

# The Three Round Table Conference (1930-32)

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Three Round Table Conference (1930-32)

## Abstract

The Round Table Conference (RTC) was a series of three conferences held between 1930 and 1932 in London, organized by the British Government to discuss constitutional reforms in India. These conferences were a direct outcome of the Simon Commission (1927) and were convened to discuss the Government of India Act, 1935. The First Round Table Conference (1930–31) was boycotted by the Indian National Congress due to the ongoing Civil Disobedience Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. However, representatives from other Indian communities and princely states participated. The Second Round Table Conference (1931) saw the participation of Mahatma Gandhi as the sole representative of the Indian National Congress, following the Gandhi-Irwin Pact. However, it failed due to disagreements over minority representation and separate electorates. The Third Round Table Conference (1932) had minimal participation from Indian leaders and was largely ineffective, leading the British to unilaterally pass the Government of India Act, 1935. The RTCs were significant in shaping India's constitutional framework, but their failure to achieve consensus delayed India's path to independence.

**Keywords:** Background; First Round Table Conference; Second Round Table Conference; Third Round Table Conference

## Introduction:

The Round Table Conferences (1930–1932) were a series of three conferences organized by the British Government in London to discuss constitutional reforms in India. These conferences aimed to address the growing demands for self-governance and to frame a new political structure for India. The discussions were based on the recommendations of the Simon Commission (1927), which had reviewed India's political situation but faced opposition for lacking Indian representation. The conferences were convened as a response to Indian nationalist movements, particularly the Civil Disobedience Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. However, due to political disagreements, especially over the representation of different communities, the conferences failed to reach a consensus. Despite this, they played a key role in shaping the Government of India Act, 1935, which later influenced India's constitutional development.

## Background

### 1. The Simon Commission (1927)

- The British government set up the Simon Commission to assess India's constitutional progress.
- It was heavily opposed by Indian leaders because it included only British members, leading to protests and the slogan "Simon Go Back!"

## 2. The Nehru Report (1928)

- In response to the Simon Commission, Indian leaders drafted the Nehru Report, demanding Dominion Status for India.
- The British rejected the demand, leading to further tensions.

## 3. Civil Disobedience Movement (1930)

- Led by Mahatma Gandhi, the movement included the Salt March and mass protests against British rule. The British government sought to control the situation and invited Indian leaders to the First Round Table Conference (1930).
- However, Congress boycotted the conference, demanding complete Swaraj (self-rule) instead of gradual reforms.

## 4. The Gandhi-Irwin Pact (1931)

- After negotiations, Gandhi and Lord Irwin signed an agreement in which Congress agreed to halt the Civil Disobedience Movement in exchange for participation in the Second Round Table Conference (1931).

Despite efforts to reach an agreement, the Round Table Conferences failed due to disagreements between Indian groups and British officials, particularly over minority representation and separate electorates. However, the discussions ultimately contributed to the passage of the Government of India Act, 1935, which introduced provincial autonomy and limited self-governance in India.

## The Three Round Table Conferences (1930–1932)

The Round Table Conferences were a series of three conferences held in London between 1930 and 1932 by the British Government to discuss constitutional reforms in India. They were organized in response to the Simon Commission (1927) and aimed at granting Indians greater political autonomy. However, the conferences failed to bring a consensus, mainly due to disagreements between different political groups and the British administration.

### 1. First Round Table Conference (November 1930 – January 1931)

The First Round Table Conference was held in London from November 12, 1930, to January 19, 1931. It was the first of three conferences organized by the British Government to discuss constitutional reforms in India, following the Simon Commission Report (1927).

**Background:** The British government wanted to introduce constitutional reforms in India. The Simon Commission (1927), which reviewed India's political situation, was opposed because it lacked Indian representation. The Indian National Congress (INC) demanded complete self-rule (Purna Swaraj) and launched the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930) under Mahatma Gandhi. As a result, the INC boycotted the conference.

