

How Congress Engaged with Princely States?

Description

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The Indian subcontinent, prior to its independence, was a complex tapestry of directly administered British provinces and over 500 Princely States. These states, while enjoying varying degrees of internal autonomy, were ultimately under the paramountcy of the British Crown. As the nationalist movement gained momentum in British India, the question of integrating these states, with their often anachronistic feudal systems and autocratic rule, became a significant challenge for the Indian National Congress.

Understanding how the Congress strategised and acted to bring these diverse entities into the fold of the national movement is crucial for grasping the full scope of Indiaâ??s freedom struggle. The approach was not static; it evolved significantly over two decades, reflecting the changing political landscape and the growing aspirations of the people within the Princely States themselves.

Conditions in Princely States Before the 1930s

Before the pivotal decade of the 1930s, the vast majority of Princely States were characterised by a distinct system of governance, often starkly different from the political developments in British India. These states were nominally ruled by their hereditary princes, maharajas, or nawabs, who exercised considerable internal authority. However, this authority was shadowed by British paramountcy, which effectively shielded these rulers from internal revolts and external threats. The subsidiary alliances and treaties had largely removed the traditional checks and balances that historically constrained despotic rulers.

The consequence of this arrangement was often severe misgovernance, economic exploitation, and political backwardness. Modern civil liberties and democratic institutions, which were slowly making headway in British India, were largely absent in the Princely States. The rulers enjoyed extravagant lifestyles, often at the expense of their subjects, leading to widespread poverty and discontent. Education, healthcare, and infrastructure development lagged significantly compared to British Indian provinces. This environment of repression and lack of public accountability created fertile ground for political awakening among the stateâ??s people, though initially fragmented and localised.

Early Congress Policy Towards Princely India (1920-1927)

In its initial phases, the Indian National Congress adopted a cautious and largely non-interventionist policy towards the Princely States. The primary focus of the Congress was on achieving self-rule or complete independence for British India, believing that the states would naturally fall in line once the core objective was achieved. Direct intervention in the internal affairs of the Princely States was seen as potentially distracting from the main struggle against the British and could even provide the British with an excuse to suppress the national movement more harshly, by portraying Congress as interfering in sovereign matters.

Despite this non-interventionist stance, the Congress was not entirely indifferent to the plight of the people in the states. The 1920 Nagpur session of the Congress, a significant event in the early 1920s, passed a resolution expressing sympathy for the aspirations of the people of the Princely States. This resolution articulated the goal of achieving responsible government under the aegis of the rulers, rather than seeking their overthrow. It signified a recognition of the growing political consciousness within these states and offered moral support, albeit without committing to direct organisational or financial assistance. The Congress hoped that local movements, if strong enough, would compel the rulers to introduce reforms, thereby aligning with the broader national struggle in due course. This early approach laid the groundwork for future, more direct engagement by acknowledging the separate but related nature of the struggle in Princely India.

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Formation and Role of the All India Stateâ??s Peopleâ??s Conference

The need for a coordinated platform for the fragmented political activities within the Princely States became increasingly apparent during the 1920s. While local â??Praja Mandalsâ?? (peopleâ??s organisations) and â??Lok Parishadsâ?? were emerging in various states, their efforts were isolated and lacked a unified voice. To address this, the All India Stateâ??s Peopleâ??s Conference (AISPC) was formed in December 1927. This was a crucial development in bringing the people of the Princely States into the larger national discourse.

Prominent leaders like Balwantrai Mehta, Maniklal Kothari, and G.R. Abhayankar were instrumental in establishing the AISPC. The primary objective of the AISPC was to coordinate the activities of the various state peopleâ??s movements, articulate their demands for constitutional reforms, and press for responsible government within the states. It aimed to provide a national platform for the stateâ??s people to voice their grievances against autocratic rule and advocate for civil liberties. The Indian National Congress, while maintaining its policy of non-intervention in internal organisational matters of the states, extended its moral support and encouragement to the AISPC. This indirect backing from the Congress lent legitimacy and strength to the AISPC, helping it to consolidate scattered movements and represent the aspirations of millions residing in Princely India more effectively on a national stage. This point needs attention: the AISPC acted as a vital bridge, connecting local struggles to the national movement, even before Congress directly assumed leadership.

Princely States Representation and the 1935 Government of India Act

The Government of India Act of 1935 represented a significant constitutional development that profoundly impacted the relationship between British India, the Princely States, and the national movement. One of its most debated features was the provision for an All-India Federation, which proposed to include both British Indian provinces and the Princely States. While seemingly progressive, the structure of this federation raised serious concerns for the Congress and the AISPC.

Under the proposed federal scheme, representatives from British Indian provinces were to be elected, reflecting a move towards democratic governance. However, the representation for the Princely States in the federal legislature was designed to be through nominations by their respective rulers, not through election by their people. This meant that the nominees would represent the interests of the autocratic princes, not the democratic aspirations of their subjects.

