

The Simon Commission and the Defence of India

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The Report of the Simon Commission has been lauded to the skies by the whole of the Press and the public in England and has been acclaimed as a most statesmanlike document and an important constructive contribution to the problem of Indian constitutional reform. On the other hand, it has been universally denounced in India as a reactionary document intended to put off indefinitely the attainment of the goal of Dominion Status. The test by which the value of the scheme recommended by the Simon Commission must be judged is whether it will lead to the fulfilment of the pledge given by the British Parliament in 1917 and re-affirmed by Lord Irwin in a more unequivocal manner within the last few months. The features of the scheme which it is material for this purpose to consider are those relating to the Central Government. There is no doubt in the mind of any Indian who is capable of reflecting on the subject that the proposals of the Simon Commission with regard to the Central Government are of a thoroughly retrograde character and cleverly contrived to retard and obstruct the attainment of the goal of British policy. Their recommendations with regard to the defence of India are alone quite sufficient to justify the condemnation of the Report by the Indian public. In complying with the request of the Editor to express my views on this portion of the Report, I feel a certain amount of embarrassment. Though I belong to the Liberal Party in India, I have no right to speak for my Party. If I offer any constructive suggestions on this important problem, it should be entirely on my own responsibility.

It will be convenient if I deal first with the survey of the problem of defence contained in volume I of the Report and then proceed to examine the specific proposals which have been made by the Commission in the second volume. The Commission recognise that responsible government cannot be realised, unless India is enabled to undertake her own defence; and they profess that they do not gloat over the difficulties which now prevent India from undertaking this burden and which, in their opinion, will continue to do so for a very long future. They remark that all who accept the declaration of India's constitutional goal are bound to repudiate a *non possumus* attitude. They admit that the Indian reformer would be justified in telling his British critic that the latter must be prepared to see great changes in the army in India or else cannot be sincerely pursuing the goal of Self-Government in India. They point out also that the problem cannot be satisfactorily handled by merely searching for temporary expedients wrapped up in soothing generalities, which will only serve to foment suspicions of the *bona fides* of British policy on the one hand and divert attention from the ultimate and fundamental difficulties on the other.

One may agree with the statement that the problem of defence on the N.W. land frontier of India is far more serious and complicated than the one with which the self-governing Dominions of the British Empire are confronted. It follows that the burden of the military expenditure is very heavy compared with that incurred by the British Dominions and in relation to the resources of British India. The cost of the army primarily depends upon its size and the composition of its personnel. It is well known that a British soldier costs about five times as much as an Indian. The size of the army must be determined by considerations as to its adequacy for the purpose for which it is maintained, and it may be said that this is a matter for the decision of military experts. I do not belong to the school

of pacifists who believe that the chances of war will be completely averted by the efforts of the League of Nations and that it is not therefore necessary to maintain any army. No advocate of disarmament has gone the length of proposing the abolition of all armies and no nation is prepared to disband its army. Whether preparedness for war provokes war, or is really a preparedness for peace and an insurance of national security, the difference between the rival schools of thought will be found to resolve itself into a question of the extent of the preparedness which should be maintained by a nation. Even the most fanatical opponents of preparedness are not ready to abandon all organisation for the defence of their country.

It may be said that the composition of the personnel of the army is also a matter for military experts and that we must take their *ipse dixit* as to the necessity for British troops and officers and the proportion of the British element to the Indian. The views of the military authorities upon this question cannot be accepted without a heavy discount owing to their interests and prejudices. For the benefit of the lay reader, it may be stated that the purpose of the army in India is defence against external danger and the maintenance of internal security and that it is divided into three sections, the covering troops on the frontier, the field army and the internal security troops. It will be a matter of surprise to the reader that, while the ratio of the British element to the Indian in India as a whole is about 1 to 25, the ratio of British to Indian in the covering troops which have to resist the first onslaught of the invader is 1 to 6.7, and in the internal security section it rises to 1.24 to 1, or in round numbers, about 8 to 7. The extraordinary disparity in the proportion of the British element required in the internal security calls for explanation. The only reason attempted to be given by the Simon Commission is that, owing to the communal tension which prevails in India, the British troops of the army

