

## **Violence in Subcontinent: A Study of the Last British Viceroyalty in India, 1947**

Benish Khan<sup>1</sup>, Manzoor Ahmed Kanrani<sup>2</sup> and Bashir Ahmed Jatoi<sup>3\*</sup>

### **Abstract**

*On 15 August 1947 India had been divided into two newly born States India and Pakistan and the British ruled in India came to end. It also brought a massacre in different areas of subcontinent particularly Punjab suffered a lot. The violence, riots and force migration were the cost that people paid on the name of independence. Million were uprooted and thousands were brutally killed and the violence continued many days. Academic scholars focused on violence, riots and women abduction in Punjab and Sikhs and Muslims had been blamed for this. If the Mountbatten would have played his role positively then situation could be changed or the violence could be minimized. However, there are different interpretations and approaches on violence in sub-continent at the time of independence. Therefore, the present paper deals with the Pakistani historian's opinions regarding Mountbatten's actions on the division of Sub-Continent. An effort will be made in this paper to reveal the role played by the last British leadership in their last viceroyalty during the 'violence of 1947'. This paper will study and examine the works of Pakistani historians on the Partition that how they see this 'Event' of partition and role of Mountbatten. Moreover, the research would try to fill the research gap in our prevailing historical writings and would benefit in studying Mountbatten's (Leadership).*

**Keywords:** Mountbatten; Jinnah; Violence; Pakistan; Riots; Sub-continent.

### **1. Introduction**

South Asian history has gone through many political, religious and social changes. This soil has constantly welcomed changes and proved ripe for it. Politically, one dynasty or empire replaced the other, history shows that starting from Gupta and Aryans, Indians also experienced Muslim rule during Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Dynasty which was replaced by British. However, Socially Indians had never gone through such fury, brutalization and aggression for each other which they had on the British 'departure'. As at that time, world scenario changed after the Second World-War. It can be easily understood by the evidences available that British had to vacate India now, sooner or later. However, it became the Government policy to hail British retreat as a great achievement and work in itself (Robert, 1991). On the other hand, partition came up with hundreds of thousands deaths and more than one million refugees suffered anarchy and chaos due to the mass migration.

---

<sup>1</sup> Govt. Degree College, Arifwala & University of Punjab, Lahore

<sup>2</sup> Government of Sindh

<sup>3</sup> Department of History, University of Sindh, Jamshoro

\*)Corresponding Author.

Email: [jatoibashir@usindh.edu.pk](mailto:jatoibashir@usindh.edu.pk)

Preliminary studies suggest that around two million people faced death due to malnutrition, slaughters, and contagious afflictions (Butalia, 2000). The violence caused by partition lingered on in future and resulted in unresolved security dilemmas between the Indian communities (Kaufmann, 1998).

In this regard, many studies have been done by the renowned scholars and historians on the partition of Indian-Subcontinent from almost all perspectives even on the genocide that took place during the partition. However, there is an historical silence about the role played by the “leadership” for avoiding or stopping the violence as they had the actual role to play for “partitioning” the Indian-Subcontinent. The leaders in India manipulated the masses’ aspirations and fears by their self-interests (Hassan, 1991). Mountbatten was resolute that history should record his accomplishments his central role in excessive occasions must be predictable. In obsessive attempt to rewrite history always with a view for giving himself a more prominent role, Mountbatten regularly claimed to remember conversations word for word which had taken place at twenty places twenty years before and of which he had made no contemporary notes. Many historians state about this attitude of Mountbatten, it was all due to his royal background and his military achievements. However, after going through the Indian partition documents, one can argue that Mountbatten knew about his mistakes and follies which he had made while transferring the powers to Indians. That is why he always dictated his versions of events so that nobody can blame him while finding no record for his mistakes rather they should just know Mountbatten “a hero”. Once he wrote to his Chief Civil Affairs Officer, “You and I at minimum have the contentment when history comes to be inscribed in a few years’ time, of being demonstrated categorically right” (Tinker, 1997). Nonetheless, the fact is that his form of these occasions did not continuously agree with the evidence. Likewise, Ziegler’s loyalty to Mountbatten cannot be questioned, even though he couldn’t resist writing,

