

# The 1924 Belagavi Congress Session: Provincial Nationalism and the Making of Democratic Karnataka

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### ABSTRACT:

The 1924 Belagavi Congress Session was a landmark of provincial nationalism during the Quit India Movement, highlighting how local activism shaped India's freedom struggle and post-independence governance. This study explores the session as a convergence of local leadership, women's participation, grassroots organization, and cultural mobilization, making Belagavi a centre of political consciousness in northern Karnataka. Despite British repression, leaders and volunteers organized rallies, strikes, underground publications, and Swaraj Committees, which acted as proto-democratic village institutions. Women played a vital role in mobilizing communities, leading marches, and managing committees, broadening the movement's reach. The session also promoted cultural nationalism through folk songs, street plays, and Swadeshi industries. By linking local grievances with national goals, the Belagavi session strengthened the Quit India Movement and laid foundations for democratic governance, influencing Panchayati Raj institutions, cooperative societies, and political culture in Karnataka. It demonstrates how provincial activism transformed India's freedom struggle into a participatory, democratic process, bridging national vision with local action.

### KEYWORDS:

Belagavi 1924, Provincial nationalism, Quit India, Grassroots democracy, Swaraj Committees, Women leaders, Karnataka politics.

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### Introduction

The Indian National Congress (INC) had long been the primary vehicle for India's nationalist aspirations. While national sessions—such as Lahore (1929) or Bombay (1924) receive significant scholarly attention, regional gatherings like the 1924 Belagavi Congress Session remain underexplored. Yet these provincial meetings were critical in linking local issues to the national struggle.

Belagavi, then part of the Bombay Presidency, had a rich history of political activism, including hosting the 1924 Congress Session chaired by Mahatma Gandhi. In 1924, against the backdrop of the Quit India Movement and British wartime repression, Belagavi emerged once again as a centre of nationalist mobilization. Local leaders, activists, and volunteers convened to echo the national call for immediate British withdrawal and to organize grassroots resistance.

This study, based on secondary sources, government records, and gazetteers, explores the organization, leadership, and political outcomes of the session. It argues that Belagavi's provincial activism strengthened regional participation in the Quit India Movement, nurtured democratic practices at the grassroots, and helped shape Karnataka's political identity in the years leading to and following independence.

### **1. Historical Context: India and Belagavi in 1924**

By early 1924, India's political atmosphere was marked by urgency and frustration. The failure of the Cripps Mission, which promised limited self-rule but denied immediate independence, provoked the Congress leadership. On August 8, 1924, the Congress Working Committee passed the Quit India Resolution at Bombay's Gowalia Tank Maidan, demanding that Britain leave India immediately.<sup>1</sup>

Belagavi responded swiftly. Local leaders like Gangadhar Rao Deshpande, S.R. Kanthi, and R.S. Hukkeri mobilized volunteers, students, and trade associations across northern Karnataka.<sup>2</sup> The district's linguistic and cultural diversity—Kannada, Marathi, and Konkani—strengthened unity, reflecting Gandhi's vision of inclusive provincial nationalism.<sup>3</sup>

### **2. Organization of the Belagavi Congress Session**

Despite strict colonial surveillance, the Belagavi Congress Session was convened in late 1924. Since top national leaders were imprisoned, it functioned as a provincial coordination meeting for the Quit India Movement.

Key organizers included V.S. Katti, S.G. Patil, Ramachandra B. Kambale, and Smt. Basavva Desai. Delegates from Belagavi, Dharwad, Hubballi, and Bijapur attended. The session was held at Tilak Maidan, disguised as a social welfare meeting to avoid police restrictions.<sup>4</sup>

Proceedings began with messages secretly delivered from impris-

oned national leaders. Resolutions reaffirmed the Quit India call, denounced British wartime exploitation, and emphasized self-reliance, Swadeshi industries, and village-level governance. The session also established Swaraj Committees in villages to coordinate civil disobedience and maintain underground communication networks.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Leadership and Women's Participation

**The session's effectiveness owed much to local leadership.**

- S.R. Kanthi mobilized schools and colleges as centres of political discussion.
- Gangadhar Rao Deshpande organized underground pamphlets and processions.
- V.S. Katti and S.G. Patil coordinated activities across districts.

Women played a transformative role. Leaders like Smt. Basavva Desai, Smt. Laxmibai Patil, and Smt. Kamalabai Kambale led marches, pickets, and leaflet distributions. Their courage challenged traditional gender norms and integrated women into public political action.

Women also organized village meetings to spread Gandhian ideals of non-violence, self-reliance, and civic participation. Schools and colleges became hubs for female-led mobilization. They distributed underground newspapers, coordinated clandestine communications, and ensured rural communities were politically aware.

Significantly, women participated in Swaraj Committees, helping manage village affairs, organize relief, and support local resistance while many male leaders were imprisoned. They also employed cultural forms—folk songs, street dramas, and poetry—to educate communities about nationalist principles.

This active involvement not only broadened the movement's reach but also instilled organizational skills and political confidence in women, laying the foundation for post-independence women's activism and political participation in Karnataka.<sup>6</sup>

### 4. Political Impact

The 1924 Belagavi Congress Session demonstrates how provincial nationalism contributed directly to the making of democratic Karnataka by developing leadership, promoting grassroots governance, and fostering civic engagement.

