# CHAPTER I

ON THE EVE OF INDEPENDENCE

O n August 30th, 1944, Wendell Willkie received me in his

law office overlooking New York harbour. He was a good

man. His death in September 1944 left America poorer.

‘The war is about seven-tenths won,’ he said, ‘and the peace is

about nine-tenths lost.’ He had toured the East and noted the

perpetuation of old conflicts between Europe and Asia, white

man and coloured man, free man and colonial slaves. He realized

that there would either be a new world or a new world war.

Others too were beginning to see that war with a dictatorship

creates a moral obligation to expand the area of freedom.

The nearer England came to victory the clearer it became that

political changes in India could not be delayed.

By 1945, India was too restive to hold, and Britain had suffered

too heavily in the war to contemplate the colossal expenditure of

men and treasure that would have been required to suppress

another non-violent contest with Gandhi or a violent contest if

he lost control. The exhaustion which compelled Britain to cut

her commitments in Greece, Turkey, the Arab countries and other

strategic regions after the war was apparent during the war.

It was especially apparent to Lord Wavell. ‘The Indian

administration,’ Leopold S. Amery, Secretary of State for India,

said in the House of Commons on June 14th, 1945, ‘overburdened

by great tasks laid upon it by the war against Japan and by plan¬

ning for the post-war period, is further strained by the political

tension that exists.’ Wavell directed the Indian administration.

Wavell was a general and a poet and an unusual person. During

my first talk with him in New Delhi in 1942, I remarked that he

looked tired. ‘Yes,’ he agreed, ‘I am tired after three years of

military defeats and setbacks.’ Then he paid a tribute to Nazi

Marshal Rommel who administered the defeats. At each sub¬

sequent meeting, Wavell brought the conversation around to

Rommel and praised his genius.

Wavell had a body like a solid thick tree trunk. His legs were

437

THE BIRTH OF TWO NATIONS

thick and bent outward. His hair was dense and grey-black. All

the wrinkles and deep lines of his gnarled face seemed to end in

his blind left eye which was partly open and riveted one’s atten¬

tion. Five rows of ribbons made a bright patch on the left breast

of his khaki uniform.

He talked philosophy and quoted Matthew Arnold. When I

walked with him once in the immense garden behind his house in

New Delhi he reminisced about service in the Caucasus during

the first World War and sang a verse of ‘Allahverdi’, a popular

Georgian drinking song. He was informal and friendly and

did not behave like a commander-in-chief or an imperial

administrator.

Wavell’s hero was General Allenby under whom he had fought

in the first World War. He was writing a long biography of

Allenby and allowed me to read part of the neatly typed manu¬

script tied in red ribbons. The prose was exquisite. The most

dramatic episode of the book was Allenby’s fierce conflict with

the British government over the political status of Egypt. Allenby

was High Commissioner of Egypt after the first World War.

While serving in that capacity he became convinced that Britain

should end her protectorate and grant Egypt independence. But

his pleas from Cairo Tailed to sway the men in Whitehall. He

accordingly appeared in London to face an all-star Cabinet which

included Lloyd George, Lord Curzon, Milner and Winston

Churchill, all of them opponents of Egyptian independence

and ‘the most determined’, Wavell wrote, ‘had been Winston

Churchill’. Allenby’s arguments did not move the ministers. He

threatened to resign. He was the conqueror of Jerusalem, the

man who broke the back of the Turks in the war, and had a strong

hold, consequently, on the loyalty and imagination of the British

people. Lloyd George did not want to risk an open break with

Allenby and capitulated.

I wrote to Wavell, ‘Lloyd George, Curzon and Churchill

probably adduced as plausible objections to the independence of

Egypt as those one can hear today in British circles in New Delhi

against the independence of India, yet Allenby stood his ground

and won. You are convinced that he was right and the Cabinet

wrong. Governments are often wrong. The whole history of

Europe between 1919 and 1939 is a record of wrong policies.

438

ON THE EVE OF INDEPENDENCE

There is little in the recent acts of British Cabinets to suggest that

London’s present attitude to India is a pillar of wisdom.’

Wavell was then Commander-in-Chief and he limited himself

to military affairs. In 1944, however, Churchill appointed him

Viceroy.

Wavell went to London in March 1945.

