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Mountbatten and the Transfer of Power (June 3, 1947-August 15, 1947): A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

The British had ruled India for more than a century, but World War II culminated in the weakening of the British Empire worldwide. Thus, it became difficult for them to maintain their domination over a unified India. Lord Mountbatten was sent as the last viceroy of India for a smooth transfer of power. The partition of India was finally decided on 3rd June 1947, and power was transferred on 15th August 1947 to the two dominions of India and Pakistan. However, the British Raj ended in India, and a hasty partition led to large-scale bloodshed of innocent lives. This partition widened the gulf between the two communities, Muslims and Hindus. It happened because of an unplanned partition. Mountbatten was expected to assume the role of an unbiased and just arbiter overseeing the partition of the Civil Service and especially the Army between India and Pakistan. He was supposed to make this process smooth. However, he miserably failed to perform this task and pushed both communities into a quagmire of hatred and enmity. Moreover, this responsibility also lay on the Congress leaders, who failed to perform their duties to curb the violence and ensure the safety of innocent lives during one of the most significant human migrations in recorded history.

Keywords: Dominions; Quagmire; Partition; Bloodshed; British Empire; Subcontinent.

1. Introduction

The partition of unified India was a landmark event in the history of the sub-continent. The British had ruled India artfully for more than a century as their colony. However, World War II culminated in the weakening of the British Empire worldwide, and thus it became increasingly difficult for them to maintain their domination over unified India (Dar, 2014a). The war dealt a fatal blow to their economic and military power, which was the cornerstone of British supremacy. Further, indigenous

Indian independence movements gained momentum, which was further exacerbated by communal violence. The situation worsened after the Direct Action Day on August 16, 1946, which resulted in the colossal loss of innocent human lives in the ensuing communal riots of Bengal (Krishan, 1983). The same fire of hatred then engulfed various other parts of the country. This episode compelled the British to announce the fateful date of the transfer of power. Therefore, on February 20, 1947, British Prime Minister Clement Atlee announced that the government had decided “to take necessary steps to effect the transfer of power to responsible Indian hands by a date not later than June 1947” (Cline-Cole & Madge, 2017). This gave the British authorities a time frame of a mere fifteen months to resolve the political, administrative, and constitutional issues associated with the transfer of power against a backdrop of festering communal divide in India (Ali, 1967).

The daunting task that lay ahead of the decision to transfer power was its administrative implementation. The first practical step, in this regard, was the appointment of Lord Mountbatten as the viceroy of India. The British government was optimistic that the fresh perspective of Mountbatten would be able to bring about a compromise between Congress and the Muslim League and break the deadlock between them, which Lord Wavell had failed to do.

Mountbatten arrived in India on 22nd March to assume the charge as India's thirty-fourth and last viceroy. The partition of the sub-continent, initially, was not a viable option for the British. Therefore, Mountbatten was instructed by Atlee to try his utmost to convince both the Congress and the Muslim League to accept the Cabinet Mission Plan, which entailed the controversy of a united India. The British wanted to safeguard their future strategic interests in this very region. They planned an independent India with the commonwealth dominion status. This project would have ensured the continuity of the combined Indian Army, which in turn would augment the British hegemony in the Indian Ocean (Ali, 2012).

Promptly after taking charge of the viceroy, Mountbatten held meetings with the Indian leaders. Atlee had directed him to chart down the steps for a unified India by October 1, 1947. However, Mountbatten, after meeting with Jinnah, came to the bitter realisation that the Muslim League would never give up on its demand for the creation of Pakistan. Within a short span of a mere three weeks, he was convinced that partition might prove to be the only alternative (Dar, 2014a). Furthermore, a reconnaissance of the situation on the ground made him aware of the gravity of impending communal violence, and the chances were that things would spiral out of control. Mountbatten was of the firm opinion that to preserve a unified India, the independence movement on communal lines had to be crushed with an iron hand. It was in this milieu, and having met the Indian leaders, he regarded Nehru as the most sincere and sensible person in his approach towards the Indian dilemma. At the same time, Jinnah was too stubborn, and Gandhi was an idealist (Ali, 2012).

