



What Happened at the Third Round Table Conference?

Description

The early 1930s marked a crucial period in India's constitutional history, characterised by a series of discussions between British authorities and various Indian political stakeholders regarding the future framework of governance. These discussions took shape in the form of the Round Table Conferences held in London. While the first two conferences saw significant, though often contentious, participation, the third and final instalment unfolded under markedly different political circumstances. Understanding what transpired at this particular conference is important for comprehending the progression towards greater constitutional reform in British India.

The Third Round Table Conference, despite its pivotal position in the series, often receives less attention than its predecessors, primarily due to the conspicuous absence of the Indian National Congress. However, its proceedings and outcomes were far from insignificant, contributing directly to the eventual constitutional legislation that would govern India for years to come. This conference was a critical step in the British government's attempts to formalise a new constitutional arrangement for India, even if it lacked the broad political consensus that could have lent it greater legitimacy.

The Third Round Table Conference: Overview

The Third Round Table Conference represented the concluding chapter in a series of high-level discussions aimed at shaping India's constitutional future. Its proceedings, held in London, reflected the evolving political landscape and the British government's continued, albeit sometimes unilateral, efforts to address Indian demands for self-governance. The atmosphere surrounding this conference was distinct from the earlier two, largely influenced by the political developments in India and Britain.

Date and Purpose

The Third Round Table Conference commenced on 17th November 1932 and concluded on 24th December 1932. Its primary purpose was to review the progress made by the sub-committees established during the Second Round Table Conference and to consolidate proposals for a new Indian constitution. The British government intended for this conference to finalise the details that would

eventually lead to a comprehensive legislative framework for India. Essentially, it was meant to be the concluding technical stage, building upon the foundational discussions and disagreements of the previous conferences. The objective was to move beyond general principles and towards concrete recommendations that could be translated into a legislative draft.

The Absence of Congress

A defining feature of the Third Round Table Conference was the absence of the Indian National Congress. This non-participation was not accidental; rather, it was a deliberate choice by the Congress, stemming from the political climate in India. Following the failure of the Second Round Table Conference, Mahatma Gandhi had returned to India, only to find the British government intensifying its repressive measures. The Civil Disobedience Movement had been revived, leading to widespread arrests of Congress leaders and activists, including Gandhi himself.

Consequently, the British government did not extend an invitation to the Indian National Congress to attend the Third Round Table Conference. This exclusion of India's largest political party significantly diminished the representative character and legitimacy of the conference. The absence of the Congress meant that the proposals developed lacked the direct input and endorsement of a major nationalist voice, making any outcome largely a British-led initiative rather than a consensus-driven Indian agreement. This point needs attention: the limited participation significantly reduced the conference's ability to forge a truly representative consensus for India's constitutional future.

Participants and Representations

The composition of delegates at the Third Round Table Conference was notably restricted compared to the earlier sessions, reflecting both the British government's strategy and the political realities in India. The deliberate exclusion of the Indian National Congress meant that the conference table did not fully represent the spectrum of Indian political opinion.

Representatives from Muslim League, Hindu Maha Sabha, and Liberals

Despite the Congress's absence, various other Indian political and communal groups were represented. Key among these were delegates from the Muslim League, the Hindu Maha Sabha, and the Liberals. These groups had diverse interests and constitutional aspirations. The Muslim League, led by figures such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Agha Khan, continued to press for communal safeguards and a federal structure that protected minority rights. The Hindu Maha Sabha, representing certain Hindu nationalist interests, also put forward its perspectives, often in contrast to the Muslim League's demands.

The Indian Liberals, prominent figures like Tej Bahadur Sapru and M.R. Jayakar, maintained their commitment to constitutional progress through dialogue and cooperation with the British. They consistently advocated for greater Indian self-rule within the framework of the British Empire. These liberal leaders played a crucial role in maintaining a channel of communication with the British, even when the Congress had withdrawn from negotiations. Their presence ensured that at least some Indian voices, albeit not the most dominant nationalist ones, were heard in the deliberations.

Princesâ?? Involvement

Indian Princes, representing the princely states, also continued their participation in the Third Round Table Conference. Their involvement had been a significant aspect of the earlier conferences, particularly with their initial agreement in principle to an all-India federation. However, by the third conference, their enthusiasm for joining such a federation had waned considerably. They had grown increasingly cautious about the implications of integration into a British Indian-dominated federal structure, fearing erosion of their sovereign powers and internal autonomy.

