

Overview of Shimla Conference in India

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ABSTRACT:

The Simla Conference 1945 was a meeting between the Viceroy of India Lord Wavell and the major political leaders of British India at Simla. Convened to agree on and approve the Wavell Plan for Indian self-government. The conference was a failure because the League and the Congress could not settle their differences. Jinnah insisted that only League members could be the Muslim representatives in the Council, and opposed to the Congress nominating Muslim members. This was because Jinnah wanted the League to be the sole representative of Muslims in India. The Congress would never agree to this demand.

KEYWORDS: Simla , Conference, Provincial , Governors , Muslim, Congress

INTRODUCTION:

The **Simla Conference 1945** was a meeting between the Viceroy of India Lord Wavell and the major political leaders of British India at Simla. Convened to agree on and approve the Wavell Plan for Indian self-government, and there it reached a potential agreement with an objective of self-rule of India that provided separate representation for Muslims and reduced majority powers for both communities in their majority regions.

Talks, however, stalled on the issue of selection of Muslim representatives. Seeking to assert itself and its claim to be the sole representative of Indian Muslims, the All-India Muslim League refused to back any plan in which the Indian National Congress, the dominant party in the talks, appointed Muslim representatives. This scuttled the conference, and perhaps the last viable opportunity for a united, independent India. When the Indian National Congress and the All India Muslim League reconvened

under the Cabinet Mission the next year, the Indian National Congress was far less sympathetic to the Muslim League's requests despite Jinnah's approval of the British plan.

The Cabinet Mission came to India aimed to discuss the transfer of power from the British government to the Indian leadership, with the aim of preserving India's unity and granting it independence. Formulated at the initiative of Clement Attlee, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the mission had Lord Pethick-Lawrence, the Secretary of State for India, Sir Stafford Cripps, President of the Board of Trade, and A. V. Alexander, the First Lord of the Admiralty. Lord Wavell, the Viceroy of India, did not participate in every step but was present and it was divided into three groups A,B,C clusters.

II SIMLA CONFERENCE

Wavell's main motive behind calling the Simla Conference was to enter into negotiations with the Indian political leaders to ease the communal deadlock and to advance India towards her goal of self-government. His aim was to replace the members of his present Executive Council by Indians chosen from lists put forward by leaders of major political parties as a result of negotiations at the conference¹. He hoped that the leaders of political parties would set aside their communal differences and learn to work together in his council to solve the difficult problems facing India. The new council would be entirely composed of Indians except the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief. The Home, the Finance, and the External Affairs portfolios would for the first time be held by Indians. Although his powers as Viceroy would remain unchanged, he would give firm assurance to the political parties that he would not use his veto powers unreasonably.

Wavell's proposal faced stiff opposition from the members of the British Cabinet and the India Committee. For example, Clement Attlee, who was the deputy PM in Churchill's cabinet, said that he was horrified at the thought of a brown oligarchy replacing the present government, which would be responsible to neither the

¹ 'India: The Constitutional Position', report by the India Committee, Paper I (45) 73 (Final), 27 April, 1945, in Nicholas Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Simla Conference*, 1 September 1944 – 28 July 1945, vol. 5 (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1974), 979.

parliament nor the electorate. Lord Wavell countered by saying that at least the new council would be more representative with a wider backing of the electorate than the present council. John Anderson, the Chancellor of Exchequer, thought that Wavell's scheme would further weaken an already weak administration and undermine the position of the Viceroy, the Secretary of State, and the Parliament². The India Committee suggested a Grand Council elected by members of the provincial legislatures and the Viceroy would select the members of his council from that pool. Wavell countered by arguing that the committee's proposal would be very time consuming to implement and it could turn into a white elephant or a nuisance.

