

Simon Commission and the Nehru Report

Appointment of the Indian Statutory Commission

The Government of India Act, 1919 had a provision that a commission would be appointed ten years from date to study the progress of the governance scheme and suggest new steps. An all-white, seven-member Indian Statutory Commission, popularly known as the Simon Commission (after the name of its chairman, Sir John Simon), was set up by the British government under Stanley Baldwin's prime ministership on November 8, 1927. The commission was to recommend to the British government whether India was ready for further constitutional reforms and along what lines.

Although constitutional reforms were due only in 1929, the Conservative government, then in power in Britain, feared defeat by the Labour Party and thus did not want to leave the question of the future of Britain's most prized colony in "irresponsible Labour hands". Also by the mid-1920s, the failure of the 1919 Act to create a stable imperial power had led to several parliamentary reports and inquiries. The Lee Commission went into the Raj's failure to recruit enough British officers; the Mudiman Commission looked into the deadlock within the diarchic dispensation; and the Linlithgow Commission inquired into the crisis of Indian agriculture. So

the British government thought it necessary to go more fully into the working of the 1919 Act. The Conservative Secretary of State for India, Lord Birkenhead, who had constantly talked of the inability of Indians to formulate a concrete scheme of constitutional reforms which had the support of wide sections of Indian political opinion, was responsible for the appointment of the Simon Commission.

■ Indian Response

The Indian response to the Simon Commission was immediate and nearly unanimous. What angered the Indians most was the exclusion of Indians from the commission and the basic notion behind the exclusion that foreigners would discuss and decide upon India's fitness for self-government. This notion was seen as a violation of the principle of self-determination, and as a deliberate insult to the self-respect of Indians.

Congress Response

The Congress session in Madras (December 1927) meeting under the presidency of M.A. Ansari decided to boycott the commission "at every stage and in every form". Meanwhile Nehru succeeded in getting a snap resolution passed at the session, declaring complete independence as the goal of the Congress.

Other Groups

Those who decided to support the Congress call of boycott of the Simon Commission included the liberals of the Hindu Mahasabha and the majority faction of the Muslim League under Jinnah. The Muslim league had two sessions in 1927 – one under Jinnah at Calcutta where it was decided to oppose the Simon Commission, and another at Lahore under Muhammad Shafi, who supported the government. Some others, such as the Unionists in Punjab and the Justice Party in the south, decided not to boycott the commission.

Public Response

The commission landed in Bombay on February 3, 1928. On that day, a countrywide *hartal* was organised and mass rallies

Dr Ambedkar and the Simon Commission

Dr Ambedkar was appointed by the Bombay Legislative Council to work with the Simon Commission. In October 1928, Ambedkar went before the commission.

He argued for 'universal adult franchise' for both male and female alike; for provincial autonomy in the provinces and dyarchy at Centre. (Significantly, universal adult franchise was at the time yet to be guaranteed in most of European countries.)

On behalf of the *Bahishkrita Hitakarini Sabha*, he submitted a memorandum on the rights and safeguards he felt were required for the depressed classes.

Ambedkar said that there was no link between the depressed classes and the Hindu community, and stated that the depressed classes should be regarded as a distinct and independent minority.

He asserted that the depressed classes as a minority needed far greater political protection than any other minority in British India because of its educational backwardness, its economically poor condition, its social enslavement, and for the reason that it suffered from certain grave political disabilities, from which no other community suffered.

In the circumstances, Dr Ambedkar demanded, for the political protection of the depressed classes, representation on the same basis as the Mohammedan minority. He wanted reserved seats for the depressed classes if universal adult franchise was granted. In case universal franchise was not granted, Ambedkar said he would campaign for a separate electorate for the depressed classes.

He also expressed the need to have certain safeguards either in the constitution, if it was possible, or else "in the way of advice in the instrument to the governor regarding the education of the depressed classes and their entry into the public services".

[The report of the Simon Commission did grant reserved seats to the depressed classes, but the condition was that candidates who would take part in the elections would have, first of all, to get their competence endorsed by the governor of the province. Ambedkar was most displeased with this but, in any case, this report remained a dead letter.]

held. Wherever the commission went, there were black flag demonstrations, *hartals* and slogans of 'Simon Go Back'.

A significant feature of this upsurge was that a new generation of youth got their first taste of political action.

They played the most active part in the protest, giving it a militant flavour. The youth leagues and conferences got a real fillip.

Nehru and Subhash Bose emerged as leaders of this new wave of youth and students. Both travelled extensively, addressed and presided over conferences.

