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Debates on the Future Strategy after Civil Disobedience Movement

Following the withdrawal of the Civil Disobedience Movement, there was a two-stage debate on the future strategy of the nationalists: the first stage was on what course the national movement should take in the immediate future, i.e., during the phase of non-mass struggle (1934-35); and the second stage, in 1937, considered the question of office acceptance in the context of provincial elections held under the autonomy provisions of the Government of India Act, 1935.

The First Stage Debate

Three perspectives were put forward on what the nationalists should work on immediately after the end of the Civil Disobedience Movement. The first two were traditional responses, while the third one represented the rise of a strong leftist trend within the Congress. The three perspectives were as follows.

1. There should be constructive work on Gandhian lines.
2. There should be a constitutional struggle and participation in elections to the Central Legislature (due in 1934) as advocated by M.A. Ansari, Asaf Ali, Bhulabhai Desai, S. Satyamurthy and B.C. Roy among others. They argued that:

- in a period of political apathy, elections and council work could be utilised to keep up the political interest and morale of the people;
- participation in elections and council work did not amount to faith in constitutional politics;
- another political front would help build up Congress and prepare the masses for the next phase;
- this approach would give the Congress a certain amount of prestige and confidence, and a strong presence in councils would serve as an equivalent to the movement.

3. A strong leftist trend within the Congress, represented by Nehru, was critical of both constructive work and council entry in place of the suspended civil disobedience movement as that would sidetrack political mass action and divert attention from the main issue of the struggle against colonialism. Instead, this section favoured resumption and continuation of non-constitutional mass struggle because the situation was still revolutionary owing to continued economic crisis and the readiness of the masses to fight.

■ Nehru's Vision

Nehru said, "The basic goal before Indian people as before people of the world is abolition of capitalism and establishment of socialism." He considered the withdrawal of the Civil Disobedience Movement and council entry "a spiritual defeat", "a surrender of ideals" and "a retreat from revolutionary to reformist mentality".

He suggested that the vested interests be revised in favour of the masses by taking up the economic and class demands of peasants and workers, and landlords and capitalists, organising masses in their class organisations—kisan sabhas and trade unions. He argued that these class organisations should be allowed to affiliate with the Congress, thus influencing its policies and activities. There could be no genuine anti-imperialist struggle, he said, without incorporating the class struggle of the masses.

■ **Nehru's Opposition to Struggle-Truce-Struggle Strategy**

A large number of Congressmen led by Gandhi believed that a mass phase of movement (struggle phase) had to be followed by a phase of reprieve (truce phase) before the next stage of mass struggle could be taken up. The truce period, it was argued, would enable the masses to recoup their strength to fight and also give the government a chance to respond to the demands of the nationalists. The masses could not go on sacrificing indefinitely. If the government did not respond positively, the movement could be resumed again with the participation of the masses. This was the struggle-truce-struggle or S-T-S strategy.

Criticising the S-T-S strategy, Nehru argued that the Indian national movement had reached a stage, after the Lahore Congress call for *purna swaraj* programme, in which there should be a continuous confrontation and conflict with imperialism till it was overthrown. He advocated maintenance of a "continuous direct action" policy by the Congress and without the interposition of a constitutionalist phase. Real power, he said, cannot be won by two *annas* and four *annas*. Against an S-T-S strategy, he suggested a Struggle-Victory (S-V) strategy.

■ **Finally, Yes to Council Entry**

Nationalists with apprehension and British officials with hope expected a split in the Congress on Surat lines sooner or later, but Gandhi conciliated the proponents of council entry by acceding to their basic demand of permission to enter the legislatures. He said, "Parliamentary politics cannot lead to freedom but those Congressmen who could not, for some reason, offer *satyagraha* or devote themselves to constructive work should not remain unoccupied and could express their patriotic energies through council work provided they are not sucked into constitutionalism or self-serving." Assuring the leftists, Gandhi said that the withdrawal of the Civil

Disobedience Movement did not mean bowing down before opportunists or compromising with imperialism.

In May 1934, the All India Congress Committee (AICC) met at Patna to set up a Parliamentary Board to fight elections under the aegis of the Congress itself.

Gandhi was aware that he was out of tune with powerful trends in the Congress. A large section of the intelligentsia favoured parliamentary politics with which he was in fundamental disagreement. Another section was estranged from the Congress because of Gandhi's emphasis on the spinning wheel as the "second lung of the nation". The socialists led by Nehru also had differences with Gandhi. In October 1934, Gandhi announced his resignation from the Congress to serve it better in thought, word and deed. Nehru and the socialists thought that the British must first be expelled before the struggle for socialism could be waged, and in an anti-imperialist struggle unity around the Congress, still the only anti-imperialist mass organisation, was indispensable. Thus it was better, they felt, to gradually radicalise the Congress than to get isolated from the masses. The right wing was no less accommodating. In the elections to the Central Legislative Assembly held in November 1934, the Congress captured 45 out of 75 seats reserved for Indians.