Atlee warned the Viceroy that the members of his new council would be politicians representing their own party interests and the Viceroy would find himself pushed into a corner by those individuals and he could end up being a constitutional monarch with no real power. Lord Wavell acknowledged that the experiment of replacing the present council by leaders of the political parties was not without possible dangers but he strongly believed that it was the right step to take in order to break the communal deadlock and to make the parties more responsible and to get them working together. The Viceroy said he knew that the easiest course of action was to do nothing at the present until the end of the war, but he believed that it would be most fatal. It would keep India quiet for the time being, but it would damage British-India relations in the long run, and there could be great danger of serious political unrest once the pressure of the war was removed³. After weeks of meetings, Wavell finally obtained the go ahead from London to proceed with his Simla Scheme. On 14 June 1945 the Viceroy announced his plan for the Simla Conference in New Delhi. Some extracts from his speech are given below.

I have been authorized by His Majesty's Government to place before the Indian political leaders proposals designed to ease the present political situation and to advance India towards her goal of full self-government...This is not an attempt to obtain or impose a constitutional settlement...I propose to invite Indian leaders both

² Note by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, India Committee, Paper I (45) 41, 31 March, 1945, in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Simla Conference*, 1 September 1944 – 28 July 1945, vol. 5, 794.

³ 'India: The Constitutional Position', report by the India Committee, Paper I (45) 73 (Final), 27 April, 1945, in *Ibid*, 980.

of Central and Provincial politics to take counsel with me with a view to the formation of new Executive Council more representative of organized political opinion. The proposed new council would represent the main communities and would include equal proportions of Caste Hindus and Muslims... It would be entirely an Indian Council, except for the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief, who would retain his position as War Member...The Council will work within the framework of the present constitution; and there can be no question of the Governor-General agreeing not to exercise his constitutional power of control; but it will of course not be exercised unreasonably⁴.

Wavell sent out the invitation to the Premiers of the Provincial Governments including the ex-Premiers of the Provinces under section 93, to Gandhi and Jinnah as the two recognized leaders of the two main political parties, to the leader of the Congress Party and the Deputy Leader of the Muslim League in the Central Assembly, to the leader of the Congress Party and the Muslim League in the Council of State, to the leaders of the Nationalist Party and the European Group in the Assembly, to Rao Bahadur N. Siva Raj as the representative of Scheduled Classes, and to Master Tara Singh as the representative of Sikhs. Almost immediately after Wavell's broadcast speech many Indian leaders and national newspapers were sharply critical of various aspects of the plan. An editorial in the *Bombay Chronicle* said the following:

Wavell's proposals are in fact, worse than the Cripps proposals which were rejected by almost all the responsible parties in the country...The new announcement doubtless refers to the full self-government as the goal. But there is neither a time limit nor an assurance of independence outside the Empire if Indians so desired...Under the Cripps scheme, an Indian representative member was to be added to the Viceroy's Executive who would take over those sections of the Department of Defence which can organizationally be separated from the Commander-in-Chief's

⁴ Broadcast speech by Wavell at New Delhi, 14 June, 1945, in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Simla Conference*, vol. 5, 1122.

War Department. Under the proposed scheme however there is to be no Indian Defence Member at all⁵.

In a similar note, the editorial of the *Hindustan Times* on 15 June, 1945 denounced the Wavell's proposal as follows:

The Indian demand for an interim solution has always been the establishment of a National Government in the center fully responsible to the Indian people in every way. The British reply has been that this was not possible under present constitution which cannot be changed during the war, and without an agreement of all the major elements of the Indian population. During the Cripps negotiations in 1942, an attempt was made to combine the two parties and evolve the structure of a de facto National Government without any major changes in the existing constitution. The negotiations broke down on the question of Defence and Governor General's veto. It must be confessed that the present scheme does not show any marked improvement in respect of either. The Commander-in-Chief will continue to be War Member and Lord Wavell has explicitly stated that 'there can be no question of the Governor-General agreeing not to exercise his constitutional power of control'. He has, however, been careful to add that 'it will, of course, not be exercised unreasonable'.

