

Swaraj Party



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The Swaraj Party or the Congress-Khilafat Swarajya Party was formed on 1 January 1923 by C R Das and Motilal Nehru. The formation of the Swaraj Party came after various significant events like the withdrawal of non-cooperation movement, the government of India act 1919 and 1923 elections. The formation of this party is an important chapter in Modern Indian History. The party's name is taken from the term *swaraj*, meaning "self-rule," which was broadly applied to the movement to gain independence from British rule.

Background

Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi the Congress emerged as a great nationalist forum of all shades and opinions voicing anti-imperialist sentiments. During Gandhi's Non Cooperation movement (1920-22), its roots spread out among all classes of people. The formal acceptance of Swaraj as the goal of the Congress really converted Noncooperation into a mass movement. Gandhi's catchy slogan 'Swaraj in one year' stirred the masses of men into action. The suspension of Non-Cooperation in February, 1922 created widespread disappointment and precipitated an open division in the leadership of the Congress. The Government took advantage of the situation to take resort to a policy of repression.

The upper middle class intellectuals looked at politics from the plane of reality, and were keen to rescue the Congress and its politics from the demoralisation that had set in after the withdrawal of Non-Cooperation. These individuals wound up frustrated with Gandhi's political judgments and impulses.

Formation of Swaraj Party

The suspension of non-cooperation movement was met with an impressive measure of logical inconsistencies among pioneers of the Congress Party. While

some wanted to continue non-cooperation, others wanted to end the legislature boycott and contest elections. The former were called no-changers and such leaders included Rajendra Prasad, Sardar Vallabhai Patel, C Rajagopalachari, etc. The others who wanted to enter the legislative council and obstruct the British government from within were called the pro-changers. These leaders included C R Das, Motilal Nehru, Srinivasa Iyengar, etc.

There was a split in the Congress. The No-Changers or orthodox Gandhians decried the programme of council-entry and desired the congress to follow Gandhi's constructive programme. The Pro-Changers or Swarajists wanted the constructive programme to be coupled with a political programme of council-entry. In 1922, in the Gaya session of the Congress, C R Das (who was presiding over the session) moved a proposal to enter the legislatures but it was defeated. Das and other leaders broke away from the Congress and formed the Congress-Khilafat Swarajaya Party with Das as the president and Nehru as one of the secretaries. Other noticeable pioneers included N C Kelkar, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Subhas Chandra Bose of Bengal, Vithalbai Patel and different Congress pioneers who were getting to be disappointed with the Congress.

The victory of the No-Changers at the Gaya Congress was short-lived. The Hindu-Muslim riots of 1923 darkened the political atmosphere. It was also clear that the civil disobedience could not be resumed as a national programme. Presently both the Swarajists and the No-Changers were occupied with a furious political battle, yet both were resolved to stay away from the appalling knowledge of the 1907 split at Surat. On the exhortation of Gandhi, the two gatherings chose to stay in the Congress however to work in their different ways. There was no fundamental distinction between the two.

The special Congress session, held at Delhi in September 1923 under the president ship of Maulana Azad allowed congressmen to contest the forthcoming elections. Annual session at Cocanada blessed the council-entry by maintaining that Non-Cooperation could be practised inside the councils also. The Congress called upon all its members to double their efforts to carry out the constructive programme of Gandhi. Thus the split in the Congress was avoided.

Gandhi and Swarajist-

After his discharge from jail in 1924, Gandhi looked to convey back the Swarajists to the Congress and re-join the gathering. Gandhi's supporters were in a greater part in the Congress, and the Congress still remained India's biggest political gathering, yet Gandhi felt it important to recuperate the gap with the Swarajists, in order to mend the country's injuries over the 1922 suspension. The Belgaum Congress, presided over by Gandhi laid the foundation of mutual trust between No-Changers and the Swarajists. He brought about an agreement incorporating the suspension of non-cooperation except in so far as it related to the refusal to use or wear cloth made out of India. It laid down that different kinds of Congress work might be done by different sections.

The constructive programme with its emphasis on the spinning wheel, Hindu-Muslim unity, prohibition and the removal of Untouchability was prescribed to congressmen as the chief means for the attainment of Swaraj. Though Gandhian noncooperation remained the Congress Party's primary strategy, actual partial cooperation in the postwar reforms thus became the alternate tactic of those Congress leaders who were less orthodox Hindu, or more secular-minded, in outlook.

