the states people in returning their representatives to the Constituent Assembly.

During this period of activity following the visit of the Cabinet Mission to India, rulers of certain states tried to form regional unions, for example, the rulers of the Deccan states and of Gujarat States. But no attempt was made to ascertain the wishes of the people and enlist their support by the Princes. When the rulers approached Mahatma Gandhi for his blessings he discouraged them point-blank on the plea that it was no use their forming

any union unless every prince had conferred responsible government on his people individually.

Finally came the Jawaharlal Nehru with the famous announcement while addressing the annual and the last session of the All India State Peoples Conference in April 1947. Jawarlal Nehru declared that any state which did not come into the Constituent Assembly would be treated by the country as to bear the consequences of being. The State Peoples Conference were fully satisfied with the stand taken by the Indian National Congress and its top leaders with regard to their future.

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