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## **SELF-REPRESENTATION IN THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Self-representation in the Indian National Congress (INC) has been a complex and evolving phenomenon throughout its history. As one of the oldest political parties in India, the INC has consistently grappled with the challenge of reflecting the diverse voices and aspirations of the Indian populace. Initially founded as a platform for Indian leaders to engage with the British colonial authorities, the INC gradually transformed into a vehicle for India's struggle for independence. In this context, self-representation was primarily a means of articulating the collective desires of a nation seeking freedom from colonial rule. Post-independence, the INC's self-representation shifted towards representing the aspirations of a newly-formed democratic republic, navigating the complexities of a multi-lingual, multi-religious, and culturally diverse nation. Over time, the INC faced criticism for its ability to authentically represent the interests of all segments of society, with some perceiving it as elitist or disconnected from grassroots concerns. This challenge has spurred debates within the party about how best to ensure a more inclusive and representative character, leading to various leadership changes, alliances, and policy shifts. In recent years, the INC has sought to revitalize itself by emphasizing greater inclusivity and engaging with a younger, more diverse demographic, reflecting a continued evolution in its self-representation strategies*

**Keywords:** *Self-Representation, Indian National Congress*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Indian National Congress, also known as the INC, is frequently cited as an example of an exceptionally long-ruling party after independence. It is also frequently cited as an early supporter of British imperialism reform, the party of Gandhi and Nehru that guided India through a nonviolent mass civil disobedience movement into democratic rule, and an illustration of a party that has held power for an exceptionally long period of time. Although each of them is an important part of the political development of India and the Congress, this thesis will not be concentrating on any of those aspects. Instead, I focus on how these and other points of view on the Indian National Congress have contributed to the formation of perceptions of the



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organisation as a whole throughout the course of my research. I investigate the manner in which the pre-independence practises of the Congress have impacted the current scholarly understandings of the Congress by focusing on the ways in which these practises were carried out. I have a theory that the utilisation and repurposing of that era's archive in order to chronicle the history of the INC has contributed to the early entrenchment of the Indian National Congress's self-representation in the resources through which it was perceived by the British administration in India during the times of colonial rule. This is what I mean by saying that I have this theory. In order to carry out their contemporaneous study of the organisation, the British government engaged in frequent interaction with and made use of these resources on a regular basis. The Congress was responsible for the dissemination of a great deal of information about itself. Therefore, the self-publications produced by the INC were strategically useful because of the impact they could have on the way the public and the state perceived them.

Because they currently constitute a sizeable section of the archive pertaining to the time period before independence, these volumes and the British comments that were made on them are extensively utilised in recent scholarly studies. The operations of the INC, which made it simpler to preserve these works for the archive, are not taken into account in a significant percentage of this literature, despite the fact that they made it possible to do so. In addition, the real archive that contains the documents is not kept in a safe place. Since the establishment of the INC, there has been a relocation of archival records due to the partition of the Indian subcontinent, the reconfiguration of British government departments, and the formation of a large number of Indian states. In addition, several of the papers that contained the official comments on the independently published materials produced by the Congress have been misplaced. Therefore, the archive is more than simply a collection of documents; it is the focal point of a vibrant political process that got begun when the newly elected leaders of the Indian National Congress presented the minutes of their first annual conference to the home secretary along with their best wishes. The archive is the focal point of a lively political process that got underway when the freshly elected leaders of the Indian National Congress handed the minutes of their first annual conference to the home secretary.

Understanding of this technique is beneficial to both the study of history and political science. I position my own work as a link between history and political science in order to contribute to the study of emerging political organisations under colonialism by gaining a better understanding of the implications of a methodological reliance on the colonial archive. This will allow me to better contribute to the study of emerging political organisations under colonialism.



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This project is structured around a number of questions pertaining to the discursive practises of the INC, including the following: 1) What was the purpose of the party's initial introduction to the colonial state, and what did it hope to accomplish by doing so? 2) What does the ongoing expansion of the INC's publication culture say about the larger plan that it is working on? 3. In what ways do the contacts between the colonial government officials and these records reflect the difficulties the administration encountered in obstructing the agenda of the Congress?

