The Turning Point . . .

"History is not the story of heroes entirely. It is often the story of cruelty and injustice and shortsightedness. There are monsters, there is evil, there is betrayal."

- David C. McCullough

Hi, Everyone! By 1939, WWII was well under way. With the Muslims making up the bulk of the army, the Viceroy was going to keep them happy.

Jinnah himself had astutely perceived this.

“Jinnah remarked later [after September 4, 1939, meeting], ‘After the war . . . suddenly there came a change in the attitude towards me. I was treated on the same basis as Mr. Gandhi. I was wonderstruck why all of a sudden I was promoted and given a place side by side with Mr. Gandhi.’”[1]

“In the Viceroy’s view, it remained as important as ever to give the fullest weight to the Muslim position at a time when their assistance and support were so essential to His Majesty’s Government, both from the military point of view (they were providing 60 percent of the army) and because of possible reactions in other countries.”[2]

But the Congress was in a strong position with the Viceroy as well. Viceroy Linlithgow was really walking a tightrope politically.

· With the Congress running eight of the eleven Provincial governments, the Viceroy was not going to upset them. This was the time to use bargaining power wisely.

· Unfortunately, the Congress High Command simply had no political acumen! And so proceeded to lose the only political advantage they had.

The Congress was demanding that “India must be declared an independent nation and present application must be given to this status to the largest possible extent.”

There wasn’t any way the British were going to focus on leaving India (even had they wanted to) when they were desperately trying to save their own skin and freedom from Hitler . . . ![3]

“The Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, issued a statement on 17 October, 1939. He reiterated that Dominion Status was the goal of British policy, but pointed out that for the present the Act of 1935 held the field. . . .

The Congress Working Committee regarded the Viceroy’s statement as ‘an unequivocal reiteration of the imperialist policy’ and therefore declared itself unable to give any support to Great Britain, for it would amount to an endorsement of the imperialistic policy, which it has always sought to end. *As a first step in this direction* the Committee called upon the Congress Ministers to resign. All the Congress Ministries accordingly resigned beween 27 October and 15 November, 1939.

Both the Secretary of State, Sir Samuel Hoare, and the Viceroy tried to win over the Congress leaders by granting more powers to Indians in the administration.

But the Congress ‘declined to consider any steps to further co-operation’ unless the British Government clearly declared its policy in favour of Indian independence, and demanded the appointment of a Constituent Assembly. . . .”

Here was a great opportunity lost by the Congress short-sightedness! Surely, this was the time to hang in there, especially with more powers being given?

· Is there ever anything to gain by resigning and taking oneself off the scene?

The Congress strategy to resign from ministries and disrupt the functioning of the Provinces failed—one more time! They did not learn from their mistakes.

To continue:

“The Viceroy felt relieved by the resignation of Congress Ministeries, for they controlled eight out of the eleven Provinces and so had power to impair war-efforts of the Government. As the eight Provinces were now being ruled by the Governors, there was no longer any need to placate the Congress, and the Viceroy canvassed the support of the Muslim League.

This considerably strengthened the position of the League and it was joined by the waverers among the Muslims. In March, 1940, the Muslim League, at its Lahore Session, made a formal demand for a separate Muslim State.”[4]

With increased influence with the Viceroy of the Muslim League, the Pakistan demand was now formally made . . . !—a direct cause-and-effect of the Congress misguided decision to resign from their provincial ministeries.

· Jinnah was not one to let grass grow beneath his feet!

“The decision of the Congress to resign was widely regretted. Even within the Congress there were some who were opposed to this course. We shall see, as we proceed, how it only weakened the bargaining power of the Congress. . . .

At the start Lord Linlithgow had recognized that he could not leave the Congress out of his reckoning. It was not only the largest and most important political party in the country; it was at the time responsible for the government of eight of the eleven provinces, and so had within its power seriously to impair the Government’s capacity to prosecute the war effort. When,

however, the Congress resigned office, Lord Linlithgow's attitude automatically changed. There was no longer any necessity to woo the Congress . .

From now on, Lord Linlithgow began to lean more on the support of the Muslim League and to discountenance any move on the part of the Congress to return to office except on his own terms. . . .

With the Congress in wilderness and Jinnah's hand considerably strengthened, waverers among the Muslims began trickling into the League. For all practical purposes Jinnah was given a veto on further constitutional progress and, Jinnah adroit politician that he was, he made the very most of the situation."[5]

There! Not only had the Congress put themselves outside the political pale, their asininity in doing so led directly to a strong Muslim League making a formal Pakistan demand!

· This is inexcusable.

· And to counteract their own political blunders and to rid themselves of Jinnah and the League, they began (as we shall see in later posts) to push the Pakistan scheme themselves . . . !

Anurupa

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[1]*Transfer of Power,* V. P. Menon, page 59.

[2]*Ibid*, page 87.

[3]"If the Congress leaders had only discussed the details of the reconstitution of the Executive council, it is possible that the Viceroy would have gone more than half to way meet the Congress. In the wartime there was no question of converting the Executive Council into a national government. Lord Linlithgow was firm on this issue and so was His Majesty's Government. Had the Congress joined the Viceroy's Executive Council at this time, and with Congress ministries coming back into power in the provinces, the political situation would have changed immensely to the advantage of the Congress. Once the Congress rejected the offer the Viceroy was in no mood to carry on any further parleys with it." *Transfer of Power*, V. P. Menon, page 97.

[4]HFMI, vol III, R. C. Majumdar, pages 598-600.

[5] *Transfer of Power*, V. P. Menon. Page 68