

The Unseen Reformer: Tracing the Legacy of the National Social Conference (1887)

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 15th Dec 2025 Accepted: 18th Dec 2025 Published: 20th Dec 2025 Keywords: <i>National Social Conference</i>	The paper aims to highlight the origin, growth, contribution and decline of 'National Social Conference' in the history of social reformation in India. Established in 1887, the institute worked in a integrated and sophisticated manner. It tried to address even a smallest of small social issues even in remotest corner of the country, By giving confidence to the local reformers and local reform associations, National social Conference not only integrated but also guided them. Thus, this paper attempts to overview the legacy of National Social Conference.

Plagiarism Check Report:

Date of Report: Dec 17, 2025

Similarity Index: 7%

Remarks: No significant matching text. All citations and matches are properly referenced. The manuscript is considered original.

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How to Cite: Pawar, A. R. (2025). *The unseen reformer: Tracing the legacy of the National Social Conference (1887)*. IIP: World Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (IIPWJHSS), 1(IV), 711-715.

Introduction :

A nation is not built merely on economic or political foundations; it rests equally on the strength and integrity of its social institutions. The journey toward constructing a socially cohesive and ethically grounded society in India was neither swift nor simple. It was the outcome of sustained, rigorous, and often challenging efforts undertaken by generations of reformers and reform organizations. While prominent bodies such as the **Brahmo Samaj** and **Prarthana Samaj** have received considerable scholarly attention for their pioneering work, other equally significant organizations—most notably the **Indian National Social Conference**—have remained relatively neglected in mainstream historiography. Yet, their contributions were indispensable in shaping the social consciousness of modern India.

India's struggle for independence was long and multifaceted, and within this vast landscape, the role of the **Indian National Congress**, founded in 1885, was undeniably crucial. The Congress, however, was conceived primarily as a political body, focusing on constitutional reform, administrative grievances, and emerging nationalist aspirations. Its platform became the principal site for debates on political rights, representative institutions, and the critique of colonial governance. While political consolidation was indeed vital during this period, many national leaders simultaneously recognized that India's internal social conditions required equal—if not more—urgent attention.

The Indian society of the late nineteenth century was deeply entangled in entrenched social evils and rigid customs. Reformers believed that without freeing society from these oppressive structures—such as child marriage, gender inequality, caste discrimination, and patriarchal norms—the quest for political freedom would remain incomplete. They argued that national regeneration demanded both political awakening and social transformation. As articulated by the reformist section, questions affecting social economy, legal rights, women's status, and community practices required national deliberation and concerted efforts toward amelioration.

This debate—*must social reform precede political reform?*—became one of the defining intellectual questions within the early Congress. The organization itself was divided into two distinct positions. Leaders such as **Dadabhai Naoroji** believed that the Congress should remain strictly political and avoid involvement in regional or community-specific social issues, fearing that such involvement could alienate conservative sections and weaken political unity. On the other hand, reform-minded leaders like **M.G. Ranade**, **B.M. Malabari**, and **R.G. Bhandarkar** strongly advocated the inseparability of social and political progress.

R.G. Bhandarkar expressed this sentiment succinctly when he stated that “**Without the acquisition of certain virtues and without a reform of our social institutions, real political advance is impossible.**” For him and other reformers, social structures formed the moral backbone of national life, and a politically free India without social upliftment would remain fundamentally weak.

This ideological divergence became the intellectual backdrop for the establishment of the **National Social Conference (NSC)** in 1887—an organization that sought to fill the vacuum created by the Congress's reluctance to directly address social issues. The National Social Conference represented the conviction that national transformation

required a dual approach: political mobilization on one hand and social reconstruction on the other.

Origin and Growth :

The debate over the respective priorities of social versus political reform occupied the minds of several leading nationalists during the 1880s. After careful deliberation, eminent leaders such as Raghunath Rao, M.G. Ranade, Narendranath Sen, and Jankinath Ghosal reached the mature conclusion that the Indian National Congress should refrain from directly addressing contentious social issues. They feared that introducing controversial questions—particularly those relating to caste, marriage customs, or women's status—might divide the fragile and emerging national political unity. It was therefore resolved that a distinct organization should be founded to devote itself exclusively to social reconstruction. This decision culminated in the establishment of the **Indian National Social Conference (INSC)** in December 1887.

The first session of the Conference was convened in Madras in the same year. Thereafter, the INSC met annually as a **subsidiary but intellectually autonomous** convention of the Indian National Congress, sharing the same venue but pursuing a clearly differentiated agenda. While Congress concentrated on constitutional and political questions, the Social Conference directed national attention to the urgent need for reform in India's social institutions. Each annual session served as an occasion to evaluate the progress of reform activities in different regions and to formulate new strategies for future action.