Due to the fact that the party portrays itself in published sources, the answers to these questions have led me to the conclusion that the colonial government of India was frequently forced to negotiate with the party on the party's conditions. This is something that I believe to be true. This move taken by the INC is now a part of the historical record, and it has affected studies of the INC that were carried out in the future. It is also helpful for appreciating the analysis of the post-independence political situation to have an understanding of how the early self-representations of the INC are reified in the secondary literature regarding India's most historically significant political party.

The difficulty that I'm trying to solve here, at its core, is one of how to interpret past political activity using the framework of the present when that activity took place within and via frameworks that are different from those we use now. In other words, I'm trying to figure out how to interpret historical political activity using the framework of the present. In this scenario, the challenging of epoch conceptions that Dipesh Chakrabarty does in his seminal text *Provincializing Europe* may prove to be helpful. He does this by extending the challenge to genre or field.<sup>2</sup> Chakrabarty's understanding of Marx's historicism, notably his definitions of "History One" and "History Two," is necessary in order to support his argument that the historical record may and must be used to study its own interstices. Chakrabarty's thesis is supported by this reading. An analysis of the Indian National Congress and its connection to the colonial state needs to take into account problems of path dependency in order to do justice to the specifics of the INC's development as well as the ways in which the various biases of earlier archival or scholarly sources are amplified in the secondary literature on the INC. This is necessary because of the specifics of both of these factors. In this procedure, the colonial state archive will serve as the starting point for the examination of the information related to this project. Making an effort to disentangle these processes may be the only way for historians and political scientists to get closer to a comprehensive understanding of the connection between the party and the state as well as the impacts of colonialism.

### **The Congress as a political party**



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The pre-independence environment in which a political party must function is one in which it must compete with a number of audiences, the most important of which are the colonial government and the polity. Parties need to communicate with a wide variety of interlocutors in order to establish themselves as legitimate organisations within colonial civil society and to define their objectives as predecessors to ultimate democratic independence. The history of decolonization typically places an emphasis on the roles that various parties performed throughout the process. The political parties that are currently in power in the majority of post-colonial republics existed in some form or another before to independence, and many of the most influential personalities in the independence movements went on to serve as party leaders.

However, due to the challenging nature of the decolonization process, it is impossible to evaluate the post-independence party without also taking into consideration the earlier time period. In this research, I argue that the reason for this is because there are well-established methods of learning about the political party, which make up the information that is required to grasp its history and personality.

As a result, analyses that centre on anti-colonialist civil society or conceptions of political parties that are derived from the field of political science are insufficient for conducting an accurate study of political parties during the time before independence. Because of its position between multiple political scientific and historical theoretical frameworks, the pre-independence political party is the focus of this research, which encompasses both the academic and the professional realms.

The Congress Party in India before to the country's independence is not a typical example of how political scientists often approach the study of political parties as part of the academic field of political science. The theoretical underpinnings of democratic governments are the primary focus of the majority of research conducted on democratic political parties. Therefore, the bulk of assessments of political parties are based on party systems, the position of parties in relation to other democratic institutions, and the structure of parties as democratic institutions. This is because party systems provide the most comprehensive picture of political parties. Research on particular political parties and how they function within the democratic state in which they are located has a long and illustrious history. When it comes to anti-colonial politics, democracy is as vital a concept as any other, and the INC is no exception. Because it symbolises the promise of democracy, as I explain it throughout this entire piece, the architecture of the Congress, as seen in the textual culture of the institution, is significant. Despite the fact that many of the INC's techniques were only partially democratic, it is nevertheless considered a location where democratic ideas can be found in contrast to the colonial power.



The literature in political science provides very little in the way of theoretical examination of parties while they were colonised. In addition to the research done on political parties in democratic systems, there is also research done in circumstances where there is only one party and there is no competition between them. The Congress Party in colonial India does not fit very well under this description because the institutional arrangements of colonial India appear to be incomparable with those of an independent nationstate. This is true regardless of whether or not democratic competition exists in the independent nationstate. What can we deduce about the informal relationship that existed between political parties and the colonial state by making observations about the ways in which colonialism as a form of government influenced the institutional environment in which political parties developed? The Indian National Congress is putting itself in a position of strategic advantage within the colonial environment by positioning itself between the colonial state and other political parties or organisations. B. B. Misra's landmark study of the pre-independence party system in India is the most in-depth analysis of the colonial era. In it, he defines the organisational structure of the Congress as a product of the broader social environment, with Gandhi's influence serving as a crucial determinant of the party's widespread appeal. This study is considered to be the most important factor in determining the Congress' organisational structure. In this section, rather than focusing on the organization's interactions with the ordinary populace, I focus on how it operated in relation to the colonial state.