An editorial in The Times of March 20th, 1945, summarizing

numerous letters in its correspondence columns and its own views,

said, ‘There is a general conviction that it is for this country to

resume the political initiative . . . First, it is proposed that Britain

should now begin a gradual remodelling of the structure, staffing

and procedure of the governmental machine in preparation for

the complete transfer of power to Indian hands; and, secondly,

that the persistence of the antagonisms now sundering the parties

and interests of India constitute a reproach to British as well as

Indian statesmanship. . . .’

British opinion, even conservative opinion, was deserting

Churchill’s intransigent stand on India.

Wavell stayed in London for nearly two months. Prophets were

predicting a Labour party triumph in the impending British

general election. Policy abroad usually reflects politics at home.

And Wavell still had four years as Viceroy.

In April 1945, on the eve of the San Francisco Conference to

draft the charter of the United Nations, Indian and foreign cor¬

respondents sought a statement from Mahatma Gandhi. ‘India’s

nationalism spells internationalism,’ he declared.

‘There will be no peace for the Allies or the world,’ he asserted,

‘unless they shed their belief in the efficacy of war and its accom¬

panying terrible deception and fraud, and are determined to

hammer out a real peace based on the freedom and equality of all

races and nations . . . Freedom of India will demonstrate to all

the exploited races of the earth that their freedom is near and that

in no case will they henceforth be exploited.

‘Peace,’ Gandhi added, ‘must be just. In order to be that it

must neither be punitive nor vindictive. Germany and Japan

should not be humiliated. The strong are never vindictive. There¬

fore the fruits of peace must be shared equally. The effort then

will be to turn them into friends. The Allies can prove their

democracy by no other means.’

439

THE BIRTH OF TWO NATIONS

But lie feared that behind the San Francisco Conference ‘lurk

the mistrust and fear which breed war’.

Gandhi saw that freedom was the twin of peace, and fearlessness

the parent of both. Who could doubt that India would be free

before i960 and most of south-east Asia as well? Who could

doubt that until they were free they could make the West’s life a

nightmare and Europe’s recovery impossible? To prevent another

war the victors would have to remove the ills which conduce to

the ‘rotten world’ of which Sumner Welles had spoken.

These ideas were beginning to shape Britain’s attitude towards

India.

Government policy is like a ticker tape; the old message is still

visible when the first words of the new message appear. A

country can have two conflicting policies or parts of two conflicting

policies. Actually there is no such thing as a government; there

are many men and women in a government and some may pull in

one direction and some in another.

Wavell brought back to New Delhi the British government’s

approval of a new plan for India which he broadcast on June

14th. The same day he released Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the

president of the Congress party, Jawaharlal Nehru and other

leaders who had been in prison since the morning of August 9th,

1942. He also summoned India’s outstanding politicians to Simla,

the summer capital, for June 25th.

Congress leaders showed no bitterness about their long im¬

prisonment without trial. They agreed to come. Jinnah attended

as president of the Moslem League and Liaquat Ali Khan as

secretary of the League. Khizr Hyat Khan and Kwaja Sir Nazi-

muddin were invited in their capacity of former prime ministers

of their provinces. In addition, Master Tara Singh represented

the Sikhs and Mr. Sivaraj the Harijans. Gandhi was not a

delegate but he went to Simla and remained throughout the

discussions.

According to the Wavell plan the Viceroy and the Commander-

in-Chief would be the only Englishmen in the Viceroy’s Executive

Council. All the others would be Indians. Indians would thus

take charge of foreign affairs, finance, police, etc.

The Viceroy would appoint the Indian members of his Council

but he undertook to do so from lists of names submitted by the

440

ON THE EVE OF INDEPENDENCE

several parties. The Viceroy would still have the right to veto the

decisions of the Council, but he promised publicly that the veto

power ‘will of course not be exercised unreasonably’. Most

political Indians took him at his word, for if he abused the veto

the Indians could withdraw from the Council and forbid any of

their party members to succeed them; that would have put an

end to the Wavell plan and to government with popular support.

The Simla conference nevertheless failed. Wavell placed the

blame on Jinnah.

The plan provided for ‘equal proportions of Moslems and

Caste Hindus’ in the Viceroy’s Council. The Congress objected.

