

Congress and the birth of India

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14 August marks the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence. Richard Brenner examines how the British Raj met its end, not through some enlightened decision to 'give India self-government' but through the actions of the mass movement against foreign rule, led by the Indian National Congress and its foremost representatives, Mahatma Ghandi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

Nehru's speech to India's first Constituent Assembly at midnight on 14 August 1947 was a masterpiece of political rhetoric. Though communalist massacres raged across India and the reality of partition had cast other Congress leaders into deep despair, the prime minister's oration not only expressed the masses' pride after years of self-sacrificing struggle, but held out the prospect of an end to centuries of suffering:

'Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom . . . the past is over and it is the future that beckons to us now. That future is not one of ease or resting but of incessant striving so that we might fulfil the pledges we have so often taken and the one we shall take today. The service of India means the service of the millions who suffer. It means the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity.'

Congress was to serve badly 'the millions who suffer' in India. But it served well the large landowners and millionaire capitalists who were, and are, the real beneficiaries of Indian independence. The seeds of this development were present from Congress' inception.

By the mid-19th century the British effectively ran the whole of India, ruling 60% of the territory directly through successive London-appointed Viceroys. The remainder of India was ruled by client princes, including large states such as Hyderabad, Mysore and Kashmir.

Integrated

With the sub-continent newly integrated by an extensive railway network, an indigenous Indian capitalist class developed in the cities, alongside the older feudal classes on the land. The Indian civil service, unlike the army, involved a relatively small number of British expatriates and relied on a mass of officials drawn from among the higher caste Hindus and privileged classes.

The education system that provided the administration also created a significant intelligentsia, which faced the routine humiliation of British chauvinism, Christian arrogance and racism. The Congress movement found a ready-made cadre among this stratum.

The Indian National Congress was formed in 1885. Its leaders were moderates who pressured the British administration for social reforms. They did not even envisage Home Rule let alone independence. Only a minority, led by B G Tilak, favoured street agitation. The mass movement of non-co-operation with the British, that characterised much of Congress activity in the 20th century, was popularised by Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi trained as a lawyer in Britain and then built up considerable respect within Congress for his role as a leading representative of Indians living in South Africa. Gandhi returned to India and became involved in Congress as an advocate of the policy of satyagraha – mass non-violent non-co-operation with the Raj. Gandhi's personal asceticism, his tireless promotion of educational and artisanal works, and his particular brand of rationalist Hinduism struck a chord among the masses, who quickly gave him the honorific title of Mahatma, meaning 'great soul'.

In 1917 Home Rule Leagues were launched by Tilak and Annie Besant, an English radical resident in India. The movement, modelled on the Irish Home Rule leagues, caught British imperialism in a weakened state. Promises of reform were made but by 1918 Britain felt strong enough to offer Congress little. Congress' rejection of the British proposals led to the introduction of more repressive legislation.

Congress organised a campaign of protest meetings. The British reply was swift. In Amritsar in the Punjab, General Dyer banned all assemblies. When an unarmed demonstration assembled, Dyer ordered his troops to fire on the crowd, including children. After ten minutes hundreds lay dead.

The Amritsar massacre led Congress, under Gandhi's influence, to launch its first all-India campaign of mass action. Congress was reorganised as a modern political nationalist movement with a small executive Working Committee and a broader representative All-India Committee. From now on, the movement's aim was to be Swaraj, or self-rule.

In January 1921 Gandhi began a nationwide speaking tour attracting mass audiences backing a comprehensive boycott of the colonial administration. Boycotts of the educational and legal institutions were followed by a spectacular campaign, much influenced by capitalists in the native textile industries, for a boycott of foreign cloth. Mass burnings of cloth and picketing of shops ensued, together with militant boycotts of foreign-controlled liquor shops.