### **CONGRESS SELF-REPRESENTATION AND GOVERNMENT SCRUTINY**

Both overtly and inferentially, the Indian National Congress (INC) has long maintained the position that it has the authority to speak for India as well as for itself. Through the self-publication of publications explaining its organisational structure, philosophical underpinnings, and purposes, it maintained a dialogic connection with the colonial state. Despite the fact that the writings were allegedly prepared for the membership of the Congress, the Congress was the one who instigated and helped facilitate the government's absorption of the Congress' texts into the colonial archive. As a consequence of this, the state's examination of the operation of the Congress acted as a venue for settling the competing claims that were brought forward by Indian nationalism and the imperial interests of the British. During the time before the United States gained its independence, these papers contributed to the formation of a foundation that was predicated on Congress's right to convey accurate information. By distributing textual representations of itself, the Congress significantly increased knowledge about the types and scope of Indian autonomy claims that were available in the relationship between the INC and the colonial state. Additionally, the government's widespread acceptance of the INC's publications granted the INC a certain kind of authority to speak for the polity.



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When the Indian National Congress (INC) was established as a political organisation at the tail end of the nineteenth century, a large number of Indian elites were already actively participating in a broad variety of voluntary organisations as well as the bureaucracy and legislature of the British government. In order to encourage political organisation, discourse, and the furtherance of Indian civil rights, the founders of the INC drew motivation from a wide range of social movements and political philosophies, one of which was liberalism.

The INC's ideological leanings, as well as the personalities and aspirations of its leadership, have been the subject of a significant amount of literature. I won't go over those aspects of the INC again because my primary focus is on the INC's decision to print, distribute, and submit to the British government official publications of its meetings and resolutions within the subcontinent. I won't go over those aspects of the INC again because my primary focus is on the decision of the INC. There has not been a great deal of focus placed on the practise of publishing within the INC's canonical works due to the fact that, on the surface, it appears to be both an obviously helpful practise and secondary to the INC's ultimate goals. I do not claim that these publications were the direct cause of India's decision to break away from Britain; however, I do claim that the INC's self-publication of texts about its organisational structure and goals had a number of effects upon the initial release of these texts, and that understanding the purposes of these texts helps our understanding of the interaction between the colonial state and the anti-colonial organisation.

The primary objective of the INC's texts was to provide its existing members and prospective members with factual information about the organisation in order to fortify its basis and foster the expansion of the organisation. This purpose had the indirect effect of portraying the Congress as an ideologically open organisation to both the populace and the colonial state. As a consequence of this, the INC was able to position itself as a repository of democratic values, even if it did so in an imperfect manner. During a time when it was more difficult to communicate facts on a national scale, the Congress was also able to successfully manage the narrative that was being spun about it. Components of the Congress apparatus that were less than totally democratic may have been depicted as such in its publications. This is because a published record of a meeting of a working committee might only contain the idealistic-sounding final decision and not the acrimonious factional argument. The analysis that follows provides examples of situations in which colonial state authorities were concerned about exactly this: that the Congress's self-representation was rosy, causing the populace to believe something that was not true. People are surprised, however, by the degree to which the Congress did "own up" to its shortcomings or internal squabbles. This is something that is reflected in the archival record in equal measure. It is possible to make the case that the INC's goals included not only



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publishing as a means of propagandising but also efficiency, internal democracy, and transparency.

### **Early entrenchment of legitimacy**

The INC published the results from its first annual conference, which took place in Bombay in December 1885, and disseminated them not only to the attendees of the congress, but also to the Home department and other official receivers in India and the United Kingdom.<sup>31</sup> The colonial archive will have a record of the proceedings, which will serve as details of a new political group. The decision made by the INC to immediately bring the issue to the attention of the state is in line with the declared goals of the INC, which are to bring concerns relating to Indian rights to the attention of the general public.