*“.. like everything else about Mountbatten, his accountabilities were on the grandest scale. His arrogance, though naïve, was outrageous, his ambitions uncontrolled. The reality in his indicators was speedily changed from what it was to what it should have been. He wanted to rewrite history with cavalier insignificance to the facts to amplify his own successes. There was a period when I became so enraged by what I began to feel was his willpower to deceive me that I found it essential to place on my desk a notice saying: Remember, in spite of everything, he was a great man (Seervai, 2005).*

Besides, coming especially to the disturbances created by the partition of India, Mountbatten’s role in it can never be negated, as he had the ‘freedom’ to do whatever he wanted to (Seervai, 2005). He arrived at India-Subcontinent in March 1947, as the last Viceroy. He came up with a mission to wind up the

British Raj latest by June 1948. On his arrival, instead of thinking about the severity of political and social situation in India “He was chiefly concerned with what he should wear on arrival” (Wolpert, 2009). On the other hand, it seems through his decisions and actions that rather than damping violence, conflicts and massacres he actually helped causing them. Mountbatten did want to secure His Majesty’s Government from any kind of blame yet his own actions couldn’t fulfill his desires.

Likewise, the outcome was one of the wickedest chapters of racial or communal viciousness ever seen by the South Asian history. As accurately millions of people left homes for their newly distinct homelands provoked on their way by manslaughter, rape, stabbing and theft (Hayden, 1996). On the other hand, the leader of the time the Viceroy, at the second staff meeting declared himself “very much in favor of Honors on a considerable scale being granted to members of Princely families.” He instructed Campbell-Johnson “to ensure that all issues of the court circular were in future rendered to him, through the personal secretary, for approval’ (Robert, 1991). Having concern for the common people who were suffering with blood shed were not his state of affair, yet.

Moreover, Mountbatten believed that he had done succeeded in all the undertakings in an exemplary manner; talent as naval commander; strategic planner and so the Viceroy, ordered terminate the Raj. He not only believed this but said so frequently, convincing himself and he hoped posterity that he was a truly great and heroic figure (James, 1997).

## **2. Riots, Massacres and State Actors**

Spreading speedy speculations, British leadership in India evoked fear conflicts and controversies, i.e. English masters announced June 1948 as the latest day for the transfer of power. Though British announced that power will be transferred soon yet they still confused the already disturbed situation. As nobody among Indians knew that how, where and when exactly he had been able to live independently even as late as May 15 1947, three months before the event uncertainty reigned. Whether the Subcontinent partitioned or not, where the lines would be drawn, whether they would be or not? If it was, what would then happen to the minorities left on either side? Nobody knew that the schedule would change soon (Bhattacharjea, 1997).

The leader (Mountbatten) had no interest to give any kind of practical assurance or confidence to the people for removing their doubts and in avoiding the disturbances or maintaining the peace (Bhattacharjea, 1997). Massacres, riots and killings of innocent people by the extremist elements among different communities were on their way, showing anger and conflicts among them. Instead of drawing some schemes to avoid ferocity of the extremist groups alternative ways to keep country united or to run as faster as British could were mooted in the meetings arranged by Mountbatten. One man’s personal ambitions and carelessness towards deciding the fate of 400

million people resulted in chaos, anarchy, destruction and loss of identities (Robert, 1991).

