CHAPTER VII

GANDHI AND THE WAVELL OFFER

Wavell, who was well conversant with Indian conditions as Commander-in-Chief, considered it necessary to make a move towards the settlement of Indian question. He wrote to Churchill that it was necessary for the British to secure India as a friendly partner in British Commonwealth as their reputation in Burma, Malaya, China and Far East depended on their settlement with India. He favoured an imaginative and constructive move for setting up of a provisional political Government within the present constitution. He was summoned to England to discuss the issue with the war Cabinet.\(^1\)

Wavell returned to India on June 6 and made a broadcast on the political proposals on June 14, 1945.\(^2\) He said,

"... I, therefore propose, with the full support of His Majesty's Government, to invite Indian leaders both of Central and Provincial politics to take counsel with me with a view to the formation of a new Executive Council more representative of organised political opinion. The proposed new Council would represent the main communities and would include equal proportions of Caste Hindus and Moslems. It would work, if formed, under the existing Constitution. But it would be an entirely Indian Council, except for the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief, who would retain his position as War Member. It is also proposed that the portfolio of External Affairs, which has hitherto been held by the Viceroy, should be placed in charge of an Indian Member of Council, so far as the interests of British India are concerned."

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2. Ibid., pp. 141-142. also
A further step proposed by His Majesty's Government is the appointment of a British High Commissioner in India, as in the Dominions, to represent Great Britain's commercial and other such interests in India.

Such a new Executive Council will, you realise, represent a definite advance on the road to self-Government. It will be almost entirely Indian, and the Finance and Home Members will for the first time be Indians, while an Indian will also be charged with the management of India's Foreign Affairs. Moreover Members will now be selected by the Governor-General after consultation with political leaders; though their appointment will of course be subject to the approval of His Majesty the King-Emperor.

The Council will work within the framework of the present constitution; and there can be no question of the Governor-General agreeing not to exercise his constitutional power of control; but it will of course not be exercised unreasonably.

I should make it clear that the formation of this interim Government will in no way prejudice the final constitutional settlement.

The main tasks for this new Executive Council would be: ... I want to make it quite clear that neither I nor His Majesty's Government have lost sight of the need for a long-term solution, and that the present proposals are intended to make a long-term solution easier."

The Viceroy assured that orders had been given for the immediate release of the members of the Congress Working Committee who were still in detention. A similar statement was made by the Secretary of State in the British Parliament.

The Viceroy issued invitations to twenty one persons* to attend the Conference which was to be held at Simla from

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* The list of invitees included: eleven Premiers of the provinces, Leader of the Congress Party and the Deputy Leader of the Muslim League Party in the Central Assembly, the leaders of the Congress Party and the Muslim League Party in the Council of State, the leaders of the Nationalist Party and the European Group in the Central Assembly, one representative each of Scheduled Castes and the Sikhs, and Jinnah and Azad representing the Muslim League and the Congress.
June 25, 1945. The name of the Congress President, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, was not initially included amongst the invitees but later on added at Gandhi's instance. Gandhi refused to be treated as a delegate on the plea that he represented no institution. Though Wavell did not trust Gandhi yet he insisted on the latter's presence at Simla during the proceeding of the Council because he carried the impression that "it was impossible to by-pass Gandhi in India as he still retained the power to breakdown any agreement." 4

Gandhi, in his telegram to the Viceroy, dated May 15, 1945, expressed his anguish over the use of the term Caste Hindus as that sounded offensive to him. He said, "... there are no caste and castless Hindus who are at all politically minded. ..." 5 The Viceroy replied that he did not use the term 'Caste Hindus' with offensive intention but it was used only to signify equality between the Muslims and the Hindus, other than the members of the Scheduled Castes. He expressed his inability to effect any change in the draft of his broadcast. 6

Gandhi, however, apprehended that if parity remained unchangeable, "religious division will become officially stereotyped on the eve of independence." 7 Stressing his faith

