

UNIT 15 – UPSC - Lord Irwin promises Dominion Status

India's History : Modern India : Lord Irwin promises Dominion Status for India; Trade Union split; Jawaharlal Nehru hoists the National Flag at Lahore : 1929

Lord Irwin



On the 1st of April 1926 Lord Irwin succeeded Lord Reading as Viceroy. Lord Irwin had hereditary connections with India. Lord Irwin's grandfather, the first Viscount Halifax had served in India and had been secretary of State for India. Lord Irwin was also a very religious man. It may have been felt by those who appointed him that he was ideal to deal with the religious Mahatma. However, for nineteen months Lord Irwin chose to ignore Gandhi.



During this period Lord Birkenhead was the secretary of State for India. He believed that Indians would not be fit for self-government even in a hundred years. A general election

was imminent in Britain and Birkenhead was apprehensive that his Conservative Party might lose the elections to the Labor party, as indeed it did.

The Labor Party was known to be more sensitive to Indian Aspirations. Under the Government of India Act of 1919 a Commission was due to review the constitution of India within about two years. Birkenhead feared that a future Labor government might concede too much power to Indians. He pre-empted any such move by deciding to appoint the Commission prematurely. Sir John Simon was appointed to lead the Commission.

The appointment of the Simon Commission caused widespread resentment. All political parties and factions were unanimous in their opposition to the Simon Commission and they decided to boycott it.

Gandhi emerging from his year of silence and rest was seeking a propitious time to launch another civil disobedience campaign. The resentment caused by the appointment of the Simon Commission provided him the necessary conditions. He decided to act. He revived the plan to conduct civil disobedience in Bardoli, which he suspended earlier in 1922 due to the violence in Chauri Chaura.

The campaign at Bardoli was inspired and orchestrated by Gandhi, from his Ashram. He asked Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel to actually move into Bardoli and organize and lead the campaign. Patel was Mayor of Ahmedabad at the time and had to resign his post in order to do so.

Patel a brilliant lawyer proved to be an excellent organizer. He instructed the peasants not to pay a twenty-two percent increase in taxes levied by the British Government.

The British Government confiscated movable property in retaliation. Pots, pans, livestock, carts and horses were taken away from the peasants. The peasants remained non-violent.

Patel asked the peasants to dismantle the carts in order to increase the difficulty of government officials. Accordingly, wheels were removed and the shafts were hidden. The officials were not impeded in any other way.

All of India keenly observed the events taking place in Bardoli. Contribution of funds poured in to help maintain the struggle. Some wanted Gandhi to expand the movement to other provinces. Gandhi resisted any such move. The civil resisters in Bardoli were well organized by Patel and were well disciplined. The population of Bardoli, which was under one hundred thousand, was also manageable. Gandhi did not want to risk degeneration into violence by expanding the struggle to other places with larger populations who were less organized and disciplined.

The British government of India came under pressure from London to crush the movement. In an effort to do so the Government stated that they had auctioned some seized lands and threatened to sell the remainder if taxes were not paid. However it had no effect. The peasants would not submit.

Finally, in a desperate move the Government arrested Patel. Gandhi replaced him as the leader and moved into Bardoli. A few days later the Government capitulated.

In an agreement with Patel the Government promised to cancel the increase in taxes and return all the confiscated property. Patel on behalf of the peasants agreed to pay taxes at the old rates.

In Bardoli Gandhi demonstrated to the British Government and to the Indian people that the method of non-violent civil disobedience was effective. He proved that the British Government could be successfully defied. The British Government would have realized that from henceforth it would be difficult to govern India without the consent of the people. They could no longer act with impunity.

The success at Bardoli quickened the temper of the Congress Party. At the annual Congress session, which met in Calcutta in December 1928, the younger leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose demanded immediate independence. Gandhi suggested that the British be given two years' notice but compromised on one year. It was then agreed that if India had not achieved freedom under Dominion Status by 31 December 1929, there would be a struggle for independence.

