



MOUNTBATTÉN AND PARTITION OF INDIA

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The whole country was in the grip of communal frenzy and the League *was* determined riot to compromise. On Jan. 31, 1947, the Working Committee of the Muslim League declared the elections to the Constituent Assembly and the Assembly itself as '*ab, jnitio void, invalid and illegal*' and that 'it should be forthwith dissolved'. It asked the Government to declare that the May 16 Plan had failed because neither Congress, nor Sikhs, nor the Scheduled' Castes had accepted it.¹

Meanwhile communal frenzy had gripped several parts of the country. League had entered the Interim Government without calling off its 'direct action' threat. In Calcutta, where Chief Minister Suhrawardy had promised 'immunity from police and army interference', atleast 4000 were killed and 10,000 injured.² The violence had spread to Noakhali and Tippera in Eastern Bengal, to Bombay, Bihar, U.P., N.W.F.P. and Punjab. Burrows reported that 'trouble in South East Bengal is not a general rising of Muslims against Hindus but activity (apparently organised) of a body of hooligans who have exploited existing communal feelings.' The League administration showed blatant bias: of the 1074 arrested only 50 were in jail by April 1947.³ In Punjab, a League campaign of civil disobedience brought down the Khizar ministry. Next day, a provocative Sikh demonstration in front of the Assembly chamber in Lahore, with Tara Singh brandishing a sword, and raising the slogan 'Raj Karega Khalga', was followed by large stale riots in Lahore, Amritsar, Multan, Attock and Rawalpindi. However, the British made no efforts to avert or control this awesome human tragedy. The Interim Government of Nehru found itself presiding helplessly over this growing communal inferno. Despite the title, it was really little more than a continuation of the old Executive Council of the Viceroy. Entry of the League in the Interim Government had brought all functioning to a standstill. The Congress leaders

¹. Shiva, Rao, B.(ed.); The Framing of India's Constitution, p. 359.

². Mansergh, N. (ed.), Transfer of Power, Vol.111, p.297-300.

³. Ibid, pp. 725-53.

lost their patience and threatened to resign from the Government.

In these deplorable conditions Prime Minister Attlee announced⁴ on Feb. 20, 1947, that power would be transferred to Indian hands 'by a date not later than June 1948'. Lord wave 11 was to be succeeded by Admiral Viscount Mountbatten. The announcement led to an intensification of Muslim League Policy and riots developed into organised largescale violent attempts to overpower provincial governments.

Mountbatten arrived in Delhi on March 22, and was sworn in on March 24, 1947. Nehru was his first official visitor,⁵ who pointed out that he was not accepted by the Muslim league the leader of the Interim Government. He stated that Wavell had blundered in inviting the League into the Constituent Assembly rather he should have waited for them to ask to be brought in. He said⁶ that the root cause of Jinnah's success and popularity was due to his negative attitude and policies. He avoided taking any positive action and refused to answer questions which might split his followers. Nehru believed that the promoters of Pakistan would realise their mistake soon. Breaking away from the rest of the country would not help them.

However, communal riots, combined with the evident unworkability of the Congress-League coalition at the centre, compelled many by this time to think in terms of accepting what had been unthinkable so far - a partition. The most insistent demands for this surgical operation had now started coming from Hindu and Sikh communalist groups in Bengal and Punjab, alarmed by the prospect of compulsory grouping into Muslim dominated sections which might very well later form themselves into Pakistan.⁷ Jinnah went on advocating that he would have Pakistan and nothing else. Kriplani informed Mountbatten: 'Rather than have a battle we shall let them have their Pakistan provided you will allow Punjab and Bengal to be partitioned in a fair manner.'⁸

In the course of his talks with the prominent leaders especially with Jinnah and his colleagues it became absolutely clear to Mountbatten that the prospect of Congress and League coming together was even more remote than it had even been. To the Congressmen, it was a choice between Pakistan and chaos. The idea of division, the

⁴. Transfer of Power, Vol. X, p. 12.

⁵. Mansergh and Penderel Moon (eds.); Transfer of Power, Vol. IX, p. 438. 58.

⁶. Mosley, Leonard, The last Days of British Raj, pp.100-101.

⁷. Sarkar, Dr. sumit, Modern India, p. 436.