The Congress vehemently opposed this aspect of the Act. Both the Congress and the AISPC demanded elected representation for the people of the Princely States in the federal legislature, arguing that nominated members would undermine the very principle of democratic representation. They criticised the Act for creating a disparity between the democratic principles applied to British India and the perpetuation of autocracy in the states. This discriminatory provision was a major reason why the federal part of the 1935 Act never came into effect. The resistance to this Act clearly demonstrated how the Congress, even with its nuanced policy, was committed to democratic ideals across all parts of India and saw the integration of statesâ?? peopleâ??s aspirations as integral to the national struggle.

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Congress Policy Shift at the Haripura Session (1938)

By the late 1930s, the political landscape had matured significantly. The popular movements within the Princely States had grown stronger and more organised, often facing severe repression from the rulers, who were supported by the British. Simultaneously, the national movement in British India had gained substantial ground, making the continued isolation of the states from the mainstream struggle increasingly untenable. This confluence of factors led to a crucial re-evaluation of Congress policy at its Haripura Session in 1938.

Presided over by Subhas Chandra Bose, the Haripura Session marked a significant shift in the Congressâ??s approach towards Princely States. The resolution passed at this session acknowledged the â??struggle of the people of the States for self-reliance, good government and responsible governmentâ?• and declared that the â??Congress stands for the same political, social and economic freedom in the States as in the rest of India.â?• Importantly, the Congress now explicitly stated that its goal for the states included complete independence as part of a united India.

However, the resolution also contained an important caveat: while expressing full sympathy with the movements in the states, it advised that the organisational efforts and direct political struggles within the states should be carried out independently by the Praja Mandals and local organisations, rather than in the name of the Indian National Congress. This was a strategic decision. It aimed to avoid giving the British or the princely rulers a direct pretext to suppress the Congress itself by accusing it of

interfering in internal state affairs. It allowed the local movements to develop their own leadership and strength, while ensuring they had the moral and ideological backing of the Congress. This subtle yet profound shift empowered local activists while maintaining Congressâ??s broader national focus. Now this becomes important: this shift was not an abandonment but a tactical evolution, allowing the local movements to gain momentum with overt, yet indirect, Congress support.

Unification of Movements Under Jawaharlal Nehruâ??s Leadership

The Haripura resolution, while encouraging local movements, laid the groundwork for a more direct organisational fusion. The year following Haripura saw a critical development that solidified the connection between the national movement and the state peopleâ??s struggles. In 1939, Jawaharlal Nehru was elected as the President of the All India Stateâ??s Peopleâ??s Conference (AISPC) at its Ludhiana Session. This event was not merely a change in leadership; it symbolised the formal integration and unification of the movements in Princely States with the broader Indian National Congress.

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Nehruâ??s presidency of the AISPC marked a new chapter of direct engagement. His leadership brought the vast resources, organisational expertise, and national stature of the Congress directly to the service of the state peopleâ??s movements. Nehru, with his socialist leanings and vision for a united, democratic India, was a strong proponent of extending full democratic rights to the people of the Princely States. His election as AISPC President clearly signaled that the Congress was no longer merely offering moral support but was now prepared to actively guide and lead the agitation within the states. This move injected renewed vigour into the Praja Mandals, providing them with a powerful national voice and strategic direction. The fusion of these movements under Nehruâ??s charismatic leadership ensured that the struggle for freedom in the Princely States became an inseparable part of Indiaâ??s overall quest for independence.

Analyzing Congress Strategy in Princely States

The Indian National Congressâ??s engagement with the Princely States was a sophisticated and evolving strategy, moving from initial non-intervention to direct integration. Initially, the Congress maintained a cautious distance, primarily focusing on British India and offering only moral support to nascent movements in the states. This was a pragmatic choice, aiming to avoid diversion from its main struggle and prevent giving the British an opportunity to label Congress as an aggressor in internal state matters.

The formation of the All India Stateâ??s Peopleâ??s Conference (AISPC) in 1927, with Congressâ??s indirect encouragement, served as a crucial intermediary. It allowed local struggles to coalesce and gain a collective voice, preparing them for more substantial engagement. The Congressâ??s critique of the 1935 Government of India Actâ??s provisions for princely representation highlighted its commitment to democratic principles across the entire Indian subcontinent. This demonstrated that while strategy might vary, the core ideals remained consistent.

The Haripura Session of 1938 represented a significant shift, acknowledging the inevitability and legitimacy of the movements within the states and openly declaring Congressâ??s goal of independence for these regions. The tactical advice for movements to operate under local names, rather than the Congress banner, was a clever way to empower local leadership while extending full ideological and moral backing.

Finally, Jawaharlal Nehruâ??s assumption of the AISPC presidency in 1939 epitomised the complete fusion of these two struggles. This move not only provided direct leadership and organisational support but also unequivocally stated that the future of the Princely States was inextricably linked with that of British India. The challenges in implementing this strategy were numerous, including the vast diversity among states, the British governmentâ??s paramountcy, and the staunch resistance of many rulers. However, the Congressâ??s adaptive and persistent approach, coupled with the growing strength of peopleâ??s movements, ultimately proved successful in integrating these disparate entities into a unified national narrative, which was vital for the formation of independent India. This strategic evolution shows the adaptability and foresight of the Congress leadership in tackling a complex political problem.

