

# **THE FORMATION OF THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS: A BRITISH MANOEUVRE?**

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One of the thorniest issues that contemporary scholars of British India are faced with is that of the genesis of the Indian National Congress (1885). While some of them believe that the foundation of this first major political party on an all-India basis was an inevitable corollary of the circumstances that prevailed in the South Asian Sub-continent as a result of British Raj, others have held opposing views. In fact, the latter, while championing the “safety-valve” theory, are convinced that the birth of this political organization was nothing more than a British stratagem aimed at forestalling an imminent popular uprising among the colonial subjects. Thus, the aim of this article is to set out the views and arguments of both camps of scholars.

*Keywords:* “Safety-valve” theory; Indian National Congress; Allan Octave Hume; Lord Dufferin

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the British Empire in India witnessed the birth of a major widely-based political party on Western model, the Indian National Congress. This move represented a milestone in India’s struggle for freedom from the yoke of colonial rule, since it was the first party of its kind to see the light of the day throughout the whole British Empire, which, later on, inspired other nationalist leaders worldwide to found similar organizations –probably the best example illustrating this was the creation, by 1912, of the African National Congress in South Africa.

Nevertheless, the genesis of this party has often been put into question. In fact, the origin of the Indian National Congress has been, till nowadays, a much-debated subject among many scholars dealing with the political history of British India. The latter are divided into two camps: on the one hand, there are

those who assumed that this political party was born as a result of governmental machinations and, on the other hand, there are those who see things differently. Hence, the aim of this article is to set out the views and arguments of both camps. Yet, before dealing with this point, it is more than useful to set out the background and circumstances which led to the formation of this political movement.

The post-1857 era, up to the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885, is seen by many scholars as one of the darkest phases in the history of South Asia under colonial rule. Commenting on this period, the Indian historian, Niranjani M. Khilnani, pointed out: "The more carefully we study the historical records, the more clearly we find out that this period between 1858 and 1885 was one of stress and strain" (Khilnani 1987:35).

Indeed, the foundation of the Indian National Congress came as a culmination of a series of unfortunate events going back to the 1860's. In other words, in the couple of decades that preceded the birth of this first Indian political movement on Western model, British India was shrouded in a socio-economic and political *malaise*, which caused widespread disaffection among the local population and in particular, the Western-educated elite. This *malaise* was brought about by a number of factors ranging from disastrous famines to colonial legislation.

According to many contemporaries, the Indian Sub-continent was subject to recurrent famines during the 1860's and 1870's, which brought about large scale deaths caused by starvation as well as wreaked havoc on the purchasing power of the local population, who were already finding it too hard to make both ends meet. In this respect, M. A. Karandikar affirmed that the famine of the late 1860's, which was followed by outbreak of cholera and smallpox, caused the death of 25 per cent of the population inhabiting the famine affected areas in the region of Orissa, and the price of wheat skyrocketed by more than 300 per cent (Karandikar 1968:151). Meanwhile, Akshayakumar R. Desai claimed that the most severe famine was that of 1877, which affected an area of 200,000 square miles and a population of thirty-six millions (Desai 1959:291).

It is worthwhile to mention the fact that famine was not the only factor responsible for the Indian impoverishment. In fact, Akshayakumar R. Desai attributed such a condition to the increasing burden of land revenue and rent, which led to indebtedness among many farmers who could no longer cope with the situation (Desai 1959). Corroborating this fact, M. A. Karandikar cited Wilfrid Scawen, a British official, who visited the Indian Sub-continent in the early 1880's, as having ascribed the existing situation to the following factors:

... the excessive land assessment which had impoverished the people and had thrown the farmers in indebtedness; taxes on new wells discouraged sinking

of wells; the exorbitant salt tax robbed the very poor; agriculture became an unprofitable business and large areas of land were left barren ... (Karandikar 1968:151)

To add insult to injury, at the time when the Indian population was experiencing such a plight, the British held, in 1877, a spectacular and extravagant official ceremony, or Durbar, in Delhi in honour of Queen Victoria in order to proclaim her as the Empress of India. According to Akshayakumar R. Desai, this act of carelessness intensified to a great extent the resentment of the native people (Desai 1959:291).