This will not be an amiss to say that communal violence had been expected for several years. Police and military intelligence had monitored the stockpiling of weaponry mostly bladed and the mushrooming of political armies which were, in every respect the counterpart of Hitler's brown shirts. The rape, killings and arson began in Punjab on 04 March and were at first concentrated in towns and cities with attacks on Non-Muslims in Amritsar, Rawalpindi, Lahore, Multan, Sialkot and Jalandhar. Afterwards all these murder cases in gangs spread out into countryside. The Governor of Punjab, Jenkins was also well aware of the entire situation before Mountbatten's arrival in India; he did inform the last viceroy time to time about gravity of the situation. He writes in his daily record diary that during March casualties figures for Punjab were 5000 killed in cities and towns, 520 in rural areas. About 1,000 more people had been seriously injured in the recent Punjab riots against Non-Muslims. "Deputy Commissioner Rawalpindi believed that in his district alone there may be 4,000 casualties including killed, injured and missing persons, feeling among the communities is very bad indeed, he added" (Wolpert, 2009).

Consequently, Mountbatten accompanied Evan Jenkins for his visit to troubled districts seeing for himself the destruction and hearing how resolute officers in command of small units had been able to scatter the mobs and to what extent the news of violence is true. Two Congressmen Patel and Sardar Baldev Singh also toured the areas and encountered some Hindus setting fire to a village. The Viceroy hoped that such situations inject them with a sense of urgency and make them amenable to his plan for partition (James, 1997). Yet, the person who claimed to be as a 'sagacious man' made unforgettable follies in the history. To handle the disturbances and conflicts among the masses he passed a judgment for which history finds no answer he said, 'speed of transfer might avoid the troubles' (Robert, 1991).

So far even Jenkins now knew that the nature of these disturbances was political (Robert, 1991) and can be solved through political leadership and political wisdom. Jenkins argued once that "The massacre had been conducted in the name of the Muslims League, and senior Military Officers thought that it had been carefully planned and organized. Non-Muslims with some justice now regarded the Muslims as little better than animals.....I said that the troubles of the Muslim League were due to folly and bad leadership" (Wolpert, 2009).

However, the leader who had to show political wisdom for sorting out these issues was busy with other things. The Punjab and Bengal imbroglio was an infuriating disruption for Mountbatten who was exclusively worried with the enactment of his plans before the ten weeks deadline. Watching Mountbatten at work during this period Shahid Hamid observed: 'He believes in giving no time to others to think, analyze or absorb' (Wolpert, 2009). Internal security deliberations were short on the Viceregal list of significances.

Consequently, which meant that Punjabis are free to rape, kill burn and steel. Swift surgery was the only alternative to prolong blood-letting or so it seemed from the perspectives of Delhi and Simla. Mountbatten always instructed not to let causalities come in the way of achieving the task (Bhattacharjea, 1997). If leader is doing nothing what would be the condition for the common men? The answer is simple and clear that is, to do whatever you want because the leader is doing whatever does he desire.

In addition, Mountbatten was the most powerful, among all the British Viceroy in India (as he himself claimed), then how is it possible that he was unaware about the killings? Evidences show that a conference on 14/15 May 1947 was held to discuss the 'new lines'. Mountbatten later claimed that no one anticipated that the butcheries in the Punjab would take a procedure they did are blasted by the cautions given before and during that meeting by Sir Evan Jenkins (If so was the case, then how historians got aware about almost accurate numbers of the brutal killings, massacres, rapes and the numbers of missing persons? In fact, it was a mere excuse to run from India as fast as possible). Jenkins informed that divider of his domain would reason 'an instant blow-up', and on the day before the conference he met the three senior associates of the Viceregal staff, Ismay, the chief of Staff, Sir Eric Mievile, the Principal secretary and George Abell, The Private Secretary, to notify that partition would mean irreversible losses (Robert, 1991). Lord Mountbatten however, did not pay heed to it and was little impressed by the opinions of the Governor of Punjab and Bengal. By neglecting these warnings and not taking serious actions upon them, Mountbatten as the leader of the time was directly responsible.

