

The Historic 1924 Belgaum Congress Session: A Milestone in India's Freedom Struggle

M.N. Bennur

Head, Department of History & Archaeology, S.T.C. Arts and Commerce
College, Banahatti.

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ABSTRACT:

The Indian National Congress session held at Belagavi (then Belgaum) in December 1924 marked a milestone in India's freedom struggle. It was the only session presided over by Mahatma Gandhi, giving it unique historical significance. At a time when internal divisions weakened the Congress, Gandhi's leadership revived the spirit of unity, discipline, and purpose within the movement.

In his presidential address, Gandhi emphasized truth, non-violence, Hindu-Muslim harmony, eradication of untouchability, promotion of Khadi, and rural self-reliance as the cornerstones of Swaraj. The session reflected his belief that political freedom must be rooted in moral strength and social reform.

A key feature of the Belagavi Session was its inclusiveness. Representatives from the Khilafat Committee, the Muslim League, non-Brahmin groups, and other social organizations participated, reflecting the Congress's national outlook. Amid rising communal tensions, Gandhi used the platform to promote reconciliation and unity, turning diversity into a source of strength.

The 1924 Belagavi Congress thus stands as a symbol of Gandhian vision—one of moral leadership, harmony, and constructive nationalism—leaving an enduring legacy in India's struggle for independence.

KEYWORDS:

Congress Session, Mahatma Gandhi, Non-Cooperation Movement,
Swaraj, Khadi, Untouchability.

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Introduction:

The Indian National Congress session held at Belagavi (Belgaum) in December 1924 occupies a special place in the history of India's freedom struggle. It was the only session presided over by Mahatma Gandhi, whose leadership transformed the Indian National Congress from a political platform into a people's movement based on truth, non-violence, and moral awakening. This session symbolized unity, discipline, and constructive nationalism, reflecting Gandhi's unique approach to achieving India's independence. Mahatma Gandhi accepted the presidency of the Belagavi session at a crucial time. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22) had recently ended, and the Congress was facing internal divisions between moderates and extremists. Gandhi's presence as president restored harmony and direction within the organization. In his presidential address, Gandhiji emphasized the importance of: Truth (Satya) and Non-violence (Ahimsa) as guiding principles. Hindu-Muslim unity, essential for national solidarity. Self-reliance through Khadi and village industries. Removal of untouchability and social reform as moral duties.

Mahatma Gandhi and His Deep Connection with Karnataka:

Mahatma Gandhi shared a profound and affectionate bond with Karnataka. Between 1915 and 1936, he visited the state eighteen times, each visit strengthening his emotional connection with its people. Among all places, Belagavi held a special place in Gandhi's heart, almost like a second home, radiating warmth, faith, and inspiration. The first invitation extended to Gandhiji to visit Karnataka came from the renowned writer and thinker D. V. Gundappa (DVG). Later, the "Lion of Karnataka" – Gangadharrao Deshpande played a pivotal role in inviting Mahatma Gandhi to preside over the historic Belagavi Session of the Indian National Congress in 1924. To awaken the spirit of nationalism in Karnataka, visionary leaders like Gangadharrao Deshpande, Hardekar Manjappa, and Kaka Karnis journeyed all the way to Sabarmati to express their wholehearted support for Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement. With deep reverence and patriotic zeal, they invited Gandhiji to visit Belagavi, marking the beginning of a new chapter in Karnataka's active participation in India's freedom struggle. During this period, communal tensions were disturbing the peace of the nation. In a remarkable act of moral courage, Gandhiji undertook a 21-day fast, appealing for Hindu-Muslim unity and the eradication of social evils. His fast acted like a

moral medicine for a divided society, awakening the conscience of the people and restoring faith in national harmony.

The visionary efforts of Gangadhar Rao Deshpande in organizing the historic Belagavi session:

Before the commencement of the Belagavi Congress Session, a preliminary meeting of Karnataka's national leaders was held at Dharwad to decide the venue for the forthcoming session. During the discussions, several cities Hubballi, Mangalore, Bellary, and Belagavi were proposed by enthusiastic freedom activists. However, among all, Belagavi alone came forward with the courage and commitment to bear the financial responsibility of hosting the session. This spirit of sacrifice and dedication made Belagavi emerge as the most suitable venue for the 39th Indian National Congress Session. The credit for this historic achievement goes to Gangadhar Rao Deshpande, who took personal leadership and initiated all the necessary preparations with extraordinary determination and patriotic zeal. Near the second gate of Belagavi Railway Station, a charming pavilion of Khadi and bamboo was constructed to accommodate visitors and representatives attending the Congress Session. For Mahatma Gandhi, Khemoji Rao Godse built a special bamboo hut at a cost of 350 rupees, reflecting the care and respect shown to the leader. To ensure the comfort of the delegates and visitors, Gangadhar Rao Deshpande took the initiative to construct a large water reservoir, providing facilities for bathing and drinking water. This reservoir was later named the "Pump Sarovar", becoming an essential and enduring feature of the Belagavi Session's infrastructure. The meticulous planning and thoughtful arrangements showcased the dedication, hospitality, and organizational brilliance of the Karnataka leaders in hosting a historic national event. While the well was being dug, a young boy from Harapanahalli tragically fell in and lost his life, which many considered an ominous incident. Yet, Gangadhar Rao Deshpande ensured the work continued, and the well was re-sealed after the Congress Session to maintain safety.