The British government, nevertheless, continued to engage with the Princes, as their inclusion was seen as vital for the success of any all-India federation proposal. The Princesâ?? representatives sought assurances regarding their treaty rights, internal administration, and financial arrangements within any proposed federal scheme. Their cautious approach reflected the complex challenges of integrating disparate princely states with British India into a single constitutional entity.

Limited Number of Delegates

A striking feature of the Third Round Table Conference was the significantly reduced number of delegates. While the first two conferences saw a large gathering of representatives, this final session was attended by only 46 delegates. This smaller contingent not only made the conference more manageable but also, arguably, less representative of the broader Indian populace.

The limited number of delegates meant that discussions were confined to a select group, primarily those willing to cooperate with the British governmentâ??s terms or those representing specific communal or regional interests. The absence of a strong, unified nationalist voice, coupled with the smaller number of participants, meant that the debates often lacked the comprehensive nature seen in the earlier conferences. It became more of a focused technical exercise rather than a broad political negotiation. This point needs attention, as the restricted participation limited the conferenceâ??s capacity to build a truly pan-Indian consensus.

Key Development: The Communal Award

The period surrounding the Round Table Conferences was marked by intense discussions and disagreements over communal representation and electoral arrangements. These issues proved to be major stumbling blocks in achieving any broad constitutional consensus.

British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonaldâ??s Announcement

One of the most significant and contentious developments related to the Third Round Table Conference, though formally announced slightly before its opening, was the Communal Award. On 16th August 1932, British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald announced this Award, laying out a scheme for minority representation in British India. The Award came as a direct consequence of the inability of Indian leaders at the Second Round Table Conference to agree on a mutually acceptable formula for communal representation. The British government, claiming to be acting as an impartial arbiter, stepped in to resolve the deadlock.

The Communal Award was designed to address the demands of various minority communities for separate electorates and guaranteed representation. It allocated separate electorates not only to Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians, but also extended them to Anglo-Indians, Europeans, and most controversially, to the 'Depressed Classes' (later known as Scheduled Castes). This extension of separate electorates to the Depressed Classes sparked immediate and fervent opposition from Mahatma Gandhi, who viewed it as a move to permanently divide Hindu society.

The Award's Context at the Conference

While the Communal Award was announced before the Third Round Table Conference, its implications and implementation were very much part of the backdrop against which the conference proceeded. The Award's provisions, particularly concerning the Depressed Classes, led to Mahatma Gandhi undertaking a fast unto death in Yerwada Jail in September 1932. This fast pressured leaders like B.R. Ambedkar, who had initially championed separate electorates for the Depressed Classes, to negotiate a compromise.

The result was the Poona Pact, signed on 24th September 1932, which retained the idea of reserved seats for the Depressed Classes within the general electorate, rather than granting them separate electorates. This amendment was later incorporated into the Communal Award. Thus, as the Third Round Table Conference convened, the Communal Award, in its modified form via the Poona Pact, was a settled policy that significantly influenced the constitutional discussions. Delegates at the conference had to deliberate on future constitutional arrangements while operating within the framework established by this Award, which had far-reaching implications for India's political and social fabric. This context is important because it shaped how representation would be structured in the proposed new constitution.

From Conference to Legislation: The Government of India Act

The series of Round Table Conferences, including the third session, were not isolated events but were part of a continuous process aimed at introducing significant constitutional reforms in British India. The conclusions and recommendations emerging from these conferences served as vital inputs for subsequent legislative action by the British Parliament.

The 'White Paper' of 1933

Following the conclusion of the Third Round Table Conference, the British government published a document known as the 'White Paper' in March 1933. This White Paper was a crucial output, consolidating the proposals and agreements that had emerged from the three Round Table Conferences. It essentially laid out the British government's constitutional proposals for India, taking into account the deliberations, reports of sub-committees, and the varying viewpoints expressed by the Indian delegates.

The White Paper outlined a framework for an All-India Federation, encompassing both British India and the princely states, though the princes' accession remained voluntary. It proposed provincial autonomy with responsible government, but retained significant reserve powers for the British Governor-General and provincial Governors. Crucially, it also incorporated the provisions of the

Communal Award (as modified by the Poona Pact) regarding communal representation. This document became the immediate blueprint for the comprehensive constitutional legislation that was to follow.