are called into requisition for the purpose of putting down internal disturbances almost universally and that this is due to the fact that the neutrality of the British soldier, unlike that of the Indian, is above suspicion. For various reasons this explanation of the high ratio cannot possibly be accepted as convincing. In the first place, the primary agency to be employed for maintaining internal order and tranquillity is the police force. The neutrality and loyalty of the Indian police forces have never been questioned. On the contrary, tribute has often been paid to the faithfulness with which the police have discharged their arduous duties in the most trying circumstances of civil disorder. Otherwise, one would have expected a proposal to have been put forward for a high admixture of the British element in the police force also. If a requisition is made for the employment of the regular troops, it is not because the neutrality of the police cannot be depended upon, but on account of the fact that they are not adequate in numbers and armament. There is no real ground for suggesting that the Indian soldier who has gone through a severer training and discipline than the police officer is not dependable in dealing with communal disturbances. But it is urged that, though the Indian soldier may be quite as reliable as the policeman or the British soldier, his neutrality would be suspect in this country. It has been also urged that as a matter of fact requisitions have been made for the employment of British troops. No figures are given as to the manner in which these requisitions have been complied with by sending British, or Indian troops alone, or both combined. It has to be remembered that the requisitions are made by the local governments and not by any responsible ministry and that they cannot be used as evidence of the want of popular confidence in Indian troops. That the local governments may have more confidence in the British troops is beside the question. Moreover, even assuming the undesirability or inexpediency of employing troops likely to be swayed by partisan feeling or local attachment, it should be

quite easy to send Indian troops free from any probable bias to the affected area. Granting even that the use of British troops may be necessary for the purpose of dealing with internal disorder, one would be disposed to think that there is no justification for the enormous disparity in the British ratio between the internal security troops and the field army. The only credible explanation is that this enormous British element is maintained not for dealing with inter-communal strife, but for the purpose of putting down any national uprising against the Government.

The next feature of the military situation to which attention is called by the Commission is the varying military capacity of the different races in India and the limitations of the sources of recruitment. Such differences as may exist in military capacity are largely due to past military policy in confining recruitment to particular areas and classes. As against this explanation, the Commission draw attention to the figures of recruitment during the war when no discouragement was offered to recruitment in any area. According to the figures on page 97 of the first volume, while Madras occupies the third place in the number of recruits furnished, it occupies only the eighth place in the figures relating to the composition of the army. The Madras Sepoy has borne a good record and has played a valuable part in the early history of the South Indian army. The success of recruitment is affected not merely by the presence or absence of military qualities, but by economic causes and various other reasons. A government which was really national would have considered it a duty to develop the soldierly qualities of the different races and communities under its charge. Military qualities are not altogether innate, but are capable of development by suitable training and under appropriate conditions. The menace to the security of particular provinces, which the Commission point out as likely to arise from the present composition of the Indian army, would and could have been avoided by a national government by a process of distributing recruitment over

various provinces and communities and levelling up the general standard of military qualities. If this argument of the Commission is good for anything, it would show that British troops and British officers would be necessary in India for all time to come for the purpose of preventing the fighting races from over-running the non-martial provinces. It is not possible to accept the statement of the Commission that the army authorities are taking their share in the work of reducing the disparity in military qualities between different communities. The Urban Battalion scheme to which reference is made by the Commission was recommended by the Territorial Force Committee in 1925, but it took nearly four years for the scheme to materialise, the result being that only one Urban Battalion (and not four) has been brought into existence and at a time when the circumstances were altogether unpropitious, owing to the political unrest and the Gandhian agitation. We have no wish to shirk the recognition of any difficulties; but there are various ways in which the difficulties may be overcome. The solutions to which all the arguments of the Commission converge are not the only ones and display no evidence of statesmanship or any anxiety for the national advancement of India.

The apologetic tone adopted by the Commission with regard to the 8-Unit scheme, which was condemned by the military witnesses as well as by the publicists who appeared before the Skeen Committee and by the two European members of the Commission as well as the Indian members, and their failure to probe the reasons for the adoption of the scheme are characteristic. Their endeavour to make out that the recommendations of the Skeen Committee have been nearly all, practically carried out will strike everyone as futile. Nor can it be said that they have succeeded in justifying the refusal of the Government to carry out the recommendation for the establishment of an Indian Sandhurst.

