

Overview of Cripps Mission in India

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ABSTRACT :

From 22 March to 11 April 1942, Stafford Cripps, a member of the War Cabinet, was dispatched to India to discuss the British Government's Draft Declaration on the Constitution of India with representative Indian leaders from all parties. The Cripps Mission failed and the issue of India's constitution was postponed until the end of the war. The failure of the Cripps Mission is generally attributed to a variety of factors, especially the constraints within which Cripps had to operate. Some analysts see the Mission merely as an appeasement of Chinese and American concerns with British imperialism. Gandhi seized upon the failure of the Mission and called for voluntary British withdrawal from India. It resulted in the 'Quit India' Movement.

Keywords : Cripps Mission, Demobilization , Quit India, British

I INTRODUCTION :

The Cripps Mission was a failed attempt in late March 1942 by the British government to secure full Indian cooperation and support for their efforts in World War II. The mission was headed by a senior minister Sir Stafford Cripps, Lord Privy Seal and leader of the House of Commons. Cripps belonged to the left-wing Labour Party, traditionally sympathetic to Indian self-rule, but was also a member of the coalition War Cabinet led by the Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who had long been the leader of the movement to block Indian independence.

Cripps was sent to negotiate an agreement with the nationalist Congress leaders, who spoke for the majority Indians and Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League, who spoke for the minority Muslim population comprising 35% of the total population. Cripps worked to keep India loyal to the British war effort in exchange for

a promise of elections and full self-government (Dominion status) once the war was over. Cripps discussed the proposals, which he had drafted himself, with the Indian leaders and published them. Both the major parties rejected his proposals, and they were also unacceptable to Churchill; no middle way was found and the mission failed. Congress moved towards the Quit India movement whereby it refused to cooperate in the war effort; in response, the British imprisoned practically the entire Congress leadership for the duration of the war. Jinnah and the Muslims, to whom Cripps had offered the right to opt out of a future Union, supported the war effort and gained in status in British eyes. He was *surprised* to see that the right to opt out of a future Union was included

II CRIPS MISSION

Prime Minister Churchill, Secretary of State for India Leo Amery, and Viceroy Linlithgow were all resist to give India more self-governance till the war lasted. Churchill wrote: “The idea that we shall ‘get more out of India’ by putting the Congress in charge at this juncture look ill-founded”¹. Amery thought that any settlement with the Congress Party would isolate the Muslims in India and it could harm Britain’s war efforts, as most of the recruited military came from the Muslim race². Like Churchill, Linlithgow was a fervid imperialist who believed that the imperial choices would be best served by yielding nothing to India. He thought that any real power transfer would increase the religious and racial divisions in the country³. Moreover, Linlithgow hated the Congress politicians and had a very less point of view to them. He wrote the following:

...there is no chance of providing satisfaction to Congress or securing their wholehearted and real support. In my experience they are fully ruthless politicians; will take all they can get; will do their utmost to maneuver us into a place in which we make sacrifices that are considerable and that will gain the prestige and power of Congress in the country.

¹ Telegram from Churchill to Attlee via Naval Cypher, 7 January, 1942, in Nicholas Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Cripps Mission, January – April 1942*, vol. 1 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1970), 14.

² Telegram from Amery to Linlithgow, 10 January, 1942, in Ibid, 20.

³ Telegram from Linlithgow to Amery, 21 January, 1942, in Ibid, 48.

Clement Attlee, who was the Lord Privy Seal in Churchill's Cabinet, opposed the policy of "do nothing" being advocated by the Secretary of State and the Viceroy. He proposed that a representative from London be sent to India to find a settlement with the leaders of India to devolve more power into their hands. He thought that the hand-to-mouth policy being succeeded by His Majesty's Government was not statesmanship; rather it was short-sighted and suicidal⁴.

Meanwhile the war situation in Asia changed rapidly. Singapore fell to the Japanese army on 15 February 1942, Rangoon on 8 March, and the Andaman Islands on 23 March. Despite the popular grievance against the British Raj, Indian participation in the Allied campaign was strong. As many as 2.5 million Indian troops were fighting the Axis forces in Africa, Middle East, South Asia, and Italy. But, as the war approached India's doorsteps, the Churchill Cabinet felt compelled to make some gestures to India to win her greater help for the war efforts. During this time, President Roosevelt was pressuring the Churchill Government for an agreement of the Indian question⁵. After Pearl Harbor, American opinion became more vocal and urged Britain to make greater efforts to seek India's cooperation in the war. In the newly reconstituted War Cabinet of Churchill, Attlee was appointed as the deputy Prime Minister and Sir Stafford Cripps as the leader of the House of Commons and also the Lord Privy Seal. It was their influence that finally persuaded Churchill to agree to an offer that Cripps made to go himself to India as the representative of His Majesty's Government to negotiate fresh with the leaders of India for a political settlement and in return get India's cooperation in the war. Another reason why Churchill agreed to send Cripps was that even if the Mission failed, it would at least show the world that the British were serious about giving India self-governance.