Boycott

In November 1921 a mass boycott of the Prince of Wales' Indian tour sparked a nationwide one-day general strike which brought 1,400,000 workers on to the streets of Bombay alone. The involvement of the workers in the movement brought a clear class dimension to the national movement. As an illiterate textile worker explained:

'We workers understood the demand for Swaraj to be only this: that our indebtedness would disappear, the oppression of the moneylender would stop, our wages would increase, and the oppression of the owner on the worker, the kicks and blows with which they belabour us, would stop.'

A boycott of the army and police led to the establishment of a Congress militia, the Congress Volunteer Corps. Labourers on the tea plantations of Assam went on strike. Fanned by the young radical nationalist, Jawaharlal Nehru, peasant associations in the United Provinces staged mass rebellions against the local landlords who were in the pockets of the British.

Gandhi's policy of non-violence was not uniformly observed by the masses, especially in the face of the ruthless repression meted out by the Raj authorities and the landlords. When the police fired on a march in Chauri Chaura in February 1922, the demonstrators drove the police back in to their station, set fire to it, and hacked to pieces those who tried to escape.

This provoked Gandhi to call off the satyagraha campaign altogether in the name of preserving non-violence. This reaction would often be repeated in the years ahead and consistently marred the development of the national democratic revolution. His avowed aim was to conserve the energy of the

masses, but in the meantime the Viceroy had not agreed to Congress' central demands, including the release of political prisoners and the granting of basic civil liberties.

The period from the end of non-co-operation in 1922 until 1927 saw the movement plunged into internal conflict and stagnation. Renewal of the mass satyagraha was provoked by the British decision in November 1927 to establish a commission to investigate whether India was 'ready' for constitutional reform and greater liberties.

The all-white commission under Sir John Simon provoked popular outrage that led to a renewed mass boycott. Jawaharlal Nehru even succeeded in winning Congress to a demand for complete independence, not just self-rule or dominion status.

Simon arrived in India in February 1928 to be greeted by a general strike and mass demonstrations. Young people came to the fore in organising militant and ingenious protests, including driving a car alongside the route of Simon's train and barracking him for the whole journey! New student and youth leagues mushroomed, impelling the entire movement leftwards.

Independence

When the new Labour government of 1929 failed to discuss proposals for limited home rule, Congress settled on a new mass movement for complete independence. Jawaharlal Nehru took over the leadership, with Gandhi's blessing, and a Declaration of Independence was announced.

The new upsurge began around a campaign against the government's tax on salt. Although only a fraction of government revenues, this tax galvanised an all-India opposition. Gandhi gave the signal for satyagraha to begin by marching 240 miles to the coast and 'illegally' collecting salt.

Similar marches and anti-tax campaigns occurred across India. The British were paralysed by indecision: repression would provoke the masses, inaction would appear like weakness. Eventually, too late to prevent Gandhi inspiring a national movement, the authorities arrested him. The masses responded with white-hot anger. In Sholapur textile workers struck, armed themselves and attacked all government buildings, setting up a rival government that was only smashed weeks later by troops.

In other towns mass demonstrations attacked salt works; boycotts began of foreign liquor stores and peasants went on rent strike against landlords who continued to pay tax to the government. Thousands of Congress activists, including Nehru, were thrown into jail.

Once again Gandhi compromised. He feared the actions of the masses would undermine the pacifist satyagraha. He opened talks with the British in 1931 and signed a peace 'pact' with the Viceroy. Gandhi's moderation demobilised and split the movement. Even Nehru, who talked left, but constantly compromised with the Gandhi leadership was dismayed.

Such moderation was not matched by the British. The 'Round Table Talks' in London got nowhere. When Congress tried to relaunch the satyagraha, the British suspended all civil liberties, outlawed Congress and all its allies and re-arrested Congress leaders including Gandhi himself.

By the 1930s the British knew they could not suppress the mass Congress movement by force alone. Under the new Government of India Act 1935 the British aimed at incorporating a section of the national movement into government while maintaining imperialist domination. The Act offered participation in state assemblies on the basis of a restricted franchise. The 'princely states' were unaffected and there were to be separate elections for Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, a divide and rule policy introduced by the British in 1906 and accepted by Congress.