This proved to be a turning point in Mountbatten's approach towards a unified India, and he came up with his “Plan Balkan”, wherein every province or sub-province (in the cases of Bengal and Punjab) would opt to join the existing constituent assembly, group to form a new one, or stand independent from either (Menon, 1968). During the discussions that were pursued, Congress was adamant that if the Muslim League's demand for the partition of India on communal lines was to be admitted, then Bengal and Punjab ought to be divided communally on the same logic. Even this was substantiated by Gandhi as well. He called the partition of Bengal and Punjab (Wolpert, 2001). Ironically, Mountbatten turned the tables on Jinnah by agreeing with Congress's demand to divide Punjab and Bengal. (Jalal, 1994) Jinnah strongly protested this idea, but Mountbatten went ahead with his self-perceived ingenious idea. Secondly, Mountbatten, in compliance with Congress, pushed back the date of the transfer of power on the condition that Congress would consent to join the

Commonwealth (Chandra et al., 2016). The antedating of the partition along with the partition of Punjab and Bengal was orchestrated to force Jinnah to reject the plan (Talbot, 1984).

2. Main Provisions of the Plan

Despite fierce opposition from the Muslim League, Mountbatten presented the plan to the British Government, stating that it represented the maximum degree of agreement that could have been secured. When Mountbatten returned from London on 31st May 1947 after spending two weeks, he had been successful in ascertaining the consent of the cabinet for his partition plan (Philips, 1986). On 2nd June, Mountbatten presented his plan to the top tier of Congress and Muslim League leadership in a meeting. Nehru reluctantly accepted the plan. Jinnah wanted the final decision regarding the acceptance of the plan to be taken by the Muslim League. He asked Mountbatten to give him more time so that he could consult with his party, but the latter, who were in a 'rush', refused. Thus, Jinnah only nodded to his plan with a slight degree of acceptance because he knew that his refusal would leave the Muslims at the mercy of Congress after the British departure. On the very next day, Mountbatten, in a broadcast address to the nation, announced the partition plan, outlining that power would be transferred to the two dominions of India and Pakistan. The broadcast addresses of Nehru, Jinnah, and Baldev Singh followed it. Nehru said that the partition plan was a 'big advance towards complete independence', whereas Jinnah simply left it to the League's Council to decide whether to accept the plan as a 'compromise or a settlement' (Jalal, 1994). On 9th June, the Muslim League Council formally announced that it had accepted the plan as a final settlement (Nawaz, 2013). Despite having grave reservations, Baldev Singh also gave his approval to the plan on 3rd June. Ironically, Gandhi, an important stakeholder, was observing his day of silence because he was in support of a unified India (Wolpert, 2009). Despite Jinnah's reservations, Mountbatten accepted the partition plan, considering it a great achievement (Ziegler, 1985). It shows that Mountbatten was determined to ignore the AIML's concerns. He had an imperial bias and wanted to support the leadership of Congress. Particularly Nehru. Ultimately, his attitude pushed the two dominions towards violence and bloodshed.

3. Responses and Reactions of All India Muslim League (AIML) and Indian National Congress (INC)

Mountbatten, then, wasted no more time and presented "The Administrative Consequences of Partition", a paper which covered the gigantic task of dividing the civil service and the army and all other paraphernalia of the Government of India (Nawaz, 2013). It outlined the contours of many committees to accomplish this uphill task, namely, a partition committee, a steering committee, an arbitral tribunal, and finally a boundary commission to deal with the subject matter of the partition of Bengal and Punjab. In this entire episode, the division of Punjab and the ongoing civil war there consumed a significant part of administrative energy. The Sikhs, albeit only 14% of the population and a minority in every district, were the most frustrated, fearing for their land holdings, investments, and religious shrines, which were on both sides of the proposed border.

The 3rd June Plan envisaged that the Hindu majority provinces would become part of India, while the Muslim majority provinces would be included in India, provided the members of the provincial assemblies representing those areas decided so (Dar, 2012). The Sindh Assembly met on 26th June and decided by 33 votes to 20 to join Pakistan. Baluchistan's Shahi Jirga also voted in favour of Pakistan, whereas in NWFP (KPK), a referendum was held and the majority voted to become part of Pakistan. The provincial assemblies of Bengal and Punjab met on 20th June and 23rd June, respectively. In joint sessions of both assemblies, the majority voted against the partition of the