After protracted negotiations, the War Cabinet finally approved a Draft Proposal in early March to be carried by Cripps to India. The salient characteristics of the Proposal were as follows:

⁴ Memorandum by the Lord Privy Seal Clement Attlee on the Indian Political Situation, 2 February, 1942, in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Cripps Mission, January –April 1942*, vol. 1, 111.

⁵ Sen, *History of the Freedom Movement in India, 1857-1947*, 136.

- a) Immediately after the cessation of the war, steps would be taken to setup a Constituent Assembly which would frame a new constitution for India⁶.
- b) The States of India would be able to engage in the Constitution making process by sending their representative to the body.
- c) The any province right to opt-out of the constitution. These non-acceding provinces would be allowed to mound their own Constitution.
- d) During the niggling period of the war, His Majesty's Government must undoubtedly take the responsibility for and keep the direction and control of the defence of India as part of their world war effort.

In the days following his arrival in India, Cripps conducted interviews with the Congress Party leader, the Muslim League, the Sikh Community, the Depressed Classes, and so on. Some of the features of the Cripps Proposal were unpalatable to the Congress such as the provinces being given the option to stay out and the inclusion of States' representatives (not elected by the popular vote) in the Constitution making body⁷. The Congress wanted the British Paramountcy in the context of the Princes to be transferred to the Indian Government when the British left India. Cripps said that it was not possible under the treaty obligations of His Majesty's Government with the Princes. Gandhi objected to autocratic Princely States persisting under British protection under the Cripps Proposal⁸. He said that the document was a virtual invitation to the Muslims to create Pakistan⁹. He described the declaration as a 'post-dated check'. The Hindu Mahasabha rejected the plan on the ground that the option given to the provinces to stay out of the Union would destroy the unity of the country. The Depressed Classes denounced the scheme for its failure to provide adequate safeguards for them. The Sikhs also protested vowing to resist any attempt to separate Punjab from India. However, when Cripps showed Jinnah the draft Proposal, he was surprised at the distance it went to meet his Pakistan demand

⁶ Draft Declaration by British War Cabinet for discussion with Indian leaders, 30 March, 1942, in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Cripps Mission, January – April 1942*, vol.1, 565.

⁷ Menon, *The Transfer of Power in India*, 125.

⁸ R. J. Moore, *Churchill, Cripps, and India, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 87.

⁹ Note by Stafford Cripps on his interview with Mahatma Gandhi, 27 March, 1942, in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Cripps Mission, January – April 1942*, vol. 1, 499.

and of course he did not oppose it. Once again, it appeared that British overtures were favouring the Muslim League above all else.

The Congress Working Committee met during the first week of April and deliberated on the Cripps Proposal. The resulting resolution raised objections to some provisions in the Proposal. According to the resolution, although the Cripps Proposal accepted India's right to self-determination in future, certain provisions in it fettered, circumscribed, and imperiled the development of a free and united India¹⁰. The people rights in the States were vitiated by initiation of non-representative elements in the constitution-making body. The resolution said: 'Complete ignoring of 90 million of people of States of India and treatment as commodities at the disposal of their rulers is complete negation of democracy and self-determination'.

The CWC resolution criticized the prior acceptance of the principle of non-accession for provinces as a severe blow to their conception of Indian unity. The resolution expressed Congress's concern that the Cripps Proposal would encourage and would lead to attempts by the provinces to split away from the Union at the very inception of it and just when utmost goodwill and cooperation were needed. It accused the British Government of giving into communal demands by a certain section of the Indian population, which could have grave repercussions by encouraging other minority communities to make related demands. The resolution objected strongly to the provision in Proposal that stipulated that the Indian defence would remain under British control until the war was over. It said that at any time defence was a vital subject, but at the time of war, defence was all important and covered almost every sphere of life and administration. By taking away that responsibility, the British Government had reduced the power to be given to the Indians to an absolute farce and nullity. The Working Committee argued that in order to rouse the Indian masses and get their enthusiastic support for the war, they must be made to believe that they were free and were in charge of maintaining and defending their own freedom. Similarly, C. R. Rajagopalachari, one of the major leaders of the Congress, told Cripps that it was essential that the Indian leaders should be able to give some clarion call to the

¹⁰ Telegram from Cripps to Churchill, 2 April, 1942, in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Cripps Mission, January – April 1942*, vol. 1, 617.

