

Challenges Before the New-born Nation

First Day of Independent India

August 15, 1947 started an epoch that ended India's colonial subjugation and looked forward to a new India—India as an independent country. The Constituent Assembly of India met at 11 p.m. on August 14, 1947. Rajendra Prasad presided over the session. In a ceremony held in the Constituent Assembly (in Parliament House) at midnight of August 14-15, 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, speaking as the first prime minister of Independent India, gave his historic speech. Nehru said, "Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will wake to life and freedom..."

On August 15, 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, as Prime Minister of India, hoisted the Indian national flag above the Lahori Gate of Red Fort in Delhi.

■ First Cabinet After Independence

The governor-general and the ministers were sworn in. Jawaharlal Nehru took charge as the first Prime Minister of India on August 15, 1947, and was assisted by 15 other members. Sardar Patel served as the deputy prime minister

till his death in December 1950. Lord Mountbatten, and later C. Rajagopalachari served as Governor-General till January 26, 1950, when India became a republic and elected Rajendra Prasad as its first president.

The first Council of Ministers of Independent India was as follows.

1. **Jawaharlal Nehru**: Prime Minister; Minister of External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations; Minister of Scientific Research
2. **Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel**: Deputy Prime Minister; Minister of Home Affairs and States; Minister of Information and Broadcasting
3. **Maulana Abul Kalam Azad**: Minister of Education
4. **John Mathai**: Minister of Railways and Transport
5. **Sardar Baldev Singh**: Minister of Defence
6. **Jairamdas Daulatram**: Minister of Food and Agriculture
7. **Jagjivan Ram**: Minister of Labour
8. **C.H. Bhabha**: Minister of Commerce
9. **Amrit Kaur**: Minister of Health
10. **Rafi Ahmad Kidwai**: Minister of Communications
11. **Narhar Vishnu Gadgil**: Minister of Works, Mines and Power
12. **R.K. Shanmukham Chetty**: Minister of Finance
13. **K.C. Neogy**: Minister of Relief and Rehabilitation
14. **B.R. Ambedkar**: Minister of Law (belonged to the Scheduled Castes Federation; resigned in 1951)
15. **Shyama Prasad Mookherjee**: Minister of Industries and Supplies [Hindu Mahasabha; first to resign from the cabinet in April 1950]
16. **Narasimha Gopalaswami Ayyangar**: Minister without portfolio; assigned the task to act as a link between the union government and the cabinet of East Punjab government
17. **Mohanlal Saxena**: Minister without portfolio

Independent India, however, had to face several challenges.

Immediate Challenges—territorial and administrative integration of princely states, communal riots, rehabilitation of nearly 60 lakh refugees migrated from Pakistan, protection of Muslims living in India as well as those going to Pakistan from communal gangs, need to avoid war with Pakistan, Communist insurgency, etc.

Medium Term Challenges—framing of the Constitution for India, building of a representative, democratic and civil libertarian political order, elections, and abolition of feudal set up in agriculture, etc.

Long Term Challenges—national integration, economic development, poverty alleviation, etc.

India, as well as Pakistan, faced the consequences of partition. The Independence Act had laid the procedure for the resolution of three major problems—(i) the settlement of boundaries between the two nations; (ii) the division of apparatus and personnel of Indian Civil Services and some other services; and (iii) division of military assets and formations.

Radcliffe's Boundary Award and the Communal Riots

In accordance with the partition plan, the respective legislative assemblies of Punjab and Bengal met in two sections (one representing the Muslim majority districts and other of the rest of the province) and decided by simple majority in favour of the partition of the two provinces. West Punjab which went to Pakistan received 62,000 square miles of territory and 15.7 million people (census 1941), of whom 11.85 million were Muslims. East Punjab (India's share) received 37,000 square miles of land area, with a population of 12.6 million, of whom 4.37 million were Muslims. Likewise, West Bengal became part of India with a territory of 28,000 square miles, and a population of 21.2 million, of whom 5.3 million were

Muslims. East Bengal, which constituted East Pakistan, got 49,400 square miles of territory and 39.10 million people (27.7 million Muslims and the rest non-Muslims). Thus on both sides of the Radcliffe Line, sizable sections of populations became minority (religion-wise)—20 million non-Muslims in Pakistan and 42 million (later reduced to 35 million) Muslims in India.

