

Origin and Growth of Congress Party in Punjab and Participation of Punjabis in Earlier Congress

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Political Parties in India originated during British rule and Indian national Congress was the first among such parties. Congress party is the oldest among the parties founded in Asia. The party takes pride on being the widest based mass party in the world. It is a powerful democratic organization with its roots in Indian soil. So, the Congress party of India is one of the most successful political parties to be founded any where in the developing world.¹ Indian National Congress holds a unique place not only in the history of India but also in the history of national movements all over the world. This party has brought democracy to India and is determined and pledged to strengthen it and to widen and deepen its roots in our country.² After independence, there had been a mushroom growth of political parties in India. Despite multiplicity of political parties, the Indian politics was dominated by the Congress Party. It was the only party which developed nation wide organization. Myron Weiner observes, 'The Congress is successful because it has the capacity to adopt to the environment'.³

The Indian National Congress is an all Indian Party with a High Command to direct, control and superintend all the Party units.⁴ It was formed in 1885 by the efforts of A.O. Hume in Bombay. Therefore, he is considered to be the architect of this party. Conflicting opinions have been expressed by different scholars about origin of the Indian National Congress⁵. Some scholars regard it to be the creation of an individual while others treat it to be a product of circumstances. A thorough study of contemporary literature enable us to arrive at certain reasonable definite conclusions in this regard. First, the origin of Congress can not be attributed to one factor but a combination of many factors.⁶ Second, the birth of Congress was preceded by a fairly long period of evolution of Indian National consciousness.⁷ Third, political and socio-economic condition of the country which was out come of its long subjection to British rule also responsible for its origin.⁸

The development of national consciousness in the 19th century was almost exclusively the work of the new middle class, created by the impact of British rule.⁹ The Britishers in India, in the beginning, came for just trade and soon they felt the weakness of its rulers. In 1858, when British queen established her control over India, many anti-Indian policies were framed.¹⁰ Indian people were dissatisfied with these policies perused by the British government. At that time, the thinking was not in

favour of ending the foreign domination altogether but for establishment of a responsible administration whose action and policy should largely reflect the aspirations and interest of the Indian people.¹¹ The Indians felt need of such an organization which could fulfill their desires and aspirations. Many reformers started many associations to awaken the Indians.¹² Indian association in Bengal (in 1876), Bombay Presidency Association in Bombay (1885), Mahajan Sabha in Madras (1884) and Sarvjanik Sabha in Pune, were few of them. These associations provided the ground for the promotion of political consciousness among the various sections of Indian people and propagated the cause of reforms in all sphere of administration¹³. It was also the period of preparation, setting the stage for the advent of the Indian National Congress in 1885.¹⁴ Indian National Congress was an amalgamation of all these associations.¹⁵ The politics of the associations operating over nearly half a century since 1837 had no doubt caused some stir, but they did not go as far as situation demanded from these associations. The Indian association (1876) had the distinction of being the first of such organizations, representing the educated middle classes. The aim of this association was to unify the Indian races and people on the basis of common political interest and aspirations.¹⁶ The leaders of the Indian association called first national conference in Calcutta on December 25 to 30, 1883 to arise universal awakening.