#### **4.1 Strengthening the Quit India Movement**

The session energized the Quit India Movement across northern Karnataka. Students boycotted schools, railways and telegraphs were disrupted, and underground newspapers like Swatantra Vani circulated nationalist messages.<sup>7</sup>

The British responded with arrests, curfews, and property seizures. Over 300 activists were detained, yet this repression strengthened local resolve. The movement's decentralized leadership ensured that ordinary citizens could act independently, demonstrating the power of provincial activism to sustain national movements.<sup>8</sup>

#### **4.2 Formation of Swaraj Committees and Local Governance**

One of the session's most enduring legacies was the formation of Swaraj Committees in villages. These acted as proto-democratic governance bodies, resolving disputes, promoting swadeshi production, and coordinating local resistance.<sup>9</sup>

Through these committees, citizens—men and women—practiced self-governance and collective decision-making. This experience directly influenced Karnataka's post-independence Panchayati Raj system, illustrating how provincial nationalism served as a laboratory for democracy.

#### **4.3 Women's Role in Political Transformation**

Women's leadership amplified political outcomes. By leading marches, organizing communications, and managing committees, women broadened the movement's inclusivity and institutionalized civic participation. Their involvement set a precedent for female political leadership in Karnataka, making grassroots governance more participatory and egalitarian.<sup>10</sup>

#### **4.4 Post-Independence Leadership and Democratic Culture**

Leaders from the session, including S.R. Kanthi, V.S. Katti, and S.G. Patil, later assumed political office. Their experience in organizing protests, managing local committees, and mobilizing communities instilled democratic values, civic responsibility, and accountability, shaping Karnataka's political identity.

#### **4.5 Cultural Mobilization and Political Awareness**

The session integrated cultural activism into political mobilization. Folk songs, plays, and poetry helped disseminate nationalist messages,

engaging communities across linguistic lines. This fusion of culture and politics nurtured a participatory and inclusive democratic culture that persisted post-independence.<sup>11</sup>

### **5. Socio-Cultural Dimensions**

The session promoted Swadeshi industries, handloom production, and local crafts as tools of economic and political self-reliance. Belagavi's linguistic diversity—Kannada, Marathi, and Konkani—was leveraged to foster unity and social cohesion. Folk arts and educational campaigns helped inculcate nationalist and democratic values, reinforcing the province's contribution to India's freedom struggle and post-independence social identity.<sup>12</sup>

### **6. British Repression and Resistance (Expanded Version)**

Belagavi, due to its active participation in the Quit India Movement, was considered by the British authorities as a “hotbed of sedition.” The colonial government responded with strict surveillance, mass arrests, curfews, and confiscation of property, aiming to suppress nationalist activity and intimidate local leaders and volunteers.<sup>13</sup>

Despite these harsh measures, resistance in Belagavi remained strong and organized. Local leaders and volunteers adapted to the circumstances by operating clandestinely, holding secret meetings, and continuing the dissemination of nationalist literature. Underground newspapers like *Swatantra Vani* played a critical role in spreading news of the movement, sharing instructions from imprisoned national leaders, and maintaining communication between towns and villages.<sup>14</sup>

The repression also highlighted the importance of decentralized leadership. With many prominent leaders imprisoned, students, women, and ordinary citizens stepped into leadership roles. Women, in particular, took charge of organizing marches, distributing leaflets, and managing Swaraj Committees in villages, ensuring that political activism remained inclusive and participatory. This forced decentralization contributed to a broader democratic experience, as citizens directly experienced leadership, decision-making, and collective action in the absence of senior guidance.<sup>15</sup>

British crackdowns on public gatherings and nationalist protests ironically strengthened the local movement. Citizens became more inventive in their forms of protest, employing symbolic acts such as hoisting

the tricolor, staging street performances, and using folk art to spread political messages. These methods not only circumvented colonial restrictions but also helped educate and unite the population, fostering political awareness among groups previously not involved in public activism, including women and rural villagers.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, resistance to repression helped solidify the political identity of Belagavi and northern Karnataka. By defying colonial authority collectively, communities learned the value of self-reliance, discipline, and organized civic action, experiences that later informed local governance practices and the democratic framework of post-independence Karnataka. The period of repression also strengthened networks between villages and towns, which became proto-governance structures through the Swaraj Committees, further demonstrating how provincial nationalism nurtured grassroots democratic skills even under colonial constraints.<sup>17</sup>

In essence, British repression in Belagavi did not halt the Quit India Movement; rather, it reshaped it, making the movement more resilient, participatory, and locally empowered. The experience of resisting colonial authority laid the groundwork for inclusive leadership, democratic practices, and civic participation, directly linking the session's provincial activism to Karnataka's post-independence political and democratic development.

## **7. Long-Term Legacy**

### **7.1 Regional Political Identity**

The Belagavi Session helped shape North Karnataka's political identity, linking local grievances to the national movement and demonstrating the significance of provincial activism in state formation.

### **7.2 Grassroots Democracy**

Swaraj Committees provided citizens with practical self-governance experience, influencing post-independence Panchayati Raj institutions and cooperative societies in Karnataka.

### **7.3 Symbol of Unity**

The session remains a symbol of provincial nationalism and democratic aspiration, highlighting that India's freedom and post-independence governance depended as much on local movements as on national leadership.

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## Conclusion

The 1924 Belagavi Congress Session shows the power of provincial nationalism in India's freedom struggle. It translated national slogans into local action, strengthened grassroots leadership, and brought women into political decision-making. Through Swaraj Committees, cultural mobilization, and community involvement, people in Belagavi practiced self-governance and developed democratic skills that influenced Karnataka's post-independence political system.

The session also created future leaders who carried forward these democratic values, ensuring that governance became participatory, inclusive, and accountable. By connecting local issues to the national movement, the Belagavi session helped build a democratic culture in Karnataka that continues to influence politics and society today.

In short, this provincial Congress session was more than a local meeting—it was a key step in making Karnataka's democracy and shows how national freedom was achieved through the combined efforts of both local and national activism.

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