■ Challenges before the Boundary Commission

In absurd hurry, the British government appointed the Boundary Commission under the chairmanship of Sir Cyril Radcliffe. The Boundary Commission consisted of two Muslims and two non-Muslim judges in each case, and worked under serious constraints. Radcliffe, with very limited knowledge of India, and with the use of out-of-date maps and census materials, was required to draw the boundaries and decide disputed points within a period of six weeks.

Although the religious demography was the deciding factor, other factors, such as rivers as natural boundaries, administrative units, economic viability, railway and roadway connectivity and other infrastructural facilities, such as the canal system, were also to be taken into consideration. The Sikhs, as a third party (Hindus and Muslims being two parties), were demographically scattered throughout Punjab. Their demand that all Sikh holy shrines be included in East Punjab (part of India) further complicated the situation. In face of such legal intricacies, a rational approach gave way to political considerations. The census of 1941, the basis of decisions, was also faulty. So the resultant boundary lines were bound to create several problems and leave many people unhappy.

The report of the Boundary Commission was ready by August 12, but Lord Mountbatten intentionally made it public after August 15, so that the responsibility of the consequences—communal riots and its repercussions—would not fall on the British.

Views

The systematic failure of British governments to contemplate or prepare for any planned transfer of power to India is epitomised by the fact that a man of Radcliffe's background and lack of experience (he had never been east of Gibraltar before he came to India) should have been asked to embark on such a fundamental task so very late in the day.

—Walter Reid, *Keeping the Jewel in the Crown*

With limitations of time, knowledge and understanding, it was virtually impossible to deal adequately with the often vital accessories of a boundary line—such as the location of the canal head waters in relation to the canals themselves, communications by road and rail, the fate of mixed or isolated populations and such 'invisible' problems as the location of pasture lands in relation to villagers' flocks and herds.

—Percival Spear

He (Radcliffe) tried to take account of irrigation canals and water supplies so that there was enough water in the central Punjab, but on the scale with which he was dealing, he was bound to make mistakes. If villages weren't bisected by the boundary they were separated from the villagers' fields, railway stations from the towns they served and communities from the resources on which they relied.

Walter Reid, *Keeping the Jewel in the Crown*

They had absolutely no conception. They asked me to come in and do this sticky job for them, and when I had done it they hated it. But what could they expect in the circumstances? Surely, they must have realised what was coming to them once they had decided on partition. But they had made absolutely no plans for coping with the situation.

—Radcliffe, quoted by Leonard Mosley,
The Last Days of the British Raj

The way in which the British government decided to demarcate the boundary and leave the country amidst unrest was a most callous way to behave.

■ Regions Most Affected by Riots

The communal riots had started in August 1946 itself, but with the announcement of partition and independence, the

situation became more inflamed. The regions through which the Radcliffe line was drawn became most violent and maximum number of murders, rapes and abduction of women and children took place. Armed bands of Sikhs (and Hindus) and Muslims roamed the cities and countryside of Punjab, committing unbelievable crimes.

A war of extermination was launched on both sides of the border, when refugee trains are reported to have arrived sometimes carrying only dead bodies. According to an estimate, around 180,000 were killed (60,000 from the west and 120,000 from the east).

The regions of Bengal, due to the presence of Gandhi and his efforts through fasts, experienced less violence in comparison to Punjab.

Riots began in Delhi, with a massacre of Muslims in revenge for Punjab (Gandhian fasts had a temporary impact).

In Bihar, prior to partition, in October 1946, Hindu peasants, allegedly instigated by Hindu landlords to divert attention from agrarian problems, killed Muslims. This was followed by violence in Garhmukteswar in the United Province where Hindu pilgrims killed thousand Muslims. But after partition, due to Gandhi's initiatives, no massacres took place in these regions.

