

14. “The Meiji Constitution (1889) was a blend of many conflicting ideas.” Discuss.

It has been said that “the Meiji Constitution of 1889 was a blend of many conflicting ideas.” This statement is true to a great extent as the Constitution contained a number of **inconsistency and ambiguities**. As a matter of fact, it was proclaimed with the intention of solving certain existing problems rather than giving Japan a liberal and democratic institution. It served as a symbol of progress: appeasement of those discontented and politically conscious; consolidation of power of Meiji oligarchs; a cover of democracy; stimulus of Japan’s nationalism as well as a typical example of imitation of the West, all of which were conflicting in meaning to each other. The Meiji leaders adopted a utilitarian approach in drafting the Constitution and they tried to balance and reconcile these conflicting forces. In short, the Meiji Constitution was made with the aim of killing several birds with one stone.

The first blend of conflicting ideas was appeasement versus symbolization, which led to the birth of the Constitution in 1889. As early as Meiji Restoration, there was a clamor for parliamentary government from the aggrieved and the politically conscious. The discontented included the idle ex-samurai and indebted peasants. The politically-conscious were merchants and educated class. The clamor came to head the ‘People’s Right Movement’ in the 1870s. Consequently, the Meiji Government decided to promulgate a constitution to calm down the unrest.

However, this idea of appeasement was opposed to the idea of necessity. Democratic institutions were considered the inevitable course of progress. Strong and advanced countries like Britain, France, and the United States all had a Constitution and this convinced the Meiji leaders that Japan with a constitution would be recognized eventually as an advanced country. It was with this blend of these conflicting ideas that the Constitution was made.

The second blend of conflicting ideas was democracy versus oligarchy. On the surface, there were many democratic features like the diet, the cabinet and a prime minister. However, oligarchy formed a greater proportion in the blend as it was the underlying idea of the constitution. For the diet, though the House of Representatives were to be elected, the election was restricted to adults who paid national taxes of 15 yen or more, thus limiting to 1% of the population. Furthermore, the House of Peers and conservative check over the Lower House. The House of Peers was actually dominated by a few men and the idea of oligarchy was obvious.

Again the cabinet was devised by Ito to replace the Council of State. Since the cabinet, composed of nine ministers and headed by the prime minister, was a strong executive power free from the supervision of the diet and was responsible to the Emperor directly, the oligarchs were given a consolidated base of power. Actually, the first cabinet was a roster of top

oligarchs: Ito as the Prime Minister, Yamagata as the Home Minister, Matsukata as the Finance Minister, Mori as the Education Minister and so on.

Moreover, the constitution was formed in absolute secrecy, only men of Ito's as choosing had any part in the deliberations. There was no consultation of the public political parties. Again, it was oligarchic. Thus, though the constitution was given the appearance of democracy. It was dominated by the idea of oligarchy. The better, consequently, formed a greater proportion in the blend of conflicting ideas.

The third set of conflicting ideas was Japanization versus westernization. Japanization was evident in the constitution, which was declared as a gift from the Emperor. The Emperor was 'sacred and inviolable' and the locus of sovereignty. He exercised executive and legislative authority. He was the source of all power and dispenser of all favours. He could appoint and remove both military and civil minister. Moreover, he could veto any laws, prorogue the diet any time and issue imperial ordinances. He could appoint judges and he was the Supreme Commander of army and navy. All these stipulations in the constitution pointed to one fact - centralization of the Emperor's power. The constitution revealed the spirit of Shintoism which emphasized national unity and loyalty to the Emperor.

Japanization seemed to blend equally with westernization. The constitution included an extensive series of popular rights of the West such as freedom of religion, speech, publication, public meetings and association. However, all these rights were useless whenever it seemed appropriate by the government. Therefore, in this blend of conflicting ideas, Japanization formed a greater proportion.

Although the Meiji Constitution was a blend of many conflicting ideas, it was a success for several decades. The reason for its success lied in that: although the ideas themselves were contradictory, there was no common ground on which they clashed, as some ideas were only superficially meant and therefore given only the show of them, while other ideas were seriously meant. However, the Meiji Constitution must be a blend of conflicting ideas, it could not be purely progressive as Japan could not change herself overnight. A blend of conservatism and progressives was only the practical thing to do.