2.1 Colonial Policy and the 1935 Act

The aim of this chapter is to describe the inner rationale of the national leadership's strategy on the ministry question. But a preliminary note must be taken of the 1935 Act itself, both in terms of the policies of the colonial rulers and in terms of its peculiarities. This will provide a necessary background to the nationalist debates on the office issue.

The 1935 Act apparently devolved power over important areas of government: of particular significance here was the transfer of responsibility over previously forbidden domains such as land revenue administration and law and order. Further there was an expansion of the electorate on which these provincial governments would be based, from some 5½ million in 1919 to 35 million under the 1935 Act.¹ So there would be a much larger social arena to which these Governments would now be accountable.

As B.R. Tomlinson has shown, these changes were designed to bring a wider popular sanction to support a State whose essential interests were to maintain the financial and military functions of India in the larger context of empire.² By bringing contentious elements of rule into the public domain, a critical concentration on these fundamental policies would be deflected.

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At the same time, the possible dangers inherent in the area of administration under the control of elected representatives could be neutralized if need be by the substantial financial and administrative safeguards in the Act.  

At the provincial level, this was mainly in the form of the safeguards the Governor could exercise to overrule the policies of the elected ministers. These safeguards, referred to as "special responsibilities", could be exercised to defend (i) peace and tranquillity; (ii) minority interests; (iii) the interests of the civil services; (iv) British commercial interests (administrative interference was prohibited by this section, a separate chapter of the Act prevented legislative discrimination); (v) the "good government" of backward areas excluded from the normal administration; (vi) the protection of the rights of the states and their rulers; (vii) the execution of orders from the Governor-General pertaining to certain federal interests. Apart from these special responsibilities the Governor could "act in his discretion" in such matters as the summoning of the legislature, appointment of ministers and the giving or withholding of assent to bills or their reservation. The Governor could also promulgate an ordinance at a time of emergency which would be valid for six months, or could enact a Governor's Act with the same status as an ordinary Act. In such "acts of discretion" the Governor would be under the control of the Governor-General and so the British Parliament still checked full self-government at the provincial level. Financially, at the provincial level the following checks were imposed: certain items of expenditure such as Governor's, Ministers' and Judges' salaries, the cost of administering the "excluded areas" and debt obligation, were to be the first charge on the revenue and, therefore, not votable. However, all these items could be discussed barring Governors' salary. Coupland, op.cit., pp. 134-36.

The most substantial financial checks were in the projected Federal Government which made up the second part of the 1935 Act. The elected legislatures here were only to have administrative power over internal affairs, the domains of army, defence, external and ecclesiastical affairs and railways being excluded from their purview. Financially the legislatures were to be powerless over money for the army, the All-India servicing and sinking funds - 80 per cent of the revenues of Central Government. In addition, while finance was otherwise formally transferred to an Indian Minister responsible to the Central Legislature, his budget proposals could not be introduced with-
How did the government expect the Act to shape the immediate political context? The consistent theme of their analysis was that conservative social and political forces would emerge as the dominant elements in the provincial governments. At first hope was directed to non-Congress formations. But more characteristically it was the official's belief that the Congress would split into pro and anti-office wings. The former was largely seen as comprising provincial opinion, and was referred to as the "Right Wing". The latter was referred to as the "inner council" and was made up of the central leadership.

The division here was seen as political rather than being grounded in differences of social ideology. The emphasis was on the distinction between non-cooperators and constitutionalists. In the government view, the former group, composed of Gandhi, the

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out the prior sanction of the Viceroy; finally a "non-political" Reserve Bank was to be set up to control currency and exchange matters - this was to be under the Viceroy's authority and its establishment was made a necessary precondition of any transfer of financial responsibility. B.R. Tomlinson, The Indian National Congress, p. 30.


5 Ibid.

6 "... there is certainly likely to be a serious split ... of those who want to work the Bill - for they will work it, although they say they mean to wreck it - and those who don't want to come in at all. "Willingdon to Zetland, 26 August 1935, ibid.

7 For this usage of Right Wing see Zetland to Linlithgow, 3 and 9 May 1937, Linlithgow Ms. F. 125/4.

8 Ibid.
Gandhian Rightists and the Left constituted one bloc, fulfilling different functions in a unified non-cooperating scheme.

The non-cooperating strategy in the official view took on changing tactical forms within an essential unity. In a late 1935 report Gandhi and Nehru were considered allied by their opposition to office and in their determination to renew civil disobedience. The All India Village Industries Association, Nehru and the CSP's insistence on agrarian mobilisation would all feed this objective. Disparate areas of unrest, as in Bihar and U.P., were linked together as parts of this grand scheme. Paranoia culminated in the belief that not only would Nehru support a socialist programme, but so would Gandhi.9

Gandhi was in fact seen as the central threat. It was feared that he was building himself up as an equal to the Government, a view confirmed for the administrators by rumours that there would be a meeting between the new Viceroy and Gandhi. So focussed on Gandhi was this apprehension that almost all changes in the Congress were ascribed to him, or seen as functional to his plans.10

This was largely how Nehru's role was seen. One analysis had Gandhi using Nehru as a threat which could be reined in whenever required and so could be converted into bargaining power for the Mahatma. This would be used to secure a meeting with the Viceroy, a revision of the Act and of the Communal Award and the

10 Secret Report, Home Department (Poll.) 19/1/36.
announcement of Dominion Status. A later report saw Gandhi as more intransigent: instead of supporting the electoral campaign he would use the funds at his command to prepare for agrarian unrest and civil disobedience. In this reading Gandhi was again using Nehru, this time to disrupt constitutional possibilities and law and order, at which point he would take over leadership. Even when the elections did come through, it was feared that the mobilisation which had taken place could lead to extremist activity and it was even suggested that Gandhi, Nehru and M.N. Roy be arrested to preempt this.

There were more thoughtful evaluations of Rajendra Prasad and Patel. Rajendra Prasad was believed to hold that Civil Disobedience would be possible by October 1937, after a stint in office, and that Nehru should be President during that more active phase. Patel on the other hand was said to favour Nehru for the post as he wanted immediate preparation for civil disobedience, through country-wide ashrams rather than through

11 Ibid.
13 Thus Zetland feared that even the moderates in the leadership were prepared to run radical risks to establish mass contact. To Linlithgow, 8 February 1937, Home Department (Poll.) 4/40/36.
14 These leaders were described as those without whom a mass movement would not be a threat. The suggestion was that of N.P. Smith, Central Intelligence Officer. Ibid.
15 Home Department (Poll. 4/20/36.
constructive work. 16

The theme of unity in the non-cooperating bloc was consistent and very rarely gave way to the belief that ideological difference would lead to a split in the alliance. However, there were hints of this in the policy towards Nehru's speeches. At Lucknow, for example, his Presidential address was considered seditious but was allowed to pass in the hope that it would alienate the property and pro-office group in the party. 17 But more characteristically the signs of united front adjustment over the agrarian programme and election manifesto in 1936 convinced officials that not only was the unity of non-cooperators durable, it was inclined to move into extremist channels. 18 Only for a transient moment was the Gandhian group identified with the moderate constitutionalists, when the Congress passed their March 1937 resolution of conditional office acceptance. 19 But the strictness with which the conditions were held to swiftly brought the government back to a skeptical view of the Gandhians' intentions.

The 1935 Act can then be seen as an attempt to disperse

16 Ibid.

17 Home Member to Private Secretary, Governor of the United Provinces, 10 April 1936. Home Department (Poll.) 4/8/36. During this period conflict in the Congress Working Committee was at its height, and it was speculated that Gandhi would cut Nehru's term short and instal Rajagopalachari in the Presidential chair at the next Congress. Linlithgow to Zetland, 4 July 1936, Linlithgow Ms. F. 125/3.


19 See below, f.n. 145.
Congress' all-India and non-cooperating character. While it was hoped that the Act would draw the Gandhian leadership of the party into its vortex,\textsuperscript{20} the government's more serious ambitions were to disengage provincial pro-office groups from the leadership's influence and thus to realize the provincialising aims of the Act, and so to erode a national centre of opposition to their rule. Superficially, the official evaluation of the Gandhians' commitment to non-cooperation might appear to be put into question by the formation of Congress ministries in July 1937, or, as in Tomlinson's view, it may be seen as a submission to the dictates of "dominant provincial interests".\textsuperscript{21} However, in the following pages, we will show that the Gandhians were not just reacting to such pressures, but had a definite understanding of how ministries should be used in order to facilitate an advance towards their objective.

2.2 A Reformulation of Tactics: Debates on Office Acceptance 1932-37

Our analysis begins with a study of the opposition to office-acceptance, as this will help pinpoint certain characteristic criticisms and fears which define the orbit of Congress' relation with constitutional arrangements. A summary of these views at this point will also allow for a logical presentation.

\textsuperscript{20} This was based on the hope that Congress promises to the rural electorate would compel ministry formation, whereafter it was hoped that the logic of such a choice would prevent wrecking tactics from within. Linlithgow to Zetland, 15 February 1937 and Zetland to Linlithgow, 21 February 1937. Linlithgow Ms. F. 125/3.

for it allows for an orderly rendering of how the pro-office group related to these fears, whether through counter arguments, tactical rationale or even by confirmation.

2.2.1 The Anti-ministry Campaign

Those opposed to the Congress forming ministries were composed of three basic groups. The overall argument against ministry-formation lay in the classic no-changer positions of the 1920s, and the main exponent of this was the Andhra Gandhian Patanjali Sitaramayya. Nehru and the CSP shared his view, though their's was integrated with an alternative leftist orientation. And, of the groupings on the left, the CPI, while accepting the CSP position officially, had significant differences with them. Finally there was opposition from Punjab and Bengal Congressmen, whose provinces' communal electorates pre-empted any possibility of Congress ministries.

Sitaramayya's critique of the Act\textsuperscript{22} was the foundation of the anti-ministry campaign. His argument underlined that the financial and administrative restrictions of the Act would make attempts at reform ineffectual. He pointed out that certain crucial financial and economic areas remained outside the control of even the projected Federal legislature: the currency exchange ratio, hitherto under the legislature, was now with the Reserve Bank; the Railway Board was accountable to the British parliament, indicating that rates would continue to be manipulated;

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\textsuperscript{22} Indian Express, 2 March 1936; Bombay Chronicle, 16 July 1936, pp. 7, 7; Speech by Sitaramayya at meeting of the Anti-Ministry Committee (M.R. Masani presiding) Bombay, 27 July 1936, Bombay Chronicle, 28 July 1936, p. 7.
coastal shipping, normally the preserve of the concerned country, was not to be so in the Indian case; and commercial safeguards would further maintain unequal economic relations. Above all was the fact that 80 per cent of the government's expenditure, tied up with military budgets and home charges, lay outside the ministers' control. Concluding his analysis of the central government under the Act, Sitaramayya pointed out that in the Federal Legislature, with its large representation of Princes, a veto would be ensured against any progressive legislation, while seats for Muslims, Christians, commercial groups and propertied classes would ensure further divisiveness.

These economic, financial and political restrictions at the centre would impede real advances at the provincial level. With so much finance tied up at the centre serious agrarian reform would be jeopardized and land revenue reduction would be difficult. In terms of other aspects of provincial autonomy Sitaramayya noted that the Governor was allowed to appropriate money without a vote. He further had the power to veto ministerial legislation and could intervene in cabinet debates. Sitaramayya even cast doubt on whether a homogenous cabinet would be feasible as the governor could select ministers on the basis of community and interest, on the ground that this would be necessary to ensure a stable government. Finally he underlined that the upper services were unaccountable; they could not be transferred or punished or even be asked for an explanation of their conduct. He scorned Satyamurti's suggestion that services would be subordinated under Congress ministries, and noted that
any serious change would show the limits of such hopes.

Nehru and the CSP built on this critique to argue that office acceptance could diffuse the Congress' objective of independence.\(^{23}\) As little could be done, and as even this would take a long time, serious effects on the movement's mass support could result.\(^ {24}\) Either mass political antipathy would develop, or a reformist attitude which looked to government for favours?\(^ {25}\) This diffusion of popular anti-imperialism would be furthered by Congress association with the imperialist machinery, as this could blunt the edge of popular resentment against the colonial rulers, now that they would no longer be directly responsible

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23 This is implied by Nehru in his remarks that the Congress' ultimate objective was the "revolutionary seizure of power", not to remove defects in the administration. Speech at Allahabad, 3 March 1937, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru* edited by S. Gopal (hereafter SWJN), Vol. 8, p. 48. During the anti-ministry campaign, the Congress Socialists argued that "... the present parliamentary activities of the Congress betray its independence pledge" (the object of the criticism here was the Central Legislative Assembly activity, but this was said in the context of the anti-ministry campaign). *Congress Socialist*, 1, 2, 28 December 1935, p. 3.


25 Suggestions that Nehru feared either apathy or reformism developing in Congress' popular support are indicated by his remark that "We have to see very carefully what effect will be produced by a particular action of ours on the people whose support and sympathies we enjoy." Speech at Allahabad, 3 March 1937, SWJN, 8, p. 54. For direct expression of these fears, see Jayaprakash Narayan, "British vs. India", Part II, *Congress Socialist*, 1, 15, 28 March 1936, p. 10.
for the operation of repressive institutions. All this would lead to an eclipse of extra-legislative mass action; the Congress would be transformed into a body seeking the spoils of office and the dispensing of patronage to the middle-class.

