

Cabinet Mission

Cabinet Mission, 1946:

Introduction:

- **The Cabinet Mission Plan** was a statement made by the Cabinet Mission and the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, on May 16, 1946, that contained **proposals regarding the constitutional future of India** in the wake of Indian political parties and representatives not coming to an agreement.
- The **members** of the Cabinet Mission were: Lord Penthick-Lawrence, Secretary of State for India, Sir Stafford Cripps, President of the Board of Trade, and A.V Alexander, First Lord of Admiralty.

Background:

- **In September 1945**, the new elected Labour government in Britain expressed its intention of creating a **Constituent Assembly for India**, that would frame India's Constitution; and the Cabinet Mission was sent to India in March 1946 to make this happen.
- The Mission had to deal with a **major obstacle**: the two main political parties – the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League – which had fundamental differences over India's future.
 - The **desire for a united India** was an outcome of both: the **British pride** in having politically unified the subcontinent and the doubts of most British authorities as to the **feasibility of Pakistan**.
- The Mission, at the **Shimla Conference**, attempted to **facilitate an agreement** between the Muslim League and the Congress.
- When this **failed**, the Mission came out with its own proposals known as the Cabinet Mission Plan.
- **Upon arriving** in the subcontinent the mission found both parties, the Indian National Congress and Muslim League, unwilling to reach a settlement.
 - The two parties had performed well in the elections, general and provincial, and emerged as the two main parties in the subcontinent.

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- The Muslim League had been victorious in approximately 90 percent of the seats for Muslims, which resulted in Jinnah bargaining with the British and Congress
- At such a juncture, the British having established the system of **separate electorates**, they could no longer reverse its consequences in spite of their genuine commitment to Indian unity.

Cabinet Mission plan:

- The plan recommended the following for the Constitution:
 - There should be a **Union of India**, embracing both British India and the States which should deal with the following subjects: Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Communications; and should have the powers necessary to raise the finances required for the above subjects.
 - The Union should have an **Executive and a Legislature** constituted from British Indian and States' representatives.
 - Any question raising a **major communal** issue in the Legislature should require for its **decision a majority** of the representatives present and voting of each of the two major communities as well as a majority of all members present and voting.
 - All subjects other than the Union subjects and all residuary powers **should vest in the Provinces.**
 - The **States will retain all subjects and powers** other than those ceded to the Union.
 - Provinces **should be free to form groups with Executives and Legislatures**, and each group could determine the Provincial subjects to be taken in common.
 - The **Constitutions of the Union** and of the groups **should contain a provision**, whereby any Province could by majority vote of its Legislative Assembly call for a reconsideration of the terms of the Constitution after an initial period of ten years and at ten-yearly intervals thereafter.
 - Rejection of the demand for a full-fledged Pakistan,

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- Grouping of existing provincial assemblies into three sections
 - Section A – Hindu Majority provinces, Section B & C – Muslim majority provinces
- **Princely states** were no longer to be under paramountcy of the British government. They would be free to enter into an arrangement with successor governments or the British government.

Reactions:

- The Plan was **initially accepted** by the Muslim League and the Congress Party.
- However, the **Congress Party soon rejected** the ‘**grouping**’ part of the **plan**’; specifically, as it was concerned about and opposed the grouping of provinces on the basis of religion.
- The **Muslim League** was not open to changing any part of the Plan and so any consensus between the Congress and the Muslim League broke down.
- Further attempts by the Cabinet Mission at reconciliation failed.
- Nonetheless, the **proceedings of the Constituent Assembly began** and an interim government, with Jawaharlal Nehru as the Prime minister, was set-up.
- The **Muslim League refused** to be part of both; it initiated ‘**Direct Action Day**’ triggering large-scale violence across the country

Significance:

- The Plan, also referred to as the ‘**State Paper**’, had a **significant influence** over the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly during its initial stages, particularly the debates around **Nehru’s Objective Resolution and federalism**.
- The Assembly acknowledged that it was a **creation of the Plan**; it wanted to, as far as possible, adhere to the Plan’s proposals as means of maintaining its legal legitimacy and to keep the door open for the Muslim League to join its proceedings.

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- At the same time, the Assembly also asserted that its legitimacy was derived from the people of India and not the Plan.
- Further, The Cabinet Mission Plan is **critical to scholarly works** that engage with various aspects of Indian **constitutionalism, law, politics and history, particularly on partition and federalism**
 - Some scholars, emphasise that the **British self-interest** behind the setting up of the Cabinet Mission was ‘to secure Britain’s defence interests in India and the Indian Ocean Area’.
 - Other scholars have taken to **evaluating the Cabinet Mission and its Plan: Granville Austin** argues that the Cabinet Mission (‘non-Indians’) should have never attempted to mediate between the Congress and the Muslim league: ‘it was foredoomed to failure’.