Government of India Act, 1935

Amidst the struggle of 1932, the Third RTC was held in November, again without Congress participation. The discussions led to the formulation of the Act of 1935.

■ Main Features

The Government of India Act was passed by the British Parliament in August 1935. Its main provisions were as follows.

1. An All India Federation It was to comprise all British Indian provinces, all chief commissioner's provinces

and the Indian states (princely states). The federation's formation was conditional on the fulfilment of: (i) states with allotment of 52 seats in the proposed Council of States should agree to join the federation; and (ii) aggregate population of states in the above category should be 50 per cent of the total population of all Indian states.

Since these conditions were not fulfilled, the proposed federation never came up. The central government carried on upto 1946 as per the provisions of Government of India Act, 1919.

2. Federal Level: *Executive* • The governor-general was the pivot of the entire Constitution.

- Subjects to be administered were divided into reserved and transferred subjects. Reserved subjects—foreign affairs, defence, tribal areas and ecclesiastical affairs—were to be exclusively administered by the governor-general on the advice of executive councillors. Executive councillors were not to be responsible to the central legislature. Transferred subjects included all other subjects and were to be administered by the governor-general on the advice of ministers elected by the legislature. These ministers were to be responsible to the federal legislature and were to resign on losing the confidence of the body.

- Governor-general could act in his individual judgement in the discharge of his special responsibilities for the security and tranquillity of India.

Legislature • The bicameral legislature was to have an upper house (Council of States) and a lower house (Federal Assembly). The Council of States was to be a 260-member house, partly directly elected from British Indian provinces and partly (40 per cent) nominated by the princes. The Federal Assembly was to be a 375-member house, partly indirectly elected from British Indian provinces and partly (one-third) nominated by the princes.

- Oddly enough, election to the Council of States was direct and that to the Federal Assembly, indirect.

- Council of States was to be a permanent body with one-third members retiring every third year. The duration of the assembly was to be 5 years.
- The three lists for legislation purposes were to be federal, provincial and concurrent.
- Members of Federal Assembly could move a vote of no-confidence against ministers. Council of States could not move a vote of no-confidence.
- The system of religion-based and class-based electorates was further extended.
- 80 per cent of the budget was non-votable.
- Governor-general had residuary powers. He could (a) restore cuts in grants, (b) certify bills rejected by the legislature, (c) issue ordinances and (d) exercise his veto.

3. Provincial Autonomy ● Provincial autonomy replaced dyarchy.

- Provinces were granted autonomy and separate legal identity.
- Provinces were freed from “the superintendence, direction” of the secretary of state and governor-general. Provinces henceforth derived their legal authority directly from the British Crown.
- Provinces were given independent financial powers and resources. Provincial governments could borrow money on their own security.

Executive ● Governor was to be the Crown’s nominee and representative to exercise authority on the king’s behalf in a province.

- Governor was to have special powers regarding minorities, rights of civil servants, law and order, British business interests, partially excluded areas, princely states, etc.
- Governor could take over and indefinitely run administration.

Legislature ● Separate electorates based on Communal Award were to be made operational.

- All members were to be directly elected. Franchise was extended; women got the right on the same basis as men.
- Ministers were to administer all provincial subjects in a council of ministers headed by a premier.
- Ministers were made answerable to and removable by the adverse vote of the legislature.
- Provincial legislature could legislate on subjects in provincial and concurrent lists.
- 40 per cent of the budget was still not votable.
- Governor could (a) refuse assent to a bill, (b) promulgate ordinances, (c) enact governor's Acts.

■ Evaluation of the Act

- Numerous 'safeguards' and 'special responsibilities' of the governor-general worked as brakes in the proper functioning of the Act.
- In provinces, the governor still had extensive powers.
- The Act enfranchised 14 per cent of British Indian population.
- The extension of the system of communal electorates and representation of various interests promoted separatist tendencies which culminated in partition of India.
- The Act provided a rigid constitution with no possibility of internal growth. Right of amendment was reserved with the British Parliament.

The Long-Term British Strategy • Suppression could only be a short-term tactic. In the long run, the strategy was

Views

We framed the Act of 1935 because we thought that was the best way...of maintaining British influence in India.

Lord Linlithgow, viceroy (1936-43)

We are provided with a car, all brakes and no engine.

Jawaharlal Nehru

The process of constitutional advance in India is determined by the need to attract Indian collaborators to the Raj.

B.R. Tomlinson

to weaken the national movement and integrate large segments of the movement into colonial, constitutional and administrative structure.

- Reforms would revive the political standing of constitutionalist liberals and moderates who had lost public support during the Civil Disobedience Movement.
- Repression earlier and reforms now would convince a large section of Congressmen of the ineffectiveness of an extra-legal struggle.
- Once Congressmen tasted power, they would be reluctant to go back to politics of sacrifice.
- Reforms could be used to create dissensions within Congress—right wing to be placated through constitutional concessions and radical leftists to be crushed through police measures.
- Provincial autonomy would create powerful provincial leaders who would gradually become autonomous centres of political power. Congress would thus be provincialised and the central leadership would get weakened.