The editorial of the *Amrit Bazar Patrika* described Wavell's plan as more retrograde than Cripps' Proposal because the Cripps offer at least had the merit of presenting a blue-print for the future constitution whereas the Wavell Plan left out the future altogether. It also pointed out that Wavell Plan's proposed parity between the Caste Hindus and the Muslims in the Executive Council. The newspaper questioned the soundness of such a proposal which would provide equality of proportion between Caste Hindus who numbered 250 million and the Muslims who numbered only 80 million. The Hindu Mahasabha leader Shyam Prasad Mookherjee took exception to the fact that the Viceroy had not invited any member of his organization to the Conference. He was sharply critical of the idea of parity between the two communities and wrote the following in the same newspaper.

⁵ Editorial in the *Bombay Chronicle*, 15 June, 1945, in Bimal Prasad, ed., *Towards Freedom: Documents on the Movement for Independence in India, 1945* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 339-340.

There can be no doubt that the main purpose of the scheme is to further placate the Muslim League and to crush the legitimate political rights of Hinduism. The Hindu Mahasabha which is acknowledged to be the only organization that can rightfully represent the Hindu cause has been excluded even from consultation...The only object of excluding the Mahasabha at this stage is that the British Government and Lord Wavell know that it will ruthlessly oppose any scheme which is intended to sacrifice the Hindus and the national cause at the altar of intransigent communalism...By no standard of logic or fair play, equity of justice, can any honest government justify the allocation of equal seats to two communities in India, one numbering about 250 million and the other about 90. How, again, can 90 million of Muslims be given five seats and 60 million Scheduled Castes one seat? Indeed a cursory glance at the list of invitees and the general structure of the scheme goes to show that while it is a dishonest device to disrupt and disunite the Hindus and to ignore their legitimate rights...A sordid and unabashed Anglo-Muslim League conspiracy has been the real hindrance to India's freedom. Hindus have been penalized mainly for their ardent patriotism and their anxiety to throw off the foreign yoke⁶.

All of the above points raised by the various newspapers in India about Wavell's plan were valid in the sense that the proposal fell short of meeting India's aspirations for self-government on many fronts. Wavell's plan didn't recognize the state of India as a dominion. Defence was to continue being a reserved subject, the sole responsibility of the British Government. The Viceroy's veto was to remain. The parity between the Caste Hindus and the Muslims doomed a majority to parity with a minority, and so on. However, Wavell's plan had many positive features and it was a step in the right direction in fulfilling India's demand for self-government. For the first time it offered the Home, the Finance, and the External Affairs portfolios to be held by Indians. Regarding the offer of parity to the Muslims, without such a gesture towards the Muslim community there was no hope of forming a coalition interim government at the center. It was the price that the nationalist India had to pay to secure Muslim

⁶ Shyam Prasad Mukherjee on Viceroy's offer, Calcutta, 16 June, 1945, in Prasad, ed., *Towards Freedom: Documents on the Movement for Independence in India, 1945*, 348-349.

cooperation. Wavell understood that very well and hence included parity in his proposal.

The Congress Party was willing to accept parity between the Caste Hindus and the Muslims in the Executive Council in the name of compromise but they were unwilling to compromise on the method of selection⁷. They objected strongly to the Muslim League insisting on having a monopoly on the selection of Muslims to the Executive Council. The Congress Party didn't want to be maneuvered into a position in which it would be regarded as a purely Hindu body. The Congress Party wanted a voice in the selection of non-Hindus and it was vital to the party as the interim arrangement would be precedent for the future composition of a new Council and would affect long term settlement. Gandhi wrote to the Viceroy voicing his strong opposition to the restriction being put on the Congress to nominate only Caste Hindus. He said that for the Congress to justify its existence for winning the independence of India it must remain a nationalist party representing all communities and free to choose best men and women from all classes⁸.