⁸. Hodson, H.V., The Great Divide, p. 236.



lesser evil, *was* considered an inevitability. Gandhi was still in favour of united India, but he now departed into shadows.⁹ Nehru said, 'We are passionately attached to the idea of a united India but we have accepted the partition of India. In order to give effect to this partition every effort should be made to meet the wishes and the interests of the people effected by it.....Recent events have made administrative division of both Punjab and Bengal an obvious and urgent necessity.'¹⁰ Nehru himself witnessed the ghastly tragedy, the sight of brutality, communal riots in March and April in Punjab which caused the death of thousands of innocent people. India was rapidly heading towards bloodshed, atred and disaster and Nehru was 'consumed with a sense of hopelessness in the face of it.'

The Rajputs of Kashmir or Jodhpur and the Nawabs of Bengal and Hyderabad wanted to keep their estates. The Akalis demanded Khalistan whereas the Pathans of N.W.F.P. sought independence in preference to merger with Pakistan. Suhrawardy set up a momentum of an independent Bengal. In the chaos of competing ambitions everyone kept their demand high.

Sardar Patél had accepted the ideal of Partition in Jan 1947. much before Nehru did. V.P. Menon¹¹, the Reforms Commissioner had convinced him that a United India was an illusion, that Tinnah would never agree to anything except Pakistan and that it was better to save what could be saved of India rather than gravitate towards civil war. Menons view: keep the predominantly non-Muslim parts of Punjab, Bengal and Assain, accept dominion status in the transition phase before a' Constituent *Assembly* could produce the basis for full freedom, deal with the princes without British interference and take over full power as soon as feasible.¹² After *Patel's* broad concurrence, Menon forwarded the plan to Pathick Lawrence with Wavell's permission. Mountbatten saw this plan before he left London for India.

The Mountbattens took a short trip to the hills of Simla in the first week of May. Nehru alongwith Indira and Krishna Menon, joined them as their personal guests on May 8, and were put up at the Viceroy Regal Lodge. On May 2, Lord Ismay and Sir George Abell flew to London with 'Mountbatten's First Draft Plan' for the transfer of

⁹. Gopal, S.; Jawaharlal Nehru A Bibliography, Vol.p.343.

¹⁰. The Transfer of Power, Vol. X, p. 519.

¹¹. Menon, V.P.; Transfer of Power in India, pp. 353-57.

¹². Menon, V.P.; Transfer of Power in India, pp. 353-57.



power to obtain the final approval of the British Cabinet. Mountbatten wanted this by 10 May, so that he could put in a week's preparation; he had marked out May 17, for separate meetings with the princes and the leaders of the political parties, during which he would reveal his plan. If the politicians did not agree, and could not offer an alternative, Mountbatten had decided he would hand over power on the basis of this plan and quit by May 10. Word came from London that the Cabinet had approved the Plan.¹³

On the evening of May 10, in an after dinner chat, Mountbatten showed this Plan to Nehru as 'an act of friendship'. According to this plan, the provinces would initially become successor *states* and inevitably this would influence the negotiating powers of particularly the larger princely states which in any case would have the right to strike - deals with the centre before integrating with the Union. The Government in Delhi would be weak, with power being transferred to so many different points in the country, it was difficult to see how an effectual and contradiction ridden central government could prevent the civil wars and chaos that would break India into chunks, large and small. At least a dozen independent nations would emerge at the very minimum through this plan.¹⁴

Nehru read the document only when he returned to his bedroom. He was horrified. Shaking with rage he was unable to compose himself. He felt cheated¹⁵ So far, the British had only discussed with him Menon's Plan which had Patel's approval. That very morning, Nehru had accepted transfer of power on the basis of dominion status, and though he claimed that the only real difficulty would be in regard to Pakistan, he said it was now clear that Pakistan would have to be conceded.¹⁶ Mountbatten had then invited him to the round table conference on May 17 along with Sardar Patel, Jinnah, Liaquat Ali and Sardar Baldev Singh.

The betrayal shook Nehru who rushed a 'personal and secret' letter to Mountbatten. The proposals, he said, had 'produced a divesting effect upon me. The whole approach was completely different from what ours had been and the picture of India that emerged frightened me... a picture of fragmentation and conflict and disorder, and unhappily also of a worsening of relations between India and Britain... (I could not

¹³. Menon, V.P.; The Transfer of Power in India, pp. 353-57.

