

It was in 1920, that ASSOCHAM formally came into being, with its maiden conference held at the Royal Exchange in Calcutta. It was a stately gathering, graced by Viceroy Lord Chelmsford and Governor of Bengal, the Earl of Rona Idshay.



Chronicling evolution of the chamber posits the advantage of stating at the outset, the schematic unfolding of the tapestry of events that eventually concluded in contrasting interests federating into a coalition of mercantile consolidation.

The birth of the Associated Chambers of Commerce of India and Ceylon was more than an event – it marked the culmination of a historical process reflecting an age of tumultuous change. It was a logical, sequential development of the coming together of associations primarily representative of British commercial interests in different parts of the country. While the seed of such a formalised structure was evidently sown by the Calcutta Trades Association, as British trading interests tried to weave themselves into a body, on the lines of the more sophisticated business chambers back home. The Bengal Chamber of Commerce, duly supported by Madras and Bombay Chambers, was the prime moving force in establishing the first-ever apex chamber in India.

The industrialization pattern then obtained under the British largely influenced the need for collective protection of local business interests and the mounting inevitability of restructuring neglected sectors and concurrently promoting entrepreneurship. The Chamber movement mirrors a paradox where British manufacturers saw a captive market for their goods in India, but the British Indian manufacturers found such move emaciating their growth. Calcutta being the seat of the Government from where functioned the Legislative Council conferred on Bengal Chamber legitimate proximity gains for interface and enunciation of its needs. Expansion of the representative character of the Council by the new law, that amended the Indian Councils Act in 1909, prompted the Bombay and Bengal Chambers to seek allotment of representative membership in the Council.

The parallel growth of industries had a direct deponentment on the chambers. The indigo, tea, jute, cotton textile industry, coal, thermal power generation and the growth of engineering units with British and Indian interests defined the expansion of converging interests. The partition of Bengal in the year 1905 gently catalyzed emergence of a cohesive political opposition. It lent the first impetus to conceiving an all-India entity when the captains of industry from the provinces, Ceylon and Burma discussed the necessity of national bonding. Twelve years later, at another such gathering again in Calcutta, in the wake of post-war scenario, the inspiration for a national business organisation was cemented specifically in response to the

“During the war, we realised the military advantage of the few local industries previously established here, especially the textile industries of cotton, jute and wool, the indigenous manufacture of cement, the tanning of hides and the smelting of steel. But we felt also most acutely the absence of many other essential industries and it is our duty to see that the dangers due to such deficiencies are reduced, if not completely eliminated in future.”

**Inaugurating the conference,
Lord Chelmsford reflected on the
lessons learnt from World War-I**

integration of economic policy into an all-India pattern, an enlarging corpus of legislation, the rapid growth of Indian business, a sharper spirit of trade rivalry, as well as the mobilization of important Indian industrial financial support for political purposes. The lessons of the war certainly prompted the idea of an all-India organisation but the transfer of capital to New Delhi in 1911 circumscribed the possibility to continue to profitably lobby with the Government primarily on the Bengal Chamber's strength.

In the same year, the new articles of the Association for ASSOCHAM were worked out and the membership structure of the Chamber was categorized into Promoter Chambers, Patron Members, Ordinary Members and Corporate Associates. For the first time ASSOCHAM also opened itself up for overseas membership.