During each session of the annual Congress, which was held in front of the whole body, a full year's worth of deliberation and preparation was presented. The conclusions of the conferences were then reenacted in text form in reports that were initially published in newspapers and then published by the Congress in their own publications. The INC continued to make preparations to ensure that its proceedings, which increasingly centred on the organization's political goals, were publicised and disseminated. At the meetings held in 1890, the goal of the group was to offer proposals for the elections for the legislative council, including the addition of a majority of locally elected authorities as candidates. The goals of the suffrage movement were extremely inclusive. They demanded that all male British citizens over the age of 21 be granted the right to vote, and that "Parsees, Christians, Mahomedans, or Hindus" be proportionally represented in situations in which they made up a minority.<sup>32</sup> In the early years of the organisation, its primary stated goals included articulating the demands of its constituents and advancing civil liberties in a number of areas. These areas included trial by jury, the separation of executive and legislative powers, exemption from the income and salt taxes, the training of Indian military officers, and the administration of local civil service examinations. Other areas included the advancement of civil liberties included trial by jury, the separation of executive and legislative powers, and exemption from the income and salt taxes.

At this point, the actions that dealt with the electorate and legislative councils are the best examples of how the INC approach should be implemented. The INC took part in the global discussion on suffrage by presenting a proposal to enlarge the electorate. This proposal included expanding the electorate of Great Britain proper, whose electorate was notoriously restricted during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In addition, the INC asserted that it spoke for all Indians because of the importance that was placed on the proportionality of minority group



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involvement. This was done despite the fact that communities belonging to minority groups only made up a small portion of the INC's membership.

The INC established a Subjects Committee in the same year in order to investigate the particulars of its proposed electoral system by "[settling] the questions of the qualifications and disqualifications for the voters, representatives, members of the provincial legislative council, and members of the imperial legislative council."<sup>33</sup> As a result of this change, the INC shifted from being an organisation that primarily advocated for the modification of policies to one that developed institutional structures within which it talked and deliberated. By gathering evidence and demonstrating that it was a valid body for deliberation, it was able to build a name for itself in the public eye as an organisation that investigated and resolved on matters pertaining to public policy.

Development of the organisation, as well as publication consistency

Even though the connection between the INC and the state was in its infancy, the early norms of self-publication and goal-articulation that surrounded the workings of political life started to become established. During the 1920s, the INC organisation went through a period in which there was considerable emphasis placed on institutional clarification and expansion. The incorporation of Mohandas Gandhi into the leadership of the Congress party resulted in considerable organisational changes inside the INC, as did a shift in the party's self-proclaimed political goals.

The typical histories of the INC state that this period is when the party begins to gain a broad appeal and transform into the well-known swadeshi-based organisation. This is the time when the INC was founded. The objectives of the Swadeshi movement were laid out in publications issued by Congress, as is customary practise for communicating major policy decisions. The British authorities were able to discern that Gandhi's goals for the support of domestic enterprises and the potential expansion of the Congress movement were intertwined. When the All India Congress Committee (AICC) made their proposal in 1925 to expand the right to vote in Congress to anybody "who can pay 4 annas per year or 2000 yards of evenly spun yarn," there was also a clause that mandated the wearing of khaddar clothes as an alternative. This clause was included in the proposal. The INC shifted the register of party discourse away from just passing resolutions that had a legal ring to them and towards adopting rules that demanded more of the behaviour of members. One of these policies required members to publicly demonstrate their commitment to swadeshi objectives in order to be eligible for membership. Although the INC did begin to adopt a more populist tone, as indicated by the altering phrasing





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of the resolutions in its published reports, the party's goals at this point were more nuanced than what is typically obvious when treating the nationalist movement as either mass-based or elite-dominated.