Jinnah was unyielding in his demand that the Muslim League be given the exclusive right to nominate all the Muslim members to the Viceroy's Council. He told the Viceroy that the Muslims would always be a minority in the new Council because the other communities e.g. the Sikhs and the Scheduled Castes would always vote with the Hindus and the Viceroy would be most reluctant to exercise his veto⁹. Wavell tried to reassure Jinnah that in such cases he and the Commander-in-Chief would see fair play for the Muslims. But Jinnah's fear of a Hindu dominance over Muslims was such that he was not willing to listen to any reasonable suggestion. He asserted that the Muslim League had the backing of 99% of Muslims in India and the party had won all the by-elections in the last two years. It is true that the Muslim League had the support of the majority of Muslim India but it is also true that a significant proportion of the Muslim community in India was nationalist in outlook and backed the Congress

⁷ Telegram from Wavell to Amery, 25 June, 1945, in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Simla Conference*, vol. 5, 1152.

⁸ Gandhi's interview to the Press at Panchgani, 18 June, 1945, in Prasad, ed., *Towards Freedom: Documents on the Movement for Independence in India, 1945*, 350.

⁹ Telegram from Wavell to Amery, 25 June, 1945, in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Simla Conference*, vol. 5, 1153.

Party. Moreover, the President of the Congress Party was Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a highly respected Muslim scholar whom Jinnah described as a traitor to the Muslim community and a hired stooge of the Congress Party, and refused to talk to him during the Conference. Jinnah was not even willing to consider a Muslim nominated by Khizar Hyat Khan, the leader of the Unionist Party in Punjab and a fellow leader of the Muslim community. He stuck intransigently to his position that only the Muslim League had the sole right to nominate the Muslim members of the Council and no one else. He was willing to wreck the Conference on that point only. He refused to submit a panel of names to the Viceroy unless his demand was conceded.

The Governors of many provinces advised the Viceroy to go ahead and form his Council without the Muslim League if Jinnah continued to be obstinate. For example, Sir A. Hope, the Governor of the Madras province, wrote that if the Viceroy didn't go ahead and form the Council then the Congress Party and the world would blame the British Government for succumbing to Jinnah's blackmail. Sir G. Cunningham, the Governor of North-West Frontier Province, a predominantly Muslim area wrote the following:

My impression is that in this Province at least half educated opinion does not admit right of Jinnah or Muslim League to nominate all Muslims to Executive Council and would be satisfied with Muslims (provided they are well known public figures) nominated by Your Excellency even if they included no Muslim Leaguers...I am hardly in position to judge how complete Jinnah's discipline over Muslim League is, but I have been told here there are leading men in his party, even Liaquat Ali himself, who might desert him if he insisted on bringing to impasse at this stage, but conclusion therefore is that from Provincial point of view there is no great danger if Your Excellency challenges Jinnah on this point¹⁰...

The Governor of Punjab, Sir B. Glancy, wrote to the Viceroy that Jinnah's claim to nominate all Muslims appeared to him in the light of League's meager hold on Muslim majority provinces to be outrageously unreasonable. In a similar note, Sir J. Colville, the Governor of Bombay, wrote that Jinnah should be faced with the alternatives of either come in or the scheme to proceed without him. Sir H. Dow, the

¹⁰ Telegram from Sir S. Cunningham, the Governor of NWFP, to Wavell, 2 July, 1945, in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Simla Conference*, vol. 5, 1190.

Governor of Sind, another Muslim majority province, also advised the Viceroy to proceed without the Muslim League. Here is an extract from the telegram he sent to the Viceroy:

In my opinion if Jinnah is intransigent, attempts should be made to form Executive Council without Muslim League. Much of Jinnah's influence depends on feeling that he is going to be successful, and will disappear if you make it clear that he is not going to get away with it. Incidentally, his hold on Sind is very tenuous and I believe my Premier would require little persuasion to break away from League...Jinnah's reference to successes in by-elections does not apply to Sind, where in one recent election Muslim League candidate withdrew to avoid certain defeat and in another election could put up no candidate, while in both elections candidate who had unofficial support of Muslim Leaguers was defeated.

