



MOUNTBATTEN PLAN AND PARTITION OF INDIA

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Prior to his arrival on 22 March 1946, Mountbatten was instructed by the Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, to avoid Partition and obtain a unitary Government for India. The hallmark was to secure British interests of keeping the army undivided and retaining India in the Commonwealth. It took, however, just a few weeks and a couple of meetings with Indian leaders to come to the conclusion that partition was inevitable, and the “only possible alternative” . Although undesirable, by both the British and the Indian National Congress, it became abundantly clear that some sort of Pakistan had to be conceded, given Jinnah's stubborn attitude and communal violence that had spread to, virtually, all parts of the country, Punjab being affected the most. It was, however, the division of Punjab and Bengal that caused misery and suffering of millions of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. This could have been avoided only if the Congress had not insisted on this division and the British had not taken side with its leaders. Both failed to realize or rather neglected, despite warnings from Jinnah and others, the possibility of horrible consequences of such fragmentation of ethnically diverse provinces. They hoped to avoid further conflict but, in reality, it made the matters worse. Another reason was the hastened nature with which the final decision was made.

By the time Mountbatten arrived in India, the communal violence and riots in Punjab, once peaceful 'jewel' of the British India, had reached considerable heights. Lahore, Amritsar and other cities were ablaze and mobs of young League's followers and armed gangs were attacking government buildings, as well as private houses, hoisting Muslim League flags. The situation was rapidly going out of control, and Congressmen “started to use the vocabulary of Partition” as a possible solution for the disaster unfolding in the region (Khan 81-5). The Congress Working Committee's resolution from March 8 demanded for immediate Dominion Status and the handing over of power to the interim government which would “function as a Cabinet with full authority and responsibility.” It also called upon all parties and groups to discard violent and coercive methods, and co-operate peacefully. Nehru urged “the Muslim League to join Congress in the Assembly and work together amicably toward reaching a final settlement.” If this would not have been possible, a division of the Punjab and Bengal, with bearing in mind the will of large groups of non-Muslims in these provinces, had become inevitable. Jinnah insisted that ideology and goal of the Congress and the League are fundamentally different and in conflict and therefore “there is no common ground for co-operation” (Wolpert 311-2).

Nehru and the Congress had been “attached to the idea of a United India” but eventually reluctantly conceded to partition, in the expressed hope of avoiding conflict and destruction of the country (T.O.P. Vol.10, 519). The only other solution was presented by Gandhi who suggested that “India could be kept united if Jinnah were offered the leadership of the whole country.” This idea, however, was

unthinkable for Nehru and Patel and Mountbatten “did not seem to take it seriously” either (Tharoor 154).

Crucial discussions between Mountbatten and Jinnah were held in April 1947. They ultimately determined the resolution of the Indian dilemma. Mountbatten was very skilful negotiator but not even him could persuade Jinnah “to shake [his] resolve to have partition.” Jinnah was a true leader of the Muslim League and the Muslims for that matter. His position was strong enough to adamantly stick to his demand, especially after the killings in Calcutta in 1946 (Zakaria 131-2). In his talks with Mountbatten, Jinnah thought that “he had only to keep arguing to ensure that Pakistan came into being” (Morris 3). They did agree on the urgency of speedy decision, given the state of uncontrollable communal conflicts in the country. In the BBC documentary *The Day India Burned: Partition of India*, Bir Bahadur Singh recollects how their Sikh village in the Punjab was being attacked by the Muslims and his father and other men decided rather to kill their own daughters and women than to see them being taken away by Muslims. Such horrible scenes of communal frenzy repeated again and again behind the curtain of political negotiations. Mountbatten warned Jinnah that partition might produce even more violence and bloodshed and it is in the best interests of the Muslims and the Hindus to avoid partition. But Jinnah reassured him that such 'surgical operation' would resolve all the troubles in the subcontinent. He also agitated against the division of Punjab and Bengal, despite the fact that they contained enormous Hindu and Sikh population. Mountbatten did not agree; he run Jinnah to the wall and told him that “as a part of the bargain” to earn any Pakistan at all, those provinces must be divided (Zakaria 132-4). Mountbatten, being a friend of Nehru, would not listen to any proposal or suggestion that would not hold ground with the Congress. Jinnah's insistence on the unity of the Punjab and Bengal was very logical and based on a realistic and peaceful solution to the impasse. Such a settlement would avoid the probable dislocation, violence and above all confusion rampant in the country. But Mountbatten in his final plan utterly disregarded the possibility of massive population transfer that was naturally attached with the partition of these two large provinces (Ghose 160). Likewise, the Sikhs of the Punjab were overlooked altogether. In the words of Mountbatten, “a psychopathic case”, Jinnah, was given a choice, either “a moth-eaten Pakistan” or the united India with safeguards that would allow him to have his Pakistan later (Wolpert 318-9). This ultimatum forced deeply saddened Jinnah to accept the 3 June plan prepared by Mountbatten and approved after considerable discussion by London. Gandhi was strongly against the partition but could not prevent it in the end and “felt helpless to carry on any more with his life-long mission.” Mountbatten had to convince Nehru and Patel first and he secured their consent with the help of Krishna Menon and V.P. Menon (Zakaria 136-40). Nehru hated the vivisection of India, but as he said on 3 June 1947 “they could not let India bleed continuously” (Moraes 357) Later, in 1960, he admitted that “partition offered a way out . . .” (Ghose 161). Mountbatten wanted to proceed as quickly as he could, in order not to be blamed for law and order of the country (*The Day India Burned*), and deliberately “swept the Indian leaders along” (Tharoor 154). Panigrahi hold the view that the Indian leaders, mostly tired old men, sacrificed the national cause by seizing the first opportunity to grasp power and thus hastily accepted partition of India (12). However, it was the fundamental divergence

of aims of the Congress and the Muslim League which constituted the crux of the whole issue: unity vs. partition (Ali 117).