Meanwhile, colonial legislation contributed to the highest degree to the widening gulf between the inhabitants of India and the British Colonial Government in post-Revolt era. The passage of the Vernacular Press Act of 1878, for instance, which restricted the freedom of the Indian press, was one of the many measures that alienated the Indian intelligentsia, particularly the Hindus. This Act, which was passed during the viceroyalty of Lord Lytton, came as a fulfilment to a claim, made several years before by Sir George Campell, a Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal in the early 1870's, that the local vernacular press was becoming a serious threat to the continuity of British rule in India, and hence, "a special legislation was required" to deal with it (Lovett 1988:21-22). Commenting on the threat represented by the local vernacular press, V. Lovett reported on a member of the British Government in India as claiming that:

... there is a large and increasing class of native newspapers which would seem to exist only for the sake of spreading seditious principles, of bringing the Government and its European officers into contempt, and of exciting antagonism between the governing race and the people of the country. (apud Lovett 1988:22)

Another example could be seen in the defeat of the Ilbert Bill of 1883. This Bill, which was presented by Sir Courtenay Ilbert, a law member of Viceroy Lord Ripon's (1827-1909) Council and backed up by the latter, aimed at "rectifying an anomaly in the Criminal Procedure Code" (Khilnani 1987:46) by providing for an equal treatment of Indians and Europeans in the sphere of criminal jurisdiction. In other words, this Bill, if passed, would allow Indian judges to try Europeans for their offences in the country on the same footing as their Indian counterparts (Kadri 1982:11).

This Bill was vehemently opposed by the white community in India, especially the British, who regarded such a proposal as an element that would "imperil the liberties of British non-officials" (Lovett 1988:26). Consequently, they organized a Defence Association as well as fierce and vigorous agitations throughout the whole Sub-continent, which were often violent (Sharma 1998:7).

In addition to that, Akshayakumar R. Desai stated that a faction of these European agitators was hatching a plot to “put the Viceroy on board a steamer ... and send him to England via the Cape” (Desai 1959:292).

In the meantime, it should be noted that these European agitators were driven by their sense of belonging to a race that was superior to that of the natives of the Sub-continent and could not imagine themselves being tried by judges who belonged to an inferior race, namely Indians. The following passage, said by a British contemporary of high standing in the Indian Sub-continent, reflects the assumption that was widespread among the European community there:

It is this consciousness of inherent superiority of the European which has won for us India. However well educated and clever a native be, and however brave he may have proved himself, I believe that no rank which we can bestow upon him would cue him to be considered as an equal by the British officer. (Desai 1959)

Faced with such a situation, the Indians tried to conduct a counter-agitation in support of the Ilbert Bill. However, they were asked to “mind their own business” and that they should not interfere in a controversy that was “intimately” between the Viceroy, namely Lord Ripon, and the Europeans settlers. In a speech given during a public meeting in Bombay, Sir Pheroza Shah M. Mehta (1845-1915), an Indian leader, regretfully said:

We were told that we have no concern with this bill at all and that it is only a little matter between Lord Ripon and the Europeans in India, in which the parties have got rather hot with each other, and that in fact we have no locus standi at all to take part in the argument. (Mehta 1998:8)

Another cause for the failure of the Indians in facing such anti-Ilbert Bill campaign could be attributed to the absence of any form of organization among them, which rendered their efforts useless (Mehta 1998:7). As a result, the British Colonial Government was, ultimately, in the obligation of reformulating the Bill, and hence, the whole project was nipped in the bud. Commenting on the Bill, H. D. Sharma stated that “though the bill was not withdrawn, it was changed beyond recognition and served no useful purpose when passed into law” (Mehta 1998).

This move aroused so much anger among the Indians, who became utterly disillusioned about the impartiality of the Colonial Government. In fact, in their eyes, the fact that the British authorities in India bowed to the demands of the European agitators was tantamount to racial discrimination (Desai 1959:292).