Poll

In the poll Congress won majorities in six of the 11 provincial assemblies, forming ministries in Bombay, Central Provinces, Orissa, Bihar, United Provinces and Madras. A tremendous wave of popular enthusiasm greeted this development. Certain important reforms were passed, including the release of prisoners in some provinces, and the return of confiscated lands to former owners. But Congress ministries quickly revealed a deep-seated tendency to accommodate to the property-owning classes and the British.

In Bengal rights were curbed and prisoners detained despite protests and hunger strikes. As early as October 1937, the Madras ministry prosecuted a Congress socialist leader for sedition, and the Bombay ministry engaged in police surveillance of the CPI. Most importantly, in order to retain the support of the landlords for Congress, the party left the structures of feudal land ownership unchanged, condemning millions of peasants to abject poverty and degrading servitude.

The ministries' attitude to the organised working class was one of naked hostility. An Industrial Disputes Act passed in Bombay aimed to restrain labour unrest. It imposed compulsory binding arbitration on trade unions, preventing strikes for a four-month interim period. The All-India TUC and CPI called a strike against the Act. The police shot dead two demonstrators.

Gandhi and Nehru were unhappy, but defended the ministries against the workers and peasants' protests. 'We cannot agitate against ourselves', Nehru declared, and backed a Congress motion condemning 'class war by violent means'. Gandhi went further, proclaiming that 'violent speech or writing does not come under the protection of civil liberty.'

The onset of the Second World War transformed the political terrain. Gandhi and Nehru were both strongly inclined to support British imperialism in the war, but were unable to secure a promise of independence after the conflict. When the Secretary of State ruled out independence in October 1939, it ended any possibility of Congress backing Britain's war effort. But still the Congress leaders refrained from initiating a new satyagraha for fear of undermining the Allies.

By 1942 Congress could hold off no longer. The privations caused by Britain's plunder of India's resources for its imperialist war effort fuelled mass discontent. British military defeats, especially in Burma and Malaya, encouraged millions of Indians who could now see the likely collapse of the British empire.

With Nehru opposed right up to its launch, the Quit India movement began in August 1942. Gandhi gave the signal for revolt, for a boycott of education and for rent strikes. The British swooped immediately and arrested the entire Congress executive on 9 August.

The response by the leaderless masses was extraordinary, as the peaceful satyagraha burst into a tidal wave of rebellion. Huge crowds attacked government buildings. Local groups blew up railway lines and bridges, workers launched strikes lasting weeks and even months. Students toured the villages with the slogan 'Burn the Police Stations!' and 'Englishmen have Fled!'

The British only contained the revolt by severe repression, including firing on unarmed demonstrations, machine gunning crowds from fighter planes and arresting over 60,000 militants.

The CPI (see box) played a scandalous role during this agitation. Its popular front with the 'democratic anti-fascist' imperialist powers led it to actively oppose the Quit India movement and advocate the suspension of the independence struggle until after the war.

Peace saw the release of the Congress leaders in July 1945. Widespread expectation of change in the new world order led to further mobilisations against the British. The movement demanded amnesty for

those arrested in 1942-43 upsurge and for the release of Indian soldiers who had joined the Indian National Army to fight alongside the Japanese against Britain.

Mutiny

In February 1946 a mutiny in the Royal Indian Navy and a general strike in Bombay presented the most dramatic threat to colonial rule. It was a sure sign that a revolutionary crisis was approaching.

Congress leaders, fully backed by the CPI, worked overtime to defuse the situation. In Karachi, they called for an end to the naval revolt. They called on the people of Calcutta to suspend strikes and return to their homes. Relying entirely on a strategy of negotiations, they feared above all a breakdown in the key institutions of bourgeois rule, particularly the armed forces, which would have weakened or made impossible the emergence of a stable capitalist India.

