



## Review Article


# Ministries of Congress (1937-1939): Exploring the Campaign Strategy, Contributions, and Its Role in the Erosion of the Colonial Power in India

**Rajnish Kumar \***

Ph.D. Scholar at the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, NCERT Campus, New Delhi, India

**Corresponding Author:** Rajnish Kumar

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15283200>

Abstract	Manuscript Information
<p>In 1937, provincial elections were held in India, as mandated by the Government of India Act of 1935. As per the mandate of the 1935 Act, elections were held in the eleven provinces of India. This paper explores the hegemony of colonial rule in the Indian state and the intention of the Britishers to announce and conduct the election in 1937. This paper examines the strategies and campaigns of Congress during the election. How Congress campaigns unite people at the grassroots level. The Indian National Congress emerged in power in eight provinces out of the eleven provinces. Congress ministries worked for twenty-eight months in those eight provinces. These twenty-eight months are considered a landmark for the erosion of British authority from the Indian subcontinent. It discusses the efforts by the Congress that were made for people's welfare, such as civil liberties, many social welfare reforms like literacy, rural developmental works, the Tenancy Act of 1939, and many agrarian reforms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>ISSN No:</b> 2583-7397</li> <li>▪ <b>Received:</b> 19-03-2025</li> <li>▪ <b>Accepted:</b> 06-04-2025</li> <li>▪ <b>Published:</b> 25-04-2025</li> <li>▪ <b>IJCRM:</b>4(2); 2025: 318-321</li> <li>▪ <b>©2025, All Rights Reserved</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Plagiarism Checked:</b> Yes</li> <li>▪ <b>Peer Review Process:</b> Yes</li> </ul> <p><b>How to Cite this Article</b></p> <p>Kumar R. Ministries of Congress (1937-1939): Exploring the Campaign Strategy, Contributions, and Its Role in the Erosion of the Colonial Power in India. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2025;4(2):318-321.</p> <p><b>Access this Article Online</b></p>  <p><a href="http://www.multiarticlesjournal.com">www.multiarticlesjournal.com</a></p>

**KEYWORDS:** 1935 Act, Election in provinces, Congress, Civil liberties, Political and Social reforms, Welfare, Rural development.

## INTRODUCTION

### Understanding the Background of the 1937 Provincial Elections

Hegemony is the political, economic, and military predominance or control of one state over others. After the long discussions on the legal issues of India in the three round table conferences between 1930 and 1932, the British government issued a 'white paper' in March 1933. In that white paper, a proposal was mentioned for the new constitution for the Indian people. There was a proposal for a federal structure for India comprising all British India provinces, all the chief commissioner's provinces, and the princely states. Provincial autonomy replaced the diarchy system, provinces were granted autonomy and separate legal identities. After the recommendation of the British parliament and the British Crown, it became the Government of India Act, 1935. Congress ministries were formed in Bombay, Madras, Central Provinces, Orissa, United Provinces, Bihar, and later in the NWEF and Assam. Gyanesh Kudaisya, in his book *Region, Nation, "Heartland" Uttar Pradesh In India's Body Politics*, explains the work of Congress ministries. The author explains that Harry Haig, who was the governor of the United Provinces, explained in his report that the Congress campaign for the election was extremely effective and made a very considerable impression on the common masses (Governor Haig to Governor Linlithgow).

### Leaders and Volunteers Campaign

Speeches delivered by congress supporters and the pamphlets issued for the election campaign were very effective, and the masses took it very positively. The idea came to be widely propagated that the 'Congress raj' is coming". Several effective promises were made by the congress candidates and supporters. They said in the election campaign that the farmers' rents would be abolished or reduced if they came to power. The debt taken by the farmers will be canceled if we win the election, and a golden age is in sight. Governor Haig observed that volunteers are going into the villages with notebooks and asking tenants what their present rent is and noting it down. The Congress volunteers were saying that if you voted for the Congress, it would be put down to 4 annas instead of two rupees per Bigha. Promises of reduced rents created such an effect that the tenants started to perceive the vote itself as an end to all their troubles. Meetings and processions, slogans and flags, the exploitation of grievances, promises which held out the vision of a new heaven and a new earth. Villagers felt and believed that the British Raj was weakening and the Congress Raj was coming.

