

THE FIRST ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE (12 NOVEMBER 1930)

Events Leading to the Conference

The Indian political community received the Simon Commission Report issued in June 1930, with great resentment. Different political parties gave vent to their feelings in different ways. The Congress started the Civil Disobedience Movement under Gandhi's command. The Muslims reserved their opinion on the Simon Report declaring that the report was not final and that matters should be decided after consultations with leaders representing all communities of India. The British government refused to contemplate any form of self-government for the people of India. The Indian political situation reached a deadlock. This caused frustration among the masses, who often expressed their anger in violent clashes.

The Labour Government returned to power in Britain 1931, raising hope in the Indians. Labour leaders had always been sympathetic to the Indian cause. The government decided to hold a Round Table Conference in London, consider new constitutional reforms. Representatives of Indian political parties were summoned to London for the conference.

The Conference

In the first session of the conference which opened in London, all parties were present except the Congress, whose leaders were in jail because of the Civil Disobedience movement. The Congress leaders stated that they would have nothing to do with further constitutional discussions unless the Nehru

Report was enforced in its entirety as the constitution of India.

Almost 89 members attended the conference, out of whom 58 were chosen from various communities and interests in British India, and the rest from the princely states and other political parties. The prominent Muslim delegates invited by the British government were Sir Aga Khan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Maulana Muhammad Ali Jauhar, Sir Muhammad Shaft and Maulvi Fazl-i-Haq. Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, Jayakar and Dr. Moonje too were invited. The Commission had proposed self-government in the provinces and federation of British India and the princely states at the Centre. However, the representatives of the Muslim League, Liberals and other parties assembled for discussion on the commission report. The Muslim-Hindu differences overshadowed the conference—the Hindus were pushed for a powerful central government while the Muslims stood for a loose federation of completely autonomous provinces. The Muslims demanded maintenance of weightage and separate electorates, the Hindus did not want these. The Muslims claimed statutory majority in Punjab and Bengal, while the Hindus resisted its imposition. In Punjab, the situation was complicated by inflated Sikh claims. Further, Dr. Ambedkar was demanding separate electorate for the depressed classes. Eight subcommittees were set up to deal with all these details. The committees dealt with the federal structure, provincial constitution, adult franchise, Sindh, the North-West Frontier Province, defence services and minorities. However, in the absence of the Congress-premier political party, the First Round Table Conference had to be adjourned on 2 January 1931. All that emerged was a general agreement to write safeguards for the minorities

into the constitution and a vague desire to devise a federal system for the country.

**Peshawa incident of 18th Royal
Garhwali Rifles (25 April 1930)**

Events in Peshawar took an even more dramatic turn. Ghaffar Khan's Pathan movement (whose members were called 'Khudai Khidmatgars') stayed non-violent and within the Congress fold but it attracted huge number of Pathans who believed it would fight against the chronic indebtedness to moneylenders. In 6 months after the Lahore Congress, its membership shot up from 500 to 50,000. The British freely used aerial bombardment on the village areas. The arrest of Ghaffar Khan and on 23 April 1930, led to a massive upsurge in Peshawar with the crowds confronting armoured cars and defying, intensive firing for 3 hrs at Kissakahani Bazaar. According to the British, 30 were killed whereas according to non-official estimates 200-250 were killed-recalling the scale of Jallianwala Bagh. A remarkable event took place during the firing. Two platoons of the Second Battalion of the 18th Royal Garhwali Rifles, Hindu troops facing a Muslim crowd, refused to fire, broke ranks, and fraternised with the crowd, handing over their weapons. They were later to declare before their court martial.

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