Indians which would stimulate them from their defeatist attitude. The Proposal should explicitly make it clear that the Indian people were being asked to defend their own country and it was not merely the obligation of the British Government¹¹. He recommended that an Indian Defence Minister should be put in the charge of managing the war in the Indian theatre of operation. This would essentially put the Indian Army under Indian control while the British troops would continue to be under the control of British Commander-in-Chief.

Amery's negative reaction to the Congress Working Committee resolution is well captured in the extracts below from a letter he wrote to Linlithgow in early April:

I have just seen Stafford Cripps' summary of CWC Resolution. It is certainly difficult to imagine a more purely negative document and I am afraid it looks as if Gandhi had once again persuaded that wrecking is the best policy. I am not sure that these people really want responsibility, and if we offered them the moon they would probably reject it because of the wrinkles in its surface...They must know equally well that they are quite incapable of taking on the whole defence problem or of 'galvanizing the people of India to rise to the height of the occasion'...I must say that the more I look at the Resolution the more doubtful I am whether people of that type would ever run straight, even if they could be brought for the moment to agree. They would be quite capable, not only of making endless difficulties for Wavell, but even of trying to negotiate a separate peace with Japan¹².

Cripps wrote a letter to Churchill suggesting that it might be a good idea to hand over the Defence Ministry to an Indian, subject to a convention in writing that the Defence Minister would not in any matter affect the prosecution of the war act contrary to the policy laid down by His Majesty's Government. He also suggested as an alternative that if it was impracticable during the time of war to hand over the full responsibility of Defence to a Minister, then perhaps some non-critical functions could be delegated subject to the Commander-in-Chief's approval. Essentially, Cripps's alternative Proposal envisioned designating the Commander-in-Chief as the War Member,

¹¹ Note by Cripps on his interview with Rajagopalachari, 28 March, 1942, in Ibid, 511.

¹² Letter from Amery to Linlithgow, 3 April, 1942, in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Cripps Mission, January – April 1942*, vol. 1, 632.

converting the Defence Department into the War Department, and creating a Defence Coordination Department to take over the transferred functions¹³. Cripps' Proposal to transfer the Defence Department entirely to Indian hands was voted down by Churchill, Amery, Linlithgow and Wavell. Amery argued that India was the key to the defence of the British Empire and putting that key in unskilled Indian hands might prove fatal for the conduct of the war.

Cripps's alternative Proposal was, however, approved by the War Cabinet with the consent of the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief.

The negotiations were further complicated by the intervention of Colonel Louis Johnson, a personal representative of President Roosevelt. He took an active part in the negotiations on the defence formula. The resulting Proposal, called the Johnson-Cripps formula, inverted the original Proposal approved by the War Cabinet¹⁴. The original Proposal was that an Indian representative member should be added to the Executive Council who would be in charge of a new department called the Defence Coordination Department and it would be responsible for specified defence matters which would be separated from the Commander-in-Chief's War Department. The specified defence matters were an unexciting semi-civilian list which included items such as public relations, demobilization and post-war construction, stationary, printing, and forms for the Army, accommodation, reception and social arrangements for all foreign missions, and dignitaries and so on. The Johnson-Cripps formula stipulated that the Defence Department would be placed in the charge of a representative Indian member, but certain functions relating to the conduct of the war would be exercised by the Commander-in-Chief, who would be in control of the armed forces in India, and who would be the member of the Executive Council in charge of the War Department¹⁵. The Johnson-Cripps Formula met strong disapprovals from the Viceroy who complained to London that Cripps was negotiating behind his back. The War Cabinet wrote the following letter chastising Cripps for going beyond his mandate:

¹³ Moore, *Churchill, Cripps, and India, 1939-1945*, 99.

¹⁴ Hodson, *The Great Divide: Britain – India – Pakistan*, 100.

¹⁵ Menon, *The Transfer of Power in India*, 129.

War Cabinet deeply sympathizes with difficulties of your task, but is greatly concerned to find that latest formula was propounded to Nehru and to Working Committee without previous knowledge and approval of Viceroy and Wavell. There is also grave danger that Johnson's public intervention may be misunderstood as representing action on behalf of U.S. Government, which of course is not the case¹⁶.