The National conference was perhaps the first of its kind in India which may rightly be regarded as the predecessor of the Indian National Congress to be founded two years later in 1885.¹⁷ The first National Congress in its Programme and proceedings, was a rehearsal of the Indian National Congress. The subjects discussed at this conference were essentially the same as later discussed in the Indian National Congress session, e.g. representative councils, education-general and technical, separation of judiciary from the executive in the administration of criminal justice and under employment of Indians in the public services.¹⁸ So the birth of Indian National Congress was a response to the total situation prevalent in India, and no single organization not to speak of a single individual, can be given exclusive credit for its emergence. However, A.O. Hume may be given credit for giving a concrete shape to idea that had been afloat for quite some time.¹⁹ He had sympathetic interest in India. He felt unhappy about the trends of government policies and actions.²⁰ Hume addressed an open letter dated 01 March, 1883 to the graduates of the Calcutta University as largely representing the educated community in India because he wanted only those educated people to come forward who had moral courage, self control and active spirit of benevolence²¹. He met Lord Dufferin and placed before him plan of setting up the new organization²². Dufferin advised Hume not to restrict its scope on the social side as was Hume's original idea but to widen its scope and definitely aim at the Political education of the people. Dufferin considered such an organization essential so that the government might be kept informed regarding the best Indian public opinion. Because under the then existing circumstances, the government of India had no adequate medium through which it could formulate its policy, correct a wrong information or controvert a false statement. Hume rapidly accepted the modification suggested by Dufferin. It would thus appear that the idea of the Congress Party as political organization originated with Dufferin.

It is rather difficult to arrive at a definite conclusion as to the part played by Dufferin in shaping the destiny of the Congress.²³ But Hume took up the work of Political organisation on the advise of Lord Dufferin. W.C. Bannerjee first President of Indian National Congress said, "If Allan Hume was the father of the Congress, the Marquis Dufferin was the God father"²⁴. National union was formed towards the close of 1884. Hume's original intention was to hold its first conference in Bombay, but later he decided to hold it at Poona from 25th to 31st December 1885, because M.G. Ranade seemed to have prevailed upon Hume to hold it at Poona. However, later on keeping in view several cases of cholera reported in Poona, the venue of conference was again shifted to Bombay.²⁵ In the mean time, Surinder Nath Banerjee the most well known Political leader of that time issued a circular calling the second National conference in Calcutta from 25 to 27 December, 1885. In order to avoid the confusion, the name of the conference of the National union had been changed as the Indian National Congress, and shifted the date of their meeting from 25 to 28 December, 1885. The first Congress was fairly well attended. The delegates were accommodated in the "Gokuldas Tejpal board school, Sanskrit college and library". There were not less than 72 delegates.²⁶ W.C. Banerjee was chosen as the President of this session. In his Presidential address, W.C. Banerjee emphasized the representative constitutional character of the Congress.²⁷ Banerjee laid down four main objectives of the Congress which were :

1. Promotion of personal intimacy and friendship among the persons working for the country's cause.
2. Eradication of all possible racial, communal and provincial prejudices amongst all over of our country and development of the sentiment of National unity.
3. Finding a solution to the social problems of the country.
4. Determination of the lines of action to be followed by Indian politicians during the following years.

The first three objectives were well worked out, but the fourth one was given little importance in subsequent years. The proceedings of this Congress were conducted in a very orderly and efficient manner, and inspite of some difference of opinions among the representatives, all the resolutions were adopted unanimously.²⁸ Regarding the composition of the Congress it may be said, that its members belonged mostly to the new English educated professional middle class composed of lawyers, doctors, journalists and teachers. Among them again, lawyers formed the predominant group. It was this class of people who had taken the initiative in establishing local Political associations before the birth of the Congress, and they had common interest, values and aspirations.²⁹

The Congress Party made a rapid progress and within a year of its existence became well known throughout the length and breathe of the country.³⁰ The Congress Party started its activities in Punjab immediately after its inception. The organizational structure of the Party assumed shape after the first branch of the Congress was established at Ambala in the third week of the January 1886. This was the first branch of Congress to have been opened not only in Punjab, but perhaps in

the whole country.³¹ However, its activities during this period did not amount to anything more than annual gatherings in which a few interested in the movement participated. The organization had no contact with the people and did not function actively for many years.³² A veteran Congressman Duni Chand inserted that, "The Congress from 1885 to 1905 was nothing but a gathering of a few holiday makers out for intellectual entertainment".³³ Prior to 1917, the Congress did not exist in the province as distinct political organization even though its committees are said to have been setup in all districts of Punjab by 1917.³⁴ It was mere a forum for individuals and groups who were the members of the other bodies and more often acted outside the auspices of the Congress.³⁵ The Indian associations and other bodies sent representatives whenever Congress session was held and individuals paid a small fee to become members of the provincial units.³⁶ The two representatives from Punjab to the first session of the Indian National Congress, namely Satyanand Agnihotri and Lala Murlidhar did not attend the session as Congressmen but the members of the Lahore Association.³⁷