Gandhi argued that the mutineers were 'thoughtless and ignorant, if they believed that by their might they would deliver India from foreign domination . . . Swaraj is not going to be obtained by what is going on now in Bombay, Calcutta and Karachi.'

By restraining the movement, Congress' bourgeois leadership allowed communalists to fuel religious antagonism. Congress, while having always opposed communalism as a dead-end, had also pursued a strategy of alliance and negotiation with Muslim communalist leaders, rather than challenging them head on.

The British had consciously fostered religious communalism. While Congress was regularly outlawed, the Muslim League and its reactionary Hindu counterpart, the RSS, were looked on benignly. The last British Viceroy, Mountbatten, had every interest in weakening and dividing the independence movement and the states that would come out of it. An Indian sub-continent united by a mass movement which had just driven the British out could have posed a real threat to imperialism's regional interests.

Reactionary

The stage was set for the Muslim League to rally mass forces to a reactionary anti-Hindu campaign, playing on unfounded fears that Muslims would be massacred in the new 'Congress Raj'. The communalist leader of the Muslim League, Jinnah, even declared that Muslims would meet the same fate as the Jews in Nazi Germany, and stepped up agitation for a separate Islamic state: the 'land of the pure' Pakistan.

When Britain finally recognised defeat in 1947 and conceded independence Congress leaders accepted partition as part of the settlement. The border was drawn with typical British cynicism to maximise conflict. Areas were divided that had been closely economically and culturally linked. Over one million people were killed in an orgy of violence, resettlement and communal 'cleansing'.

Whatever policies the new Indian government was to pursue in the name of economic independence, partition was the price for preserving the rule of capital and its representatives. Ultimately, India's subordination to the imperialist world system was secured. So too, at midnight on 14 August, was the fate of the sub-continent's people for the next half-century.

THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA

The Congress leadership's constant vacillations and betrayals during the struggle for independence caused outrage among the most militant sections of the movement, especially the workers and peasants. But the parties that claimed to represent their interests were as politically bankrupt as the Congress.

Under the influence of the Russian Revolution communist and socialist ideas spread widely among the

youth and intelligentsia in the 1920s and early 1930s.

Support

The Communist Party of India (CPI) was founded in 1925 and initially attracted significant support within Congress and in local workers' and peasants' initiatives.

However, in 1928-29 the Communist International moved into its ultra-left 'Third Period'. The socialists and social democrats were denounced as 'social fascists', while any form of anti-imperialist united front with non-proletarian forces fighting imperialism was denounced as heresy. The CPI was isolated from the anti-imperialist movement. Its potential influence in the crucial 1930-31 resistance was squandered.

While the earlier CPI had isolated itself from the mass movement by its sectarianism, its political somersault in the mid-1930s guaranteed it could never lead a struggle against the vacillations of Gandhi and co. With the adoption of the 'popular front' line, far from denouncing leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru as agents of the bourgeoisie within the anti-imperialist movement, the CPI not only embraced united action with the Congress, but consciously ceded to the bourgeois forces the role of leading the national and democratic revolution.

The 'Dutt-Bradley Thesis' afforded to Congress 'a great . . . and a foremost part in the work of realising the anti-imperialist people's front.'

If the 'Third Period' had prevented the party taking advantage of the mass agitation of 1930-31, the Peoples' Front policy blocked it from exposing or criticising Congress precisely at the point where substantial sections of the masses began to see the real danger of putting a bourgeois led Congress in power.

The failure of the CPI to advance an independent revolutionary strategy - one that fought for working class leadership of the national revolution so as to consummate its victory through a workers' revolution and the creation of a socialist India - was not an oversight. It was a conscious rejection of the Trotskyist strategy of permanent revolution.

The price of rejecting that strategy was that working class independence and unity was undermined by the Congress leadership. India's independence, therefore, came with capitalism intact, with the subordination of the country to imperialism and with a legacy of communalism as a result of partition.

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