The CSP alternative was kisan mobilisation and grass-root strengthening of the Congress organisation, perceived as the necessary conditions for renewed civil disobedience. Parliamentary methods should be functional to these priorities, basically by clarifying contradictions between the people and the Government. This would be done by compelling the Government to resort to ordinance rule, especially over matters concerning the economic and political demands of the masses.

The socialists sought to ensure such an orientation even in the context of Congress ministries. At Lucknow, they spon-


27 Resolution of the Allahabad CSP in ibid.; a similar insistence is present in Nehru's address to the Allahabad DCC of 19 February 1937 when he noted that the main programme lay outside the legislatures. SWJN, Vol. 8, p. 48.

28 In a statement to the press at Allahabad of 8 March 1937 Nehru referred disparagingly to fighting for the spoils of office, SWJN, Vol. 8, p. 57; Meherally's speech at the Lucknow Congress open session, 13 April 1936, Bombay Chronicle, 15 April 1936, pp. 9, 16.


30 This summed up the general approach to the place of parliamentary tactics within overall strategy. See proceedings of the party's Meerut Conference in Congress Socialist, I, 7, 30 January 1936, p. 13.
sored two resolutions, one directly against office acceptance, the other insisting on the objective of making the working of the constitution impossible. The latter's function was both to ensure dead-lock by binding Congress legislators at the outset and also to expose the constitutionalist motives at work by demonstrating the pro-office group's opposition to even such a policy. 

The CSP in fact feared that the Caughian leadership had become increasingly reformist and compromising and would as a result cause the national movement to succumb to imperialism and so the issue for it was tied up with that of the replacement of the leadership. The CPI also perceived the leadership in this way, but they had a different understanding of the office issue. They had wanted to evade confrontation on this question as they feared that the left was not strong enough to carry the

31 Resolution by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya in the Subjects Committee, 10 April 1936, Bombay Chronicle, 11 April 1936, p. 7. The leading anti-ministerialist, Sardul Singh Caveeshar proposed this resolution in the Open Session, Bombay Chronicle, 15 April 1936, p. 16.

32 Proposed by Sampurnanand in the Subjects Committee, 10 April 1936, Bombay Chronicle, 11 April 1936, p. 7.

33 Thus Sahajanand noted that Satyamurti spoke of deadlocks but that he did not accept Sampurnanand's resolution. Subjects Committee, 11 April, Bombay Chronicle, 13 April 1936, p. 8; and Narendra Deva noted that he could have appreciated pro-office opinion if its aim had been to make the working of the constitution impossible. Ibid.

34 Thus at an anti-constitution meeting in Bombay, C.K. Nara-

yanaswami said that "the retrograde policy of accepting office and reinforcing subjection could only be avoided when the leadership that advocated such a course was re-

placed by a radical leadership." Bombay Chronicle, 21 March 1936, p. 20.
Congress and in fact might invite repression from the leadership. But they also had an alternative strategy to deal with the Act. They thought that the Congress ministries should be set a time-bound programme. If the British prevented this the colonial authorities would stand exposed. If the Right did not accept such a programme they would be isolated. Their illegality had prevented them from propagandising this view earlier, and now it was too late as they did not want to disrupt leftist unity.35

This policy of exposure and substitution was a consistent aspect of CPI policy. It was also an element of CSP strategy before 1936. It became muted with Nehru's Presidentship which inaugurated hopes that there would be a more gradual transformation towards the left through implementation of radical programmes and through a radical restructuring of the Congress.36 Traces of their earlier attitude remained in the way they analysed the leadership's policies at this juncture. But their attitude to office was not a mere expression of factionalism. There was a genuine fear that the policy would fundamentally sidetrack the Congress from their goal.

The final constituents of the campaign were the Congressmen of the Muslim majority provinces. It was noted earlier, before the Lucknow Congress that Bengal and Punjab delegates were largely with the anti-ministry campaign.37 Sarat Bose noted

36 See below, Ch. 5.
37 See Kripalani to Rajendra Prasad, 15 February 1936, Rajendr
that ministry formation would cause an uneven political development of the provinces, with some lagging behind in a context which emphasised a form of parliamentary activity which they would not have access to. 38

This combination of anti-office opinion proved significant. Recurrently, they received above 1/3rd of the vote in the open sessions at Lucknow, Faizpur, and in the AICC at Delhi in March 1937. 39 Their effect on Congress attitudes was strong enough for Munshi, a particularly articulate pro-office spokesman, to fear their possible victory in the wake of the Lucknow Congress. 40 Even Patel who, along with Rajendra Prasad, must have had the best understanding of the inner temper of the Congress party, was sufficiently disturbed by the situation and

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Prasad Ms. III/36/coll. 1; and the opinion of Masani, Secretary of the Anti-Ministry Committee, Bombay Chronicle, 21 March 1936, p. 20.

38 Bengal and Punjab Congressmen's admission of this is as much a reflection of their social and ideological weakness as it is of the colonial rulers' divisive designs. For, theoretically, it should have been possible to put up Muslims on a secular nationalist platform and so undermine communal politics, especially as the parties which did finally form ministries, the Unionists in Punjab and the Krishak Praja Party in Bengal, were founded on agrarian appeals. However, this problem lies outside the scope of our study.

39 At the Lucknow open session the results were: Sampurnanand's amendment rejected 255-487; Caveeshar's rejected 250-450, Bombay Chronicle, 15 April 1936, p. 9. At the Faizpur Open Session, Caveeshar's amendment rejecting office was defeated by 262-441. Proceedings of the Faizpur Congress, Microfilm, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. At the Delhi AICC session in March 1937, Jayaprakash's amendment against office lost 78-135, while the conditional acceptance resolution was passed 127-70. H.N. Mitra ed. Indian Annual Register, January-June 1937.

40 See below, 2.1.1(1)
Nehru's strong pronouncements to consider standing against him for the Faispur presidency. These fears had some grounding in reality. In the UP, where some 32 out of 42 town and District Congress Committees had voted in favour of office, Nehru and his supporters managed to swing a verdict against ministry formation in the Provincial Committee. However, this was to be the only important exception, barring Delhi, the narrowly achieved anti-acceptance verdict of Maharashtra and the non-Congress majority provinces of Punjab and Bengal, in which the pro-office group failed to achieve a favourable opinion.

2.2.2 The Pro-Office Group

The anti-ministerialists then essentially feared that if Congress accepted office it would fall into the imperialist trap by ignoring the financial and political structures of the act; this would lead to collaboration, a descent into routine administration, and a possible diffusing of the Congress objective.

Our argument here will be that the pro-office group were aware of these problems, but believed that they had no option but to take office, and that they would be able to evade co-optation and diffusion of anti-imperialist politics through careful tactical deployment and organisation. In the process, however, certain elements of the anti-ministerialists' critique

41 See below, 2.2.2(ii)
re-emerged, this time as positive elements of what we shall elaborate as a revised constitutionalist strategy. Of particular significance here was the problem of the Congress' relationship to the state apparatus, seen as one of the key danger points of the issue by the opponents of office acceptance.

In a sense, the implications of this feature were profound, for the party would have to relate to a field of politics different from any it had previously experienced: one in which the primary mediating mechanisms were not those of the party, an essentially consensual institution, but were those of the state. These mechanisms had independent regulatory and repressive functions and so the Congress involvement with them could have serious consequences for the forms of activity it allowed.

However, there was no ineluctable logic operating here. Instead of this involvement leading inevitably to co-optation into the colonial regime as in the anti-ministerialist projection, there were differing views about the meaning and function of the state apparatus in pro-office arguments. For example, the most articulate constitutionalist strategist of office acceptance, K.M. Munshi, saw in the formation of the Congress ministries, and in their relationship to the machinery of the State, the possibility of a shift in the location of Congress power and an alteration in its dynamics such that the relations of power could be fundamentally and irreversibly transformed. On the other hand the Gandhians' less sophisticated perception of the issue did not place much weight on the role of Congress relations with the institutions of the Government in the develop-
ment of nationalist authority.

(1) The Constitutionalists

We start the analysis here with the constitutionalist group. Though their's was not the dominant influence in the office debate, they throw into sharp relief certain significant features of the thinking on this issue. They were not a definite group in that they were not organised in the party to represent one homogenous viewpoint. The view was instead spread across a range of ideas and practices, which had a certain internal logic. The major figures of this formation were Rajagopalachari, Munshi, Bhulabhai Desai and Satyamurti. Rajagopalachari had no articulate constitutionalist view at this time, and was more generally associated with the Gandhian Right, who envisaged ministry formation for a limited duration. However, his responses at various points indicate his identity with this group. Desai too maintained a low profile at this juncture.

The point of unity of this section can be defined as the belief that it was possible to achieve independence through constitutional practice and negotiation. It was believed that this

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44 Rajagopalachari’s emphasis on a parliamentary policy under Congress control is observable as early as 1934. See above, Ch. 1.1. However, between 1934 and 1937, he was caught up in bringing about a revival of the party in Madras, and so tended to remain marginal in the discussions over the ministry issue. However, his responses during the impasse of March-July 1937, and his practice as Madras Premier from 1937-39, clearly identify him with the constitutionalist tendency. See below, 2.3 and 3.1.

45 Patel had told him not to intervene in the office acceptance debate at Lucknow. This was probably because he was
could be done without recourse to civil disobedience. Instead, a careful working of the constitution would entrench Congress' popular influence through legislation and control of the state apparatus, and this demonstration of power would make it difficult for the Colonial authorities to implement regressive constitutional arrangements such as the Federation. 46

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regarded as the epitome of constitutionalism by the Left. On the one hand, and possibly as an index of Right-Wing good intentions on the united front programme, Patel asked Desai to introduce the agrarian programme at Lucknow. Bhulabhai Desai Ms. Diary entry at 28 June 1936.

46 Bipan Chandra has suggested that "there was no real constitutionalist current in the National Congress after 1920... nearly all Congressmen, including those in favour of council entry in the 1920s and office-acceptance in the 1930s... firmly believed that constitutional activity was a short-term tactical step which the national movement had to take in view of its incapacity at that moment to resume the extra-legal mass movement. But they accepted that the "real work lies outside the legislatures" and that, for achievement of freedom, the path of mass struggle outside the legal and constitutional framework was essential. In both of its constitutional phases, all Congressmen agreed that it was necessary to coordinate work in the legislatures and ministries with mass politics - and they did in practice coordinate the two..." "Long-term Dynamics...", op.cit., p. 24. To take the last point about coordination first, the fact that extra-legislative movements developed under Congress regimes does not mean they were consciously designed to mesh with ministerial activity. In most cases they were not approved of by the Ministers, or by the Gandhian Right, and sometimes they were suppressed; when they were tolerated, this was due to a number of factors (including the power wielded by radical Congressmen through party and trade-union organisations such as the Kisan Sabha). See below, Ch. 3. Apart from this later practical expression of the problem of coordinating constitutional and extra-constitutional activities, even at a conceptual level, those whom we have described as constitutionalist, such as Munshi, believed that extra-legislative movements should be de-emphasised under the Congress governments. See below, this section. Finally, the mere invocation of the view that the ministries would last for a period, and
On the surface this tendency's significance is cast into doubt, in as much as their strategy did not work out. But they remain extremely important because, in their ideas and in their practice (Munshi was to be Bombay Home Minister, Rajagopalachari Madras Premier) they broach an issue of epochal weight: the nature and the structure of the state apparatus in a situation of transferred power.

How exactly Congress Ministries would achieve the desired objective was elaborately outlined in only one instance, that of Munshi. His comprehensive survey of the issue\(^{47}\) revolved around the belief that a definite shift in power relations between Congress on the one side and the Colonial rulers and their social, political and institutional supports on the other could be achieved through office acceptance.

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would then give way to civil disobedience undertaken by a strengthened Congress, as was expressed by Munshi, does not mean that this was indeed envisaged. No one in the post-1920 Congress would have said otherwise. (Even Rajagopalachari only said it privately. See S. Gopal, Jawahar-lal Nehru, Vol. I, New Delhi, 1975, p. 219). But I believe that in the constitutionalist objective of integrating the state apparatus to nationalism through the 1935 Act, a fundamental shift in power was hoped for, one that could make civil disobedience redundant. This does not mean that the constitutionalists were out to compromise with imperialism, just that they believed that nationalist ends could be attained by a careful exercise of constitutional power.

\(^{47}\) The following references are taken from K.M. Munshi, "Office Acceptance: A Survey of the Problem," in Rajendra Prasad Ms. 1/36/coll. 4. I was introduced to this important source by Gyanesh Kudaisya. This article appeared as a series in the Bombay Chronicle of 8, 9 and 24 July 1936. Each major section in the source is demarcated by a capital letter, and the sub-sections by a roman numeral, e.g. section A(1).
Munshi's emphasis on power emerged out of his understanding of the Act and his analysis of the political context. The Act encouraged communal divisions and he felt that if Congress allowed a power vacuum to develop, reactionary formations could develop on the basis of these. Further, such groups would have the active support of government finance and civil service to bolster their power. Given these in-built advantages, these anti-Congress governments could capitalize on the demoralisation characteristic of the current political situation.