**Participants:** Despite Congress's absence, 89 delegates attended, representing various political groups, communities, and princely states:

#### 1. British Political Leaders

- Ramsay MacDonald (British Prime Minister, presided over the conference).
- Representatives from the Labour, Conservative, and Liberal parties.

#### 2. Indian Representatives (58 total)

- Hindus: Representatives from the Hindu Mahasabha.
- Muslims: Led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah (Muslim League).
- Dalits (Depressed Classes): Represented by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

- Princely States: 16 representatives from various princely states.
- Other communities: Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, Christians, and business leaders.

#### Discussions & Outcomes:

- **Dominion Status for India:** The British government accepted the idea of granting Dominion Status in principle but did not set a timeline.
- **Federal Structure Proposal:** The British proposed a federal government that would include British India and princely states. Princely states agreed to join the federal setup.
- **Minority Representation:** Separate electorates for Muslims, Sikhs, Dalits, and other minorities were debated but not finalized. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar demanded separate electorates for Dalits, arguing for their political protection.
- **Boycott by Congress:** The absence of the INC made decision-making difficult, as they were the largest political force in India.

**Why It Failed:** The **Indian National Congress boycotted** the conference, making it **ineffective**. There was **no agreement on the future constitution** due to differences among Indian groups. The British government did not make **any firm commitments** regarding self-rule.

**Aftermath & Significance:** The First Round Table Conference ended without a concrete resolution. Lord Irwin (Viceroy of India) negotiated with Mahatma Gandhi, leading to the Gandhi-Irwin Pact (March 1931). As a result, Gandhi agreed to attend the Second Round Table Conference (1931) on behalf of Congress.

Despite its failure, the First Round Table Conference was important as it laid the groundwork for future discussions on India's constitutional reforms.

## 2. Second Round Table Conference (September – December 1931)

The Second Round Table Conference was held in London from September 7 to December 1, 1931. It was the most significant of the three conferences, as Mahatma Gandhi participated as the sole representative of the Indian National Congress (INC) after the Gandhi-Irwin Pact (March 1931).

**Background:** The First Round Table Conference (1930-31) had failed due to the absence of Congress, the main political force in India. After negotiations between Gandhi and Lord Irwin, the Gandhi-Irwin Pact was signed in March 1931, leading to:

- The suspension of the Civil Disobedience Movement by Congress.
- The release of political prisoners by the British.
- Congress agreeing to participate in the Second Round Table Conference.

#### Participants:

##### 1. British Delegates

- Ramsay MacDonald (British Prime Minister, presided over the conference).
- Members from the Labour, Conservative, and Liberal parties.

##### 2. Indian Delegates

- Mahatma Gandhi (sole representative of Congress).
- Muslim League (led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah).
- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (representing the Dalits or Depressed Classes).
- Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, Christians, and business leaders.
- Princely States representatives.

## Discussions & Outcomes

- **Gandhi's Demand for Swaraj (Self-Rule):** Gandhi insisted that India should be granted Dominion Status and complete internal self-government. He rejected separate electorates and emphasized Hindu-Muslim unity.
- **Minority Rights and Separate Electorates:** Dr. B.R. Ambedkar demanded separate electorates for Dalits, arguing that they needed political protection. Jinnah and Muslim League demanded separate electorates for Muslims. Other minorities (Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, and Christians) also demanded separate electorates.
- **Failure to Reach a Consensus:** The British did not agree to end separate electorates, leading to major disagreements. Gandhi opposed the "divide and rule" policy, but the British continued to support minority groups separately.
- **Ramsay MacDonald's "Communal Award" (1932):** Since no agreement was reached, British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald announced the "Communal Award" in 1932. This granted separate electorates for Muslims, Sikhs, Dalits, and other minorities, which Gandhi strongly opposed.

**Why It Failed:** No agreement on constitutional reforms was reached. Gandhi's demand for a unified Indian electorate was rejected. The Muslim League, Dalits, and other minorities supported separate electorates, causing division among Indian leaders. The British did not commit to immediate self-rule for India.

