

23. BRITISH POLICY OF DIVIDE AND RULE

Along with the rise of nationalism, communalism too made its appearance around the end of the 19th century and posed the biggest threat to the unity of the Indian people and the national movement.

- Communalism is the belief that because a group of people follow a particular religion they have, as a result, common, that is, social, political and economic interests. In case of India, it means that Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians form different and distinct communities; that all the followers of a religion share not only a commonality of religious interests but also common secular interests.
- The British adopted different policies to counter and contain the rapidly growing nationalist movement. They encouraged pro-English individuals like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Raja Siva Prasad to start an anti-Congress movement.
- Later, they fanned the Hindu-Muslim communal rivalry, first among the educated Indians and then among the common people through the introduction of communal electorates. They even exploited the controversy of Hindi and Urdu and the cow-protection movement.
- Relentless efforts were made to create a split in the nationalist ranks by adopting a more friendly approach towards the more conservative or moderate sections.
- In the 1890's, efforts were made to separate the radicals of yesterday like Justice Ranade and others from leaders such as Dadabhai Naoroji who come to be considered 'moderates'. Similarly, in the first two decades of the 20th century moderates were sought to be played against extremists.
- The British also succeeded in turning the traditional feudal classes like princes and zamindars against the new intelligentsia and the common people. Princes were won over by the creation of the Chamber of Princes in 1921. Zamindars were already won over by the introduction of the Permanent Settlement.
- Attempts were also made to turn one caste against another even among the Hindus. For example, the

Communal Award of 1932 attempted to treat Harijans as a separate political entity.

- The British also followed the policy of apparent concession or conciliation, on the one hand and ruthless repression on the other against the growth of nationalism. The policy was relentlessly pursued throughout the freedom struggle and knew no bounds particularly during the Anti-partition, Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movements.
- The British authorities felt that the spread of modern education had been a major cause of the growth of nationalism. So, they deliberately followed a policy of joining hands with the socially and intellectually reactionary forces in order to prevent the spread of modern ideas.
- Plans were now set afoot to impose greater government control over education and to change its modern liberal character into a conservative and reactionary one. Modern secular education was sought to be replaced by a system based on religious and moral training.
- Patronage in Government Services used to Foster Communalism. In the absence of any avenues of gainful employment in trade and industry, the British Indian Government remained the biggest employer to which the educated youth hopefully looked for their means of livelihood. This enormous patronage—in higher and subordinate services—was cleverly used by the rulers to promote rivalry and discord among different sections of society. Our nationalist leaders were fully aware of the mischievous character of this bait, but the hunger—rather compulsion—for loaves and fishes blinded them to its dangerous potentialities. Jawaharlal Nehru explained then, 'This enormous patronage was exercised to strengthen the British hold on the country, to crush discordant and disagreeable elements, and to promote rivalry and discord amongst various groups anxiously looking forward to employment in government service. It led to demoralization and conflict and the government could play one group against the other.'

Partition of India

The origin of the idea of a separate state for Muslims can be traced back to Muhammad Iqbal's reference to the need for a 'North West Indian Muslim State' in his presidential address to the Muslim League in 1930, but the context of the speech makes it clear that the great Urdu poet and patriot was really visualizing not partition but reorganization of Muslim-majority areas in N.W. India into an autonomous unit within a single Indian Federation.

Germination of Pakistan

Choudhary Rahmat Ali's group of Punjabi Muslim students in Cambridge have a much better claim to be regarded as the original proponents of the idea. In a pamphlet, written in 1933, Rahmat Ali demanded a separate national status for a new entity for which he coined the name 'PAKISTAN' - 'P' for Punjab, 'A' for Afghan Province or the North-West Frontier Province, 'K' for Kashmir, 'S' for Sindh, and 'TAN' for Baluchistan. No one took this demand for separate state for Muslims very seriously at that time. But from 1937 there was a marked change in the attitude of the League towards the idea of a separate state for Muslims. This was mainly due to two reasons. Firstly, the federal clauses of the Act of 1935 showed signs of a strong and Hindu dominated central government. Secondly, Jinnah and the Muslim League as a whole greatly resented the refusal of the Congress in 1937 to form coalition ministries with the League in the provinces. The Aligarh scheme of Zafrul Hasan Hussain Qadri suggested four independent states of Pakistan, Bengal, Hyderabad and Hindustan. The Punjab Unionist Sikandar Hayat Khan suggested a kind of 3-tier structure with autonomous provinces legislatures, together constituting a loose confederation with the center having charge only over matters like defense, external affairs, customs and currency as if in anticipation of the cabinet mission plan of 1946. There was considerable British encouragement behind this sudden search of alternatives. As per Khali-al-quzaman, the Secretary of states, Zetland, had given a sympathetic hearing on 20th march, 1939 to redefinition of Rahmat Ali's scheme, suggesting two Muslim Federations, one in the North-West and the other in the East (covering Bengal and Assam).