This demoralisation was expressed in "squabbles between public men, in disintegration of political parties, in loss of faith in the methods so far adopted by Congress, in attempts to discover speedy quack remedies and in a growing fondness among people for clinging to people in power. Such a situation would enable any ministry which knows its business to rally the hesitant elements of the public around it. If the ministries by reactionary elements and without any political gospel assume the reins of office, the demoralisation will be intensified." On the other hand, as the Congress was composed of members of different communities, Congress rule would arrest such a reactionary polarization.

48 Ibid., section A(i).
49 Ibid., section A(ii).
50 Ibid., section B(ii).
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., section A(iii).
This made it imperative that Congress accept office. But in doing so the party must accept the limits defined by the Act. In this context, he underlined the same restrictions on provincial autonomy that the anti-ministerialists had pointed to: the protection afforded to the services and the limited capacity to change the socio-economic situation, because of the powers of the upper house and of the financial constraints of the Act. These limitations on Congress rule would have to be accepted in his opinion, as otherwise the reactionary possibilities he had outlined would be realized.

The acceptance of these limits would entail an exercise in discipline and patience, as the changes wrought would not be spectacular. Such discipline would enable the Congress "to build power as well as stability; to master the day to day details of the administration and by slow degrees overhaul the departments; and to control the civil service and render the Governor more or less a passive spectator". These methods would eliminate the possibility of conflict with the state apparatus and would place the onus for breakdown on the colonial authorities. This was in any case unlikely in Munshi's view because the Government wanted the Act to succeed, and were aware that fresh elections in such circumstances could only bring the Congress back with a larger mandate.

53 Ibid., sections A(ii) and (iii).
54 Ibid., section A(iii).
55 "If well disciplined it [the Congress] will render Government's power harmless, if not obsolete. It will not give a clear opportunity for the exercise of the Governor's special power", ibid.
56 Ibid.
To understand Munshi's argument on how office should be used, it must be situated in his more general reflections on political strategy. These relate to the relations between political methods, financial support and the fight for leadership within the Congress.

In Munshi's general argument about Congress strategy he placed a great deal of weight on the issue of organisation, which he equated with 'men of faith and money'. He felt that "vigorous propaganda" without any sense of organisation was proving disruptive: it was causing demoralisation, a context in which "men and money" would not be forthcoming. He suggested that the solution to this demoralisation lay in work through 'public activities and administrative channels', implying here the need for office acceptance. For the office experiment to be successful however discipline and patience were required, which would not be to the liking of the 'demagogue' in the party.

Finally, fears that office would itself lead to demoralisation by itself has no value, unless accompanied by organisation. And extensive organisation means men with faith and money; and men and money cannot be forthcoming where public life is hesitant, sceptic or demoralised. "More vigour of propaganda which leads to no intensive organisation is anything but a blessing..." (Ibid., section B(ii)).

The sense of frustration which has taken hold of the public mind at present can only be removed by a steady and laborious process of building up hope, faith and power. This can be done much more easily by a political party which works both through public activities and administrative channels." (Ibid.)

The party will not be able to splash its achievements across the daily newspapers, nor always meet with the approval of the idealist or the demagogue in the party..." (Ibid., section A(iii)).
ralisation and power seeking were allayed by reference to the extra-parliamentary coordination of these activities by the Gandhians, who were for office acceptance and who would guarantee against such a decline. The danger to this necessary strategy lay in the left wing who were using anti-ministerialism to weaken the Gandhians. He urged that they desist, for if the Gandhian ministerial effort failed, then this would be to the left's advantage, while on the other hand if the Gandhians were defeated on this issue, this would weaken the movement.

Out of this argument we can construct two opposed chains, which together constitute the world of Munshi's strategy:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Necessary Strategy</th>
<th>Its Opposite</th>
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<td>(1) Organisation</td>
<td>Vigorous propaganda without organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) Men of faith and money</td>
<td>Demoralisation and the loss of men and money</td>
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There was an ambiguity here. At one point the guarantee against such demoralisation was cited as the Working Committee, which, of course, meant more than the Gandhians. But at a later point in the argument, Munshi clearly refers to the Gandhian "steel-frame" as being the guarantor of such consistency of method and objective. As the opposition we next cite will indicate, that between the Gandhians and the "... minority ... extremist and idealist..." it is the second sense that is central to Munshi's argument.

While he noted that "some honestly saw office acceptance as cooperation and as destructive of Congress' revolutionary zeal, he believed that "their rank and file are not concerned with office acceptance at all, for, if it comes, it will only help to strengthen the Gandhian steel-frame which seems to them to be barring the way to their progress in the provinces."
Points (3)-(5) pertain to office acceptance. (1) and (2) are general but have a definite context: Nehru's socialist appeals, his arguments with Bombay capitalists in May 1936 and the conflict within the Congress Working Committee explain the charge of "vigorous propaganda without organisation" and the alienation of the "men of faith and money". And point (3), work through public activities and administrative channels, is seen as the panacea not only for public demoralisation, but also for the alienation of the moneyed. Office then functions also as a reassurance to the capitalists. This lends a class character to the argument at this point.

63 See Bipan Chandra, "Jayaharaj Nehru and the Capitalist Class, 1936", in Bipan Chandra, Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India, op.cit.

64 The total linkages of the argument should be reproduced to convey a sense of the relationship between oppositions (1) and (2), Nehru's appeals and the conflict in the Working Committee: "... vigorous propaganda by itself has no value, unless accompanied by organisation. And extensive organisation means men with faith and money and men and money cannot be forthcoming where public life is hesitant, sceptic and demoralised. Mere vigour of propaganda which leads to no intensive organisation is anything but a blessing. What for instance has been the effect of rumours - may be unfounded - of a difference of opinion among members of the Working Committee upon the large mass of Indians who have faith in the Congress?" Munshi's Survey, section B (II). Nehru is the unmentioned object of censure here and the allusions to controversy and alienation can be made sense of by reference to the events of the preceding months.
Point (4), the necessary adjustment under offices, suggests a de-emphasis on extra-parliamentary movements and pressures. This would be the implication of a preference for a disciplined, patient response to work in administrative channels, in contrast to the excessive and irresponsible demands of the 'demagogue', whose activities would presumably threaten to break the authority and viability of the administration (we may infer, through parallel institutions).

What prevents this from becoming an exercise in colonial constitutional politics is (5), with its underlining of an extra-parliamentary force that would coordinate all this and ensure against compromise. Its opposite, the bearers of irresponsible propaganda, demoralising divisiveness, anti-constitutional methods and demagoguery, were the left-wing minority, seen as motivated not by nationalist perspective but a factionalist one. So, while not simply this, Munshi's argument fitted into the conflict between the right and left wings in the Congress.

Munshi's reasoning now moved into its crucial part, related no longer to tactics but to questions of final power. The Gandhians resurface in his references to the scope that Congress Ministries would afford constructive work. Hitherto subject to government indulgence, it would now be performed as a right.65 This point can be seen simply as a civil libertarian one, but has politically transformative connotations if seen in the light of Munshi's analysis of how office would change Congress activity: the mentality of resistance would be maintained, now no longer

65 Ibid., section D.
through opposition but through "uncompromising administration."66

This concept suggests an exercise of administrative power which had no reference points to any authority outside the realm of its own procedures. And this makes sense in terms of the emphasis Munshi placed on discipline and patience i.e., so that the services did not feel that their functions were in any way impaired, and so that they would become effective instruments of Congress policy. However, Munshi's thesis here speaks of power too, for this reassurance was given on unprecedented terms: for the policy to be implemented by them was that of a party whose objective was to subvert the authority of their masters.

So this dual aspect of 'uncompromising administration' aimed both to reduce established animosity between the services and the Congress and to question the continued significance of the authority which had defined that antagonism, the Colonial Government. This implies that the functions of the services would be re-situated in a different power structure, without however these functions themselves being changed.

This conception was not merely a tactical adjustment, oriented to deal with the problems of the Act. It was integral·ly related to Munshi's notion of non-violent revolution, defined as a method which would leave 'the shape of government intact' but would alter its spirit through 'concentrated resistance by public opinion'.67 Munshi's thesis acquires here the final

66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., section C.
toches of bourgeois democratic theory, for it sketches in the imperative of making government accountable and responsive to popular opinion.

The argument indicates that the state structure would be a constant in the ultimate transfer of power. This might have been inadmissible in a nationalist, populist discourse, with its emphasis on the people's self-activity, and its talk of panchayati raj. But Munshi saw these institutions as viable constituents of a political system which would transform the network of allegiance and the power relations within which they functioned. Though he made references to alternative revolutionary paths (the Russian) and their inadequacy in the present circumstances, this comes across merely as a necessary engagement with leftist patterns of discussion in the Congress. For him, the characteristic institutions of the modern bourgeois state appear as the ones to be aspired to. In fact in his emphasis on this, in his diatribes against the leftist threat, and in his invocation of capitalist perspectives, he emerges as a highly sophisticated strategist of bourgeois power.

Munshi was later to suggest that if Congress had stayed on in office freedom would have been achieved sooner. And even his attitude during the ministry period indicates this view. He advocated adjustment to resolve both the major conflicts of the ministerial period, the Federation question and India's

68 Ibid.
70 In a context of mounting tension in January 1939, Munshi
involvement in the war, in order that Congress could maintain constitutional activity. And in a sense this attitude is clear even in his survey of the office acceptance question. For though he made the conventional bow to the idea of Congress renewing civil disobedience after consolidating itself, the whole thrust of the argument, in its emphasis on adjustment and gradual control of the state, reflects this.

The constitutionalist view was nowhere else expressed with such sophistication. At the closest, there was an emphasis, as with Satyamurti, on the subordination of the services, but not with the complex sense of how power could be induced from these institutions.

In spite of the apparent lack of generality of this understanding, its significance should not be underestimated. Its importance lies in its working out the logic of a modern poli-

Cont'd. f.n. 70

urged Gandhi to tone down his attacks on the Government's States policy. Gandhi to Linlithgow, 31 January 1939, CWMG, Vol. LXVIII, p. 357; and in May of that year, Munshi told Linlithgow that the Congress was eager for an early Federation, though this was not even the Right Wing's position. Linlithgow to Zetland, 26 May 1939, Linlithgow Ms. F. 125/7; Ch. 4 below.

71 Munshi told Governor Lumley that in the event of war he hoped that the Congress would remain in office and allow all immediate war measures to be put into operation. Lumley to Linlithgow, 6 April 1939. Linlithgow Ms. F. 125/53. Rajagopalachari also hoped that Congress would support the British and seek concessions only afterwards. Erskine to Brabourne, 7 October 1938, ibid., F. 125/66.

72 K.M. Munshi, "Survey...", section A.

73 Speech at public meeting in Bombay, 13 July 1936, Bombay Chronicle, 14 July, p. 7.
tical system and in seeing the national movement as integral to the process of its creation. In doing this, the theory, as a moment in nationalist strategy, laid bare certain features of power, and of how it was wielded, and then went on to insist that nationalism neither could, nor should, evade involvement with these. Further, in his view of the movement's relationship with the state apparatus under Congress Ministries, Munshi had cited very real tendencies of tension and of the reorganisation of power.

However, as often happens with a too comprehensive strategy, one which meticulously plots all the possible lines of development and their relationship to each other, there was a tendency here to miss out on a certain complexity of circumstance and of political form. The constitutionalist viewpoint was not the dominant element in strategy formulation because the Congress as a party was not amenable to such a precise re-ordering of its activity. We shall now observe, in the thinking of the Gandhian Right Wing, a rather different set of emphases.

(ii) The Non-constitutionalists

Two elements defined the Gandhian Rightists' attitude to office-acceptance. Like Munshi, they believed that there was no context for civil disobedience, that the political atmosphere was one of demoralisation. Like Munshi too they considered the Act to be too powerful a factor to be brushed aside by simple

74 e.g. Patel's speech at the open session, Lucknow Congress, 13 April 1936, Bombay Chronicle, 15 April 1936, p. 9.
no-changer responses.75

This combination of factors is in evidence in Rajendra Prasad's review of the office question.76 Two of the key questions in his outlining of the negative possibilities of office acceptance were (a) would it not raise expectations that could not be fulfilled in the act's frame77 and (b) if the programme was not fulfilled what effect would it have on the people and on the Congress.78 Logically these possibilities would only be realized if, on these limits being reached, diluted legislation went through and there was a continuation in office. The alternative possibility, of a breakdown at such a point through resignation, was regarded with apprehension. This is indicated by his suggestion that it would be preferable that a breakdown should occur as a result of the Congress trying to implement their programme and being prevented by Governor's interference, than through Congress precipitating a crisis.79

75 e.g. Patel noted that office acceptance should not be made a fetish of and if office was to be accepted to strengthen the country it might have to be considered. He noted that "this constitution was keeping in view all possible steps the Congress might take..." ibid.