Objectives and Aims of Swaraj party

The Congress-Khilafat Swarajya Party or the Swaraj Party aimed for:

- Speedy attainment of dominion status.
- Obtaining the right to frame a constitution adopting such machinery and system as are most suited to the conditions of the country and genius of the peoples.
- Establishing control over the bureaucracy.
- Obtaining full provincial autonomy.
- Attaining Swarajya (self-rule).
- Getting people the right to control the existing machinery and system of government.
- Organising industrial and agricultural labour.
- Controlling the local and municipal bodies.
- Having an agency for propaganda outside the country.
- Establishing a federation of Asian countries to promote trade and commerce.
- Engaging in the constructive programmes of the Congress.

Methods

What gave a peculiar distinction to the politics of the Swarajists was their avowed intention of wrecking the reforms from within. Michael O' Dwyer, formerly Lt. Governor of Punjab had written that to deal with 'sabotage' was much more difficult than an open rebellion. The Swarajists' methods of obstruction to all government sponsored laws were calculated to destroy the prestige of the councils which had throttled the national self-assertion and respect.

The methods of the Swarajists on the destructive side emphasised rejection of the votable parts of the budgets and rejection of proposals emanating from the bureaucracy. On the constructive side, they sought to move resolutions calculated to promote a healthy national life and displacement of bureaucracy. The General Council of the Swaraj Party laid down specific rules for the conduct of its members in the legislative bodies. They were not to serve as members on committees by official nomination.

C.R. Das summed up the methods of work inside the councils thus, “I want you to enter the Councils and to secure a majority and to put forward national demand. If it is not accepted, I want to oppose the Government in every measure, good, bad and indifferent, and make the work of the Council impossible”.

Works and Achievements of Swaraj Party

The Swarajists emerged as the single largest party in the Central Assembly, Bombay and Bengal Councils while their number in the U.P. Council was not insignificant in 1923. The victory of the Swarajists at the polls strengthened their position in the congress as against the No Changers. In the absence of mass political activities in this period, the Swarajists played a significant role in keeping the spirit of Anti-British protest alive. They made it almost impossible for the British rulers to get the approval of the legislatures for their policies and proposals.

For example, in 1928, the government introduced a bill in the legislative assembly which would give it the power to expel from the country those non-Indians who supported India's struggle for freedom. The bill was defeated. When the government introduced this bill again, Vithalbai Patel who was the president of the assembly refused to allow it. The individuals from Swaraj Party did significant work towards India's battle for Freedom. The Swarajists exposed the

weaknesses of the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms. They gave fiery speeches in the Assembly on self-rule and civil liberties. The debates in the legislatures, in which Indian members often outwitted the government and condemned the government, were read with interest and enthusiasm throughout the country.

The year 1924-25 registered many victories for the Swarajists in the Legislative Assembly. They succeeded in throwing out the Budget forcing the Government to rely on its power of certification. The Swarajists in their zeal to wreck the reforms from within often succeeded in blocking the passage of the Government's Bills and other measures. They resorted to adjournment motions and asking inconvenient questions to expose the misdeeds of the alien government.

The death of C.R. Das in 1925 deprived the Swarajists of their ablest leader and their position was weakened. In 1926, the Swarajists withdrew from the council proclaiming the death of dyarchy. The Swarajist activities produced a stir in the country and achieved whatever could be achieved by their tactics under the constitution.

Constructive Work-

The Council Entry for wrecking reforms from within was the main, but by no means the sole, objective of the Swarajists. They also had a definite conception of socioeconomic reforms or ameliorative activities which Gandhi characterised as the constructive programme. To Gandhi the chariot of freedom struggle had two wheels-constructive programme and political campaigns. The constructive programme, as adumbrated by him, consisted of eighteen items of which the most important were Hindu-Muslim unity, removal of untouchability, prohibition, Swadeshi and boycott. The Swarajists could ill-afford to ignore the programme as they knew that some day they might have to leave the Councils and resort to civil

disobedience along with those who did not go to the councils. The Swarajists lent support to the Constructive Programme but did not share Gandhi's passion and idealism in this regard.