**Aftermath & Significance:** Gandhi returned to India disappointed and restarted the Civil Disobedience Movement. The Poona Pact (1932) was later signed between Gandhi and Ambedkar, modifying the separate electorate system for Dalits. The failure of the conference led the British government to unilaterally implement the Government of India Act, 1935, which introduced limited provincial autonomy. The Second Round Table Conference was the most important of the three because it brought Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Jinnah into direct negotiations, exposing the deep divisions within Indian politics. However, its failure delayed India's path to independence.

### 3. Third Round Table Conference (November – December 1932)

The Third Round Table Conference was held in London from November 17 to December 24, 1932. It was the last of the three conferences organized by the British Government to discuss constitutional reforms in India. However, it was largely ineffective due to the absence of major Indian political leaders, especially the Indian National Congress (INC).

**Background:** The Second Round Table Conference (1931) had failed due to disagreements over separate electorates and minority representation. After the conference, British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald announced the "Communal Award" (August 1932), granting separate electorates to Muslims, Sikhs, Dalits, and other minorities. Gandhi strongly opposed the Communal Award and protested with a fast unto death. The Poona Pact (September 1932) was signed between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, modifying the separate electorate system for Dalits. The INC continued its boycott of British political processes and refused to attend the Third Round Table Conference.

#### Participants

- **British Delegates:**
  - Ramsay MacDonald (British Prime Minister, presided over the conference).
  - Members from Labour, Conservative, and Liberal parties.

- **Indian Representatives:**

- No representatives from the Indian National Congress (INC).
- Muslim League, led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah.
- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, representing the Depressed Classes (Dalits).
- Representatives from Princely States, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, and other minority groups.

**Discussions & Outcomes**

- **Further Discussions on the Federal Structure:** The British government reaffirmed its commitment to a federal structure, including British India and princely states. However, many princely states were reluctant to join.
- **Continuation of Separate Electorates:** The British upheld **separate electorates** for minorities, as per the Communal Award (1932). There was no strong opposition in this conference due to the absence of Congress and Gandhi.
- **Limited Discussions on Indian Self-Governance:** With the INC absent, there was no significant push for immediate self-rule. British officials focused more on administrative reforms than granting full autonomy.

**Why It Failed:** Congress boycotted the conference, making it largely ineffective. No major Indian leaders participated, weakening the discussions. The British government moved forward with its own plan without Indian consensus.

**Aftermath & Significance:** Since the conference failed to produce any major agreements, the British government decided to unilaterally implement constitutional reforms. This led to the passage of the Government of India Act, 1935, which:

- Introduced provincial autonomy.
- Expanded the separate electorate system.
- Proposed a federation of British India and princely states (which was never fully implemented)?

The Third Round Table Conference marked the end of negotiations between Indian leaders and the British. Its failure showed that self-governance for India could not be achieved through British-led conferences, paving the way for more direct nationalist movements and eventual independence in 1947.

**Conclusion**

One of the main reasons for the failure of the Round Table Conferences was the lack of unity among Indian leaders. The Indian National Congress (INC), the most influential political party, boycotted the First and Third Conferences, significantly weakening their effectiveness. Even in the Second Round Table Conference, where Mahatma Gandhi participated, he faced strong opposition from leaders representing minorities, such as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (Depressed Classes) and Muhammad Ali Jinnah (Muslim League). This highlighted deep divisions within Indian politics, making it difficult to reach a common agreement. Moreover, the British government used these divisions to maintain control. By supporting separate electorates for Muslims, Sikhs, and Dalits, the British strengthened communal differences and avoided making real commitments toward complete self-rule. This policy of "divide and rule" further delayed India's path to independence.

The Round Table Conferences (1930–1932) were ultimately unsuccessful in creating a new constitutional framework for India. They failed due to the absence of key political groups, deep divisions among Indian leaders, and British reluctance to commit to complete self-rule. However, they were significant in exposing British strategies, strengthening nationalist movements, and leading to constitutional reforms like the

Government of India Act, 1935. In the end, these conferences proved that independence could not be achieved through British-led negotiations but required a stronger nationalist struggle, which later paved the way for India's freedom in 1947.

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