

WHY THE INDIA CONFERENCE FAILED

By KUMAR GOSHAL

ON JUNE 14, 1945 the British government issued a White Paper offering India what the Churchill cabinet obviously considered another dose of self-government. According to the White Paper, the government was willing to reshuffle the Viceroy's Executive Council so that, with the exception of the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief, the rest of the members will be Indians. The Viceroy was authorized to "call into conference a number of leading Indian politicians who are heads of the most important parties or who have had recent experience as prime ministers of the provinces, together with a few others of special experience and authority."

From the lists of names submitted by those attending the conference, the Viceroy was empowered to select, if he so wished, his council members "in proportions which would give a balanced representation of the main communities, including equal proportions of Moslems and caste Hindus." These Indian members would be given most of the important portfolios. The White Paper was scrupulous to add that "nothing contained in any of these proposals will affect the relations of the Crown with the Indian States." As for the future, the British government reasserted its determination to stand by the Cripps offer of 1942. The Viceroy's choice of council members was made conditional on "that they would wholeheartedly cooperate in supporting and carrying through the war against Japan to its victorious conclusion." This was a bit of typically gratuitous insult thrown in to perpetuate the myth that the Congress Party leaders were imprisoned in August 1942, for their "pro-Japanese" activities.

Before proceeding with an analysis of this offer, an interesting and rather disturbing fact should be noted. Immediately upon publication of the White Paper there was still, at this late date, the customary unenlightened reaction in the American press generally. The offer was accepted by newspaper pundits at its

face value. No one bothered to figure out if it were possible, under present circumstances, for the British government to make a genuine offer of even a measure of self-government to India. No one bothered to ask if it were conceivable that the British government—which has been supporting the most reactionary elements in Poland, Italy, Greece, Belgium, Spain and the Near and Middle East, to protect its Empire lifeline and to preserve and augment its economic interests—would voluntarily take a step toward the liquidation of its Indian empire.

Instead of showing some skepticism with regard to the genuineness of the offer, the burden of proof was put on the shoulders of the Indians. Speculation ran high as to whether the Hindus and Moslems could get together and what Gandhi's reaction to the offer would be. The gentlemen of the press failed to observe that there is no Hindu-Moslem problem nor pacifists like Gandhi in Burma, Ceylon and Hongkong; yet the British government has shown no inclination to part with these colonies.

FROM the standpoint of the Indians, what does the offer amount to? It is *not* an advance over any previous offer. In essence the White Paper repeats the offer made in August 1940, and is almost a duplicate of the one contained in the Cripps proposals of 1942. It is not the provisional national government, representative of the people, which the Indians have been long demanding. It would merely transfer *portfolios*, but no real power, to the Indian members of the council. The council would remain an advisory body, meet infrequently, and would be responsible only to the Viceroy. The Viceroy would retain his power to veto even a unanimous decision of the council, as well as his right to enact measures unopposed by the council or any other governmental body. Despite the appearance of a few more Indian faces in the halls of the government, supreme power over all

issues affecting British political and economic interests in India would remain firmly in the hands of the Viceroy and the British provincial governors.

The present offer followed the shrewd pattern set in previous offers—that of dividing the people of India on a religious basis. Consider the fact that the Viceroy was to choose five caste Hindus and five Moslem members for the council. Now, the only political parties invited to confer with the Viceroy were the Congress Party and the Moslem League. Both of them were immediately faced with a dilemma. If the Moslem League agreed to let the Viceroy choose even one Moslem member from the panel submitted by the Congress Party, then the League would no longer be able to maintain that it alone represents all the Moslems of India. If the Congress Party, which is non-religious in character and has many Moslem followers, agreed to nominate only caste Hindus, it would necessarily lose many of its Moslem, Christian, Sikh, Untouchable and other members, and thereby suffer a serious setback as a political organization. Thus, by putting the proportion of representation on a religious rather than on the political party basis suggested by many Indian leaders, the British government effectively put the Congress Party and the League on the spot. The result is that Wavell has declared the conference a failure.

It is now up to the Viceroy, with whom the initiative has always rested anyway, to make the final decision. In the meantime, although the eight members of the Congress Working Committee, including Nehru and Azad, have been released after nearly three years' imprisonment without trial, at least 1,200 provincial leaders of the Congress still remain in jail, indicating that the government's fight against the Congress Party is by no means over.

Both from an immediate and a long-range point of view the British offer is a fraud. The famine of 1943-44, which took a toll of over 5,000,000 lives, has only partially abated. As an immediate program of relief—and to transform the Indians into effective fighters against Japan—India needs coordinated and vastly increased food and medical relief projects, a moratorium on peasants' debts, distribution of idle land to unemployed farmers and extension of cheap credit to them, wage increases for workers, the curtailing of the power of the government-supported landlords and the loan sharks, reduction of land rent, giving a national character to the present mercenary Indian army, and other

such constructive measures. It is preposterous to expect that the British government, which has done very little to bring relief to the Indian people, would agree to abide by the decisions of even the most representative council that might be set up. Immediate relief for India requires taking drastic steps against the most reactionary forces in India, who are the allies of the British government; it is hardly conceivable that the government that has been consistently supporting similar reactionary forces in other parts of the world would suddenly become progressive in India and alienate its only allies there because of a new Viceroy's Council.



"Bengal Famine," by the British artist Vicky.

For the postwar period, the British government's decision to stand by the Cripps proposals is no advance over the past. From a long-range point of view India needs industrialization on a gigantic scale, at a rapid tempo, founded on a thoroughgoing revision of the system of land tenure, and breaking of the feudalistic powers and privileges of the princes—as has been taking place in northern China and Poland, for example, and as has been outlined in the preliminary reports of the National Planning Committee of the Congress Party. The Cripps proposals would effectively prevent any such undertaking.

According to the Cripps plan, it will be recalled, the British government agreed to transfer power to an Indian government after the war, provided that all the political parties in India, all the minority groups, and the 500-odd Indian princes agreed to a constitutional form of government. Failing such an agreement, the dissenting province or provinces of British India would be permitted to remain outside the proposed Indian Union and form a separate Dominion or Dominions. Furthermore, the Indian princes could choose to retain their present treaty relations

with the British Crown, if they so desired. This was the fantastic scheme offered to the Indians in the name of unity and impartiality.

The biggest joker in the Cripps proposals was the fact that the Indian princes would most certainly refuse to accept a democratic constitution and prefer to retain their treaties with Britain, which guarantees them British protection against internal rebellion. Even if all the provinces of British India joined an Indian Union, the existence of these hundreds of autocratic princes' states, scattered throughout the length and breadth of India, would make a politically workable federation of the

two as well as a unified, planned modernization of Indian economy utterly impossible.

The present offer has been made because world conditions necessitated such a move on the part of the British government. The Churchill cabinet was not slow to realize that concentration on the war against Japan would bring India into

the limelight again; India also would have to be used as a base of operations in the war in Asia. It was expected that the question of colonies would come up at the San Francisco conference and, as it happened, Soviet Foreign Commissar Molotov made pointed reference to India's peculiar status in the ranks of the United Nations. There was an election coming in Britain, and the Labor Party was bound to make some reference to the status of India. Some sort of gesture was necessary to conceal that all was not well in India under the best possible government. Nevertheless, there is some significance in the fact that, although the White Paper did not mention it, Viceroy Wavell is reported to have requested an increase in the number of British officers in the Indian Army, and he has also been assured full support of the British government in using the army to maintain law and order.

The British offer was of the "heads I win, tails you lose" kind. Even if it had been accepted by the Indians, it would have effectively protected British vested interests, and would have failed to fulfill the present and future needs of the people of India.