The Punjab's participation in the Indian National Congress began immediately after its formation.³⁸ Many prominent Punjabis participated in the annual session of the Party setup at local level. The Congress Party in Punjab and its leaders took notice of the national as well as provincial issues at different platforms. From time to time, they successfully mobilized the people on number of political and social issues.³⁹ To understand the profile of leadership in the state, it is necessary to see who were early leaders of the Congress in Punjab. In brief they were as follows:

Table No. 2.1 Social Profile of important Congress leaders in 1920s

Sr. No	Name	Religion	Urban/Rural	Education	Profession
1.	Muralidhar	Hindu	Urban	B.A.	Politician
2.	Satyanand Agnihotri	Hindu	Urban	B.A.	Social Worker
3.	Dyal Singh Majithia	Sikh	Urban	B.A.	Land Lord
4.	Dunichand (Lahore)	Hindu	Urban	B.A. L.L.B	Politician
5.	Fuzl-i-Husain	Muslim	Rural	B.A. L.L.B	Politician
6.	Dunichand(Ambala)	Hindu	Urban	B.A. L.L.B	Politician
7.	Harkrishan Lal	Hindu	Urban	B.A.	Industrialist
8.	Lala Lajpat Rai	Hindu	Urban	B.A.	Politician
9.	Ruchi Ram Sahney	Hindu	Urban	B.A.	Social Worker
10.	Shradhanand	Hindu	Urban	B.A. L.L.B	Politician

These were the top Punjabi leaders who spread the message of Congress in the state. The delegates from Punjab played an active part in the discussion of the resolutions placed before the meetings.⁴⁰ In the first National assembly of Congress from 28 to 30 December, 1885 Lala Murlidhar, one of the five delegates from the Punjab, took an active interest in the deliberations, and when the occasion arose, he brought to the forefront problems facing his province.⁴¹ The active participation of the Punjabis in the deliberations of the Indian National Congress was almost

accompanied by their concern for their provincial and some times even their caste or communal interests⁴² and because of their communal approach they (Punjabis) acquired a reputation of Political backwardness.⁴³ The absence of the legislative council, vesting of the executive and judicial powers in the same person, extension of the jurisdiction of jury to the province, the lower status of the Chief court, the need for educational reforms and the land alienation bill were the main issues which engaged the attention of the Punjabi delegates. They took all these important issues in the Indian National Congress session.⁴⁴

Though the Indian Council Act of 1861 had established legislative councils in other provinces, but such council was not formed in Punjab.⁴⁵ One of the major concern of the representatives of the Congress from the Punjab therefore was to secure a legislative council for the province. They raised this issue in many annual sessions of the Indian National Congress. In 1886, Lala Kenhya Lal mentioned that the Punjab was quite prepared and fit for such representative institutions. It was only in 1897 that the legislative council was established in the Punjab and the representatives of Punjab expressed gratitude to the British government for giving the council to the province.⁴⁶

The separation of the executive and judiciary was another reform for which representatives of the Punjab pleaded from the Congress platform. In Punjab, civil as well as criminal justice was administered by the officers who held the charge also of executive and administrative duties. Therefore, the quality of the work done by the Punjab officers suffered and also the people involved. The Congressmen from the Punjab repeatedly made a plea for the separation of the executive and judicial functions at the district level.⁴⁷