The partition plan was broadcasted on June 3, 1947, and it specified the division of India into two dominions of India and Pakistan with immediate independence; “Pakistan was to be of the truncated contiguous area variety involving the partition of both the Punjab and Bengal.” The partition would have to be approved by the Legislative Assemblies of these provinces by majority of votes, first as a whole and then as two parts, one representing the Muslim-majority districts and the other the rest of the province. If either part voted for partition, then the province would be divided (Moon 66). The bisection was highly anticipated, therefore necessary steps were to be initiated, with hastened nature, for dividing the army, debt, and all the assets. In case of partition of the Punjab and Bengal, a Boundary Commission was to be appointed “to demarcate the boundaries on the basis of ascertaining the contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims, and also to take into account other factors” (67). Furthermore, the very next day, Mountbatten declared that the transfer of power to the two states “was [to be] advanced from June, 1948 to August 15, 1947” (Moraes 356).

The Quaid-i-Azzam had finally earned Pakistan for the Muslims although “there was no firm line between winners and losers”. The plan inevitably caused an utter confusion and disorientation in the minds of all communities. The country was to be divided but it was not clear whether they would be expected to relocate and where the actual boundaries would lie (Khan 89). The cardinal mistake of the Boundary Commission, under the chairmanship of Sir Cyril Radcliffe who had never been in India before, was that it had kept the already-drawn boundaries a secret until the independence was granted to Pakistan and India on 14 and 15 August 1947 respectively (Wolpert 334). The uncertainty of the borders and fixed date of the partition (Pollack, *The Day India Burned: Partition of India*), more or less, led to the worst ethnic cleansing between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in the history of British India, particularly in the Punjab (Morris). The law and order considerably weakened after the British had decided to bring most of their armed troops home in June 1947. The remaining ones, “feeble and polarised police forces and undermanned Punjab Boundary Force” could hardly make much of difference, considering a vastness of the Indian Territory, to stop colossal human tragedy from happening. The British completely failed to guarantee any safeguards to the Indian people because Mountbatten had instructed the remaining troops to stay away from the frenzy with only one exception: they could intervene “in [case of] an emergency to save British lives” (Khan 128-9). This cold-blooded attitude cast a gloomy shadow on Mountbatten's viceroyalty and Attlee's government as well.

At the end of June 1947, the Bengali and Punjabi legislative assemblies voted for partition of their provinces as a “solution to the communal problem that had burned much of Lahore and Amritsar to the ground” (Wolpert 332). The provinces had been cut in half with taking into account religious population of each individual district, which was based on outdated figures, and other factors such as connections of railways, canals, irrigation channels, etc. (Pollack, *The Day India Burned: Partition of India*). The fate of millions of people had been decided and resulted in a massive

movement of civilians prior to the announcement of boundaries but mainly in an immediate aftermath. The boundaries had been drawn in extremely rushed manner, in thirty six days, and the people who found themselves on the 'wrong' side of the boundary “were forced to embark upon unplanned migrations under extremely unguarded and dangerous circumstances” (Ali 126). Communities were literally running for their lives on foot or by trains which were often attacked by armed gangs who slaughtered the passengers. The roads were crammed with refugees and their tracks were soon covered with blood; many villages of Punjab were levelled to the ground and inhabitants executed. On top of that, countless women of all religious communities were brutally raped and often disfigured (Khan 129). The price of freedom and the emergence of Pakistan was enormously high; roughly 1 million people died and some 15 million had to relocate in the process (Hartnack 244). The evidence presented in this thesis put the question of inevitability of the partition beyond any doubt but the number of casualties could certainly have been alleviated if the British had taken full responsibility for the law and order in the country. Unfortunately, Mountbatten turned a deaf ear to the warnings of both Nehru and Jinnah (Khan 107). Celebrations of freedom, which were boycotted by its “architect” Mahatma Gandhi (Zakaria 154), were overshadowed by the holocaust across the boundaries and bitter legacies of the partition continue to haunt people of India and Pakistan even today.

Conclusion

There were several reasons for the birth of a separate Muslim homeland and the evidence suggests that all three parties – the British, the Congress and the Muslim League were responsible. First of all, the British followed a divide-and-rule policy in India and from the very beginning of their rule were categorizing people according to religion and viewed and treated them as separate from each other. Secondly, there was an ideological divide between the Muslims and the Hindus of India. While there were strong feelings of nationalism in India, there were also communal conflicts that were based on religious communities rather than class or regional ones. Jinnah played probably the most crucial role in rooting this religious divide into the minds of Muslims. Other communities inevitably answered with the same violence and India was on the verge of civil war in 1946-47. Indian Congress made several mistakes in their policies which convinced the League that it was impossible to live in an undivided India after freedom from colonial rule because their interests would be completely suppressed. The British did not hide its interest in pitching two sides against each other and in the end did not take responsibility of the law and order in the country. If they had, there would probably not have been so much suffering. There had been some hope of an undivided India, with a government consisting of three tiers along basically the same lines as the borders of India and Pakistan at the time of Partition. However, Congress' rejection of the Cabinet Mission plan of 1946 convinced the leaders of the Muslim League that compromise was impossible and partition was the only course to take.



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