



Study on the Surat Session of INS 1907

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ABSTRACT: At the Surat session of INC in 1907, held on the banks of the Tapti River, the Indian National Congress split into two factions: extremists and moderates. Lokmanya Tilak, Lajpat Rai, and Bipin Chandra Pal led the extremists, while Gopal Krishna Gokhale led the moderates. The moderate and extremist delegates of the Congress met in Surat in an atmosphere charged with excitement and anger. The ridicule and venom heaped on the moderates by the extremists in the mass meetings held in Surat a few days before the session, and the extremists were energized by the rumor that the moderates wanted to scuttle their Kolkata resolutions. The Congress session began with extremists objecting to the duly elected president for the year, Rash Behari Ghosh. The split was unavoidable because both sides came to the session prepared for a fight. In this article, we will discuss the Surat session of 1907 which will be helpful for UPSC exam preparation.

[Nain, M. **Study on the Surat Session of INS 1907**. *Academ Arena* 2023;15(5):6-10]. ISSN 1553-992X (print); ISSN 2158-771X (online). <http://www.sciencepub.net/academia>. 02.doi:[10.7537/marsaaj150523.02](https://doi.org/10.7537/marsaaj150523.02).

Key-words: INS, Surat Session, 1907, India

INTRODUCTION

The years from 1885-1905 was known as the period of the moderates because they dominated the Indian National Congress. The Moderates used petition, prayers, meetings, leaflets, pamphlets, memorandum and delegations to present their demands to the British government. Their only notable achievements were expansion of the legislative council by the Indian Councils Act of 1892. This created dissatisfaction among the people. The 1907 INC meeting was to be held in Nagpur. The Extremists wanted leaders were not released till that date. Some of the new extremists came into being with the same policy of prior extremists. The Moderates supported Rash Bihari Ghosh. Gopal Krishna Gokhale moved the meeting place from Nagpur to Surat fearing that in Nagpur, Bal Gangadhar Tilak would win. The partition of Bengal drove the rise of extremism in INC. An INC meeting was shifted from Nagpur to Surat. Since Surat was in the home province of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, he could not preside over the meeting. But what outraged the extremists was that he was not even given permission to speak. This led to a violent altercation between the two factions and the meeting being cancelled. The Moderates and the Extremists patched up their differences for a year, but in 1907 the two groups permanently split.

Moderates believed in the policy of settlement of minor issues with the government by deliberations. But the radicals believed in agitation, strikes, and boycotts. Nationalists led by Lokmanya Tilak agitated against the Moderates. The split between these two

sections became visible at the end of Congress' Banaras Session (1905). Lokmanya Tilak and his followers held a separate conference and formed the Extremist Party.^[3] However they decided to work as a part of the INC. The difference between moderates and extremists widened in Congress' Calcutta Session of (1906) and attempts were made to select one of them as the president. The moderates opposed the resolutions on Swaraj, Swadeshi, Boycott of foreign goods, and National Education and requested to withdraw from the policy laid down in the Calcutta session. But the extremists were not ready to do so.^[4] In Surat Session (1907), The Radicals or Extremists wanted Lala Lajpat Rai or Tilak as a presidential candidate, and Moderates supported Rash Behari Ghosh to be the President.^[5] But Lala Lajpat Rai stepped down and Rash Behari Ghosh became the President. The colonial authorities immediately clamped down on the extremists and their newspapers were suppressed. Lokmanya Tilak, their main leader, was imprisoned in Mandalay (present-day Myanmar) for six years.

"History very seldom records the things that were decisive but took place behind the veil; it records the show in front of the curtain. Very few people know that it was Sri Aurobindo (without consulting Tilak) who gave the order that led to the breaking of the Congress and was responsible for the refusal to join the new-fangled Moderate Convention which were the two decisive happenings at Surat..."

The Congress was on the brink of split. The 1907 session was to be held at Nagpur. But Nagpur was the

stronghold of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. The moderates were aware that the local delegates would raise the issues in favor of the extremists. So, Gopal Krishna Gokhale got the venue changed and the new venue was Surat which was a stronghold of the Congress.