In May 1929 the Labor Party won the most number of seats at the General Elections in Britain. They did not have an overall majority but formed a minority Government. Ramsay Macdonald became Prime Minister and Wedgwood Benn the Secretary of State for India.

Lord Irwin visited London to consult the new Government. It was known that the Labor Party was more sympathetic to Indian aspirations.

Soon after his return, the Viceroy Lord Irwin with the consent of the Secretary of State for India, Wedgwood Benn made a momentous announcement. He stated that a Round Table Conference would be held in which the British Government would sit with delegates from British India, and the native states to discuss India's constitutional progress. He envisaged that the natural issue of the conference to be Dominion Status for India.

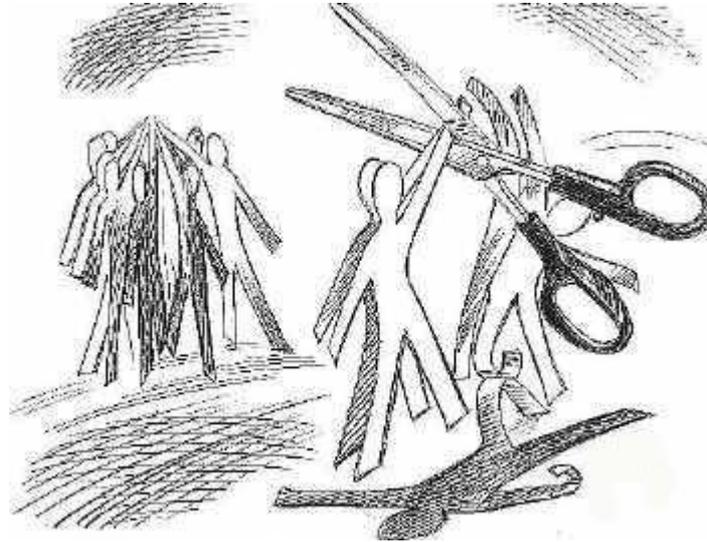
Gandhi and the elder statesman of the Congress Party welcomed the statement.

However, Lord Irwin was soon to retract the statement. His promise of Dominion Status raised a howl of protest in London. Led by his predecessor Lord Reading, the Conservatives and Liberals combined to condemn the Viceroy. Although Wedgwood Benn defended the Viceroy the minority Government had to defer to the majority pressure exerted by the Conservatives and Liberals in combination.

As a consequence the Viceroy Lord Irwin was non-committal when Gandhi met him to seek clarification. Lord Irwin merely said that he could not prejudge the final outcome of the Round Table Conference. In other words there was not going to be any Dominion Status for India.

The change in the attitude of the British Government did not leave the Congress Party with much choice. At the annual party convention held in December 1929 under the presidency of Jawaharlal Nehru it was decided to launch a campaign of civil disobedience in the pursuit of complete independence.

Trade Union Split



From the mid-twenties of the present century onwards the communists launched a major offensive to capture the AITUC. A part of their strategy was to start rival unions in opposition to those dominated by the nationalists. By 1928 they had become powerful enough to sponsor their own candidate for election to the office of the President of the AITUC in opposition to the nationalist candidate Nehru. Nehru managed to win the election by a narrow margin. In the 1929 session of the AITUC chaired by Nehru the communists mustered enough support to carry a resolution affiliating the federation to international communist forum. This resolution sparked the first split in the labor movement. The moderates, who were deeply opposed to the affiliation of the AITUC with the League against Imperialism and the Pan - Pacific Secretariat, walked out of the federation and eventually formed the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF). Within two years of this event the movement suffered a further split. On finding themselves a minority in the AITUC, the communists walked out of it in 1931 to form the Red Trade Union Congress. The dissociation of the communists from the AITUC was, however, short-lived. They returned to the AITUC the moment the British banned the Red Trade Union Congress. The British were the most favorably disposed toward the moderate NTUF. N.M. Joshi, the moderate leader, was appointed a member of the Royal Commission.