### Civil Liberties, Press, and Individual Freedom-Related Reforms

Congress won the election in eight provinces and formed its government. Gandhi ji advised the elected members and ministers of the Congress party to 'hold office lightly, not tightly'. He urged Congressmen to prove that Congress could rule with the least assistance from the police and work for the welfare of the masses. The twenty-eight months of the Congress rule were significant for many reasons. For the civil liberties in

the country, it was observed that the Congress ministers worked to ease curbs on civil liberties. Press restrictions were lifted, laws giving emergency powers were repealed, and bans on many so-called illegal organizations, such as the Hindustan Seva Dal and Youth leagues, and certain books were lifted. Newspapers were taken out of black lists. Confiscated arms and arms licenses were restored, police powers were curbed, and the CID stopped shadowing politicians. Historian Visalakshi Menon in her book *From Movement to Government: The Congress in the United Province* writes that the political prisoners and revolutionaries were released, which had been an integral part of the Congress election manifesto for the election, and deportation and internment orders were revoked. She further writes that releasing political prisoners created a new mood of freedom of thought and expression in the masses. The term 'political prisoners' referred primarily to those revolutionaries and many communists who had been convicted in the 1920s or earlier.

### Tenancy Law Reforms and Landlords Lost Their Privileges

The United Provinces Tenancy Act, 1939, Visalakshi Menon writes, was the best example of such constructive activity in the United Provinces. The Tenancy Bill was the 'crowning' achievement of the UP-Congress ministry. Of its 28 months in office, some 22 months were spent in deliberation on the Tenancy Bill, either in specialized committees or on the floors of the Legislative Assembly and Council. The Primer announced the formation of two committees on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1937, one to examine the existing tenancy laws and to suggest improvements, and the other to do the same for debt laws. The select committee presented its final version of the Bill in October 1938. However, the landlords felt that the Select Committee had overruled many of their objections. They appealed to the Governor and the Parliamentary subcommittee of the Congress to intercede on their behalf. When the committee presented the Bill to the Select Committee, the landlords did not accept the Bill because many of their objectives were overruled. A discussion was held between Primer and the landlord representatives for the legislative council. In the final result, that first acre of the landlord's land was to be left untouched; tenants in cultivation of land beyond that limit for more than five years would get hereditary rights, and those for cultivation for a period ranging from 2-5 years would get statutory rights. The landlords lost their privileged position since the advent of British rule. Congress defeated the expectation of the British that an alliance between the Congress, the right-wing, and landlords would emerge in the course of the passage of the tenancy legislation. Visalakshi Menon writes that the problem of indebtedness, the high rent rates, and the fall in prices during the economic depression contributed to increased indebtedness among the peasants. There were certain basic constraints due to which the Congress ministries could not undertake a complete overhaul of the agrarian structure by completely abolishing the Zamindari. Ministries did not have adequate powers or financial resources, and war clouds started hovering around 1938.

### Literacy, Education, Rural Development, and Welfare Measures

Welfare Measures such as literacy, rural development, and prohibition reforms were important achievements for the ministries. Visalakshi Menon writes that if improving many people's lives was an important objective of the Congress ministries, then three areas that would merit attention would be education, the problem of illiteracy, and rural development. A new literacy program fit into the larger literacy campaign of the Indian National Congress during these years. The new system of education that the Congress sought to introduce was worked out at the Wardha Educational Conference of October 1937. As the UP minister of education said, we propose to examine the whole system of education to remodel it and bring it more in line with the requirements of the country. For promoting literacy in the provinces, two commissions were appointed, one under the chairmanship of Acharya Narendra Dev, to go into the state of primary and secondary education, and the other to enquire into the workings of the universities. She further argues that of the large-scale budget, 13% is allocated for university education. Six committees were appointed to revamp the education department. Under the Wardha Scheme of Education (Gandhi's proposal for national education), initially, those districts were chosen, where there were very few schools of the existing kind. All children of seven and above would have to attend school compulsorily. For the adult literacy campaign, it was proposed to spend over two lakh rupees.

For rural development 'Better living' programme was implemented. This program included the setting of panchayats in rural India, village hospitals, dispensaries, and veterinary centers. Schools and libraries were established, and seed centers, digging wells, and educating farmers on better agricultural methods. Under the social welfare reforms, encouragement was given to khadi through subsidies and other measures. Jail reforms were undertaken and implemented. Encouragement was given to indigenous enterprises. Efforts were taken to develop planning through the National Planning Committee set up under Congress President Subhash Chandra Bose in 1938. More visible erosion was evident in the sphere of colonial ceremonial order. Ceremonies and rituals were 'crucial arenas of politics in which authority was generated, confirmed, and contested'. On assuming office and now anxious to impose their authority, congressmen renewed their attacks on symbols of the colonial empire and attempted ritual substitution on an unprecedented scale.

