

## Round Table Conference

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According to Arthurian legend, Round Table was the meeting place of King Arthur's legendary knights. This is where the term originates. Later, Round table came to known as a form of discussion and debate. In such a form of discussion, members usually discuss on a pre- decided topic and every person's opinion matters equally. The term round itself denotes equality in terms of participation and opinion.

This method of discussion was brought to India by the British during 1930 to 1932. During that time, tensions were high. India wanted independence and was keen to achieve it. British government was anxious about the nationalists that stuck to their principles. It was during this time that the British decided to conduct the Round Table Conference. They wanted to call the representatives of all the princely states, factions and parties to discuss and reach a mutual understanding regarding the constitutional reforms in India. Three Round Table Conferences were held in India during this period. But, these conferences were not very successful.

The first Round Table Conference was officially inaugurated by His Majesty George V. It was held on November 12, 1930. It was not held in India, but in London. It was presided over by the Prime Minister of Britain, Ramsay MacDonald. Ramsay MacDonald was a good friend of Lord Irwin, the Viceroy of British India. In fact, the Round Table Conference was decided to be conducted on the basis of the recommendations of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League and the report of the Simon Commission.

In the First Round Table Conference, there were delegates representing many different factions that had a keen interest over the issue. Britain was represented by three political parties. This was the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party. Each party had its own delegates. There were 16 British delegates in total. Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald was from the Labour Party. Indian delegates were divided in two. There were 16 representatives from the Princely states. British India was represented by 58 delegated in total. From India, there were delegates from Princely States such as Hyderabad, Baroda, Bhopal, Bikaner, etc., from Indian political parties such as Muslim League, Justice Party, Depressed Classes, etc. and from different communities such as Hindus, Anglo- Indians, Europeans, Indian Christians, etc. There were also

representatives from various provinces such as Sindh, Burma, etc. Women were also represented by Begum Jahanara Shahnawaz and Radha Bai Subbarayan.

However, India's largest political party, that is, the Indian National Congress did not participate. Most of its leaders were in jail after they participated in the famous Civil Disobedience Movement which had earlier caused a lot of anxiety and troubles for the functioning of the British Government in India. Others were following the decision of the Indian National Congress which had decided to boycott the first Round Table Conference.

Much advancement was made. All parties attending the meeting mutually accepted the idea of an All- India Federation. Even the Princely States agreed to it as long as their own independence and sovereignty was guaranteed. An agreement was also reached that representative system of governance should be introduced at provincial level. In this Conference, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, representative of the Depressed Classes also put forward the demand for separate electorates for the Untouchable castes. Despite these advancements, since the largest party did not participate, the first Round Table Conference can be considered as not successful.

After the First Round Table Conference, it was realised that the Conference would not be successful without a representation from India's largest and most influential political party, the Indian National Congress. Thus, then the Viceroy Lord Irwin called Mahatma Gandhi for a talk. This talk resulted in an agreement between Mahatma Gandhi and Lord Irwin, which is famously known as the Gandhi- Irwin Pact. Many prisoners belonging to the National Movement were freed and the Civil Disobedience Movement was called off. Due to this pact, Mahatma Gandhi attended the Second Round Table Conference as the only representative of the Indian National Congress.

The Second Round Table Conference was held on September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1931. It was a less auspicious event than the first Round Table Conference. Many Indian delegates were present, including Mahatma Gandhi. During this Conference, many differences also occurred. Indian National Congress was a huge party with its presence all over the country. According to Mahatma Gandhi, Indian National Congress represented all of India, but other delegates present at the Conference did not agree to such a claim. Gandhi also opposed separate electorates for the Untouchables, or for any other faction. He did not agree that the so called Untouchables should be treated as

minority. Giving separate electorate to certain groups of the society would ultimately lead to adverse effects. It will support the claim that a certain faction can only be understood, represented and served by the member of that faction only. This will ultimately lead to inequality and differences amongst the various communities. This resulted in disagreement between Mahatma Gandhi and the other delegates who supported separate electorates for the minorities. Amongst the supporters of separate electorate, the main supported was the eminent scholar Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar at that time was the leader and representative of the Depressed Classes. Mahatma Gandhi did not want Untouchables to be separated from the Hindu majority. He had the foresight to know that would lead to adverse effects on both communities and India as a whole in the long run. This difference of opinion resulted in a clash between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Thus, the Second Round Table Conference was an absolute failure. It created a rift between the Indian National Congress and the minorities who felt that the Indian National Congress, once in power, would not hesitate to suppress them.

But, Gandhiji was resolute. He began to fast. Consequently, to resolve this matter, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi signed a pact in the Yerwada Central Jail in Poona on September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1932. This pact was famously called the Poona Pact of 1932. Gandhiji, satisfied with the compromise, stopped his fast. This paved way for the Third Round Table Conference.

The third Round Table Conference was held on the 17<sup>th</sup> of November, 1932. Like the previous two Conferences, it was held in London. But, it was just a Conference in name. Indian National Congress, after experiences of the previous Conference and other circumstances, refused to participate in the Third Round Table Conference. One of the major parties of England, the Labour Party had also boycotted this Conference. Hence, only 46 delegates actually participated in the Third Round Table Conference. But, it was in this Conference that demand of a separate nation with the name of 'Pakistan' was first raised. The Conference was attended by the representatives of the Muslim League who wanted a separate nation for Muslims. The Muslim League was headed by the eminent lawyer, Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

On the basis of the discussions held during the Third Round Table Conference, the famous 'White Paper' was released. This White Paper contained the proposed provisions of the Government of India Act, 1935. The provisions contained in this paper were ideal. They ensured

a representative government. But, the action provisions of the Government of India Act, 1935 that was later passed by the British Parliament was very different from what it was proposed in the White Paper. While the Government of India Act, 1935 later became a major source for our Constitution, it was never implemented in its entirety.

These three Round Table Conferences did not yield much result. Two of these conferences were boycotted by the Indian National Congress. These Conferences actually resulted in communal differences between people of various groups. But, the Round Table Conferences made the Indian leaders realise that no compromise could be reached. Purna Swaraj became their ultimate goal, and they did not accept a dominion status for India. Thus, Round Table Conferences are important in the history of the struggle for independence of India.

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