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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FIRST ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE: INITIATIVE MADE BY THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT: THE MUSLIM PRESS IN MADRAS PRESIDENCY.

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Abstract

In a letter to Wedge Wood Benn discussing the prospects of the proposed Round table Conference, Irwin expressed the view that the most opportune time for the conference was in 1924, after the legislative Assembly had adopted the motion of Motilal Nehru recommending to the Governor-General the need of holding such a conference to settle the constitutional problem. The three Round table Conferences were organized by the British Government following the Simon Commission meeting so much resistance they did not even complete their report. Demand for Swaraj or Self-rule, in India had been growing increasingly strong. By the 1930s, the many British politicians believed that India needed to move towards dominion status. The Round Table Conference was opened officially by King George V on Thursday, November 13, 1930 and chaired by the British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald. Numerous and conflicting claims required adjustment: firstly, of various communities in British India and the States; secondly, of British India and the states; thirdly, of India and Britain; and fourthly, of democracy and vested interests. Observing the impasse created over the RTC because of the non-cooperation of the Congress the Government released the Congress leaders and withdrew the notification declaring the Congress to be an unlawful association.

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Introduction:-

In a letter to Wedge Wood Benn discussing the prospects of the proposed Round table Conference, Irwin expressed the view that the most opportune time for the conference was in 1924, after the legislative Assembly had adopted the motion of Motilal Nehru recommending to the Governor-General the need of holding such a conference to settle the constitutional problem. In 1924 the Congress had realized that the country was not prepared to continue the Non-Cooperation Movement. The Muslim League, however inactive, had accepted the goal of Self Government.¹ A great political upheaval was taking place in 1929. The Indian National Congress under Gandhi's leadership, wanted a dominion status for India and the holding of a Round table Conference would be held to consider proposals for reforms.

The three Round table Conferences were organized by the British Government following the Simon Commission meeting so much resistance they did not even complete their report. Demand for Swaraj or Self-rule, in India had

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been growing increasingly strong. By the 1930s, the many British politicians believed that India needed to move towards dominion status.ⁱⁱ

At a meeting with the Viceroy in December Gandhi and Motilal Nehru representing the Congress, insisted that Dominion status should be granted immediately and the Round Table Conference should frame a Constitution for that purpose. As there was no response from the British the Congress started Civil Disobedience.ⁱⁱⁱ By substituting for Simon Commission, the Round Table Conference endowed with equality between British and Indian representatives. The following categories were chosen by the Governor-General. The politicians belonging to All-India Parties, representatives of communal organizations, landowners, industrialists, the Europeans, Anglo-Indians, Burmese, representatives for princely states of India. So far as Congress concerned the Viceroy gave permission to Sapru and Jayakar to intervene and confer with Gandhi and other leaders in Jail.^{iv}

The Round Table Conference was opened officially by King George V on Thursday, November 13, 1930 and chaired by the British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald. The Indian National Congress, along with Indian Business leaders kept away from the Conference. Many of them were in Jail for their participation in Civil Disobedience.^v

Participants of first round table conference:

1. Muslim League: Muhammad Ali, Muhammad Shafi, The Aga Khan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Muhammad Zafrulla Khan, A.K.FazlulHuq
2. Hindu Mahasabha: B.S.Moonje and M.R.Jayakar
3. Liberals: TejBahadurSapru, C.Y.Chintamani and SrinivasaSastri
4. Sikh: SardarUjjal Singh
5. Depressed Classes: B.R.Ambedkar
6. Princely States: Akbar Hydari, Mirza Ismail, Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala, Maharaja SayajiraoGakewad III of Baroda, Maharaja Hari Singh of Jammu and Kashmir Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner, NawabHamidullah Khan of Bhopal and K.S.Ranjitsinhji of Nawanagar.

The idea of an All-India Federation was moved to the centre of discussion. All the groups attending the Conference supported this concept. The responsibility of the Executive to legislature was discussed, and B.R.Ambedkar demanded a separate Electorate for the Untouchables.^{vi}

The Muslim Press About First Round Table Conference

Saiphul Islam wrote that care should be taken while choosing the Muhammadan representatives for the conference. The Government should select All-India –Muslim League, Delhi Khilafat Committee and the Executive board of the Muslim All- Parties Conference. The conditions laid down for the grant of reforms to the Frontier Province and for the separation of Sind and the suggestion that Burma should be separated from India would doubtless be condemned by the Muslims. The Government seem to be choosing representatives for the conference from the different provinces and the Madras presidency might have five representatives.^{vii}

Darul Islam wrote that Government of India should evince proper interest regarding the nature of the representatives of India who were going to be selected to attend the forth coming Round Table Conference in London. As far as the Muslims were concerned,” we request Lord Irwin that only such persons as have understood well the grievances of the Muslim community in India and have the capacity to courageously point out those grievances at the conference should be elected as representative to it. If the so called Muslim leaders, who were Muslims only intense were ignorant of the real grievances of Muslim community were sent to the conference, the Indian Muslims would not drive any benefit whatever there from. We found that there were several leaders among the Muslims who have no faith in the advancement of their community. Hence we hope that the Viceroy would without selecting such persons to represent the Indian Muslims at the Conference”.^{viii}

As already said, Lord Irwin made an announcement on October 1929, that,” His Majesty’s Government after the publication of the Indian Statutory commission’s report, would convene a conference of representatives both of British India and of the Indian states for the purpose of seeking the greatest possible measures of agreement on the Indian constitutional problems.” In pursuance of this plan invitations were issued in October,1930, the first session of the conference commenced on November 12 , 1930.It included leading members of three political parties in England and members of every community and every organizations of India, except the Indian National Congress. The conference was inaugurated by His Majesty the King-Emperor and was presided over by Prime Minister

