

The 1924 Belgaum Session of Indian National Congress and Its Significance

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ABSTRACT:

The Belgaum Session of the Indian National Congress, held in December 1924, marks a turning point in the history of India's freedom struggle. It was only session presided over by Mahatma Gandhi, reflecting a unique confluence between constitutional politics and mass civil disobedience. The Belgaum session came at a time when the congress was re-evaluating its methods after the suspension of the Non-Cooperation Movement and internal divisions between the Swarajists and No-changers. This session not only attempted to heal the ideological rift within the congress but also laid the groundwork for the future course of India's national movement by emphasizing unity, constructive work, and self-reliance. This paper explains the background, proceedings, and outcome of the Belgaum session and its significance.

KEYWORDS:

Indian National Congress, Mahatma Gandhi, Non-Cooperation Movement, Freedom Struggle, Swarajists.

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Introduction:

The Indian National Congress (INC), founded in 1885. It played a very important role in India's freedom movement. The Indian National Congress served as the main platform through which Indian leaders articulated their demands for self-rule and national unity. Among many sessions of the congress, the Belgaum session of 1924 holds a special place. Convened between 26th and 28th December 1924 in Belgaum, it remains unique as the only Congress session ever presided over by Mahatma Gandhi. The session took place at a critical juncture in freedom movement. The Non-Cooperation Movement had been suspended following the Chauri Chaura incident, leading to a period of disillusionment and internal debates within the congress. Two ideological groups have emerged: First group The Swarajists led by Motilal Nehru and C.R Das, who advocated for entering the legislative councils to obstruct British rule from within.

Another group The No-Changeers, led by Mahatma Gandhi, who emphasized constructive work, self-reliance, and the uplift of rural India. The Belgaum session aimed to reconcile these differences and restore unity to national movement.

Historic importance of Belgaum:

Belgaum retains an important place in Indian history. In 1916 the Bombay Provincial Conference was held here. In this conference Bal Gangadhar Tilak gave the famous slogan “Swaraj is my birth right and i shall have it.” Mahatma Gandhi had attended the Home Rule League conference in Belgaum and had a long-standing association with local leaders. His letter to Gangadhar Rao Deshpande in 1916, stating, “Only death can prevent me from visiting Belgaum,” shows his regard for the city. The choice of Belgaum symbolized unity between different regions and communities, aligning with Gandhi’s broader message of national integration.

Proceedings of the Belgaum Session:

The session was organized under the leadership of Gangadhar Rao Deshpande, known as the “Lion of Karnataka.” Thousands of volunteers, local leaders, and ordinary citizens participated in the preparation of the venue, which was named Vijay Nagar. The session was inaugurated on 26 December 1924 with Gandhi as the president. The event attracted delegates from across India and become a major symbol of mass political participation.

Gandhi’s Presidential Address

In his presidential address, Gandhiji spoke about the repression by the British government and how non-violent non-cooperation was the way forward. He said, “Non-violent non-cooperation as a means of attaining political freedom has come to stay and that even its partial success has brought us near to Swaraj.” In his presidential speech, Gandhi focussed on the following major issues:

1. Unity within the Congress:

Gandhi emphasized the need for harmony between the Swarajists and No-changeers. He stated that both methods were complementary rather than contradictory and that their combined effort was essential for the nation’s progress.

2. Constructive Programme:

Gandhi reiterated his belief in the power of village reconstruction, khadi production, education, and removal of untouchability. He considered these efforts fundamental to achieving true swaraj.

3. Communal Harmony:

Gandhiji, in his address urged Hindus and Muslims to maintain unity, warning that communal discord would destroy the foundation of the national unity.

4. Moral and Spiritual Strength:

Gandhi called upon Congress members to cultivate discipline, self-purification, and spirit of service. He stressed that freedom could not be achieved merely through political agitation but through moral awakening.

5. Women's Participation:

Gandhi recognised the importance of women's involvement in the freedom struggle and constructive activities, urging them to take active roles in social reform.

6. Removal of Untouchability:

He declared the eradication of untouchability as a prerequisite for achieving Swaraj, strengthening the movement's social reform agenda.