76 To Bhulabhai Desai, 19 December 1935, Rajendra Prasad Ms. III/35/coll.2.

77 Ibid., question I(b).

78 Ibid., question I(c).

79 "Is it not better that the constitution breaks down on account of the use of emergency powers by Governors while we are engaged in carrying on our constructive programme than that we should force the hands of the Government by a programme of obstruction?" Ibid., question IV(d).
Whether in fact Rajendra Prasad put much weight even on a crisis brought about by Governor's interference is doubtful. In a letter to Patel, prior to the formulation of the Congress election manifesto, he was critical of the conditions Patel had laid down for the programme because he thought the Governors would not find them acceptable and a deadlock on such grounds would bode ill for subsequent electoral performance. The overall argument suggests that if crisis came at all then it should be due to the Governor, but this did not mean that crisis was desirable. The perspective here was determined by the question 'do not the people expect us to do them such good as is possible through the constitution?' Reform was indispensable, and in this context crisis was to be separated from the sphere of reform; it was to be seen as crucial that achievement here preceded demission of office, so that it could not be propaganda that Congress was indifferent to constructive work.

This emphasis on reform, of a demonstration of Congress' capacity to provide a constructive aspect to their representative aspirations, can be connected with Munshi's suggestion that demoralisation derived, amongst other factors, from a disenchantment with Congress methods. We can interpret Rajendra Prasad's views here in terms of a belief that Congress would have to first do something concrete for its supporters before it could

80 14 July 1936, Rajendra Prasad, Ms. I/1936.
81 To Bhuabhai Desai, 19 December 1935, op. cit., question II(b).
82 To S.K. Sinha, 4 March 1938, Rajendra Prasad Ms. 3-B/38.
expect a response for a direct action call. This could only be accentuated by the fact that now the ministries would be founded on an unprecedented electorate. The fact of such a constituency being mobilised on definite promises would set in train a chain of compulsions that a deadlock would not easily arrest.

This is the dominant aspect of Rajendra Prasad's understanding of the office issue. His other reasons are more difficult to explicate. The most undeveloped idea here is the belief that with Congress acceptance of office, reactionaries would be prevented from taking power.83 This rationale occupies an important place in Munshi's analysis as well and it is a problematic conception.

This is because, in Rajendra Prasad's case at least, there was confidence that Congress would be able to attain majorities in all provinces except Punjab and Bengal.84 Munshi never made such an assertion, though presumably he must have conceived of this possibility if he gave Congress office acceptance such importance. The problem then is that, with the assumption that Congress would obtain majorities in most of the provinces, the possibility of reactionaries taking over could be pre-empted by

83 "Is it possible and desirable to avoid acceptance of office when there are other individuals and parties in the country willing to work the Constitution in a way which may be detrimental to the best interests of the country as we conceive them to be?" Rajendra Prasad to Shulabhai Desai, 19 December 1935, question II(a).

84 To D.G. Dalvi, 24 September 1935, Rajendra Prasad Ms. III/35/Coll.3. As a result he felt there was no need to declare in favour of office before the elections.
In the absence of Rajendra Prasad's elaboration of what these fears signified, we can suggest two interpretations. The first is that the Governors could utilise the powers vested in them to bolster a minority ministry. As the anti-ministerialists had pointed out, it was not necessary for the Governor to abide by the conventions of majority party rule; he could constitute the ministry according to what he considered were the priorities of group and interest representation. If the majority party willingly allowed him such a choice by refusing office, he could actually set up such a ministry. He had the power to appropriate money without a vote, and the legislatures did not have to be called immediately, so a minority ministry could function for some time without having to face the majority. If such a space could be used to effect a certain amount of reform, Rajendra Prasad's fears about Congress non-performance could be realized. As we will show, a situation of this nature did develop between March and July 1937.

85 A point made by Nehru in his speech at the Subjects Committee meeting of the Lucknow Congress, 11 April 1936, SWJN, Vol. VII, pp. 167-68.

86 This would be enabled by the Governors 'acting in his discretion' in the appointment of Ministers, and through exercising his special responsibility to safeguard the legitimate interests of minorities. Coupland, op. cit., pp. 134-35.

87 Ministers' salaries were a first charge on the revenue and therefore not votable. Ibid., p. 135.

88 The summoning of the legislature was also in the Governor's discretion. Ibid., p. 134.
semblance of constitutional functioning, he formed the interim ministry in U.P., but at the same time he encouraged the Congress to take office. This indicated that he saw his political position as tenuous and foreshadowed his attempt to relate to the Congress ministry not as a rival but as a member of the landlord class as a sectional interest. 

Thus the government's frustration was understandable: elements of the very groups it was trying to "protect" from the Congress were critical of its stand. The impasse presented the conditions for this by compelling a recognition of the Congress' indispensability to constitutional arrangements.

The Government could hardly confirm this trend, whatever the responses of its supporters. For conciliation would alienate the services. Already this section had resented the nationalist sentiment flaunted during the elections, and this had carried on into the present context. The Government contributed to that by hoping that uncensured radicalism by sections of the Congress would alienate conservatives in the party and propertied elements, but this had not happened.

Such allowances could not be reversed in the delicate political situation of the impasse. So, without giving into the

155 After Zetland's conciliatory speech of June, he urged Congress to take office. *Indian Annual Register*, January-June 1937, p. 15.

156 See Ch. 3 below.

157 J.M. Ewart, Intelligence Bureau to Personal Secretary to the Viceroy, 19 April 1937, Linlithgow Ms. F. 125/4.

158 For example, as when no action was taken against Nehru for his Presidential Speech at Lucknow. Home Member to Private
demand, Zetland\textsuperscript{159} and Linlithgow\textsuperscript{160} indicated in speeches the likelihood of a smooth functioning of the Congress ministries, founded on mutual understanding and adjustment. They also made an appeal to the pro-ministry section of the Congress, with Zetland noting that it was unfortunate that a politician with Raja-gopalachari's attitude should not be a minister.\textsuperscript{161} This section remained the crux of the government's hopes. But there were signs of growing fatalism on the part of the colonial officials, a gathering disbelief that the hold of the Gandhians would be weakened. As late as 1 July 1937, the Viceroy was anticipating a deadlock and the need to take recourse to section 93 of the constitution.\textsuperscript{162} By 6 July, on the eve of the Working Committee meeting which would take the final decision, the Secretary of State was thinking of conciliating the Congress, a move which Linlithgow was prepared to meet with resignation from the Vice-royalty.\textsuperscript{163}

That British fears were not finally realised was not due to Gandhi. As late as 6 June, and in the face of growing Cong-

\textsuperscript{Cont'd. f.n. 158}

Secretary, Governor of the United Provinces, 10 April 1936, Home Department (Poll.) 4/8/1936.

159 For Zetland's speeches, Bombay Chronicle, 7 May 1937, p. 1; 1 June 1937, p. 7; and 10 June 1937, p. 1.


162 Linlithgow to Zetland, 1 July 1937, Linlithgow Ms. F.125/4.

ress opinion for office acceptance, Gandhi had written to Rajendra Prasad that in his opinion the conditions had to be accepted before Congress ministries were formed, but that he would finally abide by provincial opinion. On 16 July, after the Congress had decided to take office, Mahadev Desai referred to this consideration when he wrote to Birla that "the letters Bapu was receiving every day from various parts of the country were making him incline more and more towards office acceptance". It is to this popular context of the decision that we now turn.

2.3.2 The Popular Context

An overview of this period indicates that the Congress attitude at the level of provincial units derived from the fear that the electorate expected the Congress to implement its electoral promises. This fear was escalated by the signs of interim relief and reform projected by the minority interim ministries formed in the wake of Congress refusal to accept office.

Alongside this trend must be placed another feature. This was the escalation of tension in the countryside of U.P. and Bihar. Kisan activity was particularly central in Bihar, and radical proposals under Kisan Sabha aegis marked the later period

164 Gandhi to Rajendra Prasad, 6 June 1937, CWMC, Vol. LXV, pp. 284-85. Later, on 11 June he was to reiterate the importance of the assurances to Rajagopalachari. Without their fulfilment he thought acceptance would be a fatal blunder. Ibid., pp. 291-92.

here; in U.P. it was in the lower level Congress organisation itself, and more generally in peasant awakening as expressed through the formation of village panchayats that such unrest was signalled.

Clearly, there are the possibilities of two sets of interpretations in the material here. The first bears out Rajendra Prasad's evaluation of popular political attitudes, that the people desired reform. The second suggests a trend to a more straightforward attack on existing social relations. The possibility here would then be that the Congress, fearful of a radical political alternative to office, finally put a close to such trends by forming the Ministries.

Several counter-arguments must be cited in this context. Firstly, as we have shown, Patel was quite ready to face a breakdown, so clearly there was no socially coherent ideological view on the issue. Secondly, while the U.P. and Bihar cases represent trends of popular unrest, evidence from other parts of the country, particularly from the Madras Presidency, do not exhibit similar developments, but conform to an opinion for office acceptance. Given the fact that the situation in any one area could not determine All-India policy and that an anti-constitutional policy could have redounded quite seriously on the Congress hold in the South, the pressures against such a development were strong; further, while unrest in U.P. and Bihar was in evidence, its context must be qualified by the presence of negative factors—the functioning of the interim Ministries and the resulting uncertainty that a record of non-performance could cause. Finally,
we may recall that other questions, not immediately relevant to the Congress dominated provinces had a role to play, for example, the effect on politics of Congress non-performance when ministries in Punjab and Bengal were functioning.

This sums up the country-wide outlook for the period. But it is necessary to emphasize, within this picture, the inauguration of certain tensions which were to become characteristic in the ministry periods: differences between a mediatory practice to resolve social conflicts and one which leaned heavily in the direction of peasant self-activity. The major instance here is from Bihar and the indications are of the emergence of certain class determinants in a context which was not, in overall terms, so determined.

(1) The Dynamics of Local Unrest

Throughout our period of study, the U.P. exhibited signs of unrest which constantly threatened to overflow the bounds of negotiable dissent. This was particularly marked during the election campaign and the impasse, when the government feared that popular activities would undermine the authority of the administration.

Not only did this threat flourish in the localities. The UP RGC itself was based on a strong populist tradition, and it was the sole provincial unit which suggested an aggressive advance in the face of government refusal to concede the Congress demand for assurances. In their April meeting, the Executive Council of the party resolved that within a month as many Cong-
ress and non-Congress legislators as possible should assemble, elect a speaker, and begin the process of parallel legislative activity. Alongside this various agrarian sub-committees were set up by the Congress MLAs and MLGs to immediately investigate popular grievances.

Sampurnanand, a Socialist, writing of these singular events, noted that further developments would depend on the Government response, the UP PCC's capacity to follow these up and the All-India context. In his view a sustained policy on these lines at an all-India level would cause suspension of the constitution "at the very least."

However, the proposed meeting, scheduled for 2 and 3 May, was postponed, and its radical agenda never taken up, because the 29 April CWC meeting at Allahabad did not ratify this programme. Apparently the U.P. plan was considered, but turned down after considerable discussions. Instead the CWC decided that such provincial Congress legislative meetings would only pass votes of no-confidence in the interim ministries, and there was no intention of keeping these meetings in session for a long time. Gandhi was reported to have persuaded the militants to exercise patience. This decision was in keeping with the

166 Bombay Chronicle, 12 April 1937, p. 12; Leader, 12 April 1937, p. 9; Pioneer, 13 April 1937, p. 3.
167 Pioneer, 13 April 1937, pp. 1, 3, 4; Leader, 16 April 1937, p. 7.
169 Bombay Chronicle, 29 April 1937, p. 1 and 30 April pp. 1 and 10.
Gandhian Rightist view that a crisis should not be precipitated. On the other hand the militancy of the UPPCC should be qualified by reference to the nature of the unrest it had presumed. This was less volatile than was at first apparent.

Firstly, while rental collections, especially in the eastern districts, were poor throughout the period, advice against rent being paid was not common, and was generally restricted to the early part of the period. Complaints about rent on the other hand were significant, but were largely channelised into demonstrations and petitions to the Congress and the administration. Direct action on this issue was negligible.

More ambiguous was the functioning of village panchayats, of which there was a very impressive incidence and local Congress organisations. How far did these operate as a government parallel to the administration? Substantially, if we go

170 In late February there were reports of this from Etawah, Pratapgarh and Jaunpur. Police Abstracts of Intelligence (hereafter PAI) for 27 February 1937; in March there were also reports from Ballia and Ghazipur, PAI, 20 March 1937.

171 As far as complaints were concerned, these were numerous. In early April about 1,000 Kisans marched from Pratapgarh to Allahabad to complain to Nehru about rents and high handedness on the part of zamindars and taluqdaras. Baba Ramchandra was prominent. Apparently Congress officials were unhappy about the demonstration. PAI, 17 April 1937; on 13 April in Basti a panchayat was organised to protest against the local zamindar's exactions, ibid.; towards the end of the month reports from Benares referred to a march of 150 tenants to Benares to ask the District Magistrate to remit rent. PAI, 1 May. There was also one insistence of some shamars refusing to work for their zamindar and threatening the karinda. PAI, 24 April. But this is the only instance of such direct action being taken.

