

## Beginning of Democracy in Pre-Independence Era

**Ajit Singh, Research Scholar**  
**Department of Political Science,**  
**MDU Rohtak, India.**  
Email- [ajitsyadav85@gmail.com](mailto:ajitsyadav85@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This research article explores the emergence of democracy in pre-independence India, acknowledging its ancient democratic roots and the British colonial influence driven by imperial interests. It traces the incremental growth of Indian representation through various legislative acts. The article delves into the philosophy of "Swaraj" and its role in the Indian National Congress's declaration of complete independence. It concludes by highlighting the Constituent Assembly's pivotal role in shaping democratic principles for the Indian Constitution, emphasizing the multifaceted struggle for both political liberation and the eradication of social injustices, promoting a just and equitable social order grounded in liberty, equality, and fraternity.

**Key Words: Democracy, National, Independence, Institutions, Act, Swaraj, legislative, Assembly**

### Introduction

The foundations of democratic principles in India can be traced back to ancient times, as attested by references to assemblies like Sabha, samiti, and vidhata in the Vedas, which held substantial authority. While the framers of India's constitution acknowledge the

British influence in shaping contemporary democratic institutions, it is imperative to discern that the primary intent of the British colonial presence was the advancement of their imperial interests. To fortify their dominion in India and exert control over the East India Company, the British government enacted a series of Charter Acts. The Charter Act of 1853 introduced a rudimentary form of local representation, comprising a legislative body of 12 members. However, the governor-general retained the authority to veto any legislative proposals. The "Act for Better Government of India 1858" marked the transition of India into direct British rule under the aegis of the British monarch, with the governor-general assuming the title of Viceroy as the direct representative of the British crown.

The Indian Councils Act of 1861 vested the Viceroy with the prerogative to confer special powers upon individual members of the executive council, a framework pioneered by Lord Charles Canning. Nevertheless, these members wielded limited influence, as they were constrained from engaging in discussions related to financial matters and other vital issues without prior government authorization. Subsequently, the Indian Councils Act of 1892 expanded the size of the Viceroy's legislative council and empowered council members to deliberate on fiscal matters. Furthermore, it extended the prerogative to recommend members for provincial councils to various entities, including universities, municipalities, district boards, trade associations, and the Bengal Chamber of Commerce. The early 20th century bore witness to substantial unrest against British rule, with the partition of Bengal exacerbating tensions. This period saw the emergence of protests against oppressive policies and heightened demands for augmented Indian representation within the colonial bureaucracy, prompting the British government to engage with moderate voices.

The Indian Councils Act of 1909 represented a concession extended by the British to moderate factions within Indian politics. It substantially augmented the size of the central legislature, expanding it from 16 to 60 members, and accorded provincial legislatures a majority of non-official members. Members of legislative councils at both central and provincial levels were empowered to propose resolutions concerning budgets. However, this act also garnered notoriety for institutionalizing communalism, introducing separate electorates for various religious communities, including Muslims, and subsequently extending this practice to Anglo-Indians, Sikhs, Indian Christians, and others. It is paramount to recognize that the British government harbored no genuine intent to promote democratic governance in India; their primary objective lay in exploiting India as a colony to furnish raw materials for

British industries. The constitutional concessions they granted were chiefly aimed at appeasing loyalist elements and the moderate faction of the Indian National Congress.

### Role of the Middle Class

Towards the late 18th century, the East India Company discerned a growing need for a cadre of English-speaking clerks, recognizing their pivotal role in facilitating governance. As a consequence, the Company intensified its involvement in the domain of education. Thomas Macaulay, in his celebrated "Minute upon Indian Education," articulated the imperative of cultivating a class of individuals capable of bridging the cultural and linguistic divide between the British administrators and the teeming millions of India. This envisioned class was to be Indian in lineage and appearance but thoroughly imbued with English tastes, opinions, morals, and intellect. The English-educated stratum, progressively versed in Western sciences, philosophy, and abreast of global events, drew inspiration from revolutionary ideals such as liberty, equality, and fraternity, kindled by momentous events like the French Revolution, the American Revolutionary War, Boer Wars, and Irish struggles.