Even as the INC's membership became more widespread and diverse, there was continuity in the textual culture of the INC, which facilitated the continuing dialogic interaction between the Congress and the colonial power. In point of fact, the efforts that the Congress made to publish its own proceedings were surprisingly consistent. During this time period, the INC increased the number of publications it produced, grew its organisational structures to a greater depth, and expanded its reach into new areas of the subcontinent. The development of the types of publications that the Congress produced, such as the publishing of reports by the general secretaries and of working committee decisions, led to a rise in the breadth of the information that was made available to the constituents of the Congress as well as to the government. In contrast to the resolutions that are voted at annual conferences, which often contain grandiose rhetoric and all-encompassing goals, the resolutions that are made during working committee meetings and the reports of the general secretaries are more diagnostic in nature. As a direct consequence of this, they concentrated more on the INC's deficiencies. In order to increase its popularity among the general population, the congress admitted that embracing expansion or turning to popular politics did not necessarily mean that the party apparatus was operating effectively all of the time. This was done in an effort to extend the base of support among the general population. According to the annual report submitted by the general secretary in 1925, "most provincial committees have not been functioning properly, and very few have sent yearly reports." It is not always apparent whether or not the provinces made any collections at all; it is likely that they did not make very many collections.

## **OBJECTIVES**

1. To study Self-Representation in the Indian National Congress
2. To study Indian National Congress

## **Government unease at institutional challenges to the state**

As the INC became more explicitly nationalist, the archive contains more data indicating that the government did not accept the Congress's self-publication at face value. Additionally, the expected growth in covert intelligence surveillance can also be found in the record.



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In the early 1930s, the Congress made efforts to construct rival institutions, which the Home department at the time viewed as a challenge to the British colonial rule. While it was common practise for villages to have their own internal systems for settling civil problems, these arbitration courts in the style of a village panchayat were not typical political party pursuits. In reality, this was a Gandhian tenet of Indian society.

The government was anxious that these institutions might multiply, so instead of that, localised courts that were sponsored by the INC were established. The incapacity of the INC to construct important institutions and the fears of local citizens of being imprisoned by the state most likely contributed to the lack of systemization that occurred during the INC's rule. These courts came into being in response to Gandhi's advocacy for the resolution of civil issues at the level of the village because Gandhi believed that such courts would be in line with his vision of an Indian society that was rooted in villages. The authorities did take action to cope with the extremely prominent court that was formed in the Midnapore District of Bengal, and the district was named after it.

Although the government had previously tampered with INC correspondence, the government most regularly intercepted the Working Committee's correspondence with the organization's lowest levels. This is because the Working Committee was closest to the ground. Even though the Congress had not yet been ruled unconstitutional, the government was growing increasingly concerned about the numerous organisational plans that the Congress had in the works, particularly those that posed a risk to both the government's ability to keep an eye on the INC and the state's supremacy as the only legitimate governing body. This was especially true of those plans that posed a risk to both of these things at the same time.

### **Congress self-representation and recruitment**

As soon as it became clear to the state bureaucracy how much of a threat the INC's rival institutional structures constituted, the Home Department increased the amount of attention it paid to monitoring the INC's institutional structure. In addition to the institutional ideas made before, the government was concerned about volunteer organisations and militias in general, which is why this point was brought up. Because the Congress was seen as a criminal organisation throughout the 1930s, many of its leaders were put behind bars, and its activities were subject to great scrutiny. This led to a particularly challenging decade. In spite of this, the Congress persisted in publishing and reporting in the same manner that it did when it was a valid entity. As a result, it began to use the imprisonment of its leaders in the portrayal of itself that it publicised in various outlets. In spite of internal discord or disagreement on the actions of



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the government, the Congress managed to preserve its reputation as a powerful and efficient institution. In accordance with the standard operating practise, top leadership made preparations for the incarceration by allowing senior prisoners to continue functioning in their official party duties while also designating replacement leaders to fill in during the interim period. In the case of Jawaharlal Nehru, K. F. Nariman was the individual who served in the capacity of General Secretary on the Working Committee in 1934.

The formal textual acts that were taken by Congress during this time demonstrate that the group was actively articulating its views rather than simply reacting to the oppression by the government. Other, less obvious measures also left their imprint on the textual record as proof that the INC made an effort to masquerade as a representative organisation when dealing with its multiple internal divisions. Of course, the Swadeshi Resolutions are a part of this, but other, less obvious measures also left their stamp on the record.

