

Simla Conference (1945)

Background of the Simla Conference

Lord Wavell succeeded Lord Linlithgow as Viceroy of India in 1943. Lord Wavell was a reputed military commander and had commanded the British armies in the Second World War. Before coming to India, he was the C-in-C of the British forces which were fighting in North Africa against German forces. Being a military commander Lord Wavell possessed great administrative experience.

When he took over as Viceroy, the tide of the Second World War was turning in favour of the allies. Lord Wavell had a plan in his mind and was eager to invite key leaders to a summit. Wavell also viewed this mini-summit breakdown a personal challenge to bring together two parties. He has many creative ideas, and was willing to use his influence and power to settle the communal deadlock. He would try to bring some moderate Indian leaders on a settlement by calling them to Simla (India's summer capital). After correspondence with Amery in October, now Wavell decided to write Churchill.

Bengal's governor Richard Casey was well informed about Congress-League relation that he wrote to Wavell, "Congress is basically responsible for the growth of Pakistan idea, by the way they treated the Muslims especially by refusing them into coalition provincial governments." Wavell agreed with everything Casey said about Pakistan. Wavell was invited to visit England, and met with Churchill and Cabinet in May 1945. Wavell was allowed to fly back to India in June 1945 to start talks that was later called Shimla Conference. Wavell decided to call all key leaders of India in Shimla on 25 June 1945 and broadcast a message to all Indians on 14 June 1945 showing British willingness to give India dominion status as soon as possible if the communal deadlock is broken down. "India needs a surgical operation", Nehru noted after considering Wavell's idea, "We have to get rid of our preoccupation with petty problem" as he considered communal problem a petty problem. Quaid e Azam accepted the invitation but if he could meet with Wavell alone first on 24 June.

Details of the Conference.

One day before the conference was organized on 24 June, Wavell met with Azad, Gandhi and Quaid e Azam to assess their approach. Wavell officially opened the summit at 11:00 am on 25 June 1945. In the beginning Azad being president of Congress spoke of its "non-communal" character. Quaid e Azam spoke of Congress' predominately Hindu character, at that point there was a tug of war that was settled down by Wavell's intervention.

On the morning of 29 June, the conference was reconvened and Wavell asked parties to submit list of candidates for his new council, Azad agreed while Quaid e Azam refused to submit a list before consulting Muslim League's working committee. Conference was adjourned till 14 July, meanwhile Wavell met with Quaid e Azam on 8 July and tried to convince him as Quaid e Azam was determined to nominate all Muslim member from Muslim League's platform as he considered Congress's Muslim representatives as "Show Boys". Wavell gave him a letter that was placed in front of Muslim League's Working Committee on 9 July. Quaid replied after careful consideration of Working Committee, "I regret to inform you that you have been failed to give assurance relating nomination of all Muslim members form Muslim League's platform so we are not able to submit a list."

The Viceroy was equally resolved not to give at that point and wired to Amery at that night his own list of new council members. Four were to be Muslim League members (Liaquat Ali Khan, Khawaja Nazimuddin, Chaudhry Khaliquzzaman and Eassak Sait) and another Non-League Muslim Muhammad Nawaz Khan (a Punjabi landlord). The five 'Caste Hindus' had to be Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabh Bhai Patel, Rajendra Parasad, Madhav Shrihari, B.N. Rau. Tara Singh was to represent Sikhs and Dr. Ambedkar to represent "untouchables" John Mathai was the only Christian thus bringing total to sixteen with Viceroy and Commander-in-Chief. Amery asked Wavell to consult this list with Quaid, when Quaid was asked about Muslim names, he bitterly refused to allow any League member to be part of the government until the League's right to be the sole representative of Muslims of India was acknowledged.

There was a deadlock over the Muslim League's demand that all five Muslim members of the Executive Council should be the nominees of the Muslim League. The Viceroy was of the opinion that four members should be taken from the Muslim League while the fifth member should be a Punjabi Muslim who did not belong to the Muslim League. The Viceroy's insistence on having a non-leaguer in the Executive Council was in accordance with the advice given by

British and Hindu officials to support Khizar Hayat Tiwana in his stand against Muslim League. Khizar Hayat Tiwana, Chief Minister of Punjab, had demanded that one seat of the Executive Council, out of Muslim quota, should be given to his Unionist Party which was happily accepted by the Viceroy. The Congress also supported Khizar Hayat in his stand against Muslim League. The Congress denied Muslim League's claim of being the sole representative of the Indian Muslims. Quaid-i-Azam took a strong stand on these two issues and the conference failed to achieve anything and finally ended on 14th July, 1945. Thus the Wavell plan that was later to be called Shimla Conference was badly failed.

Details of the Wavell Plan.

In May 1945 Wavell visited London and discussed his ideas with the British Government. These London talks resulted in the formulation of a definite plan of action which was officially made public simultaneously on 14 June 1945 by L.S. Amery, the Secretary of State for India, in the House of Commons and by Wavell in a broadcast speech delivered from Delhi. The plan, commonly known as the Wavell Plan, proposed the following:

1. The Viceroy's Executive Council would be immediately reconstituted and the number of its members would be increased.
2. In the Council there would be equal representation of high-caste Hindus and Muslims.
4. All the members of the Council, except the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief, would be Indians.
5. An Indian would be appointed as the member for Foreign Affairs in the Council. However, a British commissioner would be responsible for trade matters.
6. The defense of India would remain in British hands until power was ultimately transferred to Indians.
7. The Viceroy would convene a meeting of Indian politicians including the leaders of Congress and the Muslim League at which they would nominate members of the new Council.
8. If this plan were to be approved for the central government, then similar councils of local political leaders would be formed in all the provinces.

9. None of the changes suggested would in any way prejudice or prejudge the essential form of the future permanent Constitution of India.

To discuss these proposals with Indian leaders, Wavell summoned them to a conference to take place in Simla on 25 June 1945.

The Wavell Plan, in essence, proposed the complete Indianisation of the Executive Council, but instead of asking all the parties to nominate members to the Executive Council from all the communities, seats were reserved for members on the basis of religion and caste, with the caste Hindus and Muslims being represented on it on the basis of parity.

While the plan proposed immediate changes to the composition of the Executive Council it did not contain any guarantee of Indian independence, nor did it contain any mention of a future constituent assembly or any proposals for the division of power between the various parties of India.

Meanwhile, general elections had been held in the United Kingdom in July 1945 which had brought the Labor Party to power. The Labor party wanted to transfer power to the Indians as quickly as possible. The new government sent the Cabinet Mission to India and this proved to be the final nail in the coffin of the Wavell Plan.