League-Congress Relations

The League celebrated the resignation of the Congress Ministries in 1939 as 'Deliverance Day',

because the Congress Ministries, according to the League, carried out a number of acts detrimental to Muslim interests during their rule between 1937 and 1939. The famous resolution of 23rd March, 1940, passed by the Lahore session of the Muslim League demanded that geographically contiguous units are demarcated into regions which should be constituted, with such territorial re-adjustments as may be necessary, that the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority as in the north-western and eastern zones of India should be grouped to constitute independent states, in which constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign. The remarkably clumsy wording left ample (and probably deliberate) scope for vagueness, ambiguity and equivocation. Neither 'Pakistan' nor 'Partition' were explicitly mentioned. Though some Indian and British Newspapers began to use the name 'Pakistan' for the proposed new states in 1940, the League officially adopted this name only in 1943. The stress on the sovereignty of the units became very important after partition for they provided the theoretical basis for the Awami League agitation (started under Fazlul Haq) against a Punjab-dominated unitary conception of Pakistan which eventually led to the break away of Bangladesh.

What was the CR Formula?

The British made a settlement between the Muslim League and the Congress a precondition for the grant of Independence to India. A few congressmen also felt it necessary. C. Rajagopalachari was one of those who realized it in 1944 and, therefore, evolved a formula, called the 'C.R. Formula' to bring about a settlement between the League and the Congress. The main proposals of the formula were the following:

- The Muslim League should cooperate with the Congress in the formation of provisional Interim Government for the transitional period.
- After the close of the war, a commission shall be appointed to demarcate the boundaries of the Muslim dominated districts in the North-West and East of India. The people of these districts shall decide by plebiscite, the issue of separation from India.
- In the event of separation, mutual agreements shall be entered into between the two governments for jointly safeguarding defense, commerce, and communications and for other essential purposes.

This formula became the basis for the Gandhi-Jinnah Talks held in 1944 to reach a settlement on the constitutional problem. Though Jinnah rejected the whole formula saying that the kind of Pakistan it was offering was a maimed, mutilated and moth-eaten one, the main reason behind his refusals was that he was vehemently opposed to the idea of conducting a plebiscite.

Essence of the Wavell Plan

After the failure of the Gandhi-Jinnah Talks based on the C.R. Formula, Lord Wavell, the Viceroy went to England in March 1945 to consult Churchill regarding the political deadlock in India. The general elections were due in Britain and the Conservative party desired to justify that it was, like the Labour party, interested in resolving the deadlock in India. Hence, a new plan was offered to the Indians. This plan, called 'Wavell Plan' was announced on 14th June 1945. It was offered as an interim agreement. The main features of the Plan were:

- To form an interim government at the center with equal representation to Hindus and Muslims.
- All portfolios except that of defense were to be transferred to the Indians.
- Only the Governor-General and the commander-in-chief were to remain free from the control of the Indian ministers.
- The Interim government consisting of all Indian ministers would work under the framework of the Act of 1935 till a new constitution was framed.
- The Governor-General would however retain the right to veto the advice of his newly constituted executive council.

A conference was called at Simla to discuss the plan. All Indian leaders representing the Congress, the Muslim League, the Sikhs, Scheduled Castes, Europeans and the Unionist Party of Punjab were called to attend the conference, but the talks broke down primarily because of the unreasonable attitude of the League. Jinnah wanted that the League alone should choose the Muslim members of the executive council. But the Congress naturally did not accept this stand of Jinnah, so the only result of this Conference was the strengthening of Jinnah as Lord Wavell practically gave him the power of Veto.

Cabinet Mission Plan

The British government headed by the Labour party was eager to solve the Indian problem and sent, in March 1946, a Cabinet Mission to India to negotiate with the Indian leaders the terms for the transfer of power to Indians. It proposed a two-tiered federal plan which was expected to maintain national unity while conceding the largest measure of regional autonomy. There was to be a federation of the provinces and the states, with the center controlling defense, foreign affairs, and communications. At the same time, individual provinces could form regional unions to which they could surrender by mutual agreement some of their powers. Both the National Congress and the Muslim League accepted this plan. But the two could not agree on the plan for an interim government which would convene a constituent assembly to frame a constitution for a free, federal India. The two put differing interpretations on the Cabinet Mission plan to which they had agreed earlier. Finally, in September 1946, an interim cabinet headed by Jawaharlal Nehru was formed by the Congress. The Muslim League decided to boycott the Constituent Assembly. The League launched the 'Direct Action Day' on 16th August 1946 to protest against the formation of interim government by the Congress, and even after joining the interim Government, it pursued a policy of disrupting the functioning of the government.

Mountbatten Plan

The British government finally tried to put an end to the Constitutional deadlock by announcing that the power be transferred to India before the end of June, 1948, irrespective of whether the Indian political parties agreed among themselves or not. Lord Mountbatten was appointed as the Viceroy in March, 1947. He resolved to execute the transfer of power at the earliest possible moment and worked out a compromise plan after long discussions with the leaders of the Congress and the League. According to this 'Mountbatten Plan', India was to be free but not united. The main contents of the plan were:

1. Muslim majority provinces would be permitted to form a separate state and set up a separate Constituent Assembly for framing a constitution for their state.
2. Provinces of the Punjab and Bengal would be partitioned.

3. Question of North-West Frontier Province and the Sylhet district of Assam was to be decided by a plebiscite.
4. A bill to be introduced in the British Parliament at once to give effect to these proposals.

Thus, the country was to be partitioned. The nationalist leaders agreed to the partition of India not because they accepted Jinnah's two-nation theory, but because they wanted to stop the widespread communal riots. The country was still ruled by foreigners who did little to check the riots but instead encouraged these riots by their policies, perhaps hoping to play the two newly independent states against each other.