¹⁴. Akbar, M.J.; Nehru: Making of India, Quoted in India Today, Nov. 1-15, 1988, p.151.

¹⁵. Mosley Leonard; The last Days of British Raj, p. 135.

¹⁶. Transfer of Power, Vol. X, p. 174.



wait to) give you some indication of how upset I have been by these proposals which I am convinced, will be resented and bitterly disliked by all over the country.’¹⁷ He sent a long not in which he charged London with completely abandoning every previous decision and pledge, of virtually scrapping the Constituent Assembly, of vitiating the central authority which could protect the nation and of engineering the Balkanization of India through successor states which would conclude treaties with Delhi on one side and HMG on the other, breeding a rash of ulsters on Indian soil. Nehru’s violent opposition shook Mountbatten and the May 17 conference was postponed to June 2. Menon’s plan was shown to the leaders on 16 May. Jinnah and Liaquat Although agreed to the Plan but refused to sign it whereas Nehru and Patel accepted it. Nehru declared that with great regret and in considerable agony of spirit, he and the Congress had agreed to the principle of partition of India because they earnestly desired a peaceful settlement of the country’s problems and the least compulsion on any group or area. He added that he and the Congress always stood for United India and endeavoured for it for the greater part of their lives.¹⁸

Mountbatten left for London on 18 May to discuss the plan with the British Cabinet. The Cabinet gave their approval to the plan. Mountbatten returned to India on 31 May and decided to present his plan to the Indian leaders on 2 June. Soon after the Viceroy’s meeting (on June 2 and 3) with the party leaders, the viceroy communicated to the Secretary of State the positive assertion given by Nehru, Jinnah and Baldev Singh in reox to the acceptance of the plan. Attlee announced the plan in the House of Commons on June 3 which came to be known as ‘The June 3 Plan’ According to the Plan :

1. The Provincial legislatures of Sind and Baluchistan with the exception of European members would decide for their respective provinces as to which of the constituent assemblies they would Join.
2. There would be a referendum in the Frontier Province and in the district of Sylhet.
3. The provincial legislatures of Bengal and the Pubjab would meet in two parts, one representing Muslim majority districts and the other non-Muslim majority districts. Both these parts would separately decide which constituent assembly they would join.

In the event of partition being decided upon by the provincial legislatures)

¹⁷. Transfer of Power, Vol. x, pp. 756-7.

¹⁸. Transfer of Power, Vol. X, p. 870.



negotiations respecting defence, finance, communication and other matters would be undertaken between the two respective governments.

The AICC passed a resolution accepting the June 3 plan on June 14, Azad expressing the view that¹⁹ the choice before the Congress was not which plan to accept and which to reject, but whether the present state of indecision and drift should continue. Taking into consideration all the factors, the working Committee had come to the conclusion that an immediate settlement was urgently required. The AICC resolution was moved by Govind Ballabh Pant. The North West Frontier Province, the Muslim majority parts of Punjab and Bengal, Sind and Baluchistan all decided for a separate constituent Assembly. Sylhet, too decided to amalgamate with Eastern Bengal. India was thus partitioned and two countries of India and Pakistan came into being. On July, 2, 1947 the Draft of the Indian Independence Bill implementing the political settlement in accordance with and conformity to the announcement of June 3 was circulated to the leaders of the Congress and the Muslim League for their consideration. The Bill was introduced in Parliament on July 5 and after having passed through both the houses, it received the Royal assent on July 18, to become operative on August, 14, 1947. The New Dominions of India and Pakistan came into being on August 15, 1947 and thus, British rule over India came to an end. It ended the chapter which began with the battle of Plassey if not with the granting of the charter to the East India Company by Queen Elizabeth.

For two generations, the major part of the national energy of India was devoted to a struggle against the British. British rule had meant for India not only 'political enslavement and economic exploitation' but above all 'spiritual emasculation'. Pandit Nehru expressed the view that 'freedom of India was freedom from imperialism itself.'²⁰

¹⁹. Menon, V.P.; *The Transfer of Power in India*, p. 385. 66.

²⁰. Bombay Chronicle, Aug 11, 1947, Quoted in Anita Singh *The Role of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in the transfer of Power*, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, B.H.U., p. 296.