This racial discrimination could be seen in the fact that most of the higher positions in the colonial administration were reserved for the Europeans; and that was despite Queen Victoria’s Proclamation of 1858 –in which she vowed to

allow native Indians with appropriate qualifications to hold higher posts and to take part in the administrative management of their country alongside the British officials (Feiling 1972:929). According to Akshayakumar R. Desai, this was because the colonial authorities in India were tacitly determined, out of caution, to keep the upper hand in all administrative matters. In fact, it was a *sine qua non* for the maintenance of their Empire in India to retain power in their hands, as T. R Metcalf put it: “No matter how far Indian employment might be extended, the ultimate controlling power had always to remain in British hands” (Metcalf 1965:287-288).

Thus, by the early 1880’s, the situation in the Indian society was on the brink of exploding.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the circumstances in the Sub-continent in the wake of the happenings of 1857, up to the early 1880’s, taught the Indians, and particularly the Hindu intelligentsia, the fact that nothing could be achieved without an organized effort. Indeed, the defeat of the Ilbert Bill, among other reasons, made the Indians realize, for the first time, the fact that sporadic efforts of individuals were useless as well as fruitless; hence, they learnt the importance and value of organization (Sharma 1998:7). This was an important factor that led to the establishment of the first organized nationwide political party speaking one voice, and representing the whole inhabitants of India – though except the Muslim community.

Meanwhile, as has been mentioned before, the genesis of the Indian National Congress was shrouded in mystery and has been subject to controversy among many scholars, particularly with regard to who was behind the emergence of this first Indian political party on an All-India basis. In fact, some historians believe that the Indian National Congress was a British creation, and that the reason behind it was the fact that the Colonial Government in India was aware of the smouldering discontent among the native population and feared the consequences. In other words, it is often said that the British officials in South Asia had the premonition that some sort of a rebellion on the pattern of the Great Revolt of 1857 was rumbling in the distance as a result of the growing discontent in the Sub-continent, hence the *raison d’être* for a national party as a preventive move to forestall such an imminent apocalypse. As confirmed by Palme Dutt, who asserted that:

La formation du Congrès national représentait dans l’esprit du gouvernement un effort pour faire échec à une révolution menaçante ou plutôt pour la devancer. (Dutt 1957:125)

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<sup>1</sup> In this respect, Akshayakumar R. Desai affirmed that “the political and economic discontent of the Indian people which had been gathering steadily ... almost threatened to reach an explosive point by 1883” (Desai 1959: 293).

To back up their standpoint, the protagonists of this opinion keep alluding to the fact that the founder of this organization was a British resident in India and a former officer in the Indian Civil Service, Allen Octave Hume (1829-1912), who was thought to be the *de facto* originator of the idea of establishing the Indian National Congress (Ghosh 1989:40), and who, as put by Judith M. Brown, “gave generous support from his own pocket” to make it real (Brown 1991:176).

According to Akshayakumar R. Desai, Allen Octave Hume, who served in the Indian Civil Service up to 1882, was said to have got hold of the very voluminous secret police reports –seven volumes– which acquainted him with the growing of popular disaffection and the spreading of underground conspiratorial organization (Desai 1959:294). In this respect, Palme Dutt affirmed that most of these police documents reported conversations heard between people from lower classes which reflected that, to quote Allen Octave Hume, these people:

... ressentaient le caractère désespéré de la situation existante, qu'ils étaient convaincus qu'ils allaient mourir de faim et qu'ils voulaient faire quelque chose. Ils allaient faire quelque chose, au coude à coude, et ce quelque chose signifiait la violence. (apud Dutt 1957:127)

Based on these secret police reports, Allen Octave Hume sensed the imminence of a huge uprising in the making. Describing Hume's and other Englishmen's anxiety, Oron K. Ghosh wrote:

Hume, like other British people in India, was in constant fear of uprisings... There might be civil commotion and civil disturbances in the bazaars and in the native areas of towns where the British resided. And the contagion might spread to the police and even the army, leading possibly, not only to the 1857-1859 of India, but to a repetition of the 1776-1783 of North America. (Ghosh 1989:40)

This prompted him to get in touch with the then Viceroy, Lord Dufferin (1826-1902), at Simla,<sup>2</sup> and advised him of the necessity to find a way to weather this crisis safe and sound. One of the solutions that Allen Octave Hume proposed to Lord Dufferin was to set up a political party on an All-India basis which could serve as a safe outlet, or a “safety-valve” (Desai 1959:294). In other words, Allen Octave Hume felt the need for the setting up of a political party that would serve as a forum where the educated Indians could voice out their pent-up grievances peacefully and constitutionally, without resorting to violence or anarchical means; hence, in the opinion of this Englishman, it was a