When Cripps was conducting interviews with the Indian Political leaders and giving press briefings, he had used language which implied that under his Proposal a wholly Indian National Cabinet would be formed in which the position of the Viceroy to the Indian Government would be similar to the position of the King to the British Government, a largely symbolic position with no real authority. He subsequently pointed out that no major amendment to the Constitution was possible during the time of war, but he told the Congress leaders that the Governor-General could allow a National Government by means of a convention¹⁷. The War Cabinet was harshly critical of Cripps. It objected to his promised Indenisation of the executive, which would severely curtail the Viceroy's powers and put him in an impossible situation. On 9 April, 1942, when Azad and Nehru talked to him about the prospects of setting up a National Government, Cripps made it understandable that there would be no change to the Constitution while the war ended and any such changes to the workings of the government were matters for discussions with the Viceroy after a settlement had been reached. In that circumstances, Azad decided to place before Cripps a detailed statement of the position of the Congress towards the Cripps Proposal. Some extracts from Azad's letter to Cripps sent on 10 April are given below:

These Proposals in effect asked for participation in the tasks of today with a view to ensure the future freedom of India. Freedom was for an uncertain future, not for the present...In our talks you gave us to understand that you envisaged a National Government which would deal with all matters except Defence. Defence at any time, and more particularly in war time is of essential importance; and without it a National Government functions in a very limited field. Apart from this consideration, it was

¹⁶ War Cabinet's 13th meeting minutes, 9 April, 1942, in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Cripps Mission, January – April 1942*, vol. 1, 707.

¹⁷ Telegram from Linlithgow to Amery, 10 April, 1942, in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Cripps Mission, January – April 1942*, vol. 1, 718.

obvious that the whole purpose of your Proposals and our talks centered round the urgency of the problems created by the threat of invasion. The chief functions of a National Government must necessarily be to organize defence, both intensively and on the widest popular basis, and to create mass psychology of resistance to an invader. Only a National Government could do that, and only a Government on whom this responsibility was laid. Popular resistance must have a national background and both the soldier and the civilian must feel that they are fighting for their country's freedom under National leadership...The formula for Defence that you sent us gave a list of subjects or departments which were to be transferred to the Defence Department. This list was a revealing one as it proved that the Defence Minister would deal with relatively unimportant matters. We are unable to accept this...you had referred both privately and in the course of public statements to a National Government and a Cabinet consisting of Ministers. These words have certain important and we had imagined that the new government would function with complete powers as a Cabinet with the Viceroy acting as a constitutional head; but the new picture that you placed before us was really not very different from the old...The new government could neither be called, except vaguely and inaccurately, nor could it function as a National Government¹⁸...

The Congress Working Committee rejected Cripps Proposal on 11 April. As soon as the Congress denied the Proposal, the Muslim League Working Committee followed suit. The Muslim League resolution was very disingenuous in its reasons for rejecting the offer. It viewed the Cripps Mission as trying to create a new Union of India and compelling the Muslims into a constitution-making body. Here is an extract from Muslim League's resolution:

In the Draft Declaration a constitution-making body has been recommended with the primary objective of making one India Union. So far as the Muslim League is involved, it has ultimately decided that the only resolution of India's constitutional problem is the partition of India into independent zones"¹⁹...

¹⁸ Letter from Maulana Azad to Cripps, 10 April, 1942, in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Cripps Mission, January – April 1942*, 726-730.

¹⁹ Resolution of the All-India Muslim League Working Committee, 11 April, 1942, in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Cripps Mission, January – April 1942*, 749.

The arrangement for defence proved to be the most vexed problem that was basically responsible for the breakdown of Cripps Mission²⁰. The British wanted Wavell, the Commander-in-Chief, to continue being responsible for all major functions of the army but this was unacceptable to the Congress. The Congress's argument was that Indians should not be expected to fight a war unless they were given the responsibility for defending their own country. Another thorny issue that contributed to the failure of the Cripps Mission was the Congress's demand for the establishment of a truly National Government in the immediate future, with the Viceroy acting as the Constitutional head of such a Government. The British Government was not ready to concede such a demand as it would have entailed changes to the Constitution at a time of war. The truth of the matter was, Churchill had no intention of providing India freedom anytime soon. The main aim behind sending Cripps to India was to show the world that Britain was making efforts to give India self-governance. The conservatives like Churchill, Amery, and Linlithgow didn't want Cripps, a labour leader, to succeed and they sabotaged and constantly opposed in his efforts to accommodate Indian opinions²¹. Churchill never trusted the Congress leaders and thought that Cripps was conceding too much of their demands. Louis Johnson, Roosevelt's personal envoy, commented that London wanted a Congress refusal. Roosevelt was highly critical of London's handling of the situation and he said that the deadlock was caused by the unwillingness of the British Government to concede to India the right of self-government.