Ramsay MacDonald. Numerous and conflicting claims required adjustment: firstly, of various communities in British India and the States; secondly, of British India and the states; thirdly, of India and Britain; and fourthly, of democracy and vested interests. The reports of the various sub-committees were received by the whole conference and were noted together with the members observations on each.^{ix}

Sahifa, while referring to Gandhi's decision to keep aloof from the Round table conference, "if the communal problem be not solved and pointing out that nevertheless the Congressmen have been unanimously awaiting the announcement of the date of the Conference". The **Sahifa** wrote that His Majesty's Government announced that the federal structure committee would meet at London in the end of June and that the conference proper would begin two months later. The duty of the Muslim delegates lies clear before them. Remarking that Gandhi was constantly changing his decisions about participating the conference.^x

Quami Report, observed that the opposition to Gandhi was growing stronger in England and it was apprehended that the Labour Government might soon come to attend on this account. The press wrote that the postponement under reference was deemed necessary for the convenience of the Indian delegates as well as the representatives of Government. This was the Governments reason for putting off Round Table Conference. But Gandhi alone was at the bottom of it all. "We afraid that when the conference does come off, the power of the Congress will have declined and Gandhi will have lost his present status; and therefore nothing will come out of the conference".^{xi}

Muslim Times, wrote under the heading of, "Is the Round Table Conference representatives?" The Gandhi- Irwin agreement and the anxiety of the Labour Ministry that the Congress representatives should attend the next session of Round Table Conference amount to a conference on the part of the Government that the first conference was not representative. It was regrettable that the congress propaganda impressed the British Cabinet. Though the Government of Lord Irwin showed its insight by including among the Muslim delegates great personalities like the late Moulana Muhammad Ali, it disregarded the demands of the Muslim representative to the first conference and its unwillingness to nominate the representative for the second conference naturally leads to the question, "Is no Muslim of this presidency fit to represent it at the conference?" The Muslims of this presidency eagerly ask, "Does not one person among us possess these qualification? Have we not very able and cultured representatives in the central and provincial legislatures?"^{xii}

Sahifa observed that the congressmen were in hurry about the convention of the Round Table Conference it wrote that the Congressmen were in hurry because they want the Indian problem to be settled while the Labour Party continues in office and to become sole masters of India. So the convention of the Round Table Conference might be postponed until the communal problem was settled. Complaining that the Government did not heed Muslim agitation for inviting Muslim delegates from Madras to the conference last time.^{xiii}

Quami Report referring with disappointment to Gandhi's decision to participate in the Round Table Conference irrespective of the solution of the Hindu-Muslim problem the it wrote that far from making any attempt to unite Muslims, Gandhi throws obstacles in the way of unity. The Congress said that when once its demands were conceded by the British Government it would satisfy the minorities which merely amounts to putting the cart before the horse.^{xiv}

In the Urdu press Muslims continue to be urged not to abate their demands from safeguards and there was criticism of Gandhi's boycott of the Round Table Conference being recommended it he should fail to come to terms with the All-India Muslim League.^{xv}

Quami Report wrote that, "if the British Statesmen should at the second Round Table Conference ask Gandhi to submit the unanimous demands of Indians we are at lost to conceive what he is going to say, Muslims in this presidency displeased with him and much more to will the Muslim nationalists". It refers Gandhi's decision to participate in the forthcoming Round Table Conference and speculating upon the attitude he would assume at the conference towards the communal problem the **Quami Report** opines that he might in order to throw dust in the eyes of Europe set up the claim that the Muslim majority was with him, and seek to justify his claim by the support of Muslim nationalists.^{xvi}

Conclusion:-

Observing the impasse created over the RTC because of the non-cooperation of the Congress the Government released the Congress leaders and withdrew the notification declaring the Congress to be an unlawful association. After this gesture by the Government the working Committee authorized Gandhi to seek an interview with Lord Irwin. On various days between February 17 and March 5 Gandhi had private interviews with the viceroy; the ultimate result being the well-known Gandhi-Irwin pact. After the pact, Gandhi went to London to take part in the RTC towards the end of 1931. Differences arose, however in the Minorities committee subsequently over Ramsay MacDonald's communal Award and Gandhi dissociated himself from the decision^{xvii}.

ⁱ Tara Chand, (1972), History of Freedom Movement in India, vol4, New Delhi, p.139

ⁱⁱ Sunil K. Saxena, (2012), History of Modern India, Surendra Publications, New Delhi, p.211

ⁱⁱⁱ Nair A.A, (1966) Peeps at the press in South India, Madras, p. 76

^{iv} Tara Chand, Op-cit, p.140

^v Sunil K. Saxena, op.cit, p.211

^{vi} ibid, p. 211

^{vii} Native News Paper Report, 1930, Saiphul Islam, madras, 25th June 1930, TNA

^{viii} Native News Paper Report, 1930, Darul Islam, Madras, 15th August 1930, TNA

^{ix} Anup Chand Kapur, (1970), Constitutional History of India, New Delhi,

^x Native News Paper Report, 1931, Sahifa, Hyderabad, 23rd May 1931, TNA

^{xi} Native News Paper Report, 1931, Quami Report, 30, 31st May 1931, TNA

^{xii} Native News Paper Report, 1931, Muslim Times, weekly, Madras, 31st May 1931, TNA

^{xiii} Native News Paper Report, 1931, Sahifa, Hyderabad, 2nd June 1931, TNA

^{xiv} Native News Paper Report, 1931, Quami Report, 15th June 1931, TNA

^{xv} Fortnightly Reports 1931, for the first half of June 1931

^{xvi} Native News Paper Report, 1931, Quami Report, 8th and 15th July 1931, TNA

^{xvii} Sunit Ghosh, (1998), Modern History of Indian Press, New Delhi, p.219