### Prabhat Pheris, National Week, Kishan Day Celebration

Gyanesh Kudaisya argues that Congress celebrated a 'National Week' from 6th April 1937, with a profusion of Prabhat Pheris, flag ceremonies, and meetings to commemorate the Jallianwala Bagh martyrs and khadi hawking. Such political rituals came to be deeply entrenched during the ministry tenure, reflecting the growing authority of the Congress. The success of these rituals is shown by the proceedings of the Congress 'Kisan Day' celebrations on the 15th of October 1939. 1,739 meetings were reported from across the province, with an estimated total

attendance of over 3.6 million people. Congressmen replaced the British flag with their own 'National flag' on several occasions. Another aspect of the Congress ministries' tenure was their boycott of all social contacts with colonial officials. The only mode of contact permitted between Congressmen and local officials was when they took grievances or complaints to them. According to Gyanesh Kudaisya, this made a huge and direct impact on the erosion of British colonial authority in India. The British realized that their authority was forceful, and it created moral pressure. The ministry also attempted to reform the police. Indeed, the ministry's attitude and congressmen's activities in the districts came together to undermine the police's authority. Gyanesh Kudaisya argues police were not alone in their tribulations under the Congress ministries. Members of the steel frame underwent similar trials. Colonial officials still felt vulnerable when the Congress ministry assumed office in July 1937. Haig reported that after the Congress ministry was formed, attacks on official authority became more open and frequently took the form of setting up institutions of authority parallel to the state, such as Congress courts, Thanas, and Chaukis. Such attempts to create a parallel locus of authority soon became very widespread. In several districts, advice has been given to audiences not to go to the Police. These activities seriously undermined the authority of the district administration. Article 'The Erosion of British Authority in the Bombay Countryside 1919-1947' by Simon Epstein explains that by August 1937 with the formation of a Congress ministry in Bombay and the removal of all bans on Congress and allied institutions, the stage was set for the resumption at a provincial and indeed all India level of the nationalist challenge to the aftermath of civil disobedience, it the shape of the confiscated lands, till then successfully countered by the district administration within the locality itself. The outbreak of the Second World War and the subsequent resignations of the Congress Ministries throughout India did much to check the declining fortunes of the British administration in India whole. The long-term erosion of official powers, the relative lack of experienced European officers in the I.C.S. itself, and the growing pressure of competing allegiances among Indian officials (even when not overtly nationalist themselves), were matters that were in no way so easily to be ameliorated.

### CONCLUSION

Congress ministries were formed in provinces like Bombay, Madras, Central Provinces, Bihar, and later in NWFP and Assam. Congress ministers were determined to work on their manifesto, election campaign promises, and meeting minutes. After the formation of the government, they worked to ease curbs on civil liberties. Restrictions on the press were lifted, and political prisoners and revolutionaries were released. Several social welfare reforms, agrarian reforms, and labor reforms took place in the provinces. The extra-parliamentary mass activity of Congress impacted much, such as the launching of mass literacy campaigns, setting up Congress police stations and panchayats, and Congress grievance committees presenting mass petitions to the government and state people's movements. The ministries

were able to control communal riots. The morale of the bureaucracy came down. Council work helped neutralize many erstwhile hostile elements (landlords, etc.). Administrative work by Indians weakened the myth that Indians were not fit to rule. However, the Congress miniseries had some basic limitations. They could not do much in administrative change, and the basic imperialist character of the system could not introduce a radical era of ease of administration and people-centric administration.

## REFERENCES

1. Kudaisya G. *Region, Nation, "Heartland": Uttar Pradesh in India's Body Politic*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications; 2006.
2. Menon V. *From Movement to Government: The Congress in the United Provinces, 1937–42*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications; 2003.
3. Epstein S. *The Erosion of British Authority in the Bombay Countryside; 1919–1947*.
4. Pandey G. *The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, 1926–1934: A Study in Imperfect Mobilization*. Delhi: Oxford University Press; 1978.
5. Seal A. *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1968.

### Creative Commons (CC) License

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license. This license permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

### About the Corresponding Author

**Rajnish Kumar**, Ph.D. Scholar at the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, NCERT Campus, New Delhi. M.Phil. in Education from NIEPA. Masters in Modern History from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Areas of research are decentralisation, community participation in education, SMC, educational policy, modern Indian history, and history of education.