two provinces. However, by the 3rd June Plan, the members representing Muslim and Non-Muslim areas met in separate sessions. In both assemblies, the former voted against the partition while the latter voted in its favour. The 3rd June Plan stated that if a simple majority of either section of the assembly voted in favour of partition, then the provinces would be divided. Therefore, for the partition of Punjab and Bengal, two boundary commissions were set up with an independent chairman to head both commissions. Both the Congress and the Muslim League were given equal representation in the commissions. Each commission was comprised of four members; two were nominated by Congress and two by the Muslim League. Sir Cyril Redcliffe was appointed as its chairman. He had a wide experience in law and was a man of high integrity, which, according to the British, qualified him for the job for which he was selected (Ziegler, 1985). However, his selection is widely criticised by many on the account that he was not familiar with the Indian Society, its ethnic divisions, and its geographical boundaries. Moreover, he had never visited India before his appointment. Stanley Wolpert argues that the appointment of Redcliff was the wrong choice, and he was given a mere few weeks to complete this horrendous task, which required at least a year or a few years to be completed (Wolpert, 2009). It also showed Mountbatten's indifference to the consequences of a hurried partition.

The Boundary Commissions were to demarcate the boundaries of Punjab and Bengal by the two principles. One was the principle of notional representation, while the other was the principle of geographical contiguity. The complication before the commissions was not only the demarcation of boundaries but also the decision to be taken about the canal system, which was vital to the life of Punjab and also to the systems of roads and rail communications. Since the Congress and the Muslim League were not on the same page due to their immense differences, the final authority was in the hands of Red Cliff. Soon after reaching India, Red Cliff started his task on a hurried basis as Mountbatten had asked him to.

Next, the British Parliament adopted the Indian Independence Act on 18th July 1947. The hallmark feature was the Commonwealth dominion status for both India and Pakistan, which gained support from conservative opposition in London and allayed the fears of the British, including Mountbatten, to safeguard the British strategic interests east of Suez. This dominion status would have also provided a means for dispute resolution between the two nascent states of India and Pakistan. It was with this theme that Mountbatten planned a common Governor-General for both states, and it was to be him.

Some regard Mountbatten's wish to be the Governor General as a manifestation of his vanity. However, he wanted it to be this way so that the process of partition would be smooth and Pakistan would get its due share out of the division of resources (Chawla, 2014). Jinnah, on the other hand, wanted to be Pakistan's Governor General, as it would provide him with the necessary authority to unite Pakistan beyond its provincial and ethnic divides and would also give his followers a sense of much-needed security (Burke & Quraishi, 1995). In his meeting with Mountbatten, Jinnah proposed the idea of two governors-general with a representative of the Crown to act as a supreme arbitrator (Dar, 2014b). Ayesha Jalal also lends support to the point of view of Jinnah that Jinnah wanted a British Crown Representative to play the role of the arbiter, especially with the division of the Indian Army (Jalal, 1994). However, Congress's invitation to Mountbatten to remain the constitutional governor-general of India and Mountbatten's refusal to play the role of an arbiter reaffirmed Jinnah's view of the futility of the experiment of the common Governor-General for both dominions. (Jalal, 1994) Jinnah knew too well that it would be tough for Pakistan to rein in the individual characteristics of its constituent units and establish a centralised authority without a Governor General of its own (Jalal, 1994). Sharing a common Governor-General with India would also have given Congress the

leverage to use this joint office to sow the seeds of disunity in the Muslim areas within Pakistan in case the Pakistan constituent assembly broke into pieces (Jalal, 1994).

4. Mountbatten and the issue of the Common Governor Generalship

Mountbatten later found himself in a tight spot and faced the awkward decision to accept the Governor Generalship of just India while Jinnah was going to be the Governor General of Pakistan (Jalal, 1994). He was so furious over Jinnah's refusal to accept him as the Governor General that he even threatened Jinnah that this decision might cost him the whole of the assets and the future of Pakistan (Morris-Jones, 1982). However, under the persuasion of the King, Attlee, Churchill, and many other advisors, Mountbatten agreed to be India's Governor General.