Congress was a much larger organization than the Moslem League.

The whole history of Congress was a battle against differentiating

between caste and outcast Hindus. So eager was Congress for a

settlement, however, that it accepted the formula.

Wavell, who worked indefatigably at Simla, then asked the

party leaders for their lists. All complied except Jinnah. ‘I

therefore,’ Wavell said in a public statement, ‘made my provisional

selections, including certain Moslem League names . . . When I

explained my solution to Mr. Jinnah, he told me that it was not

acceptable to the Moslem League, and he was so decided that I

felt it would be useless to continue the discussions.’

Jinnah torpedoed the Simla conference for one discernible

reason: he insisted that all Moslems in the Viceroy’s Council

must be designated by him as the leader of the Moslems of India.

The Moslem League had gained strength during the war and

won most elections against Moslem candidates who were not in

the League. But neither Wavell nor Gandhi, who made Congress

policy behind the Simla scenes, could admit Jinnah’s claim to

represent Moslem India. There were many Moslems in Congress;

President Azad was a Moslem and Congress wanted him in the

Viceroy’s Council. Khizr Hyat Khan, former premier of the

Punjab, was anti-Jinnah and anti-Pakistan; so were other out¬

standing Moslems.

Moreover, Congress would have been untrue to its secular

nature and to Gandhi’s principles if it had accepted the role of a

purely Hindu organization. Congress aspired to be a national

not a religious body; it could not allow itself to be identified with

one religious community.

441

THE BIRTH OF TWO NATIONS

On this rock, the Simla conference foundered. The British

authorities in India, or Britain, were not ready to act without

Jinnah’s co-operation.

During the Simla conference, the war in Europe had come to

an end. On July 26th, the Labour party decisively defeated the

Conservatives; Clement R. Attlee replaced Winston Churchill

as Prime Minister.

On August 14th Japan’s surrender was accepted by the Powers.

The British Labour government immediately announced that

it sought ‘an early realization of self-government in India’ and

summoned Wavell to Whitehall. Their conclusions were an¬

nounced by Attlee in London and Wavell in New Delhi on

September 19th, 1945.

Elections to the central and provincial legislatures were the

first step. Then Wavell would renew his efforts to form an Execu¬

tive Council supported by the main Indian parties and to restore

popular government in the provinces. Guided by the results at

the polls, he would convene an assembly to draft a constitution

for a united India.

The All-India Congress Committee, habitually distrustful,

considered the proposals ‘vague, inadequate and unsatisfactory’.

But the Government was conciliatory; more Congress prisoners

were released; three high officers of the Indian National Army

who had deserted in Malaya and Burma and joined the Japanese

were brought to trial in Delhi Fort, defended by Nehru and other

lawyers, sentenced to life imprisonment and then set free.

All parties agreed to contest the elections.

Congress won the overwhelming majority of the non-Moslem

seats in the legislatures, the Moslem League the overwhelming

majority of the Moslem seats.

The deadlock remained unbroken.

In December. 1945, Wavell, speaking in Calcutta, appealed to

the Indian people to avoid strife and violence when they stood

at the gate of political and economic opportunity’.

Gandhi was in Calcutta, too. He spent many hours with Richard

Casey, the Australian who served as British Governor of Bengal.

He also spent an hour with the Viceroy. As he left the Viceroy’s

house in Calcutta a vast multitude blocked the road and would not

allow his car to advance until he had spoken. He stood up in the

442

ON THE EVE OF INDEPENDENCE

car and said, ‘India has attained her great position in the East

because of her message of peace. 5 Thereupon the crowd opened

a corridor for him so that he could drive to his ashram eight miles

outside the city. Along the entire route, Indians touched the dust

of the road before and after he passed.

The same day, Jinnah made a statement in Bombay. ‘We could

settle the Indian problem in ten minutes, 5 he declared, "if Mr.

Gandhi would say, “I agree that there should be Pakistan; I

agree that one-fourth of India, composed of six provinces — Sind,

Baluchistan, the Punjab, the North-west Frontier Province,

Bengal and Assam — with their present boundaries, constitute the

Pakistan state. 55 5

But Gandhi could not say that and did not say it; he regarded

the vivisection of India as ‘blasphemy 5 .

443