172 e.g. in Fyzabad it was reported that Congress propaganda had led to the setting up of panchayats in 12 villages of 3 police circles, PAI, 20 March 1937; in April it was noted
by the appeals made. These included the claim that the administration need not be feared as the Congress was now in control\(^{173}\) that grievances should not be reported to the police\(^ {174}\) and that the police's functioning must be obstructed.\(^ {175}\) Left at this level such appeals could instigate subversion of the government apparatus. But the actual functioning of the panchayats was not seriously antagonistic to the administration.

For example, in March a local DCC appointed a number of Congress chowkidars who were to report grievances to the DCC; but thereafter the DCC would forward the report to the District Magistrate, and in the event of failure to perform at this level, would then channel it to the legislative assembly.\(^ {176}\) The emphasis on conventional avenues of redressal became characteristic.

The Government evaluation in May was that Congress' invoking of parallel government imagery had declined.\(^ {177}\) In that month Baba

\begin{flushright}
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that a feature of rural agitation had been the increasing number of panchayats set up in the villages, PAI, 17 April. This trend was confirmed as substantial in the 24 April report and it was noted that a distinct tendency had arisen of deciding cases. Appeals to form panchayats were also heard from Gorakhpur at the end of May, PAI, 29 May 1937.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \(173\) e.g. in Basti on 21 March, PAI, 27 March 1937.
  \item \(174\) e.g. in Ballia, ibid., 22 May 1937.
  \item \(175\) e.g. Jaunpur, ibid., 5 June 1937.
  \item \(176\) This was in Jalalabad Tahsil, Shahjahanpur. 29 Chowkidars were appointed at the meeting. PAI, 20 March 1937.
  \item \(177\) This was the view put forward by Commissioners at a meeting with Ministers and Members of the Board of Revenue on 1 May. U.P. FR (2), April 1937.
\end{itemize}
Raghav Das, the influential Congress leader from Gorakhpur, one of the most troubled areas of the province during this period, urged that grievances be reported to the administration.\footnote{PAI, 29 May 1937.} In the same district, it was advised that villagers form panchayats, not to decide criminal and civil cases amongst themselves, but as a mode of self-defence.\footnote{This was at the Gorakhpur District Kisan Conference on 19 June which Sahajanand presided over. There was also a heated debate about the zamindari system at the same meeting. PAI, 19 June 1937.} Even at the CSP organised Allahabad Kisan Conference, while it was noted that oppression should be fought, only the following procedure was suggested for redressal of grievances: the corrupt village patwaris should be bypassed and the Collector approached as he might be compelled to act to keep up the dignity of the government; only if this method failed was agitation to be resorted to.\footnote{This meeting took place on 7 June 1937. PAI, 26 June 1937.}

In fact a growing trend in Congress appeals was that peasants voice their grievances before the Legislative Assembly and the administration.\footnote{Gopinath Srivastava and other Congressmen tried to arrange for a mass Kisan demonstration to the council, PAI, 17 April 1937. M.L. Saxena, presiding over the Uhaso Tahsil Kisan Conference, urged that lakhs of kisans demonstrate before the legislature, PAI, 8 May. It was also observed in June that there seemed to be an increase in the advice to kisans that they should appear in thousands before the collector to register complaints, PAI, 19 June. Both Srivastava and Saxena were moderates. But, as we have shown, the CSP - called Allahabad Kisan Conference also tendered similar advice.} Evidently one motive here was to embarrass the Interim Ministry. But on the other hand, there
was no desire to challenge the authority of the administration. This could be either because of the priority given to accept office, in which case extra-constitutional authority had to be de-emphasised, or because it was felt that the situation would not sustain more than a defensive method of mobilisation. The two positions could overlap.

Nothing examined here shows that popular perception was inimical to mass extra-parliamentary methods. What is certain is that Congress control in U.P. was extensive, that it tended increasingly to advocate defensive methods of organisation, and that it concentrated popular energy into demonstrations against the Interim Ministry. That the Congress leadership here feared a negative response to office rejection will be related, in the next section, to the practice of the Interim Ministry.

In Bihar significant Kisan Sabha activity had developed over the previous years in the southern districts. In the Barahiya Tal region of Monghyr district, tenants had been evicted during the depression for failure to pay rents fixed at the time of higher prices. The affected sections now took to looting crops on contested land. While the local Kisan Sabha leader, Karyanand Sharma, was arrested on landlord charges that he had instigated the tenants to loot, it appears that the unrest was spontaneous. Rajendra Prasad, in an explanatory note to Nehru, noted that a general kisan awakening rather than specific Kisan Sabha instigation was at the root of the problem.

182 Bihar FR (1), March 1937.
183 To Nehru, n.d., Rajendra Prasad, Ms. 1/37/coll. 1.
Other areas of unrest in this period were Patna and Gaya, where incidents of non-payment of rent took place.\textsuperscript{184}

The Monghyr District Magistrate narrowed disputes down to certain fields where crops had been placed under police guard\textsuperscript{185} and S.K. Sinha and Rajendra Prasad extracted concessions from the landlords.\textsuperscript{186} Intermittent looting continued but most of the cases had been resolved by May.\textsuperscript{187} However, the Kisan Sabha was dissatisfied with the settlement. Rajendra Prasad had not consulted them in the process of negotiations, and Sahajanand was not happy with conditions in the Tal.\textsuperscript{188}

These tensions revealed that were to be characteristic social and political differences between the orthodox Congress and the Kisan Sabha. In this context the observations of the colonial officialdom and the Kisan Sabha on the Barahiya Tal

\textsuperscript{184} Bihar FR(2), March 1937. As with the Monghyr incidents the officials considered that the Kisan Sabha were the instigators.

\textsuperscript{185} Bihar FR(1) March 1937.

\textsuperscript{186} Bihar FR(1) March and FR(1), April 1937.

\textsuperscript{187} Bihar FR(1) April and FR(2) May 1937.

\textsuperscript{188} Bihar FR(1) and (2) April 1937. The Rajendra Prasad award "only enunciated a principle to the effect that tenants should have some land to cultivate and that the zamindars should settle at least that amount of land (choice of site and terms remaining with the landlords) with the tenants which the latter used to get for cultivation prior to the agitation which started in 1936". The award was considered unsatisfactory for the following reasons: (a) it gave permission to the landlords to shift the land given to each tenant so as to prevent the accrual of occupancy rights by him, and (b) one provision absolved landlords of the necessity of granting rent receipts for produce rent so that the tenants had no documentary proof about the lands to which they were entitled. This account is from Rakesh Gupta, Bihar Peasantry and the Kisan Sabha, 1936-47, Delhi, 1982, p. 194.
agitation jelled on one point. This was that the Bumihar Brahmin landlords whose crops had been looted were firm supporters of the Congress and that moderate Congressmen were anxious to curb any attacks on them.189

This divide carried on into the domain of strategies for settling disputes as well. Rajendra Prasad believed that kisan direct action could only lead to repression and that this would break the back of the movement and would lose for the kisans the sympathy of the courts; therefore mediation would prove a less harmful method. This viewpoint, seen by the Bihar leader as representing tenant interests, actually sought to establish landlord power on legal, rational terms which would in turn give the tenants room to consolidate themselves. The Kisan Sabha activity on the other hand was amorphous in terms of the methods and the social groups within the peasantry it addressed itself to. While the first method tended to consolidate the upper sections of the tenantry, the second presented the possibilities of action by the less well-to-do sections of the tenantry.

This was to become explicit only under the Congress Ministry,190 but during the impasse itself the united front showed signs of strain. This was expressed in the conflicts over the agrarian programme of the Congress.

189 Bihar FR(1), March 1937 for the Government view; and for the Kisan Sabha view, "Kisan-Zamindar dispute at Tal," note by Sahajanand on 9 March in Yajnik Ms. F. No. 4(1), newspaper clippings. Even Rajendra Prasad noted that the local zamindars had approached the Congress for mediation. To Nehru, n.d., op. cit.

190 See Ch. 3 below.
The direction taken by orthodox Congress activity suggested a de-emphasis on the agrarian issue. Thus the Congress Kisan Enquiry Committee, inert for so long, when activated during the impasse, appeared to concentrate on nationalist issues. Further, according to Government reports, the Committee tended to focus their tours in areas where the landlords had not supported the Congress in the elections, thereby seeking to subdue this group into submission. The implication here was that a space for survival for the big landlords under the Congress regime was being offered on condition that they accept nationalist authority.

On the other hand more radical ideological elements emerged from within the Congress as a result of kisan sabha pressure. While it was noted that by June Kisan Sabha activity had declined (in any case its relation with activities in Monghyr, Patna and Gaya had never been organised or direct) it made its presence felt in the district political conferences that the Congress organised from May onwards. At one such conference, at Warsaliganj in Gaya district, tensions emerged between Kisan Sabhaites and more orthodox Congressmen over the agrarian programme. A resolution for abolition of Zamindari with compensation was forced through, apparently the first time that this had been achieved in a meeting under Bihar Congress auspices. The next month, at Kurtha, outright expropriation

191 Bihar FR(1), May 1937.
192 Bihar FR(2), June 1937.
193 Bihar FR(1), May 1937.
Secondly, there was a more indirect possibility: if Congress rejected office, this would finally result in the imposition of Governor's rule under section 93 of the Act. On the other hand, in provinces where the Congress would be in a minority, such as Punjab and Bengal, there were to be ministries with agrarian support, the Unionists and the Krishak Praja Party, and these would inevitably pass agrarian legislation. This would mean that apart from the likelihood of repressive conditions prevailing in the Congress majority provinces, making Congress functioning difficult, there would be a simultaneous consolidation of non-Congress politics elsewhere. Achievements here could have weakened Congress' image even in their areas of strength. These fears are implied in a Congress Parliamentary Board questionnaire of 1936:

How will [non-acceptance] affect the course of political events if the normal working of the constitution is stopped or suspended in some of the provinces in consequence of such a policy? Will the administration in the provinces working with the aid of legislatures be better or worse than in others functioning without their legislatures? Will a negative policy be helpful to the growth of national solidarity? Is it likely to bring the reactionary and anti-national elements into prominence?...  

These seem to be the tendencies Rajendra Prasad wanted to consolidate against by taking office. And it is against this background that we can situate his suggestion that office acceptance could hearten the people, strengthen the Congress organi-

89 Ibid., p. 136.
sation and prevent mischief.\textsuperscript{91} The sight of Congressmen in authority, and controlling the state apparatus, was seen as a boost to the people's self-confidence and to the space for civil liberties.\textsuperscript{92} And in consolidating against reactionary formations, "mischief", and inroads into the loyalties of Congress supporters, could be prevented.

There is a great deal here which is common with Munshi's analysis of the issue: the functions of office vis-a-vis non-Congress formations, the need for reform, and of course the context of demoralisation. However, while these conditions and objectives are similar, there is no analysis in Rajendra Prasad of the method to be adopted in relation to the institutions of the government, and certainly no conception of how this relation could be operated in order to enable transfer of power. While the vision of strengthening the movement through office might necessarily alter the perception the services had of their status and allegiance, this was not part of the strategy.

Quite the contrary in fact. In Rajendra Prasad there was a wariness of the power that the constitution provided. There was a consciousness of the need to neutralise those elements of constitutional tactics that would emphasize differences in the Congress, between party MLAs and party cadres; the signs of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{91} Rajendra Prasad to Bhulabhai Desai, 19 December 1935, question II(d).
  \item \textsuperscript{92} "Is not the effect of exercise of power through their representatives likely to hearten and encourage them \textit{[the people]}?" Ibid., question II(c).
\end{itemize}
power were seen as alien and harmful to the Congress polity. He feared that the Congress would become complacent with such access to the reaches of power as were available.

In this variation of emphasis between Munshi and Rajendra Prasad, with a focus on adapting to the state on the one hand and the paramountcy given to the party and its inner condition on the other, we can discern a significant difference in relation to political agency. The centrality of the party for Rajendra Prasad indicates that he did not see the constitution as being the means for a major advance. The ministries for him were transient phenomena which could be used for short-term goals. The achievement of political power through such methods was not seriously conceived of by him.

By the Lucknow Congress the Gandhian Rightists asserted the possibilities of a radical use of ministries, and in some cases even suggested that in certain circumstances office acceptance could even be used to reject the Act. They placed characteristic emphasis on the view that the people were passive, and would not be amenable to another mass movement.

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94 Rajendra Prasad to Bhulabhai Desai, 19 December 1935, op.cit., questions I(a) and (d).

95 Kripalani's speech at the Subjects Committee, 11 April 1936, Bombay Chronicle, 13 April 1936, p. 8.

96 Azad's speech at the Committee, ibid.

However, the acceptance of the need for ministries did not necessarily mean a common view of how they were to be used. At least in the case of Patel, it is possible to cite a significant difference with Rajendra Prasad's ideas.

As we had pointed out earlier, a Government report of early 1936\(^\text{98}\) suggested in its analysis of Rajendra Prasad and Patel a certain divergence of opinion. Rajendra Prasad had seen office acceptance for a period as necessary, to be followed very shortly by civil disobedience. In the evaluation of Patel, on the other hand, ministries were not discussed; instead an emphasis on the development of Swaraj ashrams for the purposes of preparing for civil disobedience was Patel's main concern.