Why so many casualties The governor-general anticipated the danger of riots and assembled a boundary force of 50,000 men. But Nehru's decision to not allow British troops into the matter proved devastating—the boundary force themselves got divided along communal affiliations. Further, the European officers were busy preparing to leave India. According to Lockhart, the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army (August 15–December 31, 1947), the widespread disorder would have been under control if all the personnel from civil and armed services had been placed in their respective new countries.

Challenges Associated with Division of Resources

The partition of India was accompanied by division of resources of the civil government as well as division of the military forces and equipment.

■ Division of Civil Government

To resolve the division of civil government amicably, a partition council, presided over by the governor-general and consisting of two representatives each of India and Pakistan, was set up. The council was helped by a steering committee, consisting of H.M. Patel and Mohammad Ali, at operational level. All civil servants were offered to give their option about the Dominion they wanted to serve. Around 1,60,000 employees opted for transfer from India to Pakistan or from Pakistan to India.

For the personnel of the Indian Civil Services, a distinction was made between the Europeans and the Indians. The Indian members were to continue in service in their country of choice (India or Pakistan) on the existing scale of service. The European officers could continue in service on their existing pay, leave, pension rights, etc., but if they wished to retire they were entitled to special compensation and early retirement.

■ Division of Finances

The division of cash balances as well as allocation of public debt created tensions between the two countries. Pakistan wanted a one-fourth share of the total cash balances, but India had to point out that only a small portion of the cash balances represented the real cash needs of the undivided India and the rest was maintained only as an anti-inflationary mechanism. Ramachandra Guha writes in his *India After Gandhi* that the Indian government had withheld Pakistan's share of the 'sterling balance' which the British owed jointly to the two

dominions, a debt incurred on account of Indian contributions to the Second World War. The amount was some Rs 550 million. The Indian government was not keen to release the money due to Pakistan as it was angry with Pakistan for having attempted to seize Kashmir by force. Gandhi saw this as being unnecessarily spiteful. He went on a fast and made the ending of the fast conditional on the transfer of the money owed to Pakistan. He succeeded in pressurising the Congress leadership to decide to give more cash resources to Pakistan. (According to some scholars, this became one of the reasons for the assassination of Gandhi by a Hindu fanatic).

■ Division of Defence Personnel and Equipment

For a smooth division of the armed forces and their plants, machinery, equipment and stores, a joint defence council, headed by Auchinleck as its Supreme Commander, was set up. The council decided that Muslim-majority units should be transferred to Pakistan and non-Muslim units to India, but due to serious differences between the two parties, the post of Supreme Commander was abolished. Amidst serious chaos, the British troops started to leave India from August 17, 1947 and the process was completed by February 1948.

Assassination of Gandhi

On the evening of January 30, 1948, as he carried on his usual prayer meeting at Birla mansion (New Delhi), Mahatma Gandhi was shot dead by Nathuram Godse. The event sent shock waves through the nation in making. Communalism and misinterpretation of nationalism were two fundamental factors under whose influence Godse killed Gandhi.

In an address to the nation on the All India Radio, Nehru summed up the mood and spirit of the time, “The light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere... The best prayer we can offer him and his memory is to dedicate ourselves to truth and to the cause for which the

great countryman of ours lived and for which he died.”

Sardar Patel appealed to the people not to seek revenge but to follow Gandhi’s message of love and non-violence. He said, “It is a shame for us that the greatest man of the world has had to pay with his life for the sins which we have committed. We did not follow him when he was alive; let us at least follow his steps now he is dead.”

Nathuram Godse was tried and sentenced to death. At his trial he declared that he had acted as he had because of Gandhi’s consistent pandering to the Muslims, “culminating in his last pro-Muslim fast [which] at last goaded me to the conclusion that the existence of Gandhi should be brought to an end immediately.”