UPSC Perspective

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For UPSC aspirants, the topic of Congress engagement with Princely States is multifaceted, demanding attention to both factual details for Prelims and analytical depth for Mains.

Prelims focus:

Aspirants must commit to memory specific historical markers and personalities.

- **Key dates:** 1920 (Nagpur Resolution), 1927 (Formation of AISPC), 1938 (Haripura Session), 1939 (Ludhiana Session, Nehru elected AISPC President).
- **Prominent figures:** Balwantrai Mehta, Maniklal Kothari, G.R. Abhayankar (founders of AISPC), Subhas Chandra Bose (Haripura President), Jawaharlal Nehru (Ludhiana President of AISPC).
- **Important sessions:** Nagpur (responsible government in states), Haripura (Congress goal included state independence, local movements independent of Congress name), Ludhiana (formal fusion, Nehru as AISPC President).
- **Purpose of AISPC:** To coordinate state activities and demand constitutional reform and responsible government.

Mains focus:

For the Mains examination, a deeper, analytical understanding of the evolution and implications of Congress policy is essential. Questions often require discussing the â??whyâ?? and â??howâ?? of these developments.

- **Evolution of Congress policy towards Princely States:** Trace the journey from initial non-intervention to moral support, and finally to direct leadership and integration.
- **Reasons for their misgovernance:** Explain how British paramountcy removed traditional checks on princely power, leading to autocracy, lack of accountability, and economic exploitation.

- **Integration of states into the national movement:** Discuss the mechanisms and figures that facilitated this, particularly the AISPC and Nehruâ??s role.
- **Challenges and strategies of political awakening in these regions:** Analyse the difficulties faced by local movements and how Congress adapted its strategy to overcome these, including tactical non-intervention and later direct guidance.

Common Student Confusion

Students often get confused regarding the initial non-interventionist stance of the Congress versus its later direct support and eventual fusion with the movements in Princely States. This misunderstanding typically stems from viewing Congress policy as a static entity rather than a dynamic one. The key is to understand the chronological progression and the strategic reasons behind each phase. Initially, Congress was cautious, primarily because it feared British reprisal and wanted to focus its limited resources on the struggle in British India. The non-intervention was not indifference but a pragmatic decision. As the state peopleâ??s movements gained strength, and as the larger national movement consolidated, Congress policy evolved. The formation of the AISPC provided an avenue for indirect support, and later, the Haripura resolution and Nehruâ??s presidency of the AISPC marked a deliberate and strategic shift towards direct engagement and full integration, driven by the need for a unified independent India and the growing political consciousness within the states.

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Short Revision Points

- The 1930s witnessed the spread of the national movement to Princely States, largely fuelled by prevalent misgovernance and oppressive princely rule.
- British paramountcy effectively shielded the princes, removing traditional checks on their power and often leading to autocratic administration.
- The 1920 Nagpur resolution of the Congress expressed sympathy for the people of the states and called for responsible government under the rulers.
- In 1927, the All India Stateâ??s Peopleâ??s Conference (AISPC) was formed by Balwantrai Mehta, Maniklal Kothari, and G.R. Abhayankar to coordinate political activities in the states, receiving Congressâ??s moral support.
- Both the Congress and the AISPC strongly demanded elected representation for the people of the Princely States in the proposed federal legislature under the 1935 Government of India Act.
- The 1938 Haripura Session, presided over by Subhas Chandra Bose, declared that Congressâ??s goal included independence for states, but advised local movements to operate independently of the Congress name.
- The 1939 Ludhiana Session, where Jawaharlal Nehru was elected President of the AISPC, signified the formal fusion and direct leadership of the state peopleâ??s movements by the national Congress.

FAQs

1. **What were the general conditions in the Princely States before the 1930s?**
   Before the 1930s, Princely States generally suffered from autocratic rule, widespread misgovernance, economic exploitation, and a severe lack of civil liberties, with rulers often shielded from accountability by British paramountcy.

2. **When was the All India Stateâ??s Peopleâ??s Conference established?**
   The All India Stateâ??s Peopleâ??s Conference (AISPC) was established in December 1927.

3. **Who presided over the Congress Haripura Session in 1938?**
   Subhas Chandra Bose presided over the Indian National Congress Haripura Session in 1938.

The dynamic and evolving strategy of the Indian National Congress towards the Princely States reflects its commitment to a united, democratic India. From an initial cautious approach to eventual direct leadership and integration, Congress successfully navigated a complex political landscape, bringing diverse entities under a common national banner. This journey of engagement is a testament to the strategic depth required to forge a modern nation. For those preparing to serve this nation, understanding such historical nuances is fundamental, and guidance from institutions like SHRI RAM IAS is invaluable, as it is regarded as the best ias coaching in delhi for comprehensive preparation.

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