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## INDIA'S RESPONSE TO THE BRITISH OFFER OF AUGUST 1940

*Dr. Basanta Kumar Mishra*

When World War II broke out the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, announced without consulting the main political parties of India that India was also at war against the Fascists. Protesting against the British policy the Congress not only withheld its co-operation in the war efforts, the provincial Congress Governments resigned as well in November 1939. In order to elicit greater co-operation of India during the war the Congress put forward two demands in July 1940 : acknowledgement by Great Britain of the complete independence of India after the war, and constitution of a provisional National Government at the Centre immediately.

The Congress demands were criticised on party lines. Whereas the pro-Congress circle viewed the demands as reasonable, others considered the Congress resolution as nothing but a misleading strategy adopted to maintain 'the sway of Gandhism at the cost of the highest interests of the country.'

In response to the Congress demands Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy of India, explained the British stand on August 8, 1940 which later came to be known as the 'August Offer'. He announced the expansion of the Governor-General's Executive Council to include a certain number of representatives of the political parties.

In order to facilitate harmonious co-operation, agreement in the provinces between the major parties was prerequisite to their active collaboration at the centre. The Viceroy also declared the establishment of a War Advisory Council which would meet at regular intervals and include representatives of the Indian States. He committed the British Government to the revision of the Act of

1935 after the war. In any such revision, however, 'full weight should be given to the views of the minorities'.

On August 14 Amery spoke in the Parliament and repeated the Viceroy's offer. He further clarified that the enlarged Executive Council would be responsible to the Governor-General and not, in the strict constitutional sense, to the Legislature.

The Viceroy's offer did not find much support in India. Albeit people of different regions of India used different language against the offer, they had one thing in common—the 'August offer' was not acceptable to them.

People of the north believed that the offer ensured the veto of minorities on the political progress of India. Hence, they called it a thorough-going negation of the wishes and ideals, the hopes and aspirations of Indian nationalism. The nationalist press in South India unanimously declared that the Government had rejected the hand of friendship extended to them by the Congress. People of the western region felt that the offer was a means to secure the sympathy of America. Whereas a section of the people in the east bitterly complained that the Government had given the Congress a 'stone for bread', others commented that the Viceroy's proposal would create a hotch-potch state with slaves.

Even the Muslim opinion did not give the Viceroy's statement a favourable reception. Interestingly those who had hitherto written in a pro-Government strain characterised it as a 'parsimonious offer'.

The Hindu Mahasabha and the Liberal Federation rejected the offer because the expanded Executive Council would not function as a cabinet responsible to the legislature. The Muslim League also found the statement of August 8, 1940 'most unsatisfactory' as it did not go far enough to meet the demand of the League for a separate nation.

The August offer disappointed the Congress to the core. It

felt that the offer was 'ridiculously out of place' in a country demanding complete independence; it was expressive of Britain's intention to hold India in bondage indefinitely.

Maulana Azad, the Congress President, rejected the offer, having found no common ground between the Congress demand for independence and the Viceroy's offer of an enlarged Executive Council. He received full support from Gandhi for his decision.

In fact, critics have pointed out that the August offer 'lacked the character of an innovation' and it did not reflect British Government's spirit of co-operation with the leading political parties of India which was essential when Britain was fighting almost single-handed against the Nazis in Europe.

As the Rowlatt Act had a direct bearing on the Congress to start the non-cooperation movement, so the August offer obliged the Congress to launch an Individual Civil Disobedience Movement under the leadership of Gandhi, who firmly believed that the British in India could be removed by *Satyagraha*. Gandhi laid a condition for not launching the movement: a declaration from the Viceroy that 'the Congress can go on preaching anti-war propaganda'. This Linlithgow naturally rejected and the Congress started the Civil Disobedience Movement on October 17, 1940 as a moral protest against the Government's decision to drag India into the war.

With all important parties having rejected the August offer, the Viceroy thought it wise to withdraw it. So, the August declaration served no useful purpose. On the other hand the total effect was the continuation of the deadlock, a fact even recognised by the Government.