Respectively, Mountbatten asserted that he distinguished the Indian condition better than those who consumed their complete breath in India. Perhaps that is why another blunder was done by him; the delaying of 'Boundary Awards'. Mountbatten by doing such actions was irredeemably disloyal to his job that is, 'leadership'. As Awards were ready by 12 August but Mountbatten announced them after Independence, so that obligation should not descent on the British (Chandra, 1988). Mountbatten betrayed by suppressing the Radcliff Boundary awards, by breaking the promise he had made to Indian leaders that he would try and secure as early a publication of the award as was possible. It is difficult to believe that a Cabinet (HMG) who claimed to retain its sense of justice, would have permitted Mountbatten take no action for five days and take no steps to stop murder, injury, massacre and destruction of Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus and take no actions to protect destitute Muslims and Hindus in their Mass Migrations. In fact, Mountbatten knew that serious disorders were taking place in Punjab and Bengal even as Radcliff was getting the Punjab Award ready. Ayesha Jalal observes his actions like this;

*“While Punjab was struggled and turned under the influence of choices taken in detached places, Mountbatten boldly requested credit for having proficient, in less than two and a half months, one of the*

*'greatest administrative procedures in history'. On behalf of the Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs who were slaughtered in their hundreds of thousands, and the refugees who in their millions stumbled fearfully across the frontier of the two states, the historian has a duty to challenge Mountbatten's contention and ask whether this 'great operation' was not in fact an ignominious scuttle enabling the British to extricate themselves from the awkward responsibility of presiding over India's communal madness" (Jalal, 2014).*

Azad in his autobiography states that I requested to Mountbatten to defer the partition plan for a year or two.... he further adds:

*"I also asked Lord Mountbatten to take into consideration the likely consequences of the partition of the country. Even without partition, there had been riots in Bihar, Bombay, Calcutta, Noakhali and Punjab..... If the country was divided in such an atmosphere, there would be rivers of blood flowing in different parts of the country and the British would be responsible for the carnage" (Azad, 1959).*

Without a moment hesitation Lord Mountbatten replied,

*"At least on this one issue I can give you 'Complete Assurance' I shall see it that there is no blood shed and riots. I am a soldier not a civilian. Once partition is accepted in principle, I shall issue orders to see that there is no communal disturbance in the country" (Azad, 1959).*

Though not directly but indirectly, by giving "Complete Assurance" in the above statement Mountbatten proves that if anything went wrong, he would be responsible for it. Since the border had been drawn and announced beforehand, or had Mountbatten showed some patience to wait for a year, (as Azad requesting in the above statement), then those tiresome to reach recognized when they would be safe, at least from communal horror. Punjab and Bengal awards were exposed later after partition announced. Here, Mountbatten worked not in a hurry. The point where he should have shown hurried and quick action he used delayed tactics.

### **3. Lord Mountbatten and Partition of India**

When British had to enter into the Empire they examined the things for almost more than 100 years, on the other hand when they had to quit they did not wait even for six months or so. The last Viceroy was in much hurry that he rolled up all the things in no time and had his project done from 3 June to August 15. As Andrew Robert in *Eminent Churchillian* states that, Mountbatten adored speed throughout his life (Robert, 1991). As a result he couldn't resist going against his nature, showed full speed and hurry for transferring the power. The idea of reasonable degree of comfort never entered his head. Speed was all that mattered. Afterward 250 years of power and duty, Mountbatten provided

British a time of just seventy-three days to get out (Robert, 1991). He not only mishandled the things but also presented rapidity and impulsiveness for completing the tasks. As it is said “haste makes wastes”. Mountbatten’s hastiness wasted all the independence efforts of the Indians leaders.