With this issue of Governor Generalships, the new emerging issue was the status of princely states after the partition. The 3rd June Plan envisaged that the future of princely states would be decided by the principles laid down by the Cabinet Mission Memorandum of 12th May 1946, which gave three options to the states. The states could either opt for independence or accede to one of the two dominions of India and Pakistan, or some of them could join to form an independent bloc. Congress was strongly opposed to the option of independence. Nehru said that it would lead to the 'balkanization of India' (Dar, 2014b). Jinnah, on the other hand, clearly announced that the Muslim League would not "interfere with the internal affairs of any State, for that is a matter primarily to be resolved between the rulers and the peoples of the States". Moreover, he also elaborated that the Muslim League would respect the decision of states if they wished to be independent (Jinnah et al., 1966).

With only seven weeks left before the actual transfer of power, a new state department was founded to deal with the issue of the princely states (Wolpert 162). Patel was given charge of the state's department with V. P. Menon to serve as its secretary. As it transpired, the states were forced by Mountbatten to negotiate with either India or Pakistan to join either of them, as the British agreements with the states would lapse once the independence of Pakistan and India was in effect (Ali, 2012). The princely states were geographically dispersed and very much intertwined with British India, making the idea of autonomy even more challenging to consider. Furthermore, the states were not politically mature, and there was a social vulnerability and fear of agitation, which limited the options available to the princely states.

Mountbatten had a master plan to convince, rather than coerce, the rulers of the states to join either of the new states under the guise of patriotism, thereby avoiding the looming threat of civil war within the states. However, he became increasingly forceful in his approach as the time of independence drew nearer, and by using 'Machiavellian' tactics, he urged the states to decide their fate before 15th August in any case (Ali, 2012).

His strategy was somewhat outdated in certain instances and even backfired in a few peculiar cases, such as Kashmir and Hyderabad. Much of the bloodshed that took place later in the integration phase of these states with India or Pakistan could have been avoided if Mountbatten had been a little less occupied with British India and paid a little more heed to the ordeals of the princely states. His leaning towards Congress, particularly Nehru, was also a significant contribution towards his dubious role in the accession of the princely states.

Mountbatten, during the phase of the actual division of Bengal and Punjab, tried not to influence, or for that matter, portray not to influence, the decisions of the Radcliffe Award. He, however, requested the boundary commission to demarcate the lines of partition in a timely manner to keep the armies ready to control the situation on the ground. Interestingly, when the Boundary Commission Award was ready by 7th August and Redcliffe wanted to announce it on 9th August,

Mountbatten delayed its announcement to accommodate specific last-minute changes he wanted to make.

Mountbatten was very concerned with the timing of the announcement of the boundary award (Wolpert, 2009). He only wanted the announcement to be made on 17th August, so that the protests in both countries did not mar the celebrations of independence (Ali, 2012). He showed no emotion towards the pitiful state of the people, who could have been informed one week in advance of the new boundary. It would have allowed those people some time to prepare for their movement. His only concern was to shirk the British responsibility for the looming bloodshed on the horizon of Punjab. In the hope of escaping facing the harsh reality he had been brewing for quite some months now, he opted to maintain the secrecy of the award. Besides, he also feared that both the League and Congress would disagree with the award, and an earlier announcement could have “smashed the apparent settlement” (Jalal, 1994). After the publication of the Award, Mountbatten admitted in his report, “It had been clear all along that, the longer we postponed publication, the less would the inevitable odium react upon the British” (Ghosh, 1985).

There is also available documentation that suggests that many controversial last-minute changes were made to the Boundary Commission Award by Mountbatten (Hodson, 1997). As Red Cliff was asked to divide Punjab along lines of Muslim versus non-Muslim majority districts, he awarded the Ferozpur sub-districts and Gurdaspur to Pakistan in his initial maps. He also recommended a joint Indo-Pak control of the canal system and electricity generated in the princely state of Bikaner. The power distribution system of the state of Bikaner was vital to the economic progress and growth of Punjab. However, Nehru was not in favour of this joint control and told Mountbatten that it would not be acceptable at any cost. Moreover, Nehru was pathological about Kashmir. The awarding of Gurdaspur was meant to deprive India of any land access to the Vale of Kashmir. Thus, by making use of the term ‘other factors’, which was incorporated in the terms of reference for the Boundary Commissions, Mountbatten forced Redcliff to make changes in the initial map. Thus, Gurdaspur was awarded to India. In this way, Pakistan was strategically 'obliged to pay a very high price' which Mountbatten warned Jinnah after the latter refused to accept him as the common Governor-General of both the dominions.

