

SURAT SESSION: SPLIT IN CONGRESS (1907)

Confrontation at the Session

The Indian National Congress split into two groups-the extremists and the moderates-at the Surat session in 1907, held on the banks of the Tapti River. The extremists were led by lokmanya Tilak, Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal and the moderates were led by Gopal Krishna Gokhale. At the Surat session, the moderate and the extremists' delegates of the Congress met in an atmosphere surcharged with excitement and anger.

The moderates were deeply hurt by the ridicule and venom poured on them by the extremists in the mass meetings held at Surat a few days before the session and the extremists were excited by the rumour that the moderates wanted to scuttle their Kolkata resolutions. The Congress session started with the objection made by the extremists to the duly elected president for the year, Ras Behari Bose. As both sides came to the session prepared for the confrontation, the split was inevitable.

Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866-1915)

A Brahmin from Maharashtra, he was educated in India and became involved in the nationalist movement when he was quite young. A moderate, he stressed negotiation and conciliation rather than non-cooperation or violence. He was elected to the Mumbai Legislative Council in 1902. The conflict of Gokhale's moderate views with the more militant ideas of Bal Gangadhar Tilak led to a breach in the Indian National Congress that nearly immobilised it from 1907 to 1916. Gokhale was instrumental in forming the Servants of India Society, a nationalist organisation whose members, sworn to poverty and obedience, were enlisted to serve as volunteers for the social, political and economic welfare of India. In the course of the Indian freedom, he rejected the title of 'knighthood' and refused to accept a position in the council of the Secretary of State for India.

Suppression of the Extremists

The suddenness of the Surat fiasco took the extremists leaders by surprise and they offered their cooperation to the working committee of the Congress by accepting the presidency of Ras Behari Bose. However, the moderates would not relent as they found themselves on firm ground. The government used this opportunity to launch a massive attack on the extremists by suppressing their newspaper and arresting their main leader, Tilak, and sending him to Mandalay jail for 6 years. It passed the Seditious Meeting Act (1907), to control demonstrations and public meetings, and also enacted the Newspaper Incitement to Offences Act (1908) to curb the critical press. Later, it passed the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1908) to bring to trial the agitating politicians under the charges of terrorist's offences. The extremists were not able to organise an effective alternate party, or to sustain the movement. Aurobindo Ghosh gave up politics and left for Pondicherry. Bipin Chandra Pal also left politics temporarily and Lala Lajpat Rai left for Britain. After 1908, the national movement as a whole declined.



Bal Gangadhar Tilak(1856-1920)

Tilak was a journalist in Poona, and in his newspapers, *Kesari* [Lion] in Marathi and *Mahratta* in English, he set forth his nationalist ideals. He sought a Hindu revival based on Maratha traditions and independence [Swaraj] from Britain. After the Indian National Congress was founded (1885), Tilak became the acknowledged leader of the extreme wing. He fought the moderate measures of Gopal Krishna Gokhale and advocated resistance to the British rule. He was arrested (1897) by the British and imprisoned for 18 months. In 1907, a split took place in the Congress, and Tilak led his extremist's wing out of the party. The next year he was again imprisoned this time for 6 years. Unlike Gandhi, he welcomed the Montagu-Chelmsford Report (1918), which conceded a substantial measure of self-rule.

Influence of the Extremists on the National Movement Before 1916

Despite an able leadership, the extremists could not influence the course of the national movement in the direction of active political agitation, as the moderates, who were still a stronger group, would not allow them. The moderates still firmly believed in the policy of social reforms, gradual political development and the remaking of India largely in the image of the west. Soon after the Surat split, the moderates called a convention in 1908, and framed a party constitution to debar the extremist's leaders from the Indian National Congress. It was only in 1916, that the moderates and the extremists again joined hands for the national cause.

The achievements of the extremists were:

1. They instilled courage and self-confidence among the masses;
2. They made the concept of the Indian nation more precise and force-ful;
3. They made patriotism a major factor in Indian politics;
4. Their sacrifices helped the cause of freedom and democracy in the country;
5. They championed the boycott of foreign goods, which helped in the development of Indian industries.

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