Having criticised the postulates of the Commission in their

survey of the problem of defence, we may now pass on to the constitutional aspects of the problem of defence. During the course of a debate in the Assembly on the constitutional reforms, I observed that none of the colonies was in a position to assume its defence at the time when a self-governing status was granted to it. The Commission have inferred from this passage that the difference between India's defence problem and that of the self-governing Dominions has not been fully apprehended. They point out that it is necessary to understand the difference in the urgency of the risks faced by the colonies and by India with regard to defence. They have missed the point of the argument. That there is a great difference in the magnitude of the burdens of land defence in India as compared with the colonies may be conceded. But the point of our argument is that the principle of self-sufficiency for defence was not insisted upon as a condition precedent to responsible government when the colonies obtained Dominion Status, and that for some time thereafter, not merely were Imperial troops stationed in the colonies, but the cost of their maintenance was also borne by the Imperial Government and the burden of defence against external aggression was undertaken by the Imperial Government. If this is what has happened in the case of the self-governing colonies, what is the duty of England towards India? The Commission tell us that the moment complete Self-Government is attained in India, British troops and officers will be all withdrawn and that it is a mistake to suppose that large bodies of British soldiers or British officers would remain available for the purpose of maintaining order. We are under no delusion in regard to what will happen after the attainment of full Self-Government. Nor do we desire to rely upon British arms. The really important question is what is to happen in the interval preceding the attainment of full responsible government. In the first volume of the Report the Commissioners remark that it does not

necessarily follow that India's attainment of Self-Government must be postponed, till India recruits and officers from men of Indian races a complete army for external defence by land, any more than it has proved necessary to postpone Self-Government in the Dominions until each Dominion provided its exclusive defence at sea. They observe that the time may come when an intermediate solution may be considered and that one such solution might be the creation of a Dominion army, recruited for the purpose of internal order and sharing with Imperial troops the burden of external defence, the Dominion troops being under the control of a popular minister and the Imperial troops under the Governor-General. From the anxiety which they profess in another passage that the road towards the goal of complete Self-Government should not continue to be indefinitely blocked by the military difficulty, one would have been disposed to infer that the Commission might perhaps have thought of some real solution of the military problem. A perusal of their recommendations on the subject leaves no room for doubt that, instead of solving the problem, the Commission have dexterously devised a scheme which will keep India in perpetual bondage and tied to the chariot-wheels of the Imperial Government.

The views of the Commission may be put in a nutshell. There can be no full responsible Self-Government without an effective Indian army, manned and officered by Indians. A policy of Indianisation cannot be carried out, unless India obtains Self-Government. British troops and British officers for the Indian army will continue to be indispensable for a very long time, more especially as British troops are the natural guardians of peace in India. A completely Indianised army cannot be brought by the Commission even within the range of telescopic vision. It could be envisaged only if a bold policy of Indianisation were adopted. But no such development can take place until (1) sufficient Indians have attained the experience and training requisite for the officers for some

Indian regiments at least, (2) such units have stood the only test which can possibly determine their efficiency, and (3) Indian officers have qualified by a successful army career for high command. The second test must clearly refer to the test of war and it is certainly not within the power of Indians to bring about a war. Unless high military officers and the Government resolve to take steps to that end, Indians cannot arrange for the crucial experiment.

Let us now see how the Commission propose to remove the barrier to 'constitutional' advance. Their proposal is that the responsibility for external defence must be regarded not as the business of the Indian Government in touch with an Indian Legislature, but as an Imperial concern to be managed by an Imperial agency. One would have expected that, as a logical corollary of this position the Commissioners would have recommended that the cost of this Imperial agency and Imperial military organisation should be borne by the British exchequer. But the Commissioners shrink from drawing this conclusion and propose that the burden of expenditure should be the subject of an adjustment between the Government of India and the Imperial Government, and the Government of India should pay the stipulated subsidy year after year without submitting it to the vote of the Legislature. India is to face this liability to a heavy annual contribution, but to have no voice in the management of this Imperial concern. She is only to have a seat on an advisory committee. Machinery is intended to be provided for enforcing the co-operation of India with the Imperial agency for defence when the Government of India becomes responsible to the Central Legislature.