The primary objective of the Social Conference was to **unify, strengthen, and systematize** the scattered reformist initiatives already operating across the country. Numerous local and provincial associations—often working in isolation—were engaged in combating entrenched social evils such as child marriage, polygamy, female infanticide, caste rigidity, and the oppression of widows. By bringing representatives of these organizations together under one national umbrella, the INSC provided a framework for cooperation, mutual encouragement, and intellectual exchange. It offered methodological guidance, articulated reformist principles, and created a platform from which reformers could address a broader national audience. In this way, the Conference amplified the voices of local reformers and injected their efforts with a sense of national purpose.

Crucially, the social reform movement was rooted in a **secular and nationalist ideology**, sharing its intellectual foundations with the early nationalist movement. The Social Conference and the Congress, as Ranade famously described, were “**two sisters**” engaged in the common task of national regeneration. While their immediate concerns differed—one addressing political rights, the other social transformation—both organizations worked toward the broader ideal of India's moral and civic progress. Their joint presence at annual sessions symbolized the conviction that political independence and social reform were interdependent processes. As a result, they helped Indians perceive themselves not merely as a political community striving for self-government, but also as a society capable of introspection, self-critique, and ethical renewal.

At each annual gathering, Justice Ranade delivered an address offering a comprehensive review of reform activities and social trends across the country. These speeches became intellectual landmarks, synthesizing regional developments and providing a national perspective on social issues. The agenda of the Conference was both wide-ranging and

progressive. It passed resolutions advocating:

- raising the minimum marriage age (12 for girls and 18 for boys),
- the prohibition of imprisoning women in cases involving restitution of conjugal rights,
- discouragement of marriages with large age gaps,
- permission and encouragement for child-widow remarriage,
- improvement in the legal and social condition of widows,
- discouragement of polygamy and Kulin marriage practices, and
- active promotion of female education, among others.

Through these resolutions, the INSC sought not merely legislative change, but a transformation of public opinion. Its annual reports, debates, and resolutions helped shape the contours of nineteenth-century Indian social thought and inspired many provincial associations to intensify their reformist work.

Decline :

After the death of Justice M.G. Ranade, the Social Conference entered a new phase in which its members increasingly felt compelled to address India's most deep-rooted and perplexing social problems—foremost among them, the caste system. Alongside caste, the degraded and unequal status of women remained an equally fundamental concern that demanded sustained attention. However, the Conference's ability to confront such vast structural issues was consistently limited by its own internal weaknesses. Its constitution was loosely framed, and there was little organizational discipline among its members. In reality, the Social Conference never functioned as a formal, cohesive institution. It lacked a permanent office, had no dedicated staff, and produced no regular publications apart from the annual report documenting its proceedings.

Consequently, the "Conference" existed more as a recurring event rather than an organized body capable of continuous work. Its impact on public life was therefore heavily dependent on the personal influence, intellectual stature, and moral authority of its leading figures. During Ranade's lifetime, the national social reform movement appeared strong because it was essentially animated by his leadership and supported by several dozen prominent reformers of similar commitment. Once these figures diminished or disappeared from the scene, the movement struggled to sustain its momentum. Without strong leaders, the Social Conference had little structural foundation to carry forward reform independently. Thus, the trajectory of the movement reveals how deeply personality-dependent it was, and how the absence of institutionalization ultimately weakened the long-term viability of organized social reform in the pre-Gandhian national movement.

Concluding remarks :

Although the Social Conference ultimately survived for only a limited span, its historical contribution remains far more substantial than its lifespan suggests. It laid a concrete and enduring foundation for addressing India's pressing social problems at a national scale. In fact, it was the first organization to create a *genuinely pan-Indian platform* dedicated exclusively to social reform at a time when most reform efforts were fragmented, localized, or confined to specific caste and regional associations. By insisting that social

reform must proceed in tandem with political reform, the Conference articulated a vision of national progress that went beyond constitutional agitation and addressed the moral and structural fabric of Indian society.

Its interventions produced visible results. The Conference played an important role in shaping public opinion and mobilizing support on issues such as raising the Age of Consent, promoting widow remarriage, discouraging female infanticide, and advocating for women's education and rights within the family. These campaigns did not merely seek legislative change; they contributed to a broader process of social sensitization by engaging the educated middle class, vernacular press, and provincial reform associations. In doing so, the Conference helped cultivate a new kind of social consciousness that viewed reform as essential to India's self-renewal.

Despite its significance, the Social Conference has received disproportionately limited scholarly attention. Historiography has often privileged the political nationalism of the Indian National Congress, overshadowing parallel reformist efforts that shaped the intellectual and cultural foundations of modern India. Given the organization's pioneering role, its pan-Indian outreach, and its influence on public debates concerning gender, caste, and social ethics, a deeper and more systematic academic study is not only justified but necessary. The Social Conference stands as a crucial—yet understudied—chapter in the genealogy of India's national social reform movement.

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