This analysis would seem controverted by the strident way in which Patel projected the ministry question in 1936. Behind the scenes reports and newspaper accounts suggest that he wanted Congress commitment to office acceptance made clear at the Lucknow Congress itself, but was dissuaded from such a path of confrontation with Nehru by the Mahatma.\(^\text{99}\) Later in the year, Patel was again pitted against Nehru over this issue. He was

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\(^{98}\) Home Poll. 4/20/36. Of course, such sources are not to be taken at face value. But in this case they tend to conform to the other evidence we have of Right Wing attitudes in this period.

\(^{99}\) This is suggested in Bhulabhai Desai's account of the CWC proceedings at Allahabad. He noted that Patel and Rajendra Prasad drafted a resolution that Gandhi asked them to retract as it would be too direct a challenge to Nehru. Desai Ms. F. no. 11, p. 106. Diary entry at 25 June 1936; the press report on the Allahabad CWC of 7 April also listed Patel, along with Rajagopalachari and Desai, as wanting an immediate declaration in favour of office acceptance. Bombay Chronicle, 8 April 1936, p. 8.
worried by Nehru's statements\(^{100}\) to the effect that people should be aware of his views if they wanted to elect him. Patel feared that Nehru was effectively asking for a commitment on his economic views and his opposition to office acceptance. Regarding the latter, he was particularly worried as he felt that this would be a betrayal of Congress' commitment to its financiers.\(^{101}\) As it turned out, Nehru confirmed that the views he had put forward were personal, and would not bind the Congress,\(^{102}\) and so the potential crisis was diffused.

The Government analysis of Patel's priorities is nevertheless borne out by other evidence and can be reconciled with these tangles over the office issue if seen through the Gandhian Rightist subordination of the question. This is indicated in the tactical differences between Patel and Rajendra Prasad on the ministry question. Prasad disagreed with the conditions Patel had outlined for office acceptance. These included the return of lands forfeited by peasants during civil disobedience, and of punitive fines levied on Congress supporters. Prasad


\(^{101}\) "... he says that this time people have to elect him knowing his views and that on the question of spreading his ideology and on office acceptance question people know his views. If in spite of his views he is elected he will accept the responsibility. This means that my withdrawal means definitely that I agree with him on both these points or I accept his views hereafter and therefore, allow him to be elected... This position would have been easy if we had not taken the responsibility of running these elections. The people who paid money will naturally blame us and never trust us again..." Patel to Rajendra Prasad, 22 November 1936, Rajendra Prasad Ms. I/36/coll. 4, emphasis added.

rejected this because he felt such conditions would immediately lead to a deadlock which in his estimation would redound adversely on Congress' subsequent electoral performance. This difference suggests that for Patel, while ministries had to be formed and presumably it was on the basis of such a commitment that the Congress had received funds for their election campaign, the conditions on which Ministries would be formed, and the functions they would be used for, would finally be decided by the leadership. As we shall show, this subordinating of the ministry issue to a larger strategy was to be exhibited again in Patel's response to the impasse created by Gandhi's insistence that certain conditions be fulfilled before office would be accepted.

2.3 The Impasse, 18 March-7 July 1937

2.3.1 Ideological and Political Trends

Throughout the debate on office acceptance, Gandhi had largely remained a silent spectator. Only once did he intervene, to diffuse the tension over the subject at Lucknow. In fact he appeared indifferent to the issue and skeptical of British intentions. This is brought out by the Mahatma's response to Birla's negotiations with the British during the period 1935-37.

Birla's objective was to bring about contact between the British and the Congress leadership so as to enable constitu-

103 Rajendra Prasad to Patel, 14 July 1936, Rajendra Prasad Ms. 1/36.

104 See above, f.n. 99
tional functioning. 105 This would be achieved by a series of gestures made by either side, talks, and ultimately a declaration or a pact that would enable Congress to take office. 106 At each moment he tried to draw Gandhi in on this issue he was met with aloofness. 107 When he thought that he had persuaded Gandhi to postpone a decision on office acceptance at Lucknow, in line with British statesmen's requests, he was strongly rebuked for misinterpreting this decision. 108 And, as we have shown, the reasons for this were related to internal harmony rather than to any external compulsion.

Gandhi spent more time outlining the repressive nature of the colonial rulers' regime than in considering the question of office acceptance. 109 And he took little interest even in the

105 Thus he noted to Willingdon that "There must be a proper understanding between the ruler and the ruled so that leaders like Gandhiji and his lieutenants may begin to teach people to treat government as their own institution." Interview, 1 January 1935, Birla, Rep., Vol. II, pp. 15-18.


107 Gandhi at one stage even questioned the worth of Birla's negotiations. Gandhi to Birla, 7 August 1936, ibid., p. 268.

108 For Birla's interpretation of Gandhi's assurance that no decision would be taken at Lucknow, see his letters to Zetland and Linlithgow of 23 September 1935, ibid., pp. 145-47; for Gandhi's rebuff, Gandhi to Birla, 7 August 1936, ibid., p. 268.

109 Gandhi's emphasis here was a recurrent theme in Birla's correspondence and interviews. See, e.g., his interview with the Governor of Bengal, 1 May 1935, ibid., p. 46; Birla to Linlithgow, 3 August 1935, ibid., pp. 133-36; to Lothian, 23 September 1936, ibid., pp. 143-44.
Though Gandhi's lieutenants had shown positive signs regarding Congress ministry formation, Birla found Gandhi's indifference particularly disturbing. 111

However, in his statements on Congress participation in the 1934 Central Legislative Assembly elections, Gandhi showed an awareness that there was something inevitable about parliamentary work by at least a section of the Congress. 112 This did not necessarily extend to the possibility of office acceptance, but he could not be indifferent to the opinions his lieutenants held which in turn reflected the growing opinion in the Congress for ministry formation. However, our argument is that Gandhi's view cannot be placed amongst those outlined. There is no indication that he had thought out the problem either in Rajendra Prasad's terms of reform and tactical advantages, or through Munshi's idiom of gradual power. When he did articulate positive views finally, the terms were similar to Rajendra Prasad's. 113

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110 Birla expressed concern about this indifference in a letter to Gandhi on 6 August 1936, ibid., p. 267.

111 Thakurdas to Birla, 8 August 1936, Purshottamdas Thakurdas Ms. F. no. 165.

112 "Council-entry will remain a permanent feature of the Congress like civil disobedience and constructive work." To K.M. Munshi, 16 April 1934, CWM., Vol. LVII, p. 396.

113 During the impasse of March-July 1937, Gandhi articulated the Prasad kind of opinion in an address at the Hudli meeting of the Gandhi Seva Sangh. He said that the boycott of legislatures was not an eternal principle. The emphasis was rather on commitment to constructive work and how this was done was purely a question of strategy. As with Rajendra Prasad, the weight of public opinion was invoked when he noted that a vast number had been enfranchised, and the elections had given the Congress the chance to carry their programme to them. He then went on to make an important and suggestive distinction: "... The Legislatures of today
But prior to that he had intervened in the matter in his own, singular fashion.

At the decisive AICC meeting in March 1937, Gandhi added a rider to the office acceptance resolution. This was that the Congress would form ministries on condition that the Governors would not employ the special powers vested in them by the Act to interfere in the Ministers' constitutional activities.\textsuperscript{114}

At the time it was thought that the intention here was to conciliate the anti-ministerialists.\textsuperscript{115} We will show that the reasons were rather different, for Gandhi held to his position inspite of the dissenting opinions held by most groups in the Congress. In our evaluation, in a discussion governed by tactical considerations, Gandhi now oriented it to the ideological plane.

The view of the clause as mediatory is not supported by the evidence. Almost everyone was opposed to it, whatever their public positions. Constitutionalists such as Satyamurti were openly unhappy, probably fearing the consequences of the clause.\textsuperscript{116}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{114} Indian Annual Register, January-June 1937, pp. 177-78.
  \item \textsuperscript{116} Speech at AICC, Delhi, March 1937, \textit{Bombay Chronicle}, 18 March 1937.
\end{itemize}
Patel apart, both Rajendra Prasad and Rajagopalachari amongst Gandhi's associates were dissatisfied, though they supported Gandhi in public. And the group that the clause was meant to palliate, the CSP, were openly antagonistic, declaring it akin to a good behaviour pact, a move to ensure against deadlock and conflict. The CSP even preferred unconditional acceptance on the grounds that this would keep the door open to deadlock. It was only later, when unconditional acceptance seemed certain that they veered around to defending the original

117 Rajendra Prasad later noted that the pro-office bloc was unhappy with the conditions clause as they feared that this would prevent Ministry formation, while the anti-office bloc were pleased. Autobiography, pp. 436-37. Presumably he distinguished himself from both groups. However, the indications are that by early May he had become uneasy about the clause's implications. After Zetland's speech in the House of Lords on 6 May Rajendra Prasad appeared to have suggested that the Secretary of State's statement might be satisfactory. This is indicated by Gandhi's firm response, "Nothing less than prescribed assurances". To Rajendra Prasad, 15 May 1937, Rajendra Prasad Ms. II/37/ coll. 1. He echoed this in a letter of 6 June, CWMC, Vol. LXV, pp. 284-85.

118 In public Rajagopalachari would staunchly affirm the viability of the demand but in private and in negotiations with the Madras Governor Erskine, he expressed anxiety that office be accepted. Erskine to Llinlithgow, 3 February. Towards the end of March he produced a formula stating that while Government could not give assurances, the Congress was satisfied that the Governor would not use special powers to set aside the advice of the cabinet in matters pertaining to and within the legitimate scope of the provincial ministry. Gandhi rejected this. Erskine to Llinlithgow, 25 March 1937. All references from Erskine Ms. D 596/2. And in June he made his well-known remark urging the Viceroy to meet Gandhi in order that the civil disobedience mentality be removed for good. Zetland to Llinlithgow, 13 June 1937, Llinlithgow Ms. F. 125/4.

resolution in order to prevent ministry formation.\textsuperscript{120}

Only Patel and Nehru reacted positively. Patel accepted Gandhi's formula and expressed a militant approach to the issue.\textsuperscript{121} Nehru must have wanted clear rejection, but he became enthusiastic on seeing that the clause seemed to be leading to deadlock.\textsuperscript{122} However, even he became perplexed when the Mahatma seemed to be diluting his position.\textsuperscript{123}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{120} "Socialists' Open Letter", Bombay Chronicle, 19 June 1937, p. 20. This was written by the Executive Committees of the Bombay, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Karnataka Socialist parties to the Congress MLAs in the Bombay Assembly; see also editorial, "What shall we do?" Congress Socialist, Vol. II, No. 26, 3 July 1937, p. 5.
\item \textsuperscript{121} He noted the growing rift indicated by the statements of the Government, the Anglo-Indian press and communalists and that the situation would probably culminate in mid-July with the calling of the provincial assemblies. "That will probably be the time for a final burstup." To Rajendra Prasad, 24 May 1937, Rajendra Prasad Ms. II/37/coll.2. He abided by Gandhi's adaptations of the clause (from dismissal to demanding resignation) and with the same firmness: "... if that minimum is even not accepted then we have no alternative but to wait and remain out of office no matter what happens". To Rajendra Prasad, 7 June 1937, ibid., II/37/coll.3. When Zetland rejected the Mahatma's latest offer, Patel responded with an air of finality: "... Zetland has given his final no to Bapu's last statement and that is an end of it now. It is clear that they do not want us to take office now. After all Bapu's instinct has proved to be too true. He puts his finger unerringly on the right spot and his decision turns out always to be right...." To Rajendra Prasad, 9 June 1937, ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{122} Nehru to Patel, 28 March 1937, and to Rajendra Prasad, 29 March 1937, Rajendra Prasad, Ms. I/37/coll.1.
\item \textsuperscript{123} Gandhi to Nehru, 5 April 1937, CWMG, Vol. LXV, p. 55.
\end{itemize}
In our view Gandhi's demand was a genuine attempt to para-
lyse the authoritarian features of the constitution and to en-
large the space for effective popular control under the Act. In
the process he shifted Congress discussion of the issue of
office acceptance from tactical questions back to the original
democratic critique. However, of equal importance was the way
the demand was formulated, indicating significant ideological
functions. For Gandhi couched his criticisms in the language
of liberal colonialism.

By liberal colonialism we mean the belief that colonial
constitutional arrangements could, in stages and through sincere
practice, lead to dominion status. This belief was also the
ideological rationale for the colonial state's existence. It
presented British rule as an impartial mediator whose ambition
was to educate the people so that responsible and representa-
tive government would 'suit' them. In employing this idiom,
Gandhi found an audience in sections of liberal opinion in Eng-
land, in the liberal and loyalist press in India, and from
amongst the Indian liberals themselves. It can be argued that
Congressmen were also being appealed to in so far as certain
sections had illusions about the 1935 Act.