Role in the Passing of the Government of India Act

The White Paper of 1933 did not immediately become law. Instead, it was subjected to further scrutiny and deliberation by a Joint Select Committee of the British Parliament. This committee, composed of members from both the House of Lords and the House of Commons, examined the White Paper's proposals in detail, taking testimony from various stakeholders, including some of the Indian delegates who had attended the Round Table Conferences.

The recommendations of this Joint Select Committee, after extensive deliberations, formed the basis for the Government of India Bill. This Bill was then introduced in the British Parliament and, after prolonged debate and amendments, was finally passed as the Government of India Act of 1935.

Therefore, the Third Round Table Conference, by reviewing sub-committee reports and contributing to the consolidated proposals in the White Paper, played a direct and instrumental role in the eventual enactment of the Government of India Act, 1935. While the conference itself was limited in its immediate decision-making power, its function as a consultative body, filtering and refining proposals, made it a foundational step towards this landmark legislation. This Act, in turn, became a significant constitutional milestone, defining the structure of governance in India until its independence.

Assessing the Third RTC's Contribution to Constitutional Reforms

The Third Round Table Conference, despite its truncated attendance and the absence of the Indian National Congress, made a tangible contribution to the constitutional evolution of India. It served primarily as a formal mechanism to consolidate and finalise the various proposals and discussions that had occurred over the preceding years.

Its contribution lay not in forging new groundbreaking agreements, which was largely impossible without Congress's participation, but in systematically processing the work of the earlier conferences. The sub-committees formed during the Second RTC had produced detailed reports on different aspects of constitutional reform, and the third conference was tasked with reviewing and integrating these. This methodical approach helped in translating abstract principles into concrete, actionable proposals.

The conference's discussions, though limited in scope, directly fed into the 'White Paper' of 1933. This White Paper was not merely a summary but a detailed scheme that served as the primary draft for the future Government of India Act. Therefore, the Third RTC acted as an essential intermediary stage, bridging the gap between open-ended political negotiations and the precise drafting of legislation. It ensured that the British government's constitutional vision for India moved closer to implementation.

While its legitimacy was challenged by Congress's boycott, the Third RTC's efforts, combined with the earlier conferences, created a foundational document that shaped the constitutional future of India. The Government of India Act, 1935, itself was a complex piece of legislation introducing

provincial autonomy and the idea of an all-India federation. The seeds for many of its provisions, particularly regarding federal structure, provincial governance, and communal representation (as influenced by the Communal Award), were debated and refined during the Round Table Conferences, with the third conference providing a concluding review. In essence, it was a necessary, if not fully representative, step in the British legislative process for India.

UPSC Perspective

For aspirants preparing for the [Union Public Service Commission](#) examinations, understanding the Third Round Table Conference requires attention to both factual details and broader analytical insights. The UPSC often tests knowledge of historical events in their political and constitutional context.

- **Prelims focus:** For the preliminary examination, candidates should focus on specific, verifiable facts.
 - **Key dates:** The commencement date of 17th November 1932 is important.
 - **Prominent attendees:** Knowing which major groups (Muslim League, Hindu Maha Sabha, Liberals, Princes) were represented is crucial.
 - **Absentees:** The absence of the Indian National Congress is a critical point.
 - **Communal Award:** Understanding that British PM Ramsay MacDonald announced it and its initial provisions, as well as the Poona Pact's modification, is essential.
 - **Link to Government of India Act:** The direct connection to the 'White Paper' of 1933 and subsequently the Government of India Act, 1935, is a key takeaway.
- **Mains focus:** For the main examination, a deeper, analytical understanding is required.
 - **Political circumstances of the conference:** Analysing why it was held in 1932 and the broader political climate in India (Civil Disobedience, repression) is important.
 - **Reasons for Congress non-participation:** Understanding the strategic implications of the Congress's boycott and the British government's decision not to invite them. This includes linking it to the revival of the Civil Disobedience Movement.
 - **Significance of the Communal Award:** Discussing its divisive nature, Gandhi's opposition, the Poona Pact, and its long-term impact on Indian politics and society.
 - **Impact on constitutional developments:** Evaluating how the conference's outcomes, particularly the 'White Paper,' influenced the drafting and eventual passing of the Government of India Act, 1935, and its features like provincial autonomy and federalism.