This emergent class held the conviction that an alliance with the British was in India's best interest. They surmised that the modern and progressive outlook of the British could potentially catalyze transformative reforms within Indian society. Early reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and the Moderates within the nascent Indian National Congress manifested unwavering allegiance to British rule. They harbored the belief that the British administration, while perhaps oblivious to the nuanced realities on the ground, would respond favorably to the articulation of Indian grievances through constitutional means, such as prayers and petitions. Their loyalty to British authority was accompanied by contentment with incremental concessions.

Nevertheless, their contributions to India's intellectual and socio-cultural landscape remain indelible. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, often hailed as the harbinger of the modern Indian Renaissance, marshaled the Brahmo Samaj to confront myriad social ills. He also advocated for the legitimate rights of Indians and championed the separation of executive and judiciary—a pioneering proposition. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar recognized the pivotal significance of female education and championed the founding of over 35 women's schools. Subsequently, luminaries like Dadabhai Naoroji and R.C. Dutt, among others, began to apprehend that India's association with the British was engendering a significant economic drain from the

subcontinent to Britain. Dadabhai Naoroji's seminal work, 'Poverty and Un-British Rule in India,' substantiated this thesis, portraying Britain as the beneficiary of India's wealth depletion.

On the 20th of August 1917, Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India (1917-1922), made a pivotal declaration in the House of Commons, elucidating the British Government's gradual intent to introduce responsible government in India. Notably, the linchpin of this declaration was "Responsible Government." This declaration served as the foundational cornerstone for the Government of India Act of 1919, colloquially known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms. Coming into effect in 1921, these reforms bolstered Indian participation in the Viceroy's executive council and granted legislators greater autonomy, most of whom were chosen through direct elections. The 1919 Act also experimented with a system of diarchy at the provincial level, classifying subjects into two categories: "reserved" and "transferred." The former remained under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Governor and his executive council, devoid of any legislative oversight. The latter, "transferred" subjects, were subject to the administration of the Governor, guided by the counsel of ministers accountable to the legislature. This dual system of governance was subsequently abolished by the Government of India Act of 1935.

The 1935 Act introduced provisions for a federal structure, although these provisions were met with resistance from the princely states. This legislation also facilitated the establishment of responsible governments at the provincial level, and many features of the present-day Indian constitution can be traced back, directly or indirectly, to the Government of India Act of 1935.

## Philosophy of Swaraj

The term "Swaraj" conveys the essence of self-rule and self-governance. An exploration of the democratization process during the colonial era would be incomplete without a comprehensive understanding of Swaraj. This concept found prominent usage among a multitude of reformers and freedom fighters, each infusing it with their unique interpretations. Figures such as Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, M.K. Gandhi, Aurobindo, among others, offered distinct definitions of Swaraj. For some, it denoted the "administration of the soul," while for others, it represented a synthesis of both internal and external emancipation. Tilak staunchly asserted his birthright to Swaraj, whereas Aurobindo deemed it

a cause worthy of relentless struggle. Gandhi, notably, penned a seminal work entitled 'Hind Swaraj,' a remarkable contribution to the realm of political theory.

Swaraj assumed paramount significance when it was adopted as the Congress's objective during the Calcutta session of 1906. This declaration infused renewed vigor into the Swadeshi (self-reliance) and boycott movements. Subsequently, during the Lahore session of December 1929, the Indian National Congress, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, adopted the historic 'Purna Swaraj' resolution, signifying complete independence as the unequivocal goal of the Indian struggle for self-rule. In 1915, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi returned to India, introducing the potent instrument of Satyagraha, a concept he had previously trialed. Extensively traversing the Indian subcontinent, Gandhi meticulously assimilated the intricate nuances of the prevailing socio-political landscape. His reentry into India marked a seminal inflection point in the protracted quest for swaraj, or self-rule.

Within the pages of his periodical publication, "Young India," Gandhi delineated his conceptualization of Swaraj as "the governance of India through the consent of the populace, as determined by the preponderance of the adult citizenry, regardless of gender, nativity, or domicile, who have contributed to the state's welfare through manual labor and have formally enrolled as voters." He contended that the realization of authentic Swaraj would not be achieved through the concentration of authority within an elite echelon but rather through the endowment of the entire citizenry with the capability to resist authority when it transgressed its legitimate boundaries. In essence, Swaraj was to be actualized through the empowerment of the masses to judiciously regulate and circumscribe authority.