Similarly the strong element of panic in Mountbatten’s dash to formulate a second plan, he wanted to quite India as soon as possible. One can assume that Mountbatten possibly thought, ‘Run as fast as you can otherwise you (The British Government) would also be caught by these Indians and will find no escape.’ He talked to himself and Cabinet into believing that any delay would lead them being overtaken, and swamped by events which were beyond their control (James, 1997). The Government by their 14 months’ time limit put an end to all predictions of harmony between Indians. How can one presume that the thousand year gulf which stretches between Muslims and Hindus will be bridged in 14 months? Churchill called off this time limit as a “kind of guillotine” planned to cut separately all the long united services and to section, not just partition, all of India. How can we walk off India in 14 months and leave behind us a war between 90 million Muslims and 200 million castes Hindus? Will it not be a terrible disgrace to our name and record if, after our 14 months ‘time limit’ we allow one fifth of the population of the globe to fall into chaos and carnage? Would it not be a world crime that would stain our good name forever? Anyhow, after all these stunning and alarming statements the Mountbatten’s Procedure was put on continuity as a premium under continues threat of mounting communal violence.

Likewise, Anderson, Bengal Governor cautioned that devastation would face whole Indian sections and societies if this speedy process were not reviewed and its initial terminal date strapped back. But his intelligent cautions fell on deaf ears. Attlee had given Mountbatten his marching orders, and the new Viceroy was so eager to get on with the job that he would cut their all too brief allotment of time in half (Wolpert, 2009).

Moreover, amongst his closest advisers Mountbatten did not spell out the reason that he was later to present for quitting India in August 1947 rather than on the original date of June 1948 namely that the level of communal violence meant that it was vital to transfer power hurriedly before catastrophe overtook British India altogether. It would not have convinced the experienced public servants who knew that an over-hasty withdrawal would inevitably lead to more rather than fewer deaths (Robert, 1991). If the British Government did not replace Mountbatten with Lord Wavell, the violence in Punjab and Bengal could be controlled or minimize. Wavell had a plan for extraction that was measured to be inexperienced and pessimistic, at the time. It might well have resulted in far less loss of life than did Mountbatten’s. It envisioned an immediate transfer of military forces to the borderline Muslim areas in the northern provinces of the country with a simultaneous transfer to the Congress Party in the predominantly Hindu provinces. Attlee, at that time saw the plan as an ‘evidence of decline in British power and resolution.’ On 17 December 1946, the King has recorded in his diary that the Prime Minister felt the

Wavell plan 'savors too much of the military defeat and does not realize that it is a political problem and not a military one. Attlee doubts whether he has the finesse to negotiate the next step.' When military and security problems inevitably arose for Mountbatten's political 'finessing', the British soon found that they had been so concerned about saving face but they could no longer save lives.

In addition, there was only one person who had learnt a lesson from Great Killings. This was Lord Wavell. Towards the last eighteen months he spend his energies for brining Congress and Muslims League together (Bernard, 2001), as he knew that this situation can only be solved through strong leadership and not by making political follies and hastiness. On the other hand, Attlee was the Deputy Prime Minister in Churchill's war-time coalition, but he was never helpful to Wavell over India (Seervai, 2005). Attlee neither accepted Wavell's suggestions at any cost, nor did he pay heed to his proposals. He was never satisfied that the situation in India was as acute as he had been suggested by Wavell (Tinker, 1997). Later on Attlee himself was forced to accept the need for a final date, because he could not deny more, the truth of Wavell's assessment that an irreversible decline of Government authority had taken place (Chandra, 1988). They could dismiss the viceroy for being pessimistic whom they did but they could not dismiss the truth of what he said.