Another aspect in the judicial sphere that exercised the minds of the Congressmen from the Punjab was the question of extension of the jurisdiction of Jury to the province. The representatives from the Punjab (in 1872) opposed the extension of the jurisdiction of jury to the province, Lala Kanihya Lal mentioned that due to the comparative backwardness of the Punjab it would be difficult to find suitable person to act as of members of the jury. In Punjab a Chief court as the highest court was established in 1866. The Punjab had no high court. Lala Dwarkadas raised this issue in the Lahore session of National Congress in 1893. In 1894, Lala Murlidhar again stressed the need of a high court in the province. Bakshi Jaishi Ram further pointed out that because of the relatively greater amount of litigation in the province there was a strong case for the establishment of high court in the Punjab.⁴⁸

The representatives from the Punjab also tried to safeguard the interest of the agriculturists. The Punjab was an agricultural province and a land of peasant proprietors. Yet there was no permanent settlement of the land revenue system in the province. So the plea for the permanent settlement of land revenue was voiced by the representatives of the Punjab.⁴⁹

The Punjab land alienation bill, was another important issue taken by the Punjab delegates in the Indian National Congress session.⁵⁰ The land alienation act, thus, was one of the most important and at the same time the most controversial Acts passed by the imperial legislative council for the Punjab.⁵¹ The Punjab land alienation Act was designed to protect agriculturalists from the clutches of the money lenders. The

objective of the bill was to restrict the sale and mortgage of lands in the Punjab. The bill affected the material interests of both the pleader and the money lenders who happened to belong largely to the Urban Hindu commercial community. The bill posed a threat to the liberty of money lenders to invest in land. Because of the opposition to the bill, it was felt necessary to send a strong delegation to the Lucknow session of the Congress, Lala Muralidhar and Lala Kanhya Lal made impassioned speeches and a resolution denouncing the bill was passed unanimously.⁵² The Congress in its resolution regretted the introduction of the bill into the Supreme legislative council and recommended that this bill preventing the alienation of agricultural land by sale or mortgage be suitably amended.⁵³ The opposition to the bill in the council was led by Harnam Singh (a social worker), who represented the interest of land owners and money lenders. But the bill was passed in spite of the opposition of the Congress, the other Political leaders and the press.⁵⁴

The delegates from the Punjab were pressing for a fixed constitution for the Congress. They wanted to be in a dominating position in the subject committee, so as to be able to discuss the economic programme in the session of the Congress. The Congress had adopted resolutions about drafting constitution at its session of 1887, 1894, 1895 and 1898. The Punjabi's particularly had been seeking a constitution since 1895, their foremost leaders, Bakshi Jaishi Ram suggested that all office holders in the Congress should be elected and that each province should be represented on a cabinet or council of the Congress.⁵⁵ A committee was appointed to draft a new constitution for the Congress. Punjab was represented in this committee by Lala Lajpat Rai and Lala Hari Krishan Lal and the constitution was finally drafted and rectified in 1899.⁵⁶

Punjab Congress also condemned the partition of Bengal as well as the curzen regime.⁵⁷ Interestingly when differences arose between the moderates and the extremists inside the Congress the British government made an ardent endeavour to create a split in the Congress ranks by passing the Act of 1909.⁵⁸ The real purpose of the reform of 1909 was to divide the nationalists ranks and to check the growth of unity among the Indians by encouraging Muslims separatism.⁵⁹ Lala Lajpat Rai who was in England in 1909, condemned this reform which intend to divide the country into two hostile groups.⁶⁰

On August 20, 1917, British Parliament passed Montague- Chelmsford reforms providing for the introduction of the diarchical system of government in the province. The Punjab delegates to the Delhi session, moved a resolution criticizing the inferior position assigned to Punjab in the reform scheme, which mentioned that Punjab was not yet fit for self government because it was not advanced equally with other provinces and its condition was different from them. Their other objection was to the assumption that Punjab did not have sufficient number of men to administer the province if the scheme was passed. The Congressmen from Punjab raised their voice against these assumptions of the government. They insisted that their province did not suffer from any disability to receive a different status in the proposed reform scheme.⁶¹ These were some of the important issues which were taken by the Punjabi delegates in the Indian National Congress session.⁶²