- The 1907 Surat session was held at the bank of the Tapti river in Surat.
- The Extremist camp was led by Lal Bal and Pal and the moderate camp was led by Gopal Krishna Gokhale.
- The Surat session was presided by Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh.

The congress met in an atmosphere of anger and resentment in this session. Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh was elected but the extremists had an objection to this election. Initially the extremists dominated the session but soon they accepted Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh as president and offered to cooperate. But the session was suspended. Congress got split.

By the time, the next session of Congress was held in Madras in 1908 under Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh, it was the extremist camp that was facing the Lathis and arrest by the British Government who was now in its comfortable position as Congress was divided.

Surat Split History

At the Surat Session in 1907, the leaders of the Congress divided into two groups: moderates and radicals. At the Banaras Session, the division between these two factions became apparent (1905). At the conclusion of this session, Lokmanya Tilak and his followers held a separate meeting and declared the creation of the Extremist Party. However, they did choose to serve for the Indian National Congress.

The Calcutta Assembly in 1906 saw a further widening of the rift between moderates and extremists. Both parties put forth presidential nominees, but Dadabhai Naoroji was chosen as a middle ground by both. Additionally, the extremists were effective in getting a resolution passed that emphasised the swadeshi, boycott, and national education tenets.

But at the Surat Session in 1907, the Moderators were adamant about undoing what had happened at the Calcutta assembly in 1906. Extremists were equally committed to preventing the Moderates from achieving their goals. Extremists in Surat tried to promote Lala Lajpat Rai as the next president of the Congress, but moderates backed Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh. Lala Lajpat Rai averted a crisis by resigning, and Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh was elected president in his place... Read more at:

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Moderates vs Nationalists

In 1906 Sri Aurobindo came to Bengal with the purpose of a public initiation of a more forward and direct political action than the moderate reformism which had till then been the creed of the Indian National Congress. He joined the 'New Party' which had been recently formed in the Congress and persuaded its chiefs in Bengal to come forward publicly as an All-India party - the Nationalist Party - with Tilak at its head and to attack the then dominant Moderate (Reformist or Liberal) oligarchy of veteran politicians and capture from them the Congress and the country. This was the origin of the historic struggle between the Moderates and the Nationalists (called by their opponents Extremists) which in two years changed altogether the face of Indian politics.

Congress Session at Calcutta in 1906

The first great public clash between the two parties took place in the sessions of the Congress at Calcutta where Sri Aurobindo was present but still working behind the scenes. The Extremists, though still a minority, succeeded under the leadership of Tilak in imposing part of their political programme on the Congress. The Congress consisting of both Moderates and Nationalists unanimously resolved to have for its goal Swaraj or Self-government and Swadeshi, Boycott and National Education as the effective means for realising it. The Moderates at the time did not raise any dissentient voice but they seem to have felt that their position was somewhat compromised by these resolutions; and they had since then, been looking forward to an opportunity when they might return to their old position regarding ideals and methods of political progress in India.

Moderate plan for Retrogression

The Nationalists came to know that Bombay Moderate leaders were bent upon receding from the position taken up by the Calcutta Congress on Swaraj, Boycott and National Education. The Moderates had drafted a new constitution where there was a direct attempt to tamper with the ideal of Self-Government on the lines of the Self-Governing colonies, as settled at Calcutta and to exclude the Nationalists from the Congress by making the acceptance of this new creed an indispensable condition of Congress membership.

How the Moderates wanted to retrogress - Resolution passed in Calcutta Session vs Draft resolution at Surat (Refer to 'Appendix: How they wanted to go back')

Why the Moderates chose Surat?

The session of the Congress had first been arranged at Nagpur, but Nagpur was predominantly a Mahratta city and violently extremist. Gujerat was at that time predominantly moderate, there were very few Nationalists and Surat was a stronghold of Moderatism though afterwards Gujerat became, especially after Gandhi took the lead, one of the most revolutionary of the provinces. So the Moderate leaders decided to hold the Congress at Surat. The Nationalists however came there in strength from all parts, they held a public conference with Sri Aurobindo as president and for some time it was doubtful which side would have the majority, but finally in this moderate city that party was able to bring in a crowd of so-called delegates up to the number of 1300 while the Nationalists were able by the same method to muster something over 1100.