7. Rural Empowerment:

Gandhi promoted village industries and expanded the party's reach to rural areas by lowering the membership fee from 10 rupees to just 1 rupee.

Importance of the Belgaum session:

1. National Unity:

The Belgaum session played a crucial role in fostering national unity. By addressing issues like communal harmony and social justice, Gandhi sought to unite the diverse communities of India under common cause.

2. Social reforms:

The Belgaum session was notable for integrating social reforms into political agenda of the congress. Gandhi emphasized the need to combat untouchability and promote religious harmony. The session also saw a renewed focus on promoting khadi and supporting village indus-

tries. These initiatives aimed to address the socio-economic disparities prevalent in Indian society.

3. Consolidated Gandhi's leadership:

This was the only Congress session presided over by Gandhi. It re-established Gandhi's moral and ideological authority within the Congress and refocused the party on the path of non-violent resistance.

4. Strengthening Constructive Work:

The emphasis on khadi, rural upliftment, and social reform provided the freedom struggle with a social and economic dimension. Gandhi's constructive programme helped integrate ordinary Indians, particularly villagers, into the national movement.

5. Healing Internal Division:

The Belgaum Session succeeded in uniting the Congress factions. By reconciling the differences between the Swarajists and the No-Change-ers, it restored the Congress's cohesion, enabling it to continue as the principal organization of the national movement.

6. Inspiration for future Movements:

The Belgaum session laid the ideological foundation for future Congress campaigns, including the Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement. Its call for the unity, discipline, and constructive work remained guiding principles for subsequent struggle. The session also inspired a generation of leaders and activists who carried forward Gandhi's vision of an independent and just India.

7. Symbol of National Integration:

The session's location in southern India helped extend the Congress's influence beyond the northern and eastern regions. It strengthened the nationalist movement in the Kannada and Marathi-speaking areas, making Belgaum a symbol of pan-Indian unity.

8. Organizational Changes:

Under Gandhi's leadership, the Congress underwent several organizational changes. The membership fee was reduced, making it more accessible to the masses. These changes helped in broadening the base of the Congress and making it a more inclusive organization.

Implications for Karnataka:

1. Mass mobilization:

Gandhi's call for constructive programs inspired thousands of people across Karnataka leading to a much broader participation in the independence movement.

2. Constructive Programs:

The session spurred the establishment of khadi and village industry centre throughout the region. The use of khadi became widely popular, promoting self-reliance and boosting local industries.

3. Spread of Gandhian ideals:

Following the session, national leaders like Gandhi and Rajagopalchari toured Karnataka, giving further momentum to the national struggle by spreading the message of non-violence, communal harmony and self-rule.

4. Cultural and symbolic boost to Kannada identity:

Naming the venue "Vijayanagar" and hosting the national leadership in Belgaum gave a symbolic and historical boost to Kannada identity. The singing of "Udayavagali Namma Cheluva Kannada Nadu" by Huilgol Narayan Rao on the first day of the session galvanized cultural identity. This session also helped to build regional confidence that later contributed to kannad unification and stronger regional representation in in politics.

5. Local leadership:

The session drew prominent leaders from various parts of Karnataka, including S. Nijalingappa, H.K. Veerangouda, Gangadhar Rao Deshpande and many others, who were deeply influenced by Gandhi's message. The organizational success of the session was largely credited to Gangadhar Rao Deshpande, who successfully mobilised local resources and volunteers.

Conclusion

The 1924 Belgaum Session of Congress was a moment of introspection, reconciliation, and reorientation for the national movement. Coming after a period of internal conflict and disillusionment, it reaffirmed the congress's commitment to unity, constructive work and national leadership. By presiding over the session, Mahatma Gandhi symboli-

cally and practically reasserted his central role in the freedom struggle. His emphasis on social reform, communal harmony, and village reconstruction gave the movement a broader and deeper meaning. Although the Belgaum session did not produce immediate political victories, it laid the moral and organizational groundwork for future mass movements that ultimately led to India's independence.

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