

Congress Ministries (1937–1939): Policies, Muslim Response, Jinnah’s Strategy, and Impact on the Pakistan Movement

Introduction

The **Congress Ministries (1937–1939)** were provincial governments formed by the **Indian National Congress** after the elections held under the **Government of India Act 1935**. Congress formed ministries in several provinces after initially refusing to accept office because of the special powers granted to provincial Governors. These ministries remained in power from **1937 until 1939**, when Congress resigned following the outbreak of the **Second World War** and the British decision to involve India in the war without consulting Indian political leaders. For the Muslims of British India, the experience of Congress rule became a major political turning point. The **Muslim League** used this period to highlight Muslim political grievances and strengthen the argument that Muslims required effective constitutional safeguards and separate political representation.

Historical Background

The **Government of India Act 1935** introduced provincial autonomy and provided for elected provincial governments.

Under the Act:

- Provincial legislatures were expanded.
- Ministers became responsible to elected assemblies.
- Dyarchy was abolished at the provincial level.
- Elections were held in **1937**.
- Separate electorates for Muslims and other communities continued.

The elections transformed the political landscape of British India.

Elections of 1937

The elections were held in early **1937**.

Congress Performance

Congress emerged as the strongest political party and secured clear majorities in several provinces.

It eventually formed ministries in **eight provinces**:

1. Madras
2. Bombay
3. United Provinces
4. Central Provinces
5. Bihar
6. Orissa
7. North-West Frontier Province
8. Assam

Muslim League Performance

The Muslim League performed poorly in the 1937 elections.

It failed to secure dominant positions in several Muslim-majority provinces, including:

- Punjab
- Bengal
- Sindh
- NWFP

This demonstrated that the League was not yet the sole political representative of Indian Muslims.

However, the political developments following the elections allowed **Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah** to reorganize the League into a mass political organization.

Formation of Congress Ministries

Initially, Congress refused to form governments because the provincial Governors retained special powers under the Government of India Act 1935.

After negotiations with the British Government, Congress accepted office.

Congress ministries subsequently governed several provinces from **1937 to 1939**.

The Congress claimed that its ministries represented the interests of all Indians, whereas the Muslim League increasingly argued that Congress rule reflected the political and cultural preferences of the Hindu majority.

Major Policies of Congress Ministries

Congress introduced a number of educational, cultural, administrative, and economic policies.

Some policies were widely welcomed, while others generated serious controversy among Muslims.

1. Promotion of Hindi

Congress governments encouraged the use of **Hindi** in education and administration.

Muslim leaders feared that:

- Urdu would lose official status.
- Muslim cultural identity would be weakened.
- Hindi would become the dominant language of public life.

The issue became particularly sensitive because **Urdu was an important symbol of Muslim cultural identity**.

2. Wardha Scheme of Education

Congress supported an educational programme associated with **Mahatma Gandhi**, commonly known as the **Wardha Scheme of Basic Education**.

Its major principles included:

- Free and compulsory education.
- Education through productive work.
- Greater emphasis on indigenous culture.
- Instruction through the mother tongue.

Muslim critics argued that the scheme could promote Congress's cultural outlook at the expense of Muslim educational and religious identity.

3. Bande Mataram Controversy

The song **Bande Mataram**, taken from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Anandamath*, was used at some Congress political and educational gatherings.

Many Muslims objected because portions of the song contained imagery they considered incompatible with Islamic beliefs.

The controversy reinforced Muslim concerns regarding the cultural orientation of Congress governments.

4. Congress Flag

Congress symbols, particularly the **Congress tricolour**, were promoted in public life.

Muslim League leaders criticized what they perceived as the projection of Congress symbols as national symbols.

The League argued that:

Congress was a political organization, not the representative of every Indian community.

5. Allegations of Discrimination in Government Services

The Muslim League alleged that Muslims faced discrimination in:

- Government employment.
- Educational opportunities.
- Political appointments.
- Administrative representation.

Congress denied systematic discrimination, but the allegations became an important part of Muslim League propaganda and political mobilization.

6. Educational and Cultural Policies

The Congress ministries emphasized:

- National education.
- Indian languages.
- Indigenous culture.
- Political awareness.