Swamp it or Split it!

It was known that the Moderate leaders had prepared a new constitution for the Congress which would make it practically impossible for the extreme party to command a majority at any annual session for many years to come. The younger Nationalists, especially those from Maharashtra, were determined to prevent this by any means and it was decided by them to break the Congress if they could not swamp it; this decision was unknown to Tilak and the older leaders but it was known to Sri Aurobindo. At the sessions Tilak went on to the platform to propose a resolution regarding the presidentship of the Congress; the president appointed by the Moderates refused to him the permission to speak but Tilak insisted on his right and began to read his resolution and speak. There was a tremendous uproar, the young Gujerati volunteers lifted up chairs over the head of Tilak to beat him. At that the Mahrattas became furious, a Mahratta shoe came hurtling across the pavilion aimed at the President Dr. Rash Behari Ghose and hit Surendra Nath Banerji on the shoulder. The young Mahrattas in a body charged up to the platform, the Moderate leaders fled and after a short fight on the platform with chairs the session broke up not to be resumed. Congress Splits!

The Moderate leaders decided to suspend the Congress and replace it by a national conference with a constitution and arrangement which would make it safe for their party. Meanwhile Lajpatrai came to Tilak and informed him that the Government had decided, if the Congress split, to crush the Extremists by the most ruthless repression. Tilak thought, and the event proved that he was right, that the country was not yet ready to face successfully such a repression and he proposed to circumvent both the Moderate plan and the Government plan by the Nationalists joining the conference and signing the statement of adhesion to the new constitution demanded by the Moderates.

Congress Ceases, Moderates Decline

Sri Aurobindo and some other leaders were opposed to this submission; they did not believe that the Moderates would admit any Nationalists to their conference (and this proved to be the case) and they wanted the country to be asked to face the repression. Thus the Congress ceased for a time to exist; but the Moderate conference was not a success and was attended only by small and always dwindling numbers. Sri Aurobindo had hoped that the country would be strong enough to face the repression, at least in Bengal and Maharashtra where the enthusiasm had become intense and almost universal.

A Congress Pledged to Nationalism

Sri Aurobindo thought also that even if there was a temporary collapse the repression would create a deep change in the hearts and minds of the people and the whole nation would swing over to nationalism and the ideal of independence. This actually happened and when Tilak returned from jail in Burma after 6 years he was able in conjunction with Mrs Besant not only to revive the Congress but to make it representative of a nation pledged to the nationalist cause. The Moderate party shrank into a small body of liberals and even these finally subscribed to the ideal of complete independence.

Surat Session - Features

- The Congress was on the verge of breaking up. Nagpur was scheduled to host the 1907 session. But Nagpur was Bal Gangadhar Tilak's stronghold.
- The moderates were well aware that the local delegates would raise issues in favor of the extremists. As a result, **Gopal Krishna Gokhle** had the venue changed to Surat, a Congress stronghold.
- The 1907 Surat session was held on the **banks of the Tapti river** in Surat.
- **The extremist camp was led by Lal Bal and Pal, while the moderate camp was led by Gopal Krishna Gokhle.**

- **Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh** presided over the Surat meeting.
- This session of Congress was held in an atmosphere of rage and resentment. Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh was elected, but extremists objected to the outcome.
- The extremists initially dominated the session, but they soon accepted Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh as president and offered to cooperate. However, the meeting was called to a halt. Congress became divided.
- By the time the next session of Congress convened in Madras in 1908 under Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh, the extremist camp that had been facing the Lathis and arrested by the British Government, was now in a comfortable position as Congress was divided.

Surat Split 1907

- The Surat Split was caused by an ideological divide between moderates and extremists.
- These divisions became more pronounced after the partition of Bengal and as a result of the massive mass support attracted by the Swadeshi movement.
- Congress authorized the launch of mass anti-Bengali partition movements in December 1905.
- Because they believed in the policy of petition and prayer, moderates were opposed to it wholeheartedly. However, due to public pressure, they were unable to oppose the formation of mass movements.
- By December 1906, extremists had gained so much confidence that they desired to be President.
- However, Dadabhai Naoroji was elected as resolutions on Swaraj, boycott, and nationalism education were passed in Calcutta.
- The growing power of Indian nationalism posed a serious challenge to British rule.