Common Student Confusion

Students often encounter specific points of confusion when studying the Round Table Conferences. Clarifying these misunderstandings is crucial for a complete and accurate understanding.

- **Misunderstanding the scope of the Third RTC's deliberations compared to previous conferences.**
 - **Confusion:** Some students might assume that the Third RTC was another round of broad negotiations aiming for a fresh consensus, similar to the First or Second RTC. They might expect new, major agreements to emerge.
 - **Correction:** The Third Round Table Conference was largely a technical and concluding session. Its scope was primarily to review, consolidate, and formalise the reports and

proposals developed by sub-committees of the Second RTC. It was not intended to open up entirely new negotiations or achieve a political breakthrough, especially given the Congress's absence. It acted as a final filtering stage for proposals before legislative drafting.

- **Attributing the Communal Award solely to this conference without acknowledging broader political decisions.**
 - **Confusion:** A common error is to directly associate the announcement of the Communal Award with the proceedings of the Third Round Table Conference.
 - **Correction:** The Communal Award was announced by British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald on 16th August 1932, *before* the Third Round Table Conference began on 17th November 1932. While its provisions were highly relevant to the discussions at the conference and formed a part of the constitutional framework being considered, the Award itself was a unilateral British decision made due to the deadlock at the Second RTC, and not a direct outcome of the Third RTC's deliberations. The conference operated with the Award as an established policy.
- **Confusing the direct outcomes of the conference with the subsequent legislative process.**
 - **Confusion:** Students sometimes directly link the Third RTC to the passing of the Government of India Act, 1935, as if the Act was formulated entirely within the conference itself.
 - **Correction:** The Third Round Table Conference did not directly pass any legislation. Its direct outcome was its contribution to the 'White Paper' of March 1933, which outlined the constitutional proposals. This White Paper then went through further scrutiny by a Joint Select Committee of the British Parliament, leading to the Government of India Bill, and finally, the Government of India Act, 1935. The conference was an important consultative and preparatory stage, but not the legislative body itself.

Short Revision Points

- Held on 17th November 1932.
- Congress was not invited and kept away.
- British PM Ramsay MacDonald gave the Communal Award (announced prior to the conference).
- Only 46 delegates attended, including representatives from Muslim League, Hindu Maha Sabha, Liberals, and Princes.
- Conference considered reports from Second RTC sub-committees.
- Led to the 'White Paper' in 1933, forming the basis for the Government of India Act, 1935.

FAQs

1. Why was Congress absent from the Third Round Table Conference?

Congress was absent because it had revived the Civil Disobedience Movement in India, leading to the arrest of its leaders. Consequently, the British government chose not to invite the Indian National Congress to the conference.

2. What significant award was announced by the British Prime Minister during the Third Round Table Conference?

British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald announced the Communal Award on 16th August 1932, which was before the conference began but formed a key backdrop to its discussions. This Award provided for separate electorates for various minority communities, including Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and initially the Depressed Classes.

3. How did the Third Round Table Conference contribute to future legislation?

The Third Round Table Conference played a direct role in consolidating the proposals from the earlier conferences and sub-committee reports. Its deliberations contributed to the 'White Paper' of 1933, which subsequently served as the fundamental blueprint for the Government of India Act, 1935, a major constitutional legislation for British India.

The Third Round Table Conference, while often overshadowed by its predecessors, holds an important place in India's constitutional journey. It marked a transition from broad-based, albeit often deadlocked, negotiations to a more focused, British-led exercise in legislative drafting. The outcomes of this conference, especially its contributions to the 'White Paper' and subsequently the Government of India Act of 1935, directly shaped the administrative and political structure of India in the pre-independence era. For serious aspirants, understanding what happened at this conference, its context, participants, and legislative impact, provides a more complete picture of the complex process of constitutional reform in British India. Aspirants seeking to thoroughly grasp such intricate historical and constitutional topics often find valuable guidance. For those looking for the best [ias coaching in delhi](#), [SHRI RAM IAS](#) is regarded as a top choice, providing detailed insights into these crucial subjects.