5. Gandhi's Correspondence with the Government, op.cit., p. 18, Telegram from Gandhi to Viceroy dated June 15, 1945.
6. Ibid., p. 21, Telegram from Viceroy to Gandhi dated June 16, 1945.
in secular politics, he told the Viceroy that in spite of having overwhelming Hindu membership, the Congress had striven to be purely political. He asserted that though he was quite capable of advising the Congress to nominate all non-Hindus, mostly non-Caste Hindus yet he felt that by maintaining parity between Caste Hindus and Muslims, the Viceroy would "quite unconsciously but equally surely defeat purpose of Conference."\(^8\) Gandhi was eager to help the British but not at the cost of his fundamental principles. He, therefore, threatened that he would advise the Congress, which had never identified itself with Caste or non-Caste Hindus, not to participate in Executive Council, in case the principle of parity remained unaltered.

The Viceroy, however, expressed his inability to alter the parity issue. Consequently, Gandhi advised the Congress to select its nominees on the basis of ability rather than party labels, a majority of them from among the minorities. According to him, parity meant that neither community could nominate more members than the other but "was free to accept less if it chose."\(^9\)

Though several members of the Working Committee and some prominent Congress leaders were individually convinced of the wisdom of Gandhi's stand yet the Congress Working Committee could not be persuaded to adopt Gandhi's proposals.

\(^8\) Ibid.

It accepted all the five fundamental principles of the Wavell Offer as put forth by the Viceroy.\(^{10}\)

Gandhi had a meeting with the Viceroy at Simla on June 24, 1945 and referred to the question of release of all the political prisoners. Besides, he reiterated his objections to the term 'Caste Hindus' used by the Viceroy in his broadcast. He discussed with him the parity issue and the question of formation of coalition Government in the provinces. The Viceroy carried the impression that the proposals had received Gandhi's blessing though the latter appeared to be 'vague and discursive'. He found the Indian leader friendly for the time being but "perfectly prepared to go back at any time on anything."\(^{11}\)

Wavell had an interview with Jinnah on the same day. Expressing his fears, the League leader said that the Muslims would always be in a minority. He proposed to the Viceroy that any matter to which the majority of the Muslims were opposed, should not be decided by vote. The Viceroy found the proposal unacceptable and contrary to all principles of Government. The League leader claimed that the Muslim League alone had the right to nominate all Muslim members as it was the sole representative of the Muslims. The Viceroy expressed his inability to accept this as he was thinking of nominating a Muslim from the Unionist Party of the Punjab.\(^{12}\)

\(^{10}\) Ibid., pp. 127-128.

\(^{11}\) Wavell - The Viceroy's Journal, op.cit., pp. 144-146.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., pp. 146-147.
The Simla Conference commenced on June 25, 1945.

Next day, the Viceroy put the points for decision under the following heads:

A. If we could reach an agreement on the composition of the Council, were the general principles under which it would work - programme outlined in my broadcast, parity of Hindus and Muslims, present constitution etc. - acceptable;

B. If above principles were acceptable could we reach an agreement on composition of Council and names to be recommended.

The Conference was adjourned for a day as the members desired to have more time for private consultation with regard to their decision on matters raised in clause B.

When the matter could not be settled till June 29, the Viceroy decided to follow his own line of approach and asked the leaders of the parties to send the panel of names out of which he would select an acceptable team for his Council. All agreed to do so except Jinnah who wanted to consult his Working Committee before taking any decision.

The Viceroy, however, sent home his provisional selection of the Members of the Executive Council for approval of the Cabinet. The Home Government asked Wavell to persuade Jinnah to leave his hostile attitude and "tell him the Muslim names which you should favour and try to persuade Jinnah to agree to put forward names." The Cabinet further conveyed to him (Wavell) that he should show to him (Jinnah) the rest of the list and disclose to him that the list did not contain the

13. Ibid., p. 148.
name of a Congress Muslim. The Cabinet was afraid that the whole onus of failure would be thrown on the Muslims, and the League would be held as an obstacle to progress. The Cabinet, however, communicated its general approval to Wavell's 'Shadow Council' if he could secure its acceptance by leaders.