While the responsibility for the failure of Cripps Mission rests largely with the British, the Congress's intransigence and its all-or-nothing attitude also hindered reaching a settlement. Cripps's Proposal was a significant step towards granting India its freedom. In the long term, it promised India a post-war Dominion Status with a right to secede, and a constitution-making body elected from provincial legislatures. In the short term, Cripps assured the Congress leaders that the new executive would approximate a National Government, not formally but in practice through conventions

²⁰ Majumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, vol. 3, 518.

²¹ Bipin Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1989), 455.

just as the Governors' special powers had not really hindered the Congress ministries from effectively ruling the provinces from 1937 to 1939. The Congress should have taken the offer, which would have established a semi-National Government at the center and it could have hastened the attainment of India's freedom instead of another five long years that it took for India to get her freedom and that to after paying the heavy price of division of the country.

The War Cabinet had misjudged the mood of India. For them, the crisis in the war called for immediate action to break the deadlock in the face of Japanese invasion. Churchill believed that by dangling the prospects of independence and self-determination after the war, he could get the support of Indian leaders in the war effort. But many Indians were doubtful of the victory of Britain and her allies; most of them were apathetic towards the war and did not believe that Japan would invade India. The country was in no mood to sacrifice its political ambitions; instead, it wanted to take advantage of Britain's weakening position.

Perhaps the biggest reason for Congress's rejection of the Cripps Proposal was the opt-out clause for the provinces. By giving the provinces that option, the Cripps formula conceded the partition of India. In one stroke, the British Government overturned the 1935 Act as a basis for a post-war constitutional settlement²². For the first time the British Government recognized the League's demand for Pakistan by incorporating the non-acceding clause for the provinces in the Cripps formula. It advanced the idea of Pakistan one stage further²³. It led to an increase in estrangement between the two major communities in India. Jinnah now came to believe that the Pakistan idea was achievable. It would not be a stretch to say that Cripps Mission opened the doors to Pakistan for Jinnah and his followers.

III CONCLUSION

From 22 March to 11 April 1942, Stafford Cripps, a member of the War Cabinet, was dispatched to India to discuss the British Government's Draft Declaration on the Constitution of India with representative Indian leaders from all parties. The Cripps

²² Singh, *The Origins of Partition of India, 1936-1947*, 77.

²³ Ibid.

Mission failed and the issue of India's constitution was postponed until the end of the war.

By early 1942, Japan had made advances in South-East Asia and they were on the border of India. The British Government was keen to secure the full cooperation of India in the effort against the Japanese. China and the United States, who had entered the war at this point, were also keen on India's full participation in the war. Mounting pressure from China and the United States, as well as from the Labour Party in Britain, led Prime Minister Winston Churchill to send Stafford Cripps to India to discuss the Draft Declaration, as settled by the War Cabinet and its Committee between 28 February to 9 March 1942, containing proposals to resolve the Indian question of a new constitution and self-government.

Cripps arrived in Delhi on 22 March 1942 where he first met with Viceroy Linlithgow and later discussed the Draft Declaration with a great number of Indian leaders. Whether Cripps was there to negotiate the Declaration or to persuade the Indian leaders to accept it is unclear and, in fact, a reflection of the different attitudes between Cripps and Clement Attlee on the one side and Viceroy Linlithgow, Winston Churchill and Lord Amery on the other.

According to the preamble of the Draft Declaration, the object was 'the creation of a new Indian Union which shall constitute a Dominion associated with the United Kingdom and other Dominions by a common allegiance to the Crown but equal to them in every respect, in no way subordinate in any aspects of its domestic and external affairs'. The Declaration also stated that any province not willing to accept the constitution would be given 'the same full status as the Indian Union', designed to appeased the Muslim League's call for Pakistan. The Indian National Congress, however, was not satisfied with the fact that its demand for immediate complete independence had been rejected. Furthermore, Congress did not accept the provision that 'His Majesty's Government must inevitably bear the responsibility for and retain the control and direction of the Defence of India as part of their world war effort'. The Congress Working Committee rejected the Declaration on 7 April 1942. On 9 April, Cripps made one last effort to persuade the Indian leaders to accept the Declaration,

but once again Congress declined. United States President Roosevelt tried to persuade Cripps to renew his efforts, but Cripps had already left India.

The failure of the Cripps Mission is generally attributed to a variety of factors, especially the constraints within which Cripps had to operate. Some analysts see the Mission merely as an appeasement of Chinese and American concerns with British imperialism. Gandhi seized upon the failure of the Mission and called for voluntary British withdrawal from India. It resulted in the 'Quit India' Movement.

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