Decline of Swaraj Party

The enthusiasm of 1924 began to wane and the years 1925-27 saw demoralisation and eventual decline of the Swarajists. Inside the legislatures, the Swarajists failed to pursue the policy of 'constant, continuous uniform obstruction'. A substantial section of the Swarajists realised that the destructive opposition to all government measures put an end to all socially useful measures. They could not coordinate their struggle inside the Assembly with the mass freedom struggle outside. They totally relied on newspapers to carry their work and message in the Assembly to the outside world. The death of C R Das in 1925 further weakened the party. Their policy of obstructionism had its flaws and limitations.

The results of the elections of 1926 came as a rude shock to the Swarajists. Their strength in the legislative bodies went down except in the Madras where their success was signal. They suffered heavy losses everywhere. In the U.P., C.P. and Punjab, the Swarajists were routed. In fact, on the eve of the 1926 elections, The Swarajists had lost much of their ground. The party's failure to support the peasant cause in Bengal led to a loss of support of many members.

The announcement of Simon Commission in the closing months of 1927 and Lord Birkenhead's challenge to Indians to produce a constitution acceptable to all sections of society opened new political vistas in the country. The Simon Commission evoked universal boycott while Motilal, taking up the challenge of Birkenhead, prepared a constitution known as Nehru Report. The Swarajists and

the No-changers began to draw closer to one another. The Calcutta Congress of 1928 resolved that in case the British Government did not accept the Nehru Report by 31 December 1929, the Congress would declare complete independence as its goal. The Council Entry programme in the changed political situation occupied a back seat and lost its relevance. The Swaraj Party now merged with the Congress as the country began to prepare for the second round of direct mass action to achieve complete independence.

Reasons for Decline

The Demoralisation and the decline of the Swaraj Party, was due to the absence of a broad ideological basis. Although the Swarajists, with their programme of Council Entry, seemed very promising in 1923 and looked like changing the course of Indian Politics, they petered out very soon, and were undeniably a spent force by 1929. Some of the reasons for its decline are as follows -

1. **Rising Communal Politics** -The increasing communal tempo began to shape the course of events. The protracted Hindu-Muslim tension, presence of reactionary elements of both the communities within the party, which ostensibly professed secularism, really created a difficult situation. The Hindus felt that their interests were not safe in the hands of the Congress. The activities of the Hindu Mahasabha also weakened the Swarajist position. The Muslim alienation from the Congress became so marked that its erstwhile Muslim members fought elections as Muslims, not as Swarajists.
2. **Lure of Office**- The lure of office proved to be another reason for the decline of the Swarajists. They began their career with a bang by entering councils with the declared objective of stiff resistance to the bureaucracy. The spirit of resistance soon gave way to cooperation. V.J. Patel was elected

President of the Assembly and Motilal accepted membership of Sken Commission. The Policy of unqualified obstruction lost its appeal and the party showed signs of disintegration. In fact, many of the Swarajists had no faith in the policy of Non-Cooperation. Having entered the councils, they were not averse to enjoying its privileges. The Swarajist leaders accepted offices and sat on various committees.

3. **Class Character-** The Swaraj Party represented the upper-middle class elements of the Congress who had always been opposed to direct mass action. They had joined the nationalist struggle to prevent it from committing itself to revolutionary mass action. They were drawn, quite unwillingly, into the vortex of Non-Cooperation movement. On the failure of the movement, they took to parliamentary politics and later seemed to be content with playing the role of constitutional opposition.
4. **Internal Divisions-** The Swaraj Party was a house divided against itself. Mutual bickering and distrust eroded its credibility. Denial of tickets to some Swarajists led them to declare their candidature as independents. There were internal divisions among the Swarajists. They were divided into the responsivists and the non-responsivists. The responsivists (M M Malaviya, Lala Lajpat Rai, N C Kelkar) wanted to cooperate with the government and hold offices, whereas the non-responsivists (Motilal Nehru) withdrew from legislatures in 1926.

In spite of its decline, Swaraj party succeeded to a great extent in achieving its goals at that challenging time. The activities of Swarajists enlivened an otherwise dull political atmosphere. Their tactics of obstruction embarrassed the government while the parliamentary duels of the period constitute a brilliant page in the annals of parliamentary politics.