

THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA ACT OF 1935 AND ITS IMPACT ON THE POLITICS OF THE SOUTH-EAST PUNJAB

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Six of the provinces were to have two Houses of the Legislative Assembly, the rest including Punjab had only one.¹ Under the Act of 1935, an electorate of some 36 million as compared to an electorate of 7 million in 1920 and representing 30 percent of the adult population was enfranchised. Accordingly 24 percent of the adult population of Punjab was enfranchised which was about 12 percent of the total population of Punjab.²

Government of India Act, 1935 became a reality. Besides limited voting rights the Act also had many handicaps.³ The Sikh leaders were strongly opposed to the communal award but the Congress remained neutral. This award was to become the basis of the Act in 1935 with greater autonomy to the provinces.⁴ The Akalis, too exhibited a great deal of displeasure. Sardar Mangal Singh said that the Act of 1935 can not be regarded as an agreed constitution but as a constitution which has been forced upon unwilling and helpless people.⁵

On the other hand, the Congress and the Muslim League were dissatisfied with the Act because it did not go far enough to meet the political aspirations of Indians.⁶ Pt. Nehru said, "There was going to be provincial autonomy but the Governor would be a benevolent all powerful dictator keeping us in order. Further he explained that high above all would sit the All highest, the Supreme Dictator, the Viceroy, with complete powers to do what he will and check when he desires." The Congress stand was uncompromisingly opposed to the Act of 1935.⁷ To the congress, it was a charter of bondage because it was not framed by a Constituent Assembly based on adult franchise and made no mention of a British commitment to ending the Raj.⁸

Moreover, the Hindu Mahasabha at its session held in April, 1935 at Kanpur also opposed the Government of India Bill 1935. The Mahasabha realized that the British had not maintained a balance between the urban Hindus and rural Muslims and hence the Act of 1935 had become quite irrelevant.⁹

On the other hand, the All India Muslim League at its session held in April, 1936 at Bombay passed a resolution against the Act of 1935. The resolution reads, The Act is anti-democratic, it will strengthen all the most reactionary elements in the country and it will enchain and crush the forces working for democracy and freedom. The Muslim classes and Muslim masses will suffer for the new scheme as much as any other section of the Indian people.¹⁰ However, in spite of their opposition to the Act, both parties decided to contest the provincial elections under the Act because the election campaign would provide a platform for them to spread their respective messages to voters.¹¹ In 1936, there appeared to be some reason for Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru's optimism on the communal problem.¹² It was expected that the Congress Party would sweep the polls in the Hindu majority provinces and that the Muslim League or regional parties i.e. the Unionist parties led by provincial Muslim leaders would win in the Muslim majority provinces.¹³

On the other hand, the Muslim League led by Jinnah at the All India level had expressed willingness to forget the Communal Award and to apply our mind to larger questions affecting India.¹⁴

In the meantime, the Unionist Party unlike the other political parties, warmly greeted the Act of 1935, since it fulfilled many of its desires and principals and hence it began preparations for the forth coming elections.¹⁵

The Punjab Legislative Council was renamed as the Punjab Legislative Assembly and its strength was increased from 71 to 175.¹⁶ Moreover, owing to the existing mood of despondency, the demand for a Constituent Assembly also did not find an enthusiastic response in the Punjab. It was considered all right in theory, but was not found "practicable" because of mutual differences among the leaders of various communities. Sardar Mangal Singh¹⁷ stated that all of them (the non-Muslim leaders) would be dubbed as 'traitors' to the country by future historians and the situation was allowed to get out of hand.¹⁸ The opposition to the Communal Award became more pronounced with the approaching elections under the new constitution. In the meantime, there was growing realisation among the various political parties that they must close their ranks in order to show better result in the coming elections.¹⁹ The Act of 1935 provided for a Federal Executive of a diarchical nature consisting of two parts one of these in charge of transferred departments was to be responsible to the Legislature and on the other hand, dealing with specifically reserved departments like Foreign Affairs Defence etc. was to remain under the sole charge of the Governor-General who was in these matters responsible only to the British Parliament.²⁰ The Federal Legislature was to be a bicameral body consisting of a Lower Chamber known as the House of Assembly or the Federal Assembly and the other an Upper Chamber, known as the Council of State. The Lower Chamber was to consist of 250 representatives of British India and not more than 125 of the Indian States. The members of the Federal Assembly were to be elected not by popular constituencies but by the Legislative Assemblies of the Provinces.²¹

Thus though the Act of 1935 had given autonomy to the provinces in a large sphere of public administration, the special powers of the Governor were regarded as limitations on real responsible government.

It is obvious from the foregone discussions that the federal part of the Act of 1935 was never introduced but the provincial part was soon put into operation. Bitterly opposed to the Act though the Congress Party was, it decided to contest the elections under the new Act of 1935, though with the declared aim of showing how unpopular the Act was.

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