This shift in Gandhi's political idiom had been signalled
in his recent statement that dominion status would be acceptable
to the Congress instead of complete independence. In 1929,
this demand had been the lowest common denominator of political

124 "... if dominion status were offered in terms of the sta-
tute of Westminster, i.e. the right to accede at will, I
would unhesitatingly accept it." To H.S. Polak, 27 Jan-
uary 1937, CGM, LXIV, p. 322.
expectations, and had also functioned as a test of British intentions. Once the test was failed, the sanction to move on to a more radical demand and conflict with the government had been presented.125

This was characteristic of Gandhian strategy. In 1934 he had accepted Congress participation in the Central Legislative Assembly elections both as a platform for mobilisation,126 and

125 Certain accounts of this prelude to civil disobedience see in it an attempt to dilute potential radicalism, i.e., to compromise with the government for a moderate gain, in this case dominion status instead of complete independence. A significant failure of such criticisms is to analyse the content of the negotiations in terms of how far the government could ever go in accepting even such moderation. For example, the conditions Gandhi had put down for Congress participation in the Round Table Conference included immediate acceptance of Dominion status, a Congress majority in the Conference, and that there should be amnesty and a policy of general conciliation. Any of these items would have lent Congress a special status in relation to the colonial regime, and would thus necessarily have affected its standing with its supporters, whether amongst landlords, communal groupings, or most significantly, in the civil service. In this sense, the moderation of a demand should not be evaluated in relation to other more radical demands of the period, but in terms of how it operates in the given political context. Secondly, to elaborate our idea of the "lowest common denominator", the prelude can be seen as a holding together of ideologically disparate groups across a series of evolving political platforms, the succession being determined by the distance between the compulsions of the colonial regime and the demands, of even a moderate nature, put forward by the Congress. This pattern can be shown to have operated recurrently, and need not be seen simply as Gandhi's brainchild, but as the characteristic pattern of Gandhian strategy, with its central compulsion of withdrawing the widest possible ideological space from the control of the Colonial regime. The account that is dissected here is that of Sumit Sarkar in Modern India, 1885-1947, op.cit., pp. 281-84.

126 He saw a positive function for the council-entry programme in terms of "rejection of the white paper, the convening of a constituent assembly, the repeal of repressive laws and the carrying on of a constructive programme and other national activities of the Congress to the extent opportunities were possible." He felt that with a Congress pre-
as a necessary experience which would demonstrate the limits of such activity.\textsuperscript{127} The pattern was not to reject outright the offers made, or the institutions available. Rather were these deemed acceptable if the motives underlying these could be shown to be progressive.

The AICC resolution was to function similarly. By promising Congress Ministries there was an acceptance of the liberal colonial practice, if not the theory, that the party had hitherto shunned. But the assurances clause insisted that this be preceded by a demonstration of British intentions. If these were indeed to ultimately transfer power, they would have to demonstrate this by acknowledging their respect for the electorate. The latter's mandate should not be interfered with.\textsuperscript{128}

Gandhi insisted that once the demand was accepted, a peaceful transfer of power would be made possible.\textsuperscript{129} His statements in fact progressively enlarged the possibilities Government conciliation would inaugurate. He claimed that it would enable

\textsuperscript{Cont'd... f.n. 126}
office acceptance to be the mechanism through which independence and a constituent assembly could be attained.¹³⁰

Of course, Gandhi's appeals were always predicated on possibility, such advances would be made "in so far as it was possible" etc.¹³¹ But the function of this moderation is evident

Cont'd... f.n. 129

crisis and resulted in a orderly and peaceful transference of power from the bureaucracy to the largest and fullest democracy known to the world." Ibid.

¹³⁰ Thus, in a cable to The Times, after criticising Zetland he noted that "... It is ... for the British Government to show the Congress by every means open within their constitution, that the Congress can advance to its goal even by taking office..." 14 April 1937, ibid., p. 83 and Bombay Chronicle, 16 April 1937, p. 7. Again, in an interview to The Hindu he noted: "... if the assurance ... is given, the Minister can, even acting within the constitution, compel the repeal of the Act and hasten the day of the meeting of the Constituent Assembly whose Act will be accepted by the British people - unless they want to govern India by the naked sword." 22 April, ibid., p. 140. And a few days later he noted that "(Congress') aim undoubtedly is to make Congress position so irresistible as to replace the present Act by an Act which will represent the will of the masses. This will be brought about by constitutional means permissible under the Act itself. And if the Congress Ministers advances its own constitutional position to such a pitch that the British Ministers cannot possibly resist it except by force of arms, surely there can be nothing to grumble at." Interview to the Press, 25 April 1937, ibid., pp. 154-55 (emphasis added).

¹³¹ e.g. "... The Congress is in earnest and wants to make a serious effort if it takes office, to make a substantial advance by that method towards its unequivocal goal of complete independence in so far as it is constitutionally possible to make that advance." After 6 May 1937, ibid., pp. 175-76 (emphasis added).
in the shifting pattern of liberal and loyalist opinion that occurred simultaneously. At first there was hostility to the Congress after the break down of talks. But thereafter ways of preventing the crisis were suggested. The Leader, for example, otherwise critical of the Congress position for forfeiting the chance "to build healthy conventions and redress grievances," nevertheless felt that Gandhi's speech opened a space for discussions. The Pioneer was critical of the setting up of interim ministries in the wake of Congress' refusal to accept office. This paper even suggested - and this before the decisive AICC meeting - that Linlithgow and Gandhi meet to preempt any problems. And The Statesman suggested that the Government guarantee that the Congress would be allowed to implement their agrarian programme.

These opinions did not take positions on the constitutional implications of Gandhi's demand, but they did accept the larger point being made that the British should be able to demonstrate their positive intentions. In doing this they wanted to draw Congress into office acceptance and to ensure stable

132 It was charged that the Congress legislative party leaders had gone beyond the AICC resolution by insisting on definite assurances. See e.g., The Statesman, 28 March 1937.


135 3 April 1937, p. 8.


137 28 March 1937.
liberal methods in the polity. It was for this reason that Sapru, otherwise of the opinion that Gandhi's demand was unconstitutional, suggested that the Viceroy call for a political conference with the Congress leaders. 138

As a result of these objectives there was almost universal disapproval of Zetland's first speech regarding the constitutional impasse. The Secretary of State emphasised that the demands could not be accepted in terms of the constitution, that given this there was no point calling Gandhi for talks, and that Gandhi had misrepresented the seriousness of the issue. 139 Criticism arose not because of the constitutional opinions expressed, but because Zetland's speech threatened a political crisis. 140

These lines of criticism converged in Gandhi's acceptance of liberal suggestions. He welcomed the solutions put forward by The Statesman and Lord Lothian, respectively, that the government agree to allow the Congress to implement its election manifesto and that, in the event of a disagreement between the Governor and the Ministry, recourse should be taken to the elec-

138 Bombay Chronicle, 3 April 1937, p. 8; Sapru to Jayakar, 7 April 1937, Sapru MS. 1/J(J.45).

139 Speech in the House of Lords, 8 April 1937, Bombay Chronicle, April 1937, p. 1. He also noted that the minorities could even be effected by legislation not directly concerning them and as such needed protection.

140 The Pioneer noted that the speech would further the rift. 10 April 1937, p. 8; The Statesman reiterated that the Government accept the Congress agrarian programme and so maintain a positive image; so far it had reduced autonomy to a farce, 10 April 1937; the Bihar landlord-owned paper, The Indian Nation charged Zetland with being unstatesmanlike in his pronouncements, quoted in The Leader, 13 April 1937, p. 2; and Sapru also considered the speech harmful for the political situation, ibid., p. 1.
torate. 141 Later, he was to reduce this last point to a simple formula. In the event of disagreement, the Governor should dismiss the Ministry. 142

Alongside this identification with liberal methods, however, Gandhi had projected an imagery of power that placed the Congress on an equal footing with the colonial government. He suggested a tribunal be set up to solve the disagreement, with one representative from each side, with a third, independent one, to decide the issue. The question of assurances and the legitimacy of the Interim Ministries would fall under the purview of this tribunal. 143

It was this imagery of power which dominated the Government attitude to the Congress demand. Underneath the liberal reasonableness of Gandhi's positions was discerned an attempt to bring the colonial rulers to the negotiating table and to aggrandize prestige. 144 It was with this suspicion that the colonial officials perceived Gandhi and the Rightists throughout this period. The only exception was in the Viceroy's initial response to the 17 March resolution which he thought was a triumph for Gandhi and the Right Wing. 145 After the breakdown of

141 Cable to The Times, on or before 15 April 1937, CMG, Vol. LXV, pp. 84-85.
142 Interview with The Hindu, 22 April 1937, ibid., p. 140.
143 Statement to the Press, 10 April 1937, ibid., pp. 70-72.
144 In Linlithgow's words, the fear was that the Congress would be seen as the "Master of India". To Zetland, 28 April 1937, Linlithgow Ms. F. 125/4.
145 Linlithgow to Zetland, 19 March 1937, ibid.
talks hopes centred on a split between the non-constitutionalists and the constitutionalists, to which group they believed most Congress MLAs belonged. 146

The government feared that conciliation of the Congress would reduce the trust their institutional, social and political supports would have in colonial rule. Zetland explained that his 8 March speech's uncompromising tones were designed to reassure the services. 147

This priority placed the government in a double bind. On the one hand the officials had to present an unbending attitude to reassure their supporters. On the other hand the successful ideological isolation of the government by the Mahatma's appeals weighed heavily too. Apart from the shock of the Government's ideological support apparently making a volte-face, there was grave concern about the sources of its alienation. In particular, The Statesman's position caused anxiety. While the motives here were seen as related to the objective of capturing more Indian subscription, there was a deeper fear that the newspaper's view expressed the attitude of a section of the European business community which believed that the Congress could be trusted and that its claims conceded in the interest of both the country and of business. 148 While a group of European businessmen wrote a letter criticising The Statesman 149 there were rumbl-

146 Zetland to Linlithgow, 12 April 1937, ibid.
147 Ibid.
149 Linlithgow to Zetland, 26 May 1937, ibid.
les of disagreement in the community which suggested that there was no monolithic attitude amongst them. The fear that one of its stablest bases felt the compulsion to appease the Congress led the Government to have Moore, the newspaper's editor, called up and reprimanded.

This fear of losing support indicates another feature of this period separate from Gandhi's ideological articulation of it. The impasse, of some four months duration, had inscribed in it the possibilities of political crisis. It was a period with distinct political features, loaded especially with the signs of political displacement. The features of negation of stable political arrangements signalled by the Congress demand defined a reorganisation of political space.

This reorganisation marked a trend of withdrawing support to the colonial authority. This had already started with the British failure to prevent Congress victory in the elections. With the impasse, this trend was bolstered. It made certain groups which had been ranged against the Congress earlier alter their attitude. No longer were they placed in a position to

150 For example the Trichinopoly and Calicut circles of the European associations reprimanded the Madras circle for giving a negative view on the Congress demand, as it could give the impression that this was the general attitude of South Indian Europeans. The Trichinopoly circle advocated conciliation, the Calicut one took no position. The Hindu, 4 June 1937, p. 6.

151 Zetland to Linlithgow, 24 May 1937, Linlithgow Ms. F. 125/4.

152 e.g., Landlords from Orissa said that with Congress victory they had no other option but to support the Congress. Linlithgow to Zetland, 15 February 1937, Linlithgow Ms. F. 125/4.
was recommended.\textsuperscript{194} The orthodox Congressmen hit back, however, at Darbhanga, defeating a zamindari abolition resolution by 128 votes to 96.\textsuperscript{195}

These developments, isolated as they were from any immediate threat from the peasantry, were not cause enough to push the leadership into office-acceptance. However, the similarity in political structures between this situation and that prevailing under the Ministry is significant. On the one hand there was an autonomously developed peasant movement, to which the Kisan Sabha would be increasingly responsive; and, on the other, there were orthodox Congressmen, anxious to resolve disputes peacefully and through the agency of the administration. The repetition of structures of power and action across these periods indicates the insuration of a matrix of class contradictions.

The situation in the Bombay and Madras Presidencies did not exhibit any of these profound symptoms of unrest. In Bombay some advice was given to set up a parallel assembly\textsuperscript{196} village-level organisation and enquiry committees,\textsuperscript{197} but this was not complemented by any serious disturbances. In the Maharashtra FCC a suggestion that peasant unions be set up was discouraged.\textsuperscript{198}

\textsuperscript{194} Bihar FR(1), June 1937.
\textsuperscript{195} Bombay Chronicle, 21 June 1937, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{196} Made by P.H. Patwardhan at the Thana District Political Conference on 4 April, Bombay FR(1), April 1937.
\textsuperscript{197} Amraoti Kisan Conference under the Amraoti DCC. Bombay Chronicle, 1 May 1937, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{198} Notes on the Congress Agrarian Programme, 8 July 1937. Home Dept. (Poll.) 11/1/37.
More generally, activity in the Bombay 199 and Madras 200 presidencies seemed to be concentrated in the attempts of Congress leaders to enrol members and to explain why the impasse had come about with the view that elections might have to be fought again. This was so of the Central Provinces 201 and Orissa 202 as well, thought there were nodes in the direction of radical rhetoric, 203 setting up of agrarian enquiries 204 and some attempt- 199 For Bombay: Kher's letter to Congress MLAs and MLCs, Bombay Chronicle, 12 April 1937, p. 1; ibid., 17 April, p. 7; Bombay FR(2), April 1937; for Kher's rural tour, Bombay Chronicle, 10 May, p. 7; Bombay FR(1), April 1937, FR(2), May and FR(1), June on district tours by Congress leaders to explain at a popular level the impasse and the need to prepare for fresh elections. The Kolaba District Conference of 23 May called upon the interim Ministry to face the legislature. Bombay Chronicle, 25 May, p. 12.