■ Nationalists' Response

The 1935 Act was condemned by nearly all sections and unanimously rejected by the Congress. The Hindu Mahasabha and the National Liberal Foundation, however, declared themselves in favour of the working of the 1935 Act in the central as well as at the provincial level. The Congress demanded, instead, the convening of a Constituent Assembly elected on the basis of adult franchise to frame a constitution for independent India.

The Second Stage Debate

In early 1937, elections to provincial assemblies were announced and once again the debate on the future strategy to be adopted by the nationalists began.

Everyone in the Congress agreed that the 1935 Act was to be opposed root and branch but it was not clear how it

was to be done in a period when a mass movement was not yet possible. There was full agreement that the Congress should fight these elections on the basis of a detailed political and economic programme, thus deepening the anti-imperialist consciousness of the people. But what to do after the elections was not yet clear. If the Congress got majority in a province, was it to agree to form a government?

There were sharp differences over these questions among the nationalists. The two sides of the debate soon got identified with the emerging ideological divide along the left and right lines.

■ Divided Opinion

Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Bose, and Congress socialists and communists were opposed to office acceptance and thereby in the working of the 1935 Act because they argued that it would negate the rejection of the Act by the nationalists. It would be like assuming responsibility without power. Also, it would take away the revolutionary character of the movement as constitutional work would sidetrack the main issues of freedom, economic and social justice, and removal of poverty.

As a counter-strategy, the leftists proposed entry into the councils with an aim to create deadlocks, thus making the working of the Act impossible (older Swarajist strategy). And, as a long-term strategy, they advocated an increased reliance on workers and peasants, integration of their class organisations into the Congress, thus imparting a socialist direction to the Congress and preparing for the resumption of a mass movement.

The **proponents of office acceptance** argued that they were equally committed to combating the 1935 Act, but work in legislatures was to be only a short-term tactic since option of a mass movement was not available at the time, and mass struggle alone was capable of winning independence. Capture or rejection of office was not a matter of socialism but of

strategy. They agreed that there was a danger of being sucked in by wrong tendencies, but the answer was to fight these tendencies and not to abandon office. The administrative field should not be left open to pro-government reactionary forces. Despite limited powers, provincial ministries could be used to promote constructive work.

■ Gandhi's Position

Gandhi opposed office acceptance in the CWC meetings but by the beginning of 1936, he was willing to give a trial to the formation of Congress ministries.

In its sessions at Lucknow in early 1936 and Faizpur in late 1937, the Congress decided to fight elections and postpone the decision on office acceptance to the post-election phase. The Congress resolution was "not to submit to this constitution or to cooperate with it, but to combat it both inside and outside the legislatures so that it can be ended." In February 1937, elections to the provincial assemblies were held. Elections were held in eleven provinces—Madras, Central Provinces, Bihar, Orissa, United Provinces, Bombay Presidency, Assam, NWFP, Bengal, Punjab and Sindh.

These elections were the first in which a larger number of Indians than ever before were eligible to participate. An estimated 30.1 million persons, including 4.25 million women, had been enfranchised (14 per cent of the total population), and 15.5 million of these, including 917,000 women, actually exercised their franchise, according to reports.

■ Congress Manifesto for Elections

The Congress manifesto reaffirmed total rejection of the 1935 Act, and promised release of prisoners, removal of disabilities on the basis of gender and caste, radical transformation of the agrarian system, substantial reduction of rent and revenue, scaling down of rural debts, cheap credit and right to form trade unions and to strike.

Gandhi did not attend a single election meeting.

■ Congress' Performance

The Congress won 716 out of 1,161 seats it contested. (There were 1,585 seats in the legislative assemblies of the eleven provinces.) It got a majority in all provinces, except in Bengal, Assam, Punjab, Sindh and the NWFP, and emerged as the largest party in Bengal, Assam and the NWFP. Because of this performance, the prestige of the Congress rose and Nehru was reconciled to the dominant strategy of S-T-S.

Summary

- **First Stage Debate on**
 - (i) Constructive work on Gandhian lines.
 - (ii) Constitutional struggle and participation in elections.
 - (iii) Rejection of constructive work and constitutional struggle—continuation of CDM.
- **Government of India Act, 1935**

Proposed—an All India Federation; bicameral legislature at the centre; provincial autonomy; three lists for legislation—federal, provincial and concurrent.

At centre, subjects to be administered divided into reserved and transferred categories.

Provincial legislators to be directly elected.

Early 1937—elections to provincial assemblies held. Congress ministries formed in Bombay, Madras, Central Provinces, United Provinces, Bihar, Orissa, Assam and NWFP.
- **Second Stage Debate**

Nehru, Subhas, Congress and socialists opposed office acceptance.

Leftists proposed entry into the councils with an aim to create deadlocks.

Gandhi, in the beginning opposed for office acceptance, but later gave his approval.

Congress sessions at Lucknow (1936) and Faizpur (1937) decided to contest elections.