Consequently, the Viceroy held discussions with Jinnah and apprised him of the names of five Muslim Members, four from League and one from the Unionist Party of the Punjab, besides telling him that he could substitute the name of any member from the League or else could himself serve on the Council. It was also brought to the notice of the League leader that the scheme was based on parity between the Hindus and the Muslims and between the Congress and the League. But Jinnah refused to discuss the names unless his conditions mentioned earlier were accepted. Reacting to it, he said, "It is a snare and a death warrant" for the Muslim League as it would be reduced to a minority of one-third. With this attitude, the breakdown of the Conference became definite. Wavell conveyed the news of failure to Gandhi on the same day.

15. Ibid.
Gandhi commented:

"H.M.G. would have to decide sooner or later to accept either the Hindu or the Muslim point of view since they were irreconcilable."

The Secretary of State informed Wavell on July 12, 1945:

"Cabinet agree that your only course is to recognise that your strenuous efforts have failed and that breakdown must be acknowledged publicly without recrimination at final meeting of Conference on Saturday."

On July 14, 1945, in the last sitting of the Conference, Wavell announced its failure saying:

"The responsibility for failure is mine. The main idea underlying the Conference was mine. If it had succeeded its success would have been attributed to me and I cannot place the blame for its failure on any of the parties. I ask the party leaders to accept this view to avoid recriminations."

The Simla Conference reveals that the Congress leaders including Gandhi, were in an accommodating mood. The Conference was wrecked by Jinnah's unhelpful attitude. Though Wavell took the blame on himself, it was clear from the course of events as to where the blame could be laid. The British were also conscious of Jinnah's responsibility for the failure of the talks as is evident from Amery's letter to Wavell:

"So all our plans have for the moment broken down in the face of Jinnah's intransigence ... It is at any rate something to have further confirmation of the fact that the difficulty does not lie as between India and His Majesty's Government, but within India itself ... Nor will it be altogether to the bad that the Congress leaders have been in personal touch

with you and brought right up against the fact that it is the Muslims League and not you or I who stand in the way of their aspirations ..."22

In reply, Wavell admitted:

"The immediate cause of the failure of the Conference was Jinnah's intransigence about Muslim representation and Muslim safeguards..."23

The attitude of Jinnah at the Conference reveals that the League leader was not interested in finding an immediate solution to the constitutional tangle within the framework of a united India as his heart was set on a separate state. He was sure that so long as a powerful British lobby was there to safeguard his interests, he had not to fear any dire consequences from his refusal to accept Viceroy's offer. His negative approach and intransigence had been paying dividend to him. With singleness of purpose, he was unreservedly pursuing the creation of Pakistan.

The distrust of the Congress and fear of Hindu domination equally accounted for his lack of interest in any compromise offered by Wavell. He was conscious that in spite of parity between the Muslims and the Caste Hindus in the Council, the Muslim strength in the Council would in effect be one-third of the total members.24 Wavell gave credence

23. Ibid., p. 1263.
24. Ibid., p. 1245.
to the Muslim fear and said,

"Their fear that the Congress, by parading its national character and using Muslim dummies will permeate the entire administration of any united India is real."25

However, the real consideration that must have prevailed upon Jinnah in rejecting the Wavell offer was that the acceptance of any compromise formula would erode his claim for a separate homeland.

The League leader's claim to represent all the Muslim members of the Council, however, does not seem tenable as League's hold over the majority of Muslims in North-West Frontier Province, Punjab, Bengal, and Sind had not been convincingly demonstrated. The claim of the Muslim League for representing all the Muslims had not yet been established. There were many Muslim organisations claiming allegiance of a large number of Muslims which were not ready to admit League's claim to represent all Muslims. For instance, the Unionist Party which was carrying on Government in the Punjab for about two decades, challenged Jinnah's considered claim of the League as unjust since it would enable the League to monopolise representation for its own followers and thereby disenfranchise other schools of thought.26

Nevertheless, Jinnah alone cannot be held responsible for the failure of the talks. The British Conservative statesmen were pulling wires to put pressure on the Viceroy

25. Ibid., p. 1263.
to make every possible effort to conciliate Jinnah.\footnote{27} In a way, the League leader had been given the veto power to wreck the Conference if he so liked. Similarly, British Bureaucracy was supporting Jinnah for his moves that resulted in the failure of the talks. Jayakar, the Liberal leader, recorded that Jinnah's arrogance had reached the summit with the backing of the British Imperialism.\footnote{28}

Durga Das reported:

"When Jinnah was to announce his decision on the Wavell's proposal at the hotel lounge, a few moment earlier he had received a message from the cell of British Civil Servants in Simla which was in tune with the die-hards of London, that if Jinnah stepped out of the talks, he would be rewarded with Pakistan."