Muslim critics feared that these policies could lead to the **Hinduization of public education and culture.**

7. Cow Protection and Religious Sensitivities

In several areas, Muslim leaders complained about policies and local practices relating to cow protection and religious issues.

Although not every complaint can be attributed directly to official Congress policy, such controversies contributed to growing communal distrust.

Muslim Reaction to Congress Rule

Muslim political reaction became increasingly negative.

The Muslim League argued that Congress rule demonstrated what Muslims could expect under a future Hindu-majority democratic system.

Pirpur Report (1938)

The **Muslim League** appointed a committee under **Raja Syed Muhammad Mehdi of Pirpur** to investigate Muslim complaints against Congress ministries.

The resulting **Pirpur Report (1938)** documented alleged instances of:

- Religious discrimination.
- Political victimization.
- Restrictions on Muslim cultural expression.
- Misuse of official authority.
- Problems relating to Urdu.
- Congress interference in Muslim religious and cultural matters.

The report became an important political document for the Muslim League.

Significance

The Pirpur Report provided the League with a systematic account of alleged Muslim grievances and strengthened its campaign against Congress rule.

Sharif Report (1939)

A committee headed by **Mian Muhammad Sharif** prepared another report concerning alleged Muslim grievances, particularly in the **Bihar** context.

It highlighted complaints regarding:

- Educational policies.
- Cultural discrimination.
- Political treatment of Muslims.
- Congress administration.

It further strengthened Muslim League criticism of Congress ministries.

Fazl-ul-Haq Report

A.K. Fazlul Huq, the prominent Bengali Muslim leader, also presented allegations concerning Congress rule and Muslim grievances.

These reports collectively strengthened the Muslim League's argument that Muslims required independent political safeguards.

Muslim League's Political Campaign

Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah used the Congress ministries period strategically.

He argued that the experience of Congress rule demonstrated the dangers of simple majority rule.

The League increasingly promoted the idea that:

- Muslims were a separate political nation.
- Congress could not legitimately claim to represent all Indians.
- Muslims needed independent political organization.
- Constitutional safeguards were essential.

Day of Deliverance — 22 December 1939

The outbreak of the **Second World War** in September 1939 created a new political crisis.

The British Government declared India a participant in the war without consulting Indian political parties.

Congress demanded clarification of Britain's war aims and constitutional commitments.

When the British Government did not meet Congress's demands, Congress ministries resigned in **October–November 1939**.

Jinnah responded by observing **22 December 1939 as the “Day of Deliverance”** from Congress rule.

He called upon Muslims to celebrate the end of Congress ministries.

Why Did Congress Ministries Resign?

The immediate reason was the constitutional and political dispute over India's participation in the Second World War.

Congress objected that:

- India had been committed to the war without consultation.
- Britain had not clearly promised Indian independence.
- Congress ministries had little control over foreign and defence policy.

As a result, Congress ministries resigned in 1939.

Impact of Congress Resignation

The resignation created a significant political opportunity for the Muslim League.

Jinnah used the occasion to:

- Criticize Congress rule.

- Demonstrate the League's political importance.
- Mobilize Muslims.
- Strengthen the League's organizational structure.

The political balance increasingly shifted in favour of the Muslim League.

Impact on Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah

The Congress Ministries period was crucial for Jinnah's political transformation.

1. Reorganization of the Muslim League

After the disappointing 1937 elections, Jinnah worked to expand the League's membership.

2. Mass Mobilization

The League moved beyond elite constitutional politics and increasingly appealed directly to ordinary Muslims.

3. Strengthening of Muslim Nationalism

Jinnah argued that Muslims could not safely rely on Congress assurances.

4. Congress-League Polarization

Relations between the two organizations deteriorated significantly.

This eventually contributed to the League's demand for a separate political future.

Impact on the Pakistan Movement

The Congress Ministries period had profound consequences for the Pakistan Movement.

1. Strengthening of the Two-Nation Theory

The League argued that Hindus and Muslims had distinct:

- Religious beliefs.
- Cultural traditions.
- Social institutions.
- Historical experiences.
- Political interests.