The composition of the working committee at this stage reflected the efforts that Congress had made to bring together the many organisations and interests that coexisted with it at the time. In 1934, the committee included representatives from the All-India Spinners' Association, the Congress Socialists, the Nationalist Moslems, and ex-officio members of the Congress Parliamentary Board. All of these groups were part of the Congress. These weren't anywhere close to being all of the factions that made up the INC, and contrary to popular belief, the other groups weren't exactly powerless or subservient either. As was mentioned earlier, the communist party members who were excluded from the meeting made their feelings known on the first day of the conference that established the working committee by storming the location where the conference was being held.

As a result, the continuous publication of the Congress's resolutions, meeting dates, and more overt propaganda contributed to the formation of the notion that the group is legitimate and will continue to exist for some time. When it came to publishing, the leadership of the Congress had to also take into consideration their very own membership. There is considerable evidence to suggest that it was difficult for the Congress to appreciate the many purposes of something as straightforward as the resolutions that were presented by the AICC. In a letter that he wrote to Mohandas Gandhi in 1934, Jawaharlal Nehru made a remark concerning the organisation of the Congress. This letter was later read by the political division of the Home department because it had been intercepted. This comment does an excellent job of summing up the theory that underpins the top-down structure of the Congress. Nehru expressed concern with what he referred to as the "triumph" of opportunism inside the Congress; yet, he placed the blame for the issue on the Congress Working Committee. He stated that:



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*During times of reaction, confusion not only contributes to a loss of morale but also facilitates the growth of reactionary demagogues.*

The government pointed to this type of self-doubt as evidence that the Congress is lagging behind, failing to meet its objectives, and having trouble making progress. However, it is also obvious from Nehru's words that he believed the level of accuracy of the Working Committee's policies, or the lack thereof, was vital to the organisational results of the INC.

Letters like to the one that was stated above did supply the government with textual evidence of the Congress' intentions and aspirations that went beyond what the INC publicised; nonetheless, these efforts to gather intelligence on the group were an outlier among other attempts to monitor the organisation. The documentation found in the archives reveals that during this time period, attempts were undertaken to collect accurate information regarding the organisational structure of the Congress by using informants. However, in many cases, these reports didn't actually add much to what the INC had already disclosed to the media or made publicly available. In other words, they didn't really provide anything new. It is shocking to see intelligence reports written by covert agents coexisting with press clippings in the same folders in the storehouse of information.

What is most remarkable about these reports is the amount of information that they disclose. This information helps the Congress appear to be functional and strategic in many of its high-level debates, and it is one of the things that makes these reports so shocking. The testimony of one such informant during Congress meetings held in October 1934 demonstrates how vital it was for Congress to ensure that the qualifications for party membership firmly anchored the swadeshi goals. During this time period, Gandhi was an advocate for stringent criteria that required a particular quantity of hand-spun yarn. During these meetings, the nuances of the operation of the internal Parliamentary Board of Congress were discussed and decisions were made regarding those intricacies.

The published accounts of Congress may have been helpful to the British intelligence corps' research of the group, but they also made it possible for a significant portion of the general people to become members of the organisation. During this period of civil disobedience, the Home department's primary focus was on gathering accurate information regarding the growth of the Congress Party. This was done due to the fact that the Congress Party was gaining more and more influence. The government officers themselves were aware even at the time that intelligence field reports of raw membership numbers were outrageously inaccurate; yet, they



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proceeded to offer analysis and interpretation based on the erroneous data despite the fact that they knew it was inaccurate.

## CONCLUSION

The archiving of Congress publications and the subsequent use of those publications is a topic that is hardly ever discussed in either history or political science textbooks, and this fact was the impetus for this paper's research of the Indian National Congress and its dealings with the colonial British administration in India. The paper began with the observation that this topic is almost never covered. I have argued that this relationship was in part established by an ongoing conversation that was begun by the textual culture of the Congress, then repeated, expanded, and integrated into the colonial state through the intra-departmental correspondence of the colonial state, and finally recorded in the colonial archive. This conversation was started by the textual culture of the Congress and continued by the intra-departmental correspondence of the colonial state. In light of the fact that the two fields in question are dependent not only on these embedded accounts but also on one another, it is beneficial for both of them to have a grasp of this process.

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