The Simla Deputation and the Founding of the All-India Muslim League 1906

This handout covers the Simla Deputation of October 1906 and the founding of the All-India Muslim League in December 1906: the reasons for each, the demands made, the aims of the League and their importance. It opens Section 2 of the syllabus: the emergence of Pakistan 1906-47.

Key dates

Date	Event
1867	The Hindi-Urdu controversy begins
1885	The Indian National Congress is founded
1905	Bengal is partitioned; Hindu protests begin
Early 1906	The Liberal Party wins the general election in Britain; John Morley, Secretary of State for India, later speaks of plans for council reform
1 October 1906	The Simla Deputation, led by the Aga Khan, meets the Viceroy, Lord Minto
30 December 1906	The All-India Muslim League is founded at Dhaka
1909	The Morley-Minto Reforms grant separate electorates to Muslims
1913	The League adopts self-government as an aim; Jinnah joins the League

Background

By 1906 many Muslim leaders were worried about the future of their community. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had advised Muslims to stay out of the Indian National Congress, and most had done so. This meant that they had no political organisation of their own. Three developments made the need urgent.

- The Hindi-Urdu controversy had shown that the language and culture of the Muslims could come under attack.
- The Hindu protests against the partition of Bengal in 1905 were powerful and well organised. Muslims, who supported the partition, had no similar body to put their case.
- In early 1906 the Liberal Party won a general election in Britain. The Secretary of State for India, John Morley, made it known that the government planned to give Indians a larger share in the councils through elections.

The Simla Deputation, October 1906

Why was the deputation sent?

1. **Fear of being outvoted.** If more council seats were to be filled by election, the Hindu majority would win almost all of them. Muslims were a minority and were also poorer, so fewer of them

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would qualify to vote. Muslim leaders wanted to put their case before the new rules were written.

2. **Hindu opposition to the partition of Bengal.** The strength of the campaign made Muslims fear that the British might give way to Congress pressure. They wanted to show the Viceroy that Muslims had their own views and interests.
3. **Congress did not speak for Muslims.** Congress claimed to represent all Indians, but its demands, such as open elections and support for Hindi, did not suit the Muslims. Muslim leaders wanted the British to treat them as a separate community.

What happened

A group of 35 Muslim leaders from different parts of India, led by Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, the Aga Khan, met the Viceroy, Lord Minto, at Simla on 1 October 1906. Nawab Mohsin-ul-Mulk, the secretary of the Aligarh college, played a leading part in arranging the meeting. The deputation presented a written address setting out the Muslim requests.

The demands

1. **Separate electorates.** Muslims should elect their own representatives: Muslim seats should be filled only by Muslim voters.
2. **Weightage.** Muslims should have more seats in the councils than their share of the population alone would give, because of their political importance and their service to the empire, including in the army.
3. **A fair share of posts.** Muslims should receive a proper share of government jobs and of seats on local bodies such as municipal and district boards. They also asked for Muslim judges in the higher courts.
4. **Support for Muslim education.** They asked for help in setting up a Muslim university.

The Viceroy's reply

Lord Minto gave a sympathetic answer. He agreed that the Muslims were a separate community and promised that their rights and interests would be protected in any new system. He did not give exact details, but the principle of separate representation had been accepted.

Why was the Simla Deputation important?

- The British accepted, for the first time, that Muslims should be represented separately. This led to separate electorates in the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909.
- It showed that the earlier work of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had succeeded: the British were now ready to listen to Muslims and to work with them.
- It showed that Muslims saw themselves as a separate community from the Hindus, with their own political interests.
- Its success encouraged Muslim leaders to form a permanent political party.

The founding of the All-India Muslim League, December 1906

Why was the League founded?

1. **The need for a permanent organisation.** A deputation could meet the Viceroy once, but a party was needed to follow up the promises made at Simla and to speak for Muslims year after

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year.

2. **The growing strength of Congress.** Congress was dominated by Hindus and was leading the campaign against the partition of Bengal. Muslims needed their own body to balance its influence.
3. **The coming reforms.** With elected councils expected, Muslims needed an organisation that could choose candidates, state policy and negotiate with the government.
4. **The legacy of Sir Syed.** His view that Muslims had separate interests, and the educated leaders produced by Aligarh, made a Muslim party both possible and natural.