About Rash Behari Ghosh

- Rash Behari Ghosh was born on **December 23, 1845**. He was a moderate Congress leader, eminent legal expert, social worker, and philanthropist. He was born in the **Bankura District of the Bengal Presidency**.
- Ghosh was a member of the **Indian National Congress** and **succeeded Dadabhai Naoroji as its president**.
- He presided over two sessions, one in **Surat (1907)** and the other in **Madras (1908)**.

- Between 1891 and 1894, he served on the Bengal Legislative Council, and again between 1906 and 1909.
- He also served on the Secretary of State's Council of India in 1891 and 1893. During his time there, he was in charge of tabling two bills that were passed by the government and enacted.
- One of the bills dealt with a court sale in a debt case, while the other dealt with pre-emption law.
- He was widely known and respected as a legal scholar. Even today, his work on mortgage law is regarded as a classic.
- The British government bestowed upon him the **CIE (Companion of the Order of the Indian Empire) in 1896** and the **CSI (Companion of the Order of the Star of India) in 1909**.

Surat Session 1907 - Outcome

- The Surat Split was a huge failure for Indian nationalists on the one hand, and a huge success for the British on the other. Surat Split accomplished what the British failed to achieve in the Bengal Partition.
- Expulsion of extremists **nullified the effect of both sections of Nationalists**, because moderates and extremists could only be effective when they worked together.
- If extremists wield the sword, moderates wield the shield; however, once they leave, the effect is lost.
- Surat Split enabled the British to **ignore moderates while successfully suppressing extremists**. Tilak was sentenced to hard labor and deported to Myanmar.
- Arvindo Ghosh was tried in connection with the Alipur Bombing. Despite being acquitted, he left active politics and retired to the presidency.
- The Swadeshi Movement died suddenly as a result of the Surat Split. It was a movement led by extremists, and once they were removed from Congress, the movement lost its leadership and died out suddenly.
- Because no mass agitation could be organized in India for decades, the Surat Split transformed the atmosphere of **political activism into passivism**.
- Surat's split and the failure of the Swadeshi movement disillusioned the younger generation of nationalists; they lost faith in the efficacy of peaceful methods and began to believe that British bondage could only be

broken through the use of the western hammer of violation.

- This way of thinking **fueled the revolutionary extremist movement**. Surat Split taught Indian nationalists a valuable lesson. They realized their error.
- This bitter experience came in handy when similar ideological differences arose as a result of the Non-Cooperation Movement's abrupt withdrawal in 1920-21. Because of the difficult lesson learned by Surat Split, another split could be avoided consciously.

Surat Split Consequences

Following the Surat Separation, Rabindranath Tagore made vain attempts to bring the Moderates and Extremists back together. Additionally, the 1908 Allahabad convention's adoption of resolutions to forever disqualify the Congress's Extremist section made matters worse. In contrast to the Extremists, who wanted complete independence after the Surat Split in 1907, the Moderates called for colonial self-government.

The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 show that the British government was unimpressed by the moderates' constitutional politics. The younger breed of nationalism had fallen out of favour with the Moderates. The desire for outcomes among the younger population fueled the ascent of revolutionaries. The Brits employed a divide and conquer tactic to quell militant nationalists.

In Bengal, Maharashtra, and Punjab, where terrorist activity was on the increase and the government could impose repression, extremism was primarily contained. The moderate-dominated Congress fell dormant after leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak were imprisoned. Muslims were given separate voting districts in 1909. Congress suffered a defeat because the INC did not include the most vocal and important constituents

Conclusion: Surat split is a national misfortune, wherein the extremists left Congress, adversely impacting the moderates as both were considered to be the brain and soul of the Indian nation. The Indian national movement was also believed to come to a deadlock for some time. The Extremists' principles and rebellious actions provided the Indian citizens with a new hope and power of opposing the British. In 1916, there was a *reunion of Moderates and Extremists after 8 years* at the Lucknow session.

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4/22/2023