When the correspondent asked him why he had spurned the Wavell offer when he had won his point of parity for the League with the Congress, Jinnah replied:

"Am I a fool to accept this when I am offered Pakistan on a platter."\footnote{29}

Later, it was learnt that a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council had sent a secret message through his League contact. The same fact was revealed to V.P.Menon by Hossain Imam, the Leader of Muslim League Party in Council of State.\footnote{30}

\begin{enumerate}
\item[28.] Jayakar Papers, File No. 816-B, Letter No. 264 from Jayakar to Jagdish Parsad dated July 16, 1945, N.A.I., New Delhi.
\item[29.] Durga Das, op.cit., p. 216.
\item[30.] V.P.Menon, op.cit., p. 215.
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Mosley, referring to the same incident, said,

"Now it is certainly true that there were many British officials in India, some very high officials, who did not wish to see the end of the British Raj and were prepared to use every stratagem possible to preserve British hegemony and their own jobs, as long as possible. One British Governor of an important Indian province successfully wrecked a conference at Simla ... first by advising Jinnah on tactics and then using his influence on the Viceroy to make sure that the tactics worked."31

Several observers had held Wavell responsible for the failure as he had the choice of proceeding with the formation of the Executive Council without the help or participation of the League. Hodson maintained that the Viceroy,

"... had in effect capitulated to Jinnah ... It is arguable that if the Viceroy had been as adamant as Mr. Jinnah, the latter would have been obliged himself to give in ..."32

All-India Congress Committee also felt that the settlement of communal problem was possible only if the Viceroy had adopted a firm attitude.33 Similarly Azad, the Congress President, conveying the general opinion of Congress Working Committee, wrote to the Viceroy:

"... the Conference failed not because the majority of the summoned delegates did not agree upon a panel of names for the proposed Executive Council but because you allowed the All-India Muslim League veto to prevail ... "34

Wavell's inability to take a strong stand against Jinnah's demands had far-reaching consequences. Though sceptical about the reasonableness of League's claim, he refused to go ahead without it when Jinnah declined to submit the list of names. He had his own reasons for adopting this course as constituting a Cabinet without League, meant a Congress dominated Council which he could not afford to have at a time when the war was still going on and memories of the Quit India movement and non-cooperative attitude of the Congress towards war efforts had not faded out. Moreover, had he taken this step of forming the Executive Council without the support of the League, there was no guarantee of its being approved by the Cabinet Committee of India and the Secretary of State for India. Besides, Churchill, who had reluctantly consented to Viceroy's move, would not have agreed to the formation of an Executive Council dominated mainly by the Congress, since in his discussion with the Viceroy, he (Churchill) had indicated to the latter that any approach to Gandhi would be over his dead body.  

Further, majority of the Members of the Cabinet sub-Committee were not in favour of Wavell's offer. Amery conveyed to Wavell that most of the Ministers of Cabinet, including Simon, Grigg, Butler, frankly want the proposals to breakdown and are

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not without sympathisers in the rest of the Cabinet.\textsuperscript{36} When Wavell consulted Amery about the formation of his provisional Executive Council, the latter promptly wrote to him that Cabinet felt it difficult to approve of his latest scheme.\textsuperscript{37} Khaliq-uz-Zaman thankfully acknowledged the role played by the Secretary of State in refusing to allow the Viceroy to proceed without the League. He said,

"... this was one of the last memorable acts of Mr. Amery before he handed over charge of his office to Lord Pethick-Lawrence ten days later."\textsuperscript{38}