On February 4, 1948, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was banned by the government. It was felt by the government that the right wing extremism which the RSS was seen to represent would be very harmful for the unity of the nation. Though not directly involved in the assassination of Gandhi, the organisation was seen to have a hand in the Punjab violence. It also attracted the support of many of the refugees. It was also rumoured that the members of the RSS had celebrated the death of Gandhi. Nehru considered that groups such as the RSS had “the blood of Mahatma Gandhi on their hands” even though they dissociated themselves from his killing. The ban was lifted in July 1949, when the RSS accepted the conditions laid down by the government. These conditions were that the Sangh would restrict itself to cultural activities and not meddle with politics; renounce its agenda of violence and secrecy; profess publicly loyalty to the Indian Constitution and flag (tri-colour); and organise itself on democratic principles.

Rehabilitation and Resettlement of Refugees

The people displaced by partition were ‘refugees’ in the sense that they had not left their homes voluntarily. The two new

governments did not organise an orderly exchange of population. Refugee resettlement became the immediate challenge for both governments (India and Pakistan). The Indian government established an emergency committee of the cabinet to deal with the crisis in Delhi, and a Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation to look after the refugees. In view of large-scale influx of displaced people, the notion of 'evacuee property' to be protected by government, for any future return of those who had left for Pakistan, became an empty rhetoric because it was almost impossible to force the refugees who settled in the empty houses of Muslims. (This, at a later time, made the return of the refugees impossible).

■ East Punjab

Some refugees were accommodated temporarily in refugee camps, which were run till 1949. For urban refugees, the government started industrial and vocational training schemes, and even grants were given to start small businesses or industries. The rural refugees were given land, agricultural loans and housing subsidies. Although, the state government and the central government mobilised massive resources, it was still not adequate and a general trend of differentiated entitlements to such benefits was observed. For example refugees with social and cultural capital—class and caste status and political connections—often got the better deal, while the depressed classes were given little or no consideration.

■ Bengal

The problem was much more prolonged and complicated in Bengal. By 1948, only a small group of high-caste, landed or middle class Hindus migrated to West Bengal by arranging exchange of property or jobs on individual levels. But during December 1949 and January 1950, due to a fresh outbreak of violence in Khulna, a large number of peasants started to leave East Pakistan. In revenge, anti-Muslim riots started in

February 1950 and forced about one million Muslims to leave West Bengal. This further aggravated anti-Hindu violence in East Pakistan and by 1951, about 15 lakh Hindu refugees arrived in West Bengal. But the Indian government didn't recognise these migrants as refugees and Nehru tried to send them back.

■ Delhi Pact on Minorities

To resolve the problems of refugees and restore communal peace in the two countries, especially in Bengal (East Pakistan as well as West Bengal), the Indian prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru and the Pakistani prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, signed an agreement on April 8, 1950. The agreement, known as the Delhi Pact on Minorities or Liaquat-Nehru Pact, envisaged the appointment of ministers from minority communities in both Pakistan and India at both central and provincial levels. Under the pact, minority commissions were to be set up, together with the Commissions of Inquiry to look into the probable causes behind the communal riots on both sides of border (in Bengal), and to recommend steps to prevent recurrence of such incidents. Under the pact, India and Pakistan also agreed to include representatives of the minority community in the cabinets of East Pakistan and West Bengal and decided to depute two central ministers, one from each government, to remain in the affected regions for such period as might be necessary.

The pact provided for the creation of an agency entrusted with the task of recovering and rehabilitating 'abducted' women (the idea was criticised by many scholars). The idea to encourage refugees to return to their original homes failed, because the two governments failed to restore confidence among the refugees. Further, the properties of the refugees were declared as enemy property [India brought amendments in the Enemy Property Act, 1968 in 2016 also].

The provisions of the Liaquat-Nehru Pact were severely criticised by Hindu nationalists like Shyama Prasad Mookherjee and K.C. Neogy. Mookherjee resigned from the

Nehru cabinet in protest, as he believed that the refugee problem could only be solved through a transfer of population and acquisition of certain territories from Pakistan to rehabilitate the people who came into India.