Wavell made many attempts at the Conference to get Jinnah to budge from his position a little by allowing one Non-League Muslim member to be nominated by the Unionist Party. When all his efforts failed, and Jinnah continued to refuse to submit a list of names, Wavell made a provisional list for the Council which included four League Muslims and one Non-League Muslim from Punjab. He met with Jinnah again and told him about his provisional selections for the Executive Council, which included five Muslims of whom four were members of Muslim League and one Non-League Muslim from Punjab and also revealed the names of the Muslims in his list¹¹. Wavell also told Jinnah the communal and party composition of the Council and asked him if he would be ready to cooperate on that basis. Jinnah replied that it was impossible for him to co-operate unless all Muslim members were drawn from the Muslim League and the Governor-General's veto were reinforced by special safeguard that no decision opposed by the Muslims should be taken in the Council except by a clear two-third majority, or something of that nature. These conditions were fundamental and he could not cooperate without those being met.

On 13 July 1945, Wavell made a speech at Simla announcing the failure of the plan. He took responsibility for the failure of the conference without placing the blame on

¹¹ Telegram from Wavell to Amery, 11 July, 1945, in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-7: The Simla Conference*, vol. 5, 1224-1225.

Jinnah because he feared that it might exacerbate the already tense communal situation in the country. Here is an extract from that speech:

The Conference has failed. Nobody can regret this more than I do myself. I wish to make it clear that the responsibility for the failure is mine. The main idea underlying the conference was mine. If it had succeeded, its success would have been attributed to me, and I cannot place the blame for its failure upon any of the parties.

Jinnah stuck to his position that the League represented all Indian Muslims and hence should have the right to nominate all Muslim members to the proposed Council. On this issue, the Congress could not compromise. It claimed to be a secular body representing all sections of the society. To concede to Jinnah meant giving up this status and becoming a communal party representing the Hindus only. In addition, the President of the Congress, Maulana Azad, was a Muslim and not to be able to nominate him to the Executive Council was out of the question for the party. Wavell's compromise formula of '4 Plus 1', i.e. four Muslim League members and one Non-Congress Muslim member from the Unionist Party, was a virtual refusal to regard the Congress as a secular party. It implicitly conceded Jinnah's assertion that the Congress was a Hindu party.

Wavell chose to ignore the advice of his Provincial Governors who overwhelmingly counselled him to proceed with his plan without the Muslim League, arguing that Jinnah would cave in eventually. At this time, the fortunes of the League in the provinces were at a low ebb. In Punjab, the Muslim members of the Unionist Party had definitely broken away from the League. In NWFP, the Congress Party under Dr. Khan Sahib had taken control. In Bengal, the Muslim League leader Nazimuddin had been defeated and the province was under Section 93.

Many Muslim leaders of India had publicly proclaimed that they didn't subscribe to Jinnah's two-nation theory and his claim to be the sole spokesperson for the entire Muslim community of India.

III CONCLUSION :

Lord Wavell invited 21 political leaders including Mahatma Gandhi and M A. Jinnah to Shimla, the summer capital of British India to discuss the Wavell Plan. The Shimla Conference took place on June 25, 1945. The conference was a failure because the League and the Congress could not settle their differences. Jinnah insisted that only League members could be the Muslim representatives in the Council, and opposed to the Congress nominating Muslim members. This was because Jinnah wanted the League to be the sole representative of Muslims in India. The Congress would never agree to this demand. In the Wavell Plan, there were 6 Muslim representatives out of 14 members, which was more than the Muslim share of population. Despite this, the League wanted the power of veto to any constitutional proposal which it believed was not in its interest. The Congress opposed this unreasonable demand also. Jinnah refused to give the names to the council unless the government acknowledged that only the Muslim League was the exclusive representative of Indian Muslims. The Wavell Plan, thus, was dissolved with the failure of the conference.

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