The experience of Congress rule was presented as practical evidence supporting this argument.

2. Rise of Muslim League

The League transformed itself from a relatively limited political organization into a mass movement.

3. Decline of Muslim Trust in Congress

Muslim political leaders increasingly believed that Congress's claim to represent all Indians was incompatible with Muslim political aspirations.

4. Demand for Stronger Constitutional Safeguards

The experience of 1937–39 strengthened demands for:

- Provincial autonomy.
- Separate electorates.
- Muslim representation.
- Constitutional protection.
- Ultimately, a separate political arrangement.

5. Road to Lahore Resolution

The political experience of Congress ministries helped create the atmosphere in which the Muslim League adopted the **Lahore Resolution on 23 March 1940**.

Thus, the period from **1937 to 1939** can be seen as a major political bridge between the Fourteen Points and the Pakistan Resolution.

Were Congress Ministries Really Anti-Muslim?

This is an important **CSS analytical point**.

A balanced answer should avoid presenting every allegation as an established historical fact.

Muslim League's View

The League argued that Congress ministries:

- Promoted Hindu culture.
- Discriminated against Muslims.
- Undermined Urdu.
- Used Congress symbols as national symbols.
- Ignored Muslim political concerns.

Congress's View

Congress leaders rejected these accusations and argued that:

- Their policies were nationalist rather than anti-Muslim.
- Educational and cultural reforms were intended for all Indians.
- Congress represented a secular Indian nationalism.
- Muslim League propaganda exaggerated provincial grievances.

Historical Assessment

The controversy itself was politically important. Regardless of the extent of individual discriminatory practices, **Muslim perceptions of Congress rule became politically decisive**. The League successfully transformed these grievances into a broader argument about the dangers of majority rule.

Critical Evaluation

The Congress Ministries of 1937–1939 were a decisive turning point in the political history of British India. Their period of rule provided Congress with practical experience of provincial government but simultaneously gave the Muslim League an opportunity to reorganize after its poor electoral performance. The League's reports on Muslim grievances, combined with controversies over language, education, symbols, and cultural policies, intensified Muslim apprehensions about Congress dominance. While not every allegation against Congress ministries can be accepted without qualification, the political impact of these perceptions was undeniable. Jinnah successfully converted provincial grievances into a broader constitutional argument: if Muslims could not secure adequate safeguards under Congress provincial governments, they could not safely depend upon a future centralized democratic India dominated by a Hindu majority.

Timeline

Year/Date	Event
1935	Government of India Act enacted
1937	Provincial elections held
1937	Congress forms ministries in several provinces
1938	Pirpur Report published
1939	Sharif Report and other Muslim League criticism
September 1939	Second World War begins
1939	Congress ministries resign
22 December 1939	Jinnah observes Day of Deliverance
23 March 1940	Lahore Resolution adopted

Why Were the Congress Ministries Important for Pakistan?

The political significance can be summarized as:

1937 Elections



Congress Ministries



Muslim Grievances & Political Mobilization



Strengthening of Muslim League



Jinnah's Leadership Consolidates



Growing Muslim Nationalism



Day of Deliverance (1939)



Lahore Resolution (1940)



Pakistan Movement

Conclusion

The Congress Ministries (1937–1939) were a critical turning point in the evolution of Muslim politics in British India. Although Congress regarded its provincial governments as instruments of Indian nationalism and administrative reform, the Muslim League portrayed the period as evidence of the dangers of Hindu-majority rule. Controversies surrounding Urdu, the Wardha educational scheme, Bande Mataram, Congress symbols, and alleged discrimination became powerful tools of Muslim political mobilization. The Pirpur and Sharif Reports further documented Muslim grievances, while the resignation of Congress ministries in 1939 provided Jinnah with an opportunity to consolidate the Muslim League's position. Most importantly, the experience convinced many Muslims that their political future could not depend solely on Congress assurances. Consequently, the Congress Ministries became an important stepping stone from constitutional safeguards toward the demand for a separate Muslim political destiny, culminating in the **Lahore Resolution of 1940** and ultimately the creation of Pakistan in 1947.