■ Centres of Refugee Settlements in India

In Delhi, Lajpat Nagar, Rajinder Nagar, Punjabi Bagh, Nizamuddin East and Kingsway Camp were some areas developed into housing complexes to settle the refugees permanently. People who came from West Pakistan settled in states like Punjab (which at the time included the present day Haryana) and Himachal Pradesh. The Sindhi Hindus settled in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Ulhasnagar (city of joy), in Maharashtra, was especially developed to settle refugees from Sindh areas.

West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and other north-eastern states accommodated the refugees from East Pakistan (present Bangladesh). The government settled some refugees in the Andaman Islands too (at present, Bengalis form the largest linguistic group in some parts of Andaman Islands).

Communists and Independence

On September 1948, on the pretext of maintaining law and order situation in South India, the Indian army intervened and took control of Hyderabad without much resistance from the Nizam. But the internal politics of Hyderabad became complicated due to the Telangana movement led by the communists. The alliance between the Congress and the communists had broken before the accession of Hyderabad into India.

In December 1947, the Communist Party of India (CPI) had denounced the Indian independence as 'fake'—with the slogan, '*ye azadi jhooti hai*'—and termed the Congress government led by Nehru as the stooges of Anglo-American imperialism and the feudal forces within the country. In February-March 1948, in its Second Congress in Calcutta, the CPI adopted its 'Political Thesis', which formally declared

that the national government established on August 15, 1947 was indeed the major enemy of the Indian people and hence required to be changed through general revolution. To achieve this goal, the communist leaders decided to follow what popularly came to be known as the B.T. Ranadive line (after the name of CPI's then general secretary). They declared, "the present state will be replaced by a people's democratic republic—a republic of workers, peasants and oppressed middle classes." The Communist insurgency spread to other parts of India especially in West Bengal which saw the revival of the Tebhaga Movement and an urban insurgency in Calcutta.

■ **Why Communists were Skeptical about Independence?**

1. They believed that a policy of class struggle and armed insurgency against the State run by the Congress, alleged as collaborationist bourgeoisie, was necessary to shift the attention of the masses from the politics of communal hatred that shrouded the country after partition.

2. The late 1940s and the early 1950s witnessed communist successes in Asian countries like China, Malaya, Indonesia, the Philippines and Burma (Myanmar). In September 1947, Russia announced its 'A. Zhdanov thesis' as an answer to the Marshall Plan, encouraging more activism on the part of the international communist parties. The Indian communists thus geared up for an armed insurgency.

3. According to Ramachandra Guha, the CPI leadership, encouraged by the initial successes of the Telangana movement, misconceived the 'scattered disillusionment with the Congress as revolutionary potential, and thought this as the 'beginning of Red India'.

■ **Shift from Antagonistic Strategy to Constitutional Democracy**

The communist movement remained localised in Hyderabad and West Bengal. The mass support was sporadic and

conditional as people were not ready to reject the Congress so soon after Independence. The government also decided to take stern action; while in the Hyderabad region the Indian armed forces continued its 'police action', in West Bengal the CPI was banned in March 1948 and in January, a security act was passed to imprison the communist leaders without trial. Within the Communist leadership, there were divisions on the 'Chinese line' and the 'Russian line' which became wider after the failure of a proposed railway strike on May 9, 1949.

In September 1950, the prominent communist leaders like Ajoy Ghosh, S.A. Dange and S.V. Ghatge criticised the organisation for its faulty strategies and its failure to take notice of the true picture of independent India. Consequently, in October 1951, at the Third Party Congress of the CPI, held in Calcutta, a significant shift in its policy was endorsed. It decided to withdraw the Telangana movement and forge an inclusive front of the peasants, workers and middle classes. Consequently, the ban was lifted by the government, and the Indian communists participated in the general election of 1951-52, thus moving from an insurrectionist path to the path of constitutional democracy.