The Pump Sarovar was constructed with durable granite stones, featuring ten elegant arches, reflecting both utility and architectural finesse. The total cost of building the Sarovar amounted to 4,370 rupees and 3 annas, while an additional 9,293 rupees and 3 paise were spent on laying the pipeline to supply water to the delegates. These meticulous arrangements demonstrated the leaders' dedication, foresight, and com-

mitment to the comfort and well-being of the participants, making the Belagavi Congress Session a truly historic and well-organized event. The venue for the Belagavi Congress Session, held in the lower fort area, was named Vijayanagar, evoking grandeur and historical pride. A majestic gateway and a tall tower were constructed, atop which a soaring flag symbolized national unity. The main entrance of the session featured a 70-foot-high tower, welcoming delegates in regal style. From every corner of India – from Khweta in the west to Burma in the east, and from Kashmir to Kerala about 17,000 activists gathered to participate in this historic event.

Food Arrangements

The responsibility for feeding the delegates was entrusted to Annapurneshwari, the chief cook. Essential food items were collected from all over India, including 51 measures of chili powder, 1,000 bamboo baskets and 250 Petromax lamps

Session Expenditure

The total expenditure for the session was 90,000 rupees, with 77,000 rupees' worth of food purchased on credit. A grand shamiana (canopy) was erected for the delegates, costing 5,000 rupees, with 500 rupees spent on insurance. Initially, a 10-rupee fee was planned for each delegate, but Mahatma Gandhi insisted on reducing it to just one rupee, making the session accessible to all. The meticulous preparations from towering gateways and massive shamianas to careful food and lodging arrangements reflected the leaders' dedication, foresight, and unwavering commitment to hosting a truly historic Congress Session.

The Historic arrival of Mahatma Gandhi in Belagavi:

Mahatma Gandhi arrived in Belagavi six days before the historic Congress session. He began his journey from Ahmedabad on December 18, 1924, and reached Belagavi on December 20. The following day, December 21, Gandhi held discussions with the Belagavi Municipal Council, the District Board, and the Welcome Committee, chaired by Tammannappa Chikkodi and Shri Chougule. Gandhi's arrival united all factions of Belagavi-political rivals and independent groups alike—who worked tirelessly to ensure the success of the session. Various organizations such as the Khilafat Committee, Muslim League, Liberals, and Non-Brahmin movements actively participated in the event. The Belagavi Session also

endorsed the principles of the Non-Cooperation Movement led by Lala Lajpat Rai at the Calcutta Session of December 1920. Eminent national leaders including Motilal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, Lala Lajpat Rai, C. Rajagopalachari, Dr. Annie Besant, Chittaranjan Das, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Saifuddin Kitchlew, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Mohammad Ali, Maulana Shaukat Ali, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Subhas Chandra Bose, Sarojini Naidu, and Rangaswami Iyengar, among many others, graced this grand national event, making the Belagavi Session a landmark in India's freedom movement.

The Iconic Presidential speech of Gandhiji: December 26.27. 1924

Mahatma Gandhi, addressing the 39th Congress Session, expressed his deep satisfaction at seeing Hindus, Muslims, Brahmins, and non-Brahmins set aside all divisions and come together in unity for this historic gathering. He conveyed his firm belief that untouchability would soon be completely eradicated and called upon everyone to uphold tolerance, equality, and solidarity; emphasizing that only through such unity could Swaraj (self-rule) be achieved.

G.S. Halappa described – the Belagavi Session as a session of unity, asserting that national unity alone could lead to true independence. Gandhi further stated that while he would continue to struggle for Swaraj within the British Empire, he was prepared to sever all ties if British injustice made it unavoidable. He stressed the importance of national education and condemned untouchability as a blot on Hinduism, inspiring the launch of the Non-Cooperation Movement against the British. Observing the enthusiasm of the masses who had gathered, Gandhi remarked that no other president could command such love and trust, and urged leaders to translate their creative programs into action. He reminded everyone that Swaraj was the responsibility of all, encouraging them to spread this message across their districts. He also delivered a strong message against Muslim untouchability and inspired the crowd to overcome anger, jealousy, and negativity, to “bury them deep in the ground and burn them.” His words ignited a wave of action: activists from every corner of the state returned to their regions determined to implement his teachings and bring about social reform and national unity.

Conclusion:

The historic Belgaum Session of 1924 stands as a milestone in

India's freedom movement, symbolizing unity, equality, and the relentless spirit of Swaraj. Under Mahatma Gandhi's inspiring leadership, divisions of caste, religion, and social hierarchy were set aside, sowing the seeds of national integration and social reform. The session not only reinforced the ideals of tolerance, justice, and self-rule but also galvanized activists across the country to translate vision into action. It remains a fruition of collective resolve, a testament to the power of leadership that uplifts hearts, reforms society, and charts the path toward India's ultimate independence.

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The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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