



The historic Belgaum Congress session of 1924 and its reflections on peasant movement in Karnataka

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Abstract

The Belgaum Congress session was a momentous event and the enthusiasm of the people of Karnataka region was abounding in energy. It is of historical importance because it was the only Congress session in which Mahatma Gandhiji presided. The entire people of Karnataka including old Mysore region reacted positively & confidently to the call given by Mahatma Gandhiji for several constructive programmes. The Khadi was introduced in 1920 as a political weapon and as the best instrument for giving concrete expression to the Swadeshi spirit to boycott foreign goods. Khadi rendered an opportunity to every man, woman and child to cultivate self-discipline and self-sacrifice as a part of the non-cooperation movement. The spread of Khadi and village industries was taken up all over Karnataka. This paper examines the importance of Gandhian visit to this region & spotlights impact on social reconstruction & propagation of Swadeshi ideals.

Key words: Belgaum congress, Social reconstruction, Khadi movement, Swadeshi ideals

“Swaraj (self-rule) without swadeshi (country made goods) is a lifeless corpse and if Swadeshi is the soul of Swaraj, khadi is the essence of Swadeshi”-Mahatma Gandhi

Introduction:

The 39th Indian National Congress Session was held in Belgaum³⁵. It was a historic place since the dawn of history. The Congress ideals were first propagated by A. O Hume here. He visited Belgaum to propagate Congress ideals in 1893. It was a home for both the factions of the Congress Bal gangadhara Tilak visited it in 1906. This place was a

scene of Mahatma Gandhi's historic visit in 1924.

Historical Background

On February 5th 1924, Gandhiji was released from prison following an operation for appendicitis. The Hindu-Muslim cooperation for which he had striven so zealously had nearly vanished. With the abolition of Khilafat in Turkey, no encouragement was left for preponderance of the Indian



Muslims to collaborate & work together with the Hindus. The Muslim League eclipsed during the Khilafat agitation found a breathing space once again. Thus with the passage of time the incongruity between the Hindus and the Muslims began to appear and communal riots occurred at regular intervals. To compensate for the sins of his erring countrymen, Gandhiji undertook a fast of 21 days from September 18 to October 8. This was his desperate effort to solve the communal tangle. The Council entry programme of the Swarajists was not welcomed by Gandhiji. But the circumstances as they were, it was impossible for anybody to bring back the masses to an active non-cooperation and therefore as sort of compromise was reached³⁶. The Congressmen were given freedom to decide for themselves either to work for the Council entry or to carry on the constructive work outside the Council³⁷. It was in this background that Gandhiji presided over the Belgaum session in December 1924 with the objective of restoring unity between Congressmen who were for Council entry and those against it and between Hindus and Muslims. Removal of untouchability and spread of Chakra and Khadi were the other objectives. (Mahatma

Gandhi used to refer to Khadi as "The livery of freedom"³⁸.

Historic session of 1924

The Belgaum Congress session was a momentous event and the enthusiasm of the people of Karnataka, as it was the only Congress session in which Gandhiji presided.

1. The venue where the session was held was named Vijayanagara and the entrance gate was designed like the Gopura of the Virupaksha temple at Hampi.
2. A flag railway station was constructed near the site of the Congress Session, which came to be called 'Vijaya Nagara', after the mighty empire of Hampi and the entrance gate, with an impressive height of 70 feet was designed as a 'gopura' from the same place
3. The huts for visitors and the delegates were built with Khadi and had bamboo roofs.
4. Mahatma Gandhi used to refer to Khadi as "The livery of freedom".
5. Gandhiji was taken in a procession to the Congress camp. All efforts were made to represent the culture and



- history of Karnataka at the session.
6. For the supply of water round the clock a tank, Pampa Sarovara was constructed³⁹.
7. To feed the participants, a huge kitchen was set up and thousands of lanterns and petromax light were brought from Bombay for lighting purpose.
8. Volunteers of Hindustan Seva Dal, trained by N.S.Hardikar were looking after the arrangements and attending the comforts of the visitors.
9. When Gandhiji⁴⁰ along with the Ali brothers, Sarojini Naidu, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and a host of leaders arrived at Belgaum, they were welcomed by a mammoth crowd led by Gangadharrao Deshpande, the Chairman of the Reception Committee.
10. The Session began with 'Vande Mataram' sung by Paluskar. This was followed by two songs in Kannada by a choir.
11. Great stalwarts of music like Veene Seshanna gave their recital and Huyilagola Narayana Rao sung the Kannada anthem 'Udayavagali namma cheluva Kannadanadu' at the session⁴¹.
- In his presidential address Gandhiji spoke on the necessity of Hindu-Muslim unity, boycott of foreign goods, encouraging spinning and weaving of Khadi, working towards eradication of untouchability and other issues. "I am convinced that swaraj cannot come so long as the tens of millions of our brothers and sisters do not take to the charkha, do not spin, do not make khadi and wear it."⁴² A number of session were also held at Belgaum on the occasion like the
1. All-India Khilafat Conference,
 2. All-India Hindu Mahasabha Conference,
 3. All-India Non-Brahmin Conference,
 4. All-India Social Conference
 5. The first Karnataka Unification Conference⁴³
- The people of Karnataka region including old Mysore region reacted positively & confidently to the call given by Gandhiji for constructive programmes⁴⁴.
1. The spread of Khadi and village industries was taken up all over Karnataka⁴⁵. There



was a sporadic khadi movement in Princely Mysore as well⁴⁶. The enthusiastic people undertook setting up of khadi⁴⁷. The organizations for Harijan welfare were set up in many places of the state.

2. The lower rungs of society were included in the programs and there was a wide participation in the Congress lead Movements.
3. Between 1922 and 1925 national leaders like C.Rajagopalachari, C.R.Das, Lala Lajpat Rai, S.Srinivasa Iyengar, Pattabhi Seetharamiah, Jamnadas Mehta, Konda Venkatappiah and others toured all over Karnataka and kept the national spirit alive⁴⁸.
4. The flame of freedom struggle was also kept alive by a host of Congressmen of Karnataka like N.S.Hardikar, Srinivas Rao Kaujalgi, Gangadharrao Deshpande, Kadapa Raghavendra Rao, R.R.Diwakar, Krishna Rao Mudvedkar and others.
5. The authorities in Princely state of Mysore understood the value of spinning and weaving Khadi in the scheme of rural development and often cooperated with the Congress workers in the

extension of Khadi industries and other village industries sponsored by the Congress⁴⁹.

6. The Diwan of Mysore, Albion Banerjee not only permitted the Department of Industries to send exhibits to the Congress exhibition at Belgaum in 1924, but also gave a donation for the expenses.
7. It leads to the Setting up of All India Spinners Association (AISA) / Akhil Bharat Charkha Sangh in 1935⁵⁰.

Conclusion:

Thus the Congress session of 1924 can be heralded as a great step in promotion of the peasant consciousness. Even though there were some loopholes in the post Congress Session programs there was a widening of the spirit among peasants of this region who started participating in Congress lead Movements. The Salt Satyagraha held in Sirsi Ankola, Siddapura & Mangalore were projected by the peasantry & promoted by the Indian National Congress leaders. The High inclusion of peasantry in this movement was a affirmative indication of the awareness among peasantry.

List of Industries opened during Swadeshi Movement

Name of the industry	Place
Paper processing	Bangalore
Tanning	Belgaum
Match box industry	Bangalore
Waxing & lac making	Bangalore
Agarbathi	Mysore
Brick making	Bellary
Food processing	Hubli
Oil tanneries	Mangalore
Cloth manufacturing	Dharwad

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