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<sup>2</sup> “Simla” was India's summer capital during British rule from 1865 to 1939. This was due to its cool climate and beautiful landscape. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, UK, 2001, CD-ROM Edition.

good idea to have such a forum where, as M. A. Karandikar put it, the attention of the educated Indians would be diverted from secret conspiracies as a result of the “great and growing forces generated by our own action” (Karandikar 1968:153). In this respect, drawing on the private papers and correspondence of Allen Octave Hume, Akshayakumar R. Desai cited him as saying:

The ferment... was at work with a radically increasing intensity, and it became of paramount importance to find for its products an overt and constitutional channel for discharge, instead of leaving them fester as they had already commenced to do, under the surface. (apud Desai 1959:294)

Furthermore, Akshayakumar R. Desai claimed that in addition to its role as a “safety-valve”, Allen Octave Hume believed, this forum could be used by the Colonial Government as a means through which it could collect information about the views and reactions of the educated Indians with regard to the British policies in India (Desai 1959).

In the meantime, in an attempt to further substantiate their point of view, the “pro-safety-valve” explanation scholars argued that the best indication confirming the “Britishness” of the origin of the Indian National Congress is the fact that its founders did not demand self-government for India; hence, they were, as referred to by some Indian extremists, “anti-nationalist” as well as “compromising, if not loyalist, vis-à-vis imperialism” (Chandra *et al.* 1989:61).

In fact, it should be noted that the main objectives of this political party at the time of its foundation were by no means anti-imperialist and were characterized by the demand for isolated reforms, which can be summarized into the following points: the enlargement of the Legislative Councils, the inclusion of more educated Indians in the public services, the separation between the executive and judicial functions, the reduction in military expenditure, commissions for Indians in the army, and so on (Mehrotra 1965:31). In this regard, Sanjay Seth observed that the Congress:

resolutions opposing government action or inaction would not “condemn” but rather “regret”; and resolutions proposing some course of action or remedy to the government would not “demand” but rather “suggest” or, at the most, “urge.” (Seth 1999:102)

Then, the same scholar reported on a Hindu extremist as referring to “the general timidity of the Congress” and “its fear of too deeply displeasing our masters” (Seth 1999:102).

Meanwhile, Bipan Chandra *et al.*, who vehemently opposed the “safety-valve” theory, regretfully reported on Lala Lajpat Rai, a Hindu extremist leader in early twentieth century, as saying in his *Young India*, published in 1916, that the Indian National Congress was a “product of Lord Dufferin’s brain” and that

it was founded more with the object of safeguarding the very foundations of the British Empire against any potential threat to its stability than with that of winning political liberty for India. Hence, Lala Lajpat Rai concluded, the interests of the British were primary and those of the Indians came only second (Chandra *et al.* 1989:62).

Besides, with regard to his view of Allen Octave Hume, Lala Lajpat Rai claimed that though he was known for being a lover of freedom who sought political freedom for India within the British Empire, he was, after all, an “English patriot” (Chandra *et al.* 1989:64).

On the other hand, the opponents of the “safety-valve” theory, mostly Hindu scholars, rejected all of the arguments mentioned above, which they labelled as “totally inadequate and misleading” (Chandra, Tripathi & De 1983:57). Prominent among whom was the distinguished Indian historian – already cited above– Bipan Chandra, who took the lead in denying the assumption that the Indian National Congress was nothing more than a “safety-valve” designed by the British administration in order to absorb the seething discontent among the native population. He further stated that this political organization was a creation by the Indians who were opposed to the exploitation of their country in favour of British interests, and who felt the need for an organization whereby they could struggle for their country’s political and economic progress (Chandra, Tripathi & De 1983).

In response to those who claimed that Allen Octave Hume was using the Indian intelligentsia to avert an imminent social explosion, Bipan Chandra *et al.* stated that it was the Indian founders who were using him as a “lightning conductor” (Chandra, Tripathi & De 1983:57). Lending support to Bipan Chandra *et al.*, Oron K. Ghosh described the function of the “lightning conductor” as being a metal rod or wire fixed to an exposed part of a mast to divert electricity into the earth or sea, then said: “Hume was used by the Congress in that way” (Ghosh 1989:41).