Gandhi frequently referred to his conception of Swaraj as "Poor man's Swaraj," underscoring its commitment to a dignified independence that did not harbor intentions to inflict harm upon any individual or nation. Influenced by the precepts of the Shrimad Bhagwad Geeta, he propagated the notion that within a Swaraj framework, the predominant emphasis would pivot from individual rights to collective civic duties. Gandhi's nonviolent resistance against the British Raj resonated profoundly across the expansive spectrum of Indian society. Students, women, marginalized communities, mercantile interests, the educated middle class, laborers, peasants, artisans, indigenous tribes, and the Muslim demographic actively engaged in his Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements. This collective mobilization witnessed legal practitioners relinquishing their legal vocations, students embarking on a

boycott of government-run educational institutions, and women transcending the confines of their traditional domestic roles to partake in the boycott of foreign goods. Gandhi's adroit organizational skills found tangible expression in the efficacious orchestration of mass mobilizations, notably exemplified by the iconic Dandi March and the various salt marches conducted throughout the Indian subcontinent. The reverberations of the Gandhian socio-political movements exerted sufficient pressure to compel the British Government to convene the Round Table conference and acknowledge the Indian National Congress as the legitimate representative of a wide cross-section of the Indian populace.

### Democracy on the eve of India's Independence

Amidst the backdrop of World War II, the British Empire found itself in a confluence of military reversals, prompting it, under the duress of international allies, to embark upon a course of concession to India. Cognizant of the criticality of securing Indian support for the exigencies of the wartime endeavor, the British government dispatched a delegation under the leadership of Stafford Cripps to the Indian subcontinent. The primary mandate of the Cripps Mission encompassed negotiations with preeminent Indian leaders, seeking to secure their endorsement of the war effort. Central to the mission's overtures was the proposition of establishing an Indian Union, replete with dominion status, and the concomitant creation of a Constituent Assembly entrusted with the solemn task of fashioning a nascent constitutional order. Regrettably, these overtures foundered, ensnared in an impasse.

In contrast, the proposals articulated by the Cabinet Mission of 1946 elicited concurrence from both the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League. Subsequently, the creation of a Constituent Assembly, vested with the prerogative to delineate a constitution of its own volition, marked the apogee of the democratization process. The Constituent Assembly convened a coterie of sagacious leaders and stalwart champions of the cause of Indian self-determination, whose collective efforts were dedicated to the enshrinement of democratic principles such as Justice, Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity within the hallowed contours of the Indian Constitution. Despite their variegated ideological proclivities, the members of the Constituent Assembly acted in concert, marshaling their energies and resources in the pursuit of the national interest, thereby evincing a cohesive and unified endeavor.

## Conclusion

The struggle during the colonial era extended beyond the quest for liberation from British colonial rule; it encompassed a simultaneous battle against the entrenched social injustices prevailing within Indian society. This multifaceted struggle operated on two distinct fronts: one aimed at dismantling the British colonial system, and the other focused on eradicating the endemic social evils. Prominent reformers and thinkers such as Ram Mohan Roy, Sayyed Ahmad Khan, Behramji M. Malabari, Baba Ram Singh Kuka, and Jyotiba Phule were emblematic of this dual struggle. Collectively, these reformers sought to effect profound changes within Indian society, advocating for the promotion of modern and progressive ideas. Their efforts were geared toward challenging orthodox norms, fighting against social prejudices, and championing the rights and dignity of marginalized communities. In essence, this struggle epitomized the broader endeavor for the democratization of both the state and society. It aimed not only at securing political autonomy but also at fostering a just and equitable social order characterized by principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

## References

1. Bandyopadhyay S. (2007). From plassey to partition : a history of modern india (Repr). Orient Longman.
2. Chandra, B. (2009). History of modern India.
3. Constitution of India. (2023, November 2). Constitution of India - The Largest Digital Archive of India's Constitutional History. <https://www.constitutionofindia.net/>
4. Gandhi, Mahatma (1919). "Young India"
5. Guha, Ramachandra. (2007). "India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy."
6. Guha, Ranajit. (2007). "Founders of India's Democracy."
7. The Meaning of Swaraj | India of My Dreams by M K Gandhi. (n.d.). <https://www.mkgandhi.org/indiadreams/chap02.htm>
8. Pradhan, R.C. (2008). Raj to Swaraj. Prabhat Prakashan.