The case of the Bengal Boundary Commission was not significantly different. The Muslim-majority district of Murshidabad and the whole of Malda were given to India. Ironically, no Hindu-majority area was awarded to Pakistan, and the term “other factors” was not applied while deciding the fate of Calcutta, over which the economic development of East Bengal rested (Wolpert, 1984).

Among the “other factors”, the Sikh issue was one of the foremost. The case of the Sikhs was ignored in the entire process of partition in the sense that their demands were not fulfilled in the way they wanted. They did not want to divide their community and assets. In July, they presented a lengthy memorandum to the Boundary Commission, demanding that the Muslim-majority districts of Lahore, Faisalabad, and Gujranwala be given to the Sikhs due to their sacred religious sites and the substantial land revenue paid by Sikh peasants. They also made it very clear that 'they had planned a population exchange on both sides of the border, if need be, by violent means, to replace in the East what they were to lose in the West' (Tan, 1994). Unfortunately, all the leaders failed to take their demands seriously, and the aftermath of partition saw the armed Sikh bands massacring the Muslim population and forcing them to flee to West Punjab. The situation was not much different in West Punjab, where armed Muslims were killing the Sikhs and Hindus, forcing them to leave West Punjab.

In the entire process of partition and transfer of power, the immense communal violence was the most disturbing feature that the British failed to control. The early and hasty withdrawal of British troops further aggravated the situation. Mountbatten's official biographer Philip Ziegler writes that

Mountbatten tried his best to tackle the situation, and the Boundary Force was employed, but he could not handle it alone. He rightfully blames the Indian leaders, in particular Jinnah and Nehru, for not playing their role while handling the situation.

Violence had started long before Mountbatten had arrived in India. It became common after the “Direct Action Day” observed by the Muslim League, and it was a failure on Jinnah’s part to stop the communal violence effectively. Eventually, when the violence engulfed the rest of the country, Nehru and Congress leaders also failed to perform their role while dealing with this challenging task. The entire saga of communal violence puts a question mark on the role of political leaders who have focused their energies on achieving their political aims and neglected the sufferings of the people all along. The unwarranted delay in announcing the Boundary Commission Award further added to the people's misery.

5. Conclusion

The partition plan of Mountbatten was flawed in the sense that, although it ended the British Raj in India, it culminated in a hasty partition and thus led to huge-scale bloodshed of innocent lives. Although the struggle for independence was a long trek and the acceptance of freedom and partition by the British seemed to be a culmination of the historic effort of centuries, independence was not the only milestone. It marked the beginning of another tiring journey, fraught with the implementation and administrative challenges of the partition that lay ahead.

Mountbatten's role was a central one in this entire saga of partition. Moreover, to add fuel to the fire, his influence on the Boundary Commission award was dubious and based on mala fide intentions. His constant leaning towards the Congress, and particularly his friendly terms with Nehru, upset the role of an impartial arbiter. He failed to strike a balance between his relationships with Congress and other political parties, especially Jinnah, for whom his hatred was no secret, which later took the form of enmity when the issue of Governor Generalship of Pakistan arose. History is witness to the fact that Mountbatten considered Jinnah “mad” and “suffering from megalomania”.

Although Mountbatten initiated the task of partition with perhaps a positive intention, as the events unfolded, he made several blatant decisions, such as altering the Radcliffe Award, which significantly altered the course of history. The painful repercussions of the spiteful manoeuvres of Mountbatten are being borne by the people of Kashmir even today, after seven decades. He was at best a military leader, but not a statesman India badly needed at that fateful juncture of the partition of India.

When one blames Mountbatten for his hasty implementation of the partition plan and his lack of statesmanlike characteristics, equal blame is to be put on the leaders of Congress and the Muslim League. They were the ones witnessing the Indian independence movement brewing for many decades, and they all knew very well that communal violence would break out in the case of a mass movement post-partition. Being visionary leaders, they could have taken prudent and pragmatic steps to curb this violence and ensure the safety of innocent lives during one of the most significant human migrations in recorded history.

Having said this, one can finally state in a nutshell that the implementation of the partition plan from 3rd June till 15th August 1947 was a Herculean task and all stakeholders are to be credited or blamed for whatever transpired in those eventful few months.

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