This upsurge among the youth also provided a fertile ground for the germination and spread of new radical ideas of socialism reflected in the emergence of groups such as the Punjab Naujawan Bharat Sabha, Workers' and Peasants' Parties and Hindustani Sewa Dal (Karnataka).

■ Police Repression

The police came down heavily on demonstrators; there were lathicharges not sparing even the senior leaders. Jawaharlal Nehru and G.B. Pant were beaten up in Lucknow. Lala Lajpat Rai received severe blows on his chest in October 1928 which proved fatal and he died on November 17, 1928.

View

The blows, which fell on me today, are the last nails driven into the coffin of British Imperialism.

—Lala Lajpat Rai

■ Impact of Appointment of Simon Commission on the National Movement

The impact of the appointment of the Simon Commission on Indian politics was two-fold:

(i) It gave a stimulus to radical forces demanding not just complete independence but major socio-economic reforms on socialist lines. When the Simon Commission was announced, the Congress, which did not have any active programme in hand, got an issue on which it could once again forge mass action.

(ii) The challenge of Lord Birkenhead to Indian politicians to produce an agreed constitution was accepted

by various political sections, and thus prospects for Indian unity seemed bright at that point of time.

■ The Simon Commission Recommendations

The Simon Commission published a two-volume report in May 1930. It proposed the abolition of dyarchy and the establishment of representative government in the provinces which should be given autonomy. It said that the governor should have discretionary power in relation to internal security and administrative powers to protect the different communities. The number of members of provincial legislative council should be increased.

The report rejected parliamentary responsibility at the centre. The governor-general was to have complete power to appoint the members of the cabinet. And the Government of India would have complete control over the high court.

It also recommended that separate communal electorates be retained (and extended such electorates to other communities) but only until tensions between Hindus and Muslims had died down. There was to be no universal franchise.

It accepted the idea of federalism but not in the near future; it suggested that a Consultative Council of Greater India should be established which should include representatives of both the British provinces as well as princely states.

It suggested that the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan should get local legislatures, and both NWFP and Baluchistan should have the right to be represented at the centre.

It recommended that Sindh should be separated from Bombay, and Burma should be separated from India because it was not a natural part of the Indian subcontinent.

It also suggested that the Indian army should be Indianised though British forces must be retained. India got fully equipped.

But by the time the report came out, it was no longer relevant because several events overtook the importance of its recommendations.

Nehru Report

As an answer to Lord Birkenhead's challenge, an All Parties Conference met in February 1928 and appointed a sub-committee under the chairmanship of Motilal Nehru to draft a constitution. This was the first major attempt by the Indians to draft a constitutional framework for the country. The committee included Tej Bahadur Sapru, Subhash Bose, M.S. Aney, Mangal Singh, Ali Imam, Shuab Qureshi and G.R. Pradhan as its members. The report was finalised by August 1928. The recommendations of the Nehru Committee were unanimous except in one respect—while the majority favoured the “dominion status” as the basis of the Constitution, a section of it wanted “complete independence” as the basis, with the majority section giving the latter section liberty of action.

■ **Main Recommendations**

The Nehru Report confined itself to British India, as it envisaged the future link-up of British India with the princely states on a federal basis. For the dominion it recommended:

(i) Dominion status on lines of self-governing dominions as the form of government desired by Indians (much to the chagrin of younger, militant section—Nehru being prominent among them).

(ii) Rejection of separate electorates which had been the basis of constitutional reforms so far; instead, a demand for joint electorates with reservation of seats for Muslims at the Centre and in provinces where they were in minority (and not in those where Muslims were in majority, such as Punjab and Bengal) in proportion to the Muslim population there with right to contest additional seats.

(iii) Linguistic provinces.

(iv) Nineteen fundamental rights including equal rights for women, right to form unions, and universal adult suffrage.

(v) Responsible government at the Centre and in provinces—

(a) The Indian Parliament at the Centre to consist of a 500-member House of Representatives elected on the basis of adult suffrage, a 200-member Senate to be elected by provincial councils; the House of Representatives to have a tenure of 5 years and the Senate, one of 7 years; the central government to be headed by a governor-general, appointed by the British government but paid out of Indian revenues, who would act on the advice of the central executive council responsible to the Parliament.

(b) Provincial councils to have a 5-year tenure, headed by a governor acting on the advice of the provincial executive council.

(vi) Full protection to cultural and religious interests of Muslims.