On the other hand Attlee's favorite Mountbatten never had any experience of the administration of India. As one of the leading Partition historian argues that:

*To both Mountbatten and Ismay Hindu-Muslim conflict looked extremely dangerous and ugly. They probably did not think, as a Deputy Commissioner or a Provincial Home Secretary would have done, that law and order could be brought about by using extremely ruthless and drastic methods. Instead of taking the view that power should be transferred only after law and order had been brought about, they thought the situation might deteriorate into anarchy for which British would be blamed (Robert, 1991).*

#### **4. Conclusion**

The myth that British wound up the Indian Empire in an orderly and honorable way, fulfilling the mission of trusteeship to the letter, has largely endured to this day. Speculations along these lines are hard to sustain, for Mountbatten was basically a man of action relatively than thought (James, 1997). In India he ensued on a supposition that whenever faced with the crisis it was constantly better to do something rather than plan, wait or see. He was the first Viceroy who attached a press attaché, whose task was to make sure that the Raj ended with a display of favorable publicity.

This partition and Mountbatten, as against his desires, would always be remembered in terms of violence, massacres and rapes, dishonor and blaming one community to the other, no matter if he is Hindu, Muslim or a Sikh. If the



leader wanted to control the circumstances and used the 'force' which he claimed (Seervai, 2005) to and situation could be made in the favor of Humanity, rather than British, Muslim or Hindus.

This will not be an amiss to say that the Labor Government at London herself helped a lot Mountbatten doing hurry. When Newspaper reported outbreaks of violence in Lahore and Amritsar, official assistances from London recommended that it was the Indian Leaders who were yet to regulate their future (Bhattacharjea, 1997). Nobody could ask the British authorities that if local leaders are playing political tactics then where their (British) political authority has been vanished? Do not they have any kind of power to pull the grab of violence out? Many among the victims of violence in partition never reached their destinations on either side of the new frontier. Trains were found standing in the middle of nowhere. As today, the two nations are standing in the middle of nowhere.

Likewise, leadership plays a pivotal role in saving the sinking boat of any nation. As far as the Genocide history of Subcontinent is concerned, there is a huge vacuum of leadership role. Indeed, looting plundering and killing was the ultimate outcome of fragile leadership and their worthless decisions. Mountbatten is one of such leader in words who is mainly responsible for disturbances on both sides of India and Pakistan. He was not the man of vision. His objective was to make himself a hero in the history without having the qualities of a genuine leader. He was a self-proclaimed charismatic leader. On the other hand, it may reasonably be asked why Britain did not do more to solve the problems they passed on to independent India after taking charge for so long. There is no answer except that the leadership is responsible for all the chaos and butchery nobody else.

## References

- Ahmed, I. (2012).** *The Punjab bloodied, partitioned and cleansed: Unravelling the 1947 tragedy through secret British reports and first-person accounts*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Azad, M. A. K. (1988).** *India Wins Freedom*, New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Bernard, J. A. (2001).** *From Raj to the Republic: a political history of India, 1935-2000*. New Delhi: Har Anand Publications.
- Bhattacharjea, A. (1997).** *Countdown to Partition: The Final Days*, New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Butalia, U. (2000).** *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Chandra, B. (1988).** *Aditya Mukherjee and others, India's Struggle for Independence 1857-1947*, New York: Penguin Books.
- Hajar, N. (2015).** *Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacy of India's Partition*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.
- Hassan, M. (1991).** *Nationalism and Communal politics in India 1885-1930*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.

- Hayden, R. M. (1996).** Schindler's Fate: Genocide, Ethnic Cleansing and Population Transfers, *Slavic Reviews*, 55(4), 727-748.
- Jalal, A. (2014).** *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- James, L. (1997).** *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India*, Great Britain: ABACUS Publishers.
- Kaufmann, C. D. (1998).** When All Else Fails: Ethnic Population Transfer and Partitions in the Twentieth Century, *International Security*. 23(2), 120-156
- Khan, Y. (2017).** *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, London: Yale University.
- Robert, A. (1991).** *Eminent Churchillian*, London: Orian Publishers.
- Seervai, H. M. (2005).** *Partition of India: Legend and Reality*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tinker, H. (1997).** *Viceroy: Curzon to Mountbatten*, Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Wolpert, S. (2009).** *Shameful Flight: The Last Years of the British Empire in India*, USA: Oxford University Press.