To put it differently, the Indian nationalists used Hume in the sense that he helped them fulfil their long time dream of setting up a nationalist party on an all-India basis. Oron K. Ghosh quoted Gopal Krishna Gokhale, an early twentieth-century Hindu nationalist leader, as saying in retrospect:

No Indian could have started the Indian National Congress –If an Indian had – come forward to start such a movement, the officials would not have allowed it to come into existence. If the founder of the Congress had not been a distinguished ex-official, such was the distrust of political agitation in those days that the authorities would have at once found some way or other of suppressing the movement. (apud Ghosh 1989:41)



On the other hand, Bipan Chandra went on defending those Indians who took part in the founding of the Congress, who were referred to by the “pro-safety-valve” scholars as “anti-nationalists.” He said:

They were patriotic men of high character and were in no way stooges of the foreign government. They co-operated with Hume because they did not want to arouse official hostility to their early political efforts and they hoped that a retired Civil Servant’s active presence would allay official suspicions. (Chandra, Tripathi & De 1983:57)

Regarding Lala Lajpat Rai’s contention that the Indian National Congress was a “product of Lord Dufferin’s brain,” Bipan Chandra et al. argued that the perusal of Lord Dufferin’s private papers would put an end to such a myth (Chandra *et al.* 1989:69-70). This was confirmed by A. Read and D. Fisher, who argued that this Viceroy had no part in the formation of the Congress, and that like the other British officials, he regarded it with suspicion (Read & Fisher 1998:73). To back up their statement, A. Read and D. Fisher quoted Lord Dufferin as saying to another British official “in what way the happy despatch may best be applied to the Congress, (for) we cannot allow the Congress to continue to exist” (Read & Fisher 1998).

Furthermore, A. Read and D. Fisher contended that the story of the seven-volume police report –warning of an impending uprising in the Sub-continent– that Allen Octave Hume had supposedly seen was untrue (Read & Fisher 1998). In this regard, Bipan Chandra et al. commented that “so deeply rooted had become the belief in Hume’s volumes ... that a large number of historians ... devoted a great deal of time and energy searching for them in the National Archives” (Chandra *et al.* 1989:65).

In addition to all that, according to Oron K. Ghosh, Allen Octave Hume was a person who believed in occultism and mysticism (Ghosh 1989:41). Moreover, he was said to have once disclosed to Lord Dufferin’s predecessor, Lord Ripon, the fact that he was in touch with some people with supernatural powers, that he referred to as “ethereal *gurus*”, who had used their occult powers to save Europe during the revolutionary years of 1848 and the British Empire in India during the bloody happenings of 1857 (Read & Fisher 1998:72).

In the mind of Allen Hume, it was these *gurus*, “men of the highest quality who ... have purged themselves from earthly desires, and fixed their desires on the highest good,” who, with the help of their *chelas*, or disciples, were acquainted with all that was going on “under the surface” and could easily influence the course of events anywhere on the earth (Chandra *et al.* 1989:66). Hence, these *gurus*, being aware of the imminent unrest in British India, got in

touch with Hume, who had access to the Government officials in India, in order to “avert a catastrophe” (Chandra *et al.* 1989).

Allen Octave Hume further stated that hardly anybody in India knew of the existence of such supernatural people due to the fact that “absolute secrecy was an essential feature in their lives” (Chandra *et al.* 1989). Therefore, this made him fail to show any material evidence about the police reports contained in the “famous” seven volumes to Lord Dufferin. In this respect, A. Read and D. Fisher affirmed that when Hume talked to the Viceroy about his advisers and informants, he did not mention that they had “no physical reality” and that they only existed “on an astral plane, or at best in some secret Tibetan Shangri-La” (Read & Fisher 1998:72-3).

In a word, whether a “safety-valve” or not, the debate is still going on. Yet, the Indian National Congress was there and its founders claimed that it represented, and spoke on behalf of the whole population of India. Moreover, although this nationalist party had a mild, hesitant –as well as doubtful–beginning, twentieth-century history proved that it was thanks to its struggle that India got its independence from British raj by 1947.

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