How it was founded

In December 1906 the Mohammedan Educational Conference held its annual meeting at Dhaka, with Nawab Salimullah of Dhaka as host. When the Conference had finished its work, the delegates held a political meeting on 30 December, chaired by Nawab Viqar-ul-Mulk. Nawab Salimullah proposed that a political organisation should be formed, to be called the All-India Muslim League. The proposal was accepted. Mohsin-ul-Mulk and Viqar-ul-Mulk were made joint secretaries to prepare its constitution, and the Aga Khan became its first president.

The aims of the League

1. To promote feelings of loyalty to the British government among the Muslims of India, and to remove any misunderstanding about the government's intentions.
2. To protect and advance the political rights and interests of the Muslims, and to represent their needs to the government.
3. To prevent the growth of hostility between Muslims and other communities, without harming the other aims of the League.

These aims show that the early League was a moderate and loyal body. It did not ask for independence or for a separate state. Its purpose was to protect Muslims within British India.

How important were the Simla Deputation and the Muslim League?

Their importance.

- Muslims now had a political voice of their own for the first time. Congress could no longer claim to speak for all Indians without challenge.
- Separate electorates, won in 1909, gave Muslims a secure place in the councils. They remained part of every later constitutional scheme and were accepted by Congress in the Lucknow Pact of 1916.
- The League gave Muslim politics a lasting structure. Under Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah it later became the party that demanded and won Pakistan.

The limits.

- The early League was small. Its leaders were mostly landowners, nawabs and wealthy men, and it had little contact with ordinary Muslims for many years.
- Its first aim was loyalty to the British. Critics, including many in Congress, said the British had encouraged it in order to divide Indians.

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- Its trust in the British was shaken when the partition of Bengal was reversed in 1911. Only after that did it adopt the aim of self-government, in 1913.
- Congress opposed separate electorates at first and saw the League as a rival, so relations between the communities became more distant.

Judgement. In 1906 the League was a modest organisation with limited aims, and nobody at Dhaka was planning a new country. Its importance lies in what it made possible. The Simla Deputation won the principle that Muslims were a separate political community, and the League gave that community a permanent organisation. Without these two steps the later demand for Pakistan would have had no recognised basis and no party to lead it.

Key terms and people

- **Deputation:** a group of people sent to speak on behalf of others.
- **Separate electorates:** a system in which Muslim voters alone elect Muslim representatives.
- **Weightage:** giving a community more seats than its share of the population.
- **The Aga Khan:** leader of the Simla Deputation and first president of the League.
- **Lord Minto:** Viceroy who received the deputation.
- **Nawab Salimullah:** host of the Dhaka meeting, who proposed the formation of the League.
- **Mohsin-ul-Mulk and Viqar-ul-Mulk:** Aligarh leaders and first joint secretaries of the League.

Exam practice

1. Describe the Simla Deputation of 1906. [4]
2. Why was the All-India Muslim League founded in 1906? [7]
3. "The demand for separate electorates was the most important outcome of the Simla Deputation." How far do you agree? Explain your answer. [14]

Outline answers

1. A group of 35 Muslim leaders led by the Aga Khan met the Viceroy, Lord Minto, at Simla on 1 October 1906. They asked for separate electorates, more seats than their numbers alone would give, and a fair share of government posts. Minto gave a sympathetic reply and promised to protect Muslim interests.

2. Three explained reasons: (a) Muslims needed a permanent body to follow up the success at Simla and speak for them in the coming reforms; (b) Congress was Hindu-dominated and was leading the campaign against the partition of Bengal, so Muslims needed their own party; (c) the ideas of Sir Syed and the earlier language dispute had convinced Muslims that their interests were separate and needed protection.

3. Agree: separate electorates were accepted in principle, became law in 1909, guaranteed Muslim representation and were kept in later schemes. Other outcomes: better relations and British recognition of Muslims as a separate community; the confidence that led directly to the founding of the Muslim League; a clear break from the Congress claim to represent all Indians; the request for weightage and jobs. Judgement: separate electorates were the most concrete gain, but the founding of the League may have mattered more in the long run because it was the organisation that later

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won Pakistan.

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