It was also believed in certain quarters that Simla Conference was only the Conservative election stunt. Their assertion was not altogether devoid of truth as Amery and his colleagues of the India Committee were not keen to accept the Wavell plan at the time when there was a coalition Government in England. But when it broke up on May 25, and election became imminent, Wavell's plan was hurriedly approved.\textsuperscript{39}

Jawaharlal Nehru also wrote from London:

"It is now known that the Wavell offer was maintained in being as part of election necessities ..."\textsuperscript{40}

Nav Shakti, a Nationalist paper, commented that the scheme appeared to be a 'mere stunt of the Tory Party for success in the elections'.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{36} Nicholas Mansergh, op.cit., vol. V, pp. 1228-1229.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., pp. 1223-1224.
\textsuperscript{38} Khaliq-uz-Zaman, op.cit., p. 328.
\textsuperscript{39} Wavell - The Viceroy's Journal, op.cit., p. 136.
\textsuperscript{40} Pyarelal, Mahatma Gandhi-The Last Phase, vol.I, Book-One, p.32
\textsuperscript{41} Home Poll. 18/6/1945, Fortnightly Report, N.A.I., New Delhi.
The failure of the Conference disturbed Gandhi. He was sore over the very question of maintaining imposed parity which in his view was not only unjustified but could also wreck the Conference. It is true that parity between the League and the Congress was suggested in Desai-Liaquat Pact and Gandhi had even given his blessings to the move but for him there was a fundamental difference between the two. The Desai-Liaquat Pact was the result of an attempt by the Congress leadership to remove the Muslim fear of Hindu domination through a voluntary surrender of certain claims of Hindus. But in the case of Wavell offer, it was an imposition by the alien Government which implied that the Muslim interests were safe only in British hands. Moreover, Gandhi was afraid that if this principle was given an official recognition, it could become a precedent in the future negotiations. Sapru, the Liberal leader, also did not subscribe to the parity clause. Referring to parity in the Sapru Committee recommendations, he explained:

"Our recommendation about parity is conditioned by the Muslims accepting joint electorate and I should be prepared to pay that much price."

Further, Gandhi's main objection was the use of the term 'Caste Hindus' by Wavell which in the opinion of the former would result in creating more divisions in the Hindu society and could cause a serious blow to his drive against untouchability. Expressing his sorrow over the failure of the

Conference, Gandhi wrote to Wavell:

"It grieves me to think that the Conference which began so happily and so hopefully should have ended in apparent failure due exactly, as it would seem, to the same cause as before. This time you have taken the blame on your own shoulders. But the world will think otherwise. India certainly does."

He continued:

"The deeper cause is perhaps the reluctance of the official world to part with power, which the passing of virtual control into the hands of their erstwhile prisoners would have meant."43

The failure of the Simla Conference revealed that Gandhi and the Congress had to fight various forces and reconcile diverse interests for keeping India united. But it definitely enhanced the prestige of the League and its leader in the eyes of the Muslims as it demonstrated that Jinnah alone held the key to India's political progress which implied that he was head and shoulders above all Muslim leaders. Consequently, the Muslim masses flocked to his camp. Hodson observed:

"Mr. Jinnah's demonstration of imperious strength at the Simla Conference was a shot in the arm for the League and a serious blow for its Muslim opponents, especially, in the Punjab."44

The acceptance of parity between the Hindus and the Muslims by the Congress, though under the compulsion of India's


44. H.V.Hodson, op.cit., p. 127.
fight for freedom, added weight to Jinnah's demand for partition. Taking advantage of the situation, he raised his demands further as he insisted not only on parity of the League with the Congress, but also with all other parties joined together with the Congress. Wavell noted with surprise:

"He (Jinnah) seemed at one time to raise his claim to parity inside the Council with all other parties combined."45

Sapru commented that this claim of the League leader was inadmissible and outrageous.46

According to Menon:

"The Simla Conference afforded a last opportunity to the forces of nationalism to fight a rearguard action to preserve the integrity of the country, and when the battle was lost the waves of communalism quickly engulfed it. Only the Hobson's Choice of partition was left."47


47. V.P. Menon, op.cit., p. 217.