200 Rajagopalachari undertook tours to explain the situation in April. Madras FR(2), April 1937; more activity of this sort carried on at the village level but was reported to have declined somewhat after Zetland's more conciliatory speech of May. Madras FR(1), May 1937. Otherwise attempts at radical activity were ineffective. Thus Ranga's attempts to form village associations in North Arcot met with little response and at one or two places were opposed by Congressmen. Madras FR(1), May 1937.

201 For the Central Provinces: village propaganda regarding impasse and expectations of elections, Central Provinces and Berar FR (2), April 1937.

202 For Orissa FR(2), May 1937.

203 In the Central Provinces there developed anti-malguzar rhetoric though it was thought that this might be related to party factionalism. FR(1), June 1937.

204 Orissa FR(1), May 1937; Central Provinces and Berar FR(1), May 1937. In the Central Provinces there were petitions about agrarian grievances directed to the Congress. FR(1), April 1937 and FR(2), May 1937.
ted peasant mobilisation. But the context of unrest that characterised the Bihar and U.P. situations was neither so emphatic nor self-activated.

(11) The Interim Ministries

The main aim of the Interim Ministries, set up in the wake of the Congress refusal to accept office, appears to have been to discomfort the Congress party by providing relief to the peasantry by announcing prospects of major reform. Whether it was genuinely hoped that this would reverse electoral fortunes in the future is uncertain. However, we will show that Congressmen were worried that their hold on the peasantry would be affected by these measures.

The programme of reform announced by the interim ministries was similar to that of the Congress. For example, Sir Dhunjishah Cooper's Bombay government proposed the following measures:

- Land revenue remission in relation to the fall in prices since the previous settlement;
- The distribution of wasteland amongst agricultural labourers;
- Investigation of oppressive tenures;
- Fixing of interest on debts at the prevailing market rates and in terms of the debtor's ability to pay;
- Investigation of irrigation systems and forest management;
- In the industrial sector, the granting of recognition to trade unions and the setting up of machinery to decide minimum wages and to settle disputes;
- The releasing of 'as many' political prisoners 'as possible';

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205 The Orissa party in particular seemed quite active. FR(1), June 1937.

206 Bombay Chronicle, 10 April, 1937, pp. 7-8.
introduction of prohibition; and finally a cut in Government
servants' salary in between the scales 200/- and 2000/-, those
above this level being protected. Others proposed similar pro-
grammes, and it was charged that an attempt was being made to
steal Congress' thunder.

Perhaps more threatening were the measures taken to provide
immediate relief. Revenue, rent and canal dues were remitted
in certain districts of U.P. As we have shown in Bihar,
administrative initiatives to resolve disputes in Monghyr had
been at least temporarily successful. Later, Deputy Collectors
in Patna, Gaya, Monghyr and Shahabad, the most disturbed regions,
were empowered to settle rental levels and reduce rents under
section 112a of the Bihar Tenancy (Amendment) Act. In Bihar
and U.P. too the problem of the sugar crisis was also taken up
for resolution, with extension of the period of crushing, reduc-
tion in prices and railway freight rates being achieved.

A connection can be made between these measures and the
emphasis placed by the U.P. Congress leadership on office accep-
tance. The party's anxiety in this regard is indicated by their

207 In U.P. legislation to secure hereditary rights was sugges-
ted as were methods for dealing with the debt problem
through the establishment of debt conciliation boards and
providing for compulsory registration. See UP FR(2),
April 1937 for Conference of Ministers with Commissioners
and Members, Board of Revenue, 1 May; and Bombay Chronicle,
6 May 1937, p. 1; the Bihar Ministry also announced inten-
tions of reducing rents and dealing with the problem of
rural debt. Bihar, FR(2), April 1937, for the Madras
Ministry's similar promises see Madras FR(2), April 1937.

208 The Pioneer, 14 April 1937, p. 1 and 28 April 1937, p. 3.

209 "Officers empowered to reduce rent", clipping of 24 June
1937 in Yajnik Ms. F. No. 4(ii).

210 For U.P., UP FR(2), April and FR(2), June 1937; for Bihar
actively countering the interim ministry’s propaganda and relief work through criticism, and even by attempts to take credit for such achievement.\footnote{211} At the early May meeting of the Congress Legislature Party, Pant acknowledged the threat posed by the ministry when he stressed the need to formulate a clearcut agrarian programme to counter the ministry’s publicity.\footnote{212}

By around mid-May, Pant was firmly convinced that office should be accepted. He and another future Congress Minister, K.N. Katju, informed Gandhi that they felt that Zetland’s recent speech was adequate to break the deadlock.\footnote{213} Two factors might have influenced this evaluation. One was the dissatisfaction felt by local Congressmen about the prolongation of the assurances debate and now, it was felt, on increasingly obscure terms.\footnote{214} Another reason might possibly have been that Pant had just undertaken a tour in the areas affected by the sugar crisis.\footnote{215} The interim ministry’s mediation in this issue might have governed the urgency of Pant’s view.

\footnotesize{\textit{Cont'd.. f.n. 210}}

\footnote{211} The U.P. Revenue Minister’s and April tour of Rae Bareili found local Congressmen trying to dissuade tenants from attending a meeting to be addressed by the interim minister, reportedly without much success. \textit{The Pioneer}, 28 April, 1937, p. 3. Congress activity in the districts was also focussed on claiming that the interim ministry’s relief work was due to Congress pressure. U.P. FR(1), May 1937.

\footnote{212} UP FR (1), May 1937.

\footnote{213} Cited in Rajendra Prasad to Nehru, 22 May 1937, Rajendra Prasad Ms. 1/37/coll.1.

\footnote{214} M.N. Kaul to Sapru, 23 May 1937. Sapru Ms. 52/3 (K 30). At this level too it was felt that Zetland’s speech would suffice.

\footnote{215} \textit{Bombay Chronicle}, 24 May 1937, p. 12.
In Tamilnadu too the relief provided in this period had disturbing results. The Tanjore Mirasdras' Association thanked the ministry for the proposed land revenue remission and brought to its notice concessions which were still pending. When Rajagopalachari pointed out the political dangers of such an acknowledgement, the Mirasdras' Association clearly indicated their short-term economic motivations when, in a note in their journal, they referred to themselves as a "non-political" organisation. 216

The effects of the impasse on the Congress hold in the south was a particularly worrying factor. Nowhere had the effects of the breakdown of negotiations over the conditions clause been so strong. Rajagopalachari had immediately gone on tour to "lessen the shock" of the breakdown and to explain the reasons for the impasse. He noted to Patel that disappointment in the Presidency was great. 217 The district level reports from the organisation indicate that while the people were remaining loyal to the Congress they were anxious for some reforms. 218 Leading Congressmen of the province found Zetland's conciliatory speech adequate. 219 Rajagopalachari himself confessed that the majority

216 G. Aravamathiyengar, Secretary, Mirasdras' Association to Interim Ministry, 22 April 1937; cutting from Indian Express of 1 May; both enclosed in Rajagopalachari to Vaidyanatha Dikshitar, Mirasdras Association, 11 May 1937; Vaidyanatha Dikshitar to Rajagopalachari, 11 May 1937. C. Rajagopalachari Ms. Roll. 4 (hereafter C.R. Ms.).

217 To Patel, 2 April 1937, C.R. Ms. Roll. 5.


219 T. Prakasam to CR, 10 June 1937, CRMs. Roll 3. At the
of Congressmen wanted office. When he circularised Congress MLAs on the issue at the end of May he was greeted with a resounding opinion for Ministry formation.

Aware of this opinion, the interim ministry attempted to dislodge Congress influence by weaning MLAs away from the party. An interim minister, R.M. Palat, tried to persuade Congress MLAs who favoured ministry formation to constitute a separate parliamentary group which would accept office. This did not affect the party; the people approached reported the matter to Rajagopalachari and Patel who publicized the matter. In another instance, two Congress members of the Council of State told the Madras Governor that they would break with the party once the Viceroy had clearly rejected any possibility of assurances. All this confirmed the Government in its belief that the political crisis would be resolved by pressure on this front. With a view to precipitating panic in the Congress ranks, it was

Cont'd. X.n. 219

Andhra Political Conference of 16–20 June a resolution proposed by Prakasam noted that the orders of Gandhi and the CWC would be followed even in the event of agreement with the Government. The socialist amendment urging that ministries be formed only if the Government accept the AICC resolution was defeated by 90–40 votes. Bombay Chronicle, 22 June 1937, p. 1. A. Kaleswara Rao also found Government pronouncements adequate. To CR 16 June 1937, CR Ms. Roll 3.

220 To Ramalinga Chettiar, MLC, 19 May 1937, CR Ms. Roll 4.
221 CR Ms. Roll 5, passim.
222 A.B. Shetty to Palat, 22 April; Haji P. Kunhamed Kutty to C.R., 29 April. CR Ms. Roll 4; also Bombay Chronicle, 4 May 1937, p. 1.
223 They were Varadarajulu Naidu and Narayandas Girdhardas. Erskine to Linlithgow. Erskine Ms. D. 396/2.
decided that the Madras Assembly would be the first to be called.224

In doing this, it is notable that the colonial officials did not flatter themselves that they would be able to control the crisis. As we have shown doubt assailed them till the end. Nevertheless, it was indeed in the fears of Congressmen at the popular level that the compulsion to accept office lay. In this sense, the analysis Rajendra Prasad had made of the popular context was borne out in the experience of the impasse, and in the practice of the interim ministers.

To summarise: our analysis has addressed itself to the way the national leadership perceived the issue of ministry formation under the 1935 Act, what strategic considerations defined their views, and what the significance of that crucial "interruption" in the process of office acceptance, the impasse of March–July 1937, was. We have established that there existed in this discussion the following approaches: the anti-ministerialists, a group larger than the Congress leftwing, feared that Congress ministries would lead to a compromise with the colonial government and a dispersal of mass energies into apathy or reformism (included in this group were Congressmen from Bengal and Punjab whose provinces' communal electorates prevented office acceptance). In this emphasis they echoed no-changer politics of the 1920s. The Gandhian group in the leadership countered this apprehension by asserting that apathy and refor-

224 Linlithgow to Erskine, 28 June; Erskine to Linlithgow, 29 June, ibid.
mism already defined mass consciousness. If Congress did not take office, others would, thus eroding Congress influence. On the other hand, Congress ministries would not fall into compromise as they would be strictly controlled and would serve only a definite and limited function: that of reform, which would consolidate the party's influence. Once this was achieved, further engagement with the constitution would necessarily end, especially in the context of the Federation section of the Act.

A second strand of the pro-office argument, which we have described as a revised constitutionalism, placed emphasis on a different point. While incorporating the points about blocking ministerial power to reactionary groups, as well as that about the need for reform, it significantly focussed on the question of the power which could be achieved by a careful working of the 1935 Act. This related to the subordination of the state apparatus, a process which might irrevocably change the political balance in Congress' favour. However, such an emphasis also suggested a reorientation of Congress politics. To acquire such a control over the State apparatus a de-emphasis on extra-parliamentary pressures was implied. Within this focus, there was also an awareness of capitalist needs and expectations. While this position did not dominate the pro-office view, it nevertheless highlighted real possibilities of office acceptance.

In May 1937, the strategic and tactical considerations of the Act temporarily gave way to an ideological critique. The Mahatma's formulation of the AICC resolution accepting office demanded assurances that the Governor's special responsibilities
would not be used to interfere in the constitutional activities of the ministers. The demand had several functions. It reasserted a democratic critique of the Act by highlighting its overtly authoritarian features, and in the process sought to paralyse them; it articulated liberal political opinion by employing a liberal colonial idiom which held the promise of a sublimation of Congress activity into constitutionalism; in the process it embarrassed the Government, which found itself in a double bind, of ideological isolation on the one hand for refusal to conciliate the moderate demands of the nationalists, and political erosion on the other if it did. For the effects of such conciliation on service morale in particular were deeply feared. In essence, though it was never "achieved", the Mahatma's demand presented the conditions of political crisis and displacement. For by threatening to disengage from the constitution the Congress compelled forces which had previously rivalled it for leadership into admitting the indispensability of the nationalist party for any scheme of stable government.

That the impasse was finally resolved was due to the overwhelming opinion for office in the party. This was related to fears that the people would prove apathetic to the party if the constitution was suspended without redressal of popular demands. Popular unrest seemed to be restricted to the U.P. and Bihar, and tended to decline by May-June 1937. And rarely did it threaten to break into direct action.

The office acceptance issue represented a critical moment for the national movement. Nationalist influence had hitherto
been exercised outside the domain of the state structure. The dilemma of how such an influence could be developed through government, but without full power, was now presented to the Congress. The Gandhians resolved the dilemma by arguing that the power of their organisation and commitment would make the constitutional experiment one of precise aim and of limited duration. They were to be proved right, but the experiment was to bring to the surface many tensions in the party, and in the process would underline the relationships of power that the national movement was giving rise to in Indian society.