Despite these activities of the Punjab unit of Congress, the Congress Party in

Punjab first shot into prominence with Jallianwala Bagh tragedy in 1919.⁶³ It continued to be basically a paper organization until the momentous events of 1919-1920. Dr. Gopi Chand Bhargava, one of the Congress leaders in the pre-independence period frankly asserted that before 1920 "No regular Congress Party existed". In March 1919, government passed the Rowlett Bill which invested the government with extra ordinary powers to suppress any kind of Political agitation.⁶⁴ The Punjab Congress aroused adequate response during the 1919-21 non-cooperation movements launched by Mahatma Gandhi against Rowlett Bill.⁶⁵ Meetings against the Rowlett Act were held at several places in the state. Both the moderates and the extremists in the provincial Congress were united over this issue. In the Punjab, the agitation against the Act had started in Punjab under the leadership of Ram Raj Dutt, Lala Duni Chand, Lala Hari Krishan Lal, Gokul Chand Narang, Dr. Satyapal and Dr. Saif-Ud-Din Kichlew. The wide spread agitation in the Punjab led the government to adopt repressive measures. Beside Gandhi, popular Congress leaders in Punjab such as Dr. Satyapal, Dr. Kitchlew, Chaudhari Ram Bhaj Dutta, Duni Chand and Lala Hari Krishan Lal were also arrested and deported.

This action of the government made the atmosphere in the Punjab tense and people became agitated. In the mean time, the leaders of the city had announced a meeting to be held in the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, on the Baisakhi Day (April 13, 1919) to protest against the arrest of their popular leaders. As soon as General Dyer received the news of meeting, he opened fire on the protesters without giving any warning. The casualties were about 400 dead while the wounded were more than a thousand and immediately after the firing, curfew was imposed in the town.⁶⁶ After Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, martial law was proclaimed. Under this law, important news papers were prosecuted.⁶⁷ The Viceroy appointed the Hunter Committee to investigate the disturbances in the Punjab.⁶⁸ In the mean time the Congress appointed a sub-committee of nine members to conduct an enquiry into the recent occurrences in the Punjab. The members of the Congress sub-committee visited the disturbed area and took evidences. The Congress report put the blame on the government for the tragic happenings in province and it demanded the dismissal of General Dwyer from the command, the repeal of Rowlett Act, and the release of the people arrested under martial law regime in the Punjab. So, in this way Gandhi's movement against Rowlett bill in 1919 provided the context to so called extremists to gain prominence in Punjab Congress Party and Punjab Congress Party also shot in to prominence.⁶⁹

It may be concluded from the above discussion that the Congress Party in Punjab is a branch of the Indian national Congress which was established in 1885 by the educated elite class of Indians, with the aim of obtaining greater privileges from the British colonial government. The Congress Party started its activities in Punjab immediately after its inception. The organizational structure of the Party assumed shape after the first branch of the Congress was opened at Ambala in the third week of the January 1886. This was the first branch of Congress to have been opened not only in Punjab, but perhaps in the whole country. The Punjab's participation in the Indian National Congress began immediately after its formation. Though, the Congress Party in Punjab and its leaders took notice of the National as well as provincial issues at different platforms from time to time and successfully mobilized the people on

number of Political and social issues, but it could not become mass Party owing to variety of reasons as it was in many other states in Punjab. Actually in Punjab, the Congress Party first shot into prominence with Jallianwala Bagh tragedy in 1919. It continued to be basically a paper organization until the momentous events of 1919-1920. The Gandhi's movement, against Rowlett bill in 1919 provided the context to so called extremists (Lala Duni Chand, Lala Hari Krishan Lal, Gokulchand Narang, Ram Raj Dutt, Satyapal and Dr. Saif-ud-Din Kichlew to gain prominence in Punjab Congress party and Punjab Congress Party also shot in to prominence. So in this phase, the character of the Congress Party changed into a mass Party.

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