(vii) Complete dissociation of State from religion.

■ The Muslim and Hindu Communal Responses

Though the process of drafting a constitutional framework was begun enthusiastically and unitedly by political leaders, communal differences crept in and the Nehru Report got involved in controversies over the issue of communal representation.

Delhi Proposals of Muslim League

Earlier, in December 1927, a large number of Muslim leaders had met at Delhi at the Muslim League session and evolved four proposals for their demands to be incorporated into the draft constitution. These proposals, which were accepted by the Madras session of the Congress (December 1927), came to be known as the ‘**Delhi Proposals**’. These were:

- joint electorates in place of separate electorates with reserved seats for Muslims;
- one-third representation to Muslims in Central Legislative Assembly;
- representation to Muslims in Punjab and Bengal in proportion to their population;
- formation of three new Muslim majority provinces—Sindh, Baluchistan and North-West Frontier Province.

Hindu Mahasabha Demands

The Hindu Mahasabha was vehemently opposed to the proposals for creating new Muslim-majority provinces and reservation of seats for Muslims majorities in Punjab and Bengal (which would ensure Muslim control over legislatures in both). It also demanded a strictly unitary structure. This attitude of the Hindu Mahasabha complicated matters.

Compromises

In the course of the deliberations of the All Parties Conference, the Muslim League dissociated itself and stuck to its demand for reservation of seats for Muslims, especially in the central legislature and in Muslim majority provinces. Thus, Motilal Nehru and other leaders drafting the report found themselves in a dilemma: if the demands of the Muslim communal opinion were accepted, the Hindu communalists would withdraw their support, if the latter were satisfied, the Muslim leaders would get estranged.

The concessions made in the Nehru Report to Hindu communalists included the following:

- Joint electorates proposed everywhere but reservation for Muslims only where in minority;
- Sindh to be detached from Bombay only after dominion status was granted and subject to weightage given to Hindu minority in Sindh;
- Political structure proposed broadly unitary, as residual powers rested with the centre.

■ Amendments Proposed by Jinnah

At the All Parties Conference held at Calcutta in December 1928 to consider the Nehru Report, Jinnah, on behalf of the Muslim League, proposed three amendments to the report:

- (i) one-third representation to Muslims in the central legislature;
- (ii) reservation to Muslims in Bengal and Punjab legislatures proportionate to their population, till adult suffrage was established; and
- (iii) residual powers to provinces.

These demands were not accommodated.

Jinnah's Fourteen Points

Jinnah went back to the Shafi faction of the Muslim League and in March 1929 gave fourteen points which were to become the basis of all future propaganda of the Muslim League. The fourteen points were as follows.

1. Federal Constitution with residual powers to provinces.
2. Provincial autonomy.
3. No constitutional amendment by the centre without the concurrence of the states constituting the Indian federation.
4. All legislatures and elected bodies to have adequate representation of Muslims in every province without reducing a majority of Muslims in a province to a minority or equality.
5. Adequate representation to Muslims in the services and in self-governing bodies.
6. One-third Muslim representation in the central legislature.
7. In any cabinet at the centre or in the provinces, one-third to be Muslims.
8. Separate electorates.
9. No bill or resolution in any legislature to be passed if three-fourths of a minority community consider such a bill or resolution to be against their interests.

10. Any territorial redistribution not to affect the Muslim majority in Punjab, Bengal and NWFP.

11. Separation of Sindh from Bombay.

12. Constitutional reforms in the NWFP and Baluchistan.

13. Full religious freedom to all communities.

14. Protection of Muslim rights in religion, culture, education and language.

■ **Nehru Report Found Unsatisfactory**

Not only were the Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Sikh communalists unhappy about the Nehru Report, but the younger section of the Congress led by Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Bose were also angered. The younger section regarded the idea of dominion status in the report as a step backward, and the developments at the All Parties Conference strengthened their criticism of the dominion status idea. Nehru and Subhash Bose rejected the Congress' modified goal and jointly set up the **Independence for India League**.

Summary

● **Simon Commission**

Came in 1928 to explore possibility of further constitutional advance.

Boycotted by Indians because no Indian represented in the commission.

Responses of Various Groups/ Ambedkar's Memorandum

Impact of Simon Commission

● **Nehru Report (1928)**

First Indian effort to draft constitutional scheme.

Recommended—

* dominion status

* not separate electorates, but joint electorates with reserved seats for minorities.

* linguistic provinces

* 19 fundamental rights

* responsible government at centre and in provinces.

* responses of various groups