What will be the character of the Government of India from the constitutional point of view, when it is divested of its responsibilities for external defence? As a matter of commonsense, one would think that the functions of the Government of India having become divided and the responsibility for the civil and military functions having been entrusted

to different agencies, the Government of India would assume a dyarchic character. The Simon Commission, however, point out that this separation of the civil and military functions of the Government of India cannot be regarded as a dyarchic arrangement. (See the foot-note on page 138 of Vol. I of the Report). With a strange inconsistency they protest that, whatever form the Government of India may hereafter take, it must continue to be a unitary government (not as opposed to federal, but as opposed to dyarchical).

It is not very clear what are the successive stages contemplated by the Commission in the evolution of the Government of India. Apparently in the next or the first stage, the Government of India will have no responsibility to the Legislature in any department. The external defence of India will be removed from the purview of the Legislature and treated as an Imperial concern for which the Government will pay a non-votable subsidy. In the last stage, when the Indian Legislature becomes responsible, and India becomes self-governing, she must make arrangements for the maintenance of internal order and tranquillity and will have no right to demand the loan of any troops from the subsidised Imperial army. At no stage is it contemplated that the Indian Legislature should have any part or lot in the control of the Imperial army which she must subsidise. The treaty obligations of the Crown towards the Indian Princes make it impossible for the Crown ever to transfer control of the army to the Indian Legislature.

It is needless to say that no Indian with any sense of patriotism or self-respect will look at the scheme. However good may be the intentions with which it has been paved, it will be regarded as utterly rotten and mischievous. The defence of India is a matter either of Indian concern or of Imperial concern or both. If it is a matter of Imperial concern, the best course for the Imperial Government would be to occupy the tribal area between the Frontier Province and Afghanistan and govern it as a buffer State and meet the cost of

the whole concern out of British revenues. Should any occasion arise (which God forbid) for the Government of India to requisition British troops from the tribal area, the cost of such troops when serving in British India may be met from the Indian-exchequer, in the same manner as the Indian troops are now paid for when requisitioned by the Imperial Government. If absolutely necessary, the Indian Government may contribute to the cost of the Imperial troops. But the amount of her contribution should bear the same proportion as her revenues bear to those of Britain. The liability to contribute to the cost should carry with it a voice in the management. These suggestions may well claim to be less fantastic and more equitable than those put forward by the Commission. As a matter of fact, the late Lord Haldane adumbrated a proposal to make the British troops in India a charge on the Imperial revenues alone. If, on the other hand, the matter were treated as one of joint concern to India and the Empire, the most proper course would be to leave the management in the hands of the Government of India, a subsidy being paid by the British Government to the Indian. Thoughtful Indians recognise that, thanks to the British military policy in India, they are not in a position to ask for the immediate transfer of the subject of defence to the Legislature. And this is the reason why they are willing to accept such transitional arrangements as may be necessary for safeguarding the security of India against external danger.

We cannot understand why the Commission have not explored the possibility of entrusting the portfolio of Defence to Indian ministers responsible to the Viceroy during the period of transition. The Viceroy may be entrusted with the power of restoring any grants for military expenditure which may have been refused by the Legislature. To entrust the portfolio of Defence to the Viceroy during the transitional period would not be open to the objection of introducing dyarchy any more than the scheme of the Simon Commission. Above all, it is essential that the Imperial Government should undertake measures to

Indianise the commissioned ranks of the Indian army according to a time-table and within a reasonable period. If Britain refuses to undertake this duty, she must allow us to import French or German military experts for the purpose.

(In the first volume, the Commission were good enough to suggest the formation of Indian troops on the Dominion pattern. In the second volume, they propose that this Dominion army for India should be developed with the magnificent resources that may be left after a heavy contribution to the maintenance of the Imperial army and the demands of a progressive civil administration.) The grim humour of the suggestion is an excellent illustration of the spirit in which the problem has been approached by the Commission and it really adds insult to injury.