

Independence with Partition

Attlee's Statement of February 20, 1947

Clement Attlee, the British prime minister, sensing the trouble all around, made an announcement on February 20, 1947. The British House of Commons declared the British intention of leaving the Indian subcontinent.

■ Main Points of Attlee's Statement

- A deadline of June 30, 1948 was fixed for transfer of power even if the Indian politicians had not agreed by that time on the constitution.
 - The British would relinquish power either to some form of central government or in some areas to the existing provincial governments if the constituent assembly was not fully representative, i.e., if the Muslim majority provinces did not join.
 - British powers and obligations *vis-a-vis* the princely states would lapse with transfer of power, but these would not be transferred to any successor government in British India.
 - Mountbatten would replace Wavell as the viceroy.
- The statement contained clear hints of partition and even Balkanisation of the country into numerous states and was, in essence, a reversion of the Cripps Offer.

■ Why a Date Fixed by Government for Withdrawal

- The government hoped that a fixed date would shock the parties into an agreement on the main question.
- The government was keen to avert the developing constitutional crisis.
- The government hoped to convince the Indians of British sincerity.
- The truth in Wavell's assessment could no longer be denied—that an irreversible decline of the government's authority had taken place.

■ Congress Stand

The provision of transfer of power to more than one centre was acceptable to Congress because it meant that the existing assembly could go ahead and frame a constitution for the areas represented by it, and it offered a way out of the existing deadlock.

But the illusory hopes of a settlement were soon shattered as the statement proved to be a prelude to the final showdown. The League launched a civil disobedience movement to overthrow the coalition government in Punjab, as it felt emboldened by the statement.

Independence and Partition

The communal riots and the unworkability of the Congress-League coalition compelled many in early 1947 to think in terms of accepting the so far unthinkable idea of partition. The most insistent demand now came from the Hindu and Sikh communal groups in Bengal and Punjab who were alarmed at the prospect of compulsory grouping which might find them in Pakistan. The Hindu Mahasabha in Bengal was assessing the feasibility of a separate Hindu province in West Bengal.

On **March 10, 1947**, Nehru stated that the Cabinet

Mission's was the best solution if carried out; the only real alternative was the partition of Punjab and Bengal.

In **April 1947**, the Congress president, Kripalani, communicated to the viceroy— "... rather than have a battle, we shall let them have their Pakistan provided you allow Bengal and Punjab to be partitioned in a fair manner."

■ **Mountbatten as the Viceroy**

Mountbatten proved more firm and quick in taking decisions than his predecessors because he was informally given more powers to decide things on the spot. He also had the advantage of the firm decision of the British government to quit at the earliest. His task was to explore the options of unity and division till October 1947 and then advise the British government on the form of transfer of power. But he soon discovered that the broad contours of the scenario to emerge were discernible even before he came to India. The Cabinet Mission Plan was a dead horse and Jinnah was obstinate about not settling for anything less than a sovereign state. But a serious attempt at unity would involve supporting those forces which wanted a unified India and countering those who opposed it. Mountbatten preferred to woo both sides.

■ **Mountbatten Plan, June 3, 1947**

The freedom-with-partition formula was coming to be widely accepted well before Mountbatten arrived in India. One major innovation (actually suggested by V.P. Menon) was the immediate transfer of power on the basis of grant of dominion status (with a right of secession), thus obviating the need to wait for an agreement in the constituent assembly on a new political structure.

Main Points

The important points of the plan were as follows.

- Punjab and Bengal Legislative Assemblies would meet in two groups, Hindus and Muslims, to vote for

partition. If a simple majority of either group voted for partition, then these provinces would be partitioned.

- In case of partition, two dominions and two constituent assemblies would be created.
- Sindh would take its own decision.
- Referendums in NWFP and Sylhet district of Bengal would decide the fate of these areas.
- Since the Congress had conceded a unified India, all their other points would be met, namely,
 - (i) independence for princely states ruled out—they would join either India or Pakistan;
 - (ii) independence for Bengal ruled out;
 - (iii) accession of Hyderabad to Pakistan ruled out (Mountbatten supported the Congress on this);
 - (iv) freedom to come on August 15, 1947; and
 - (v) a boundary commission to be set up if partition was to be effected.

Thus, the League's demand was conceded to the extent that Pakistan would be created and the Congress' position on unity was taken into account to make Pakistan as small as possible. Mountbatten's formula was to divide India but retain maximum unity.

Why Congress Accepted Dominion Status

The Congress was willing to accept dominion status despite its being against the Lahore Congress (1929) spirit because

- (i) it would ensure a peaceful and quick transfer of power;
- (ii) it was more important for the Congress to assume authority to check the explosive situation; and
- (iii) it would allow for some much needed continuity in the bureaucracy and the army.

For Britain, the dominion status offered a chance to keep India in the Commonwealth, even if temporarily, considering the economic strength, defence potential and greater value of trade and investment in India.

View

There is, however, no basis for the claim that the Civil Disobedience Movement directly led to independence. The campaigns of Gandhi ... came to an ignoble end about fourteen years before India achieved independence ... During the First World War the Indian revolutionaries sought to take advantage of German help in the shape of war materials to free the country by armed revolt. But the attempt did not succeed. During the Second World War Subhas Bose followed the same method and created the INA. In spite of brilliant planning and initial success, the violent campaigns of Subhas Bose failed ... The Battles for India's freedom were also being fought against Britain, though indirectly, by Hitler in Europe and Japan in Asia. None of these scored direct success, but few would deny that it was the cumulative effect of all the three that brought freedom to India. In particular, the revelations made by the INA trial, and the reaction it produced in India, made it quite plain to the British, already exhausted by the war, that they could no longer depend upon the loyalty of the sepoys for maintaining their authority in India. This had probably the greatest influence upon their final decision to quit India.

- **R.C. Mazumdar**

Rationale for an Early Date (August 15, 1947)

Britain wanted to secure Congress' agreement to the dominion status. At the same time, the British could escape the responsibility for the communal situation.

The plan was put into effect without the slightest delay. The legislative assemblies of Bengal and Punjab decided in favour of partition of these two provinces. Thus, East Bengal and West Punjab joined Pakistan; West Bengal and East Punjab remained with the Indian Union. The referendum in Sylhet resulted in the incorporation of that district in East Bengal. Two boundary commissions, one in respect of each province, were constituted to demarcate the boundaries of the new provinces. The referendum in NWFP decided in favour of Pakistan, the Provincial Congress refraining from the referendum. Baluchistan and Sindh threw in their lot with Pakistan.

■ Indian Independence Act

On July 5, 1947 the British Parliament passed the Indian Independence Act which was based on the Mountbatten Plan, and the Act got royal assent on June 18, 1947. The Act was implemented on August 15, 1947.

The Act provided for the creation of two independent dominions of India and Pakistan with effect from August 15, 1947. Each dominion was to have a governor-general to be responsible for the effective operation of the Act. The constituent assembly of the each new dominion was to exercise the powers of the legislature of that dominion, and the existing Central Legislative Assembly and the Council of States were to be automatically dissolved. For the transitional period, i.e., till a new constitution was adopted by each dominion, the governments of the two dominions were to be carried on in accordance with the Government of India Act, 1935.

As per the provisions of the Indian Independence Act, 1947, Pakistan became independent on August 14 while India got its freedom on August 15, 1947. M.A. Jinnah became the first Governor-General of Pakistan. India, however, decided to request Lord Mountbatten to continue as the Governor-General of India.

Plan Balkan

Between March and May of 1947, Mountbatten decided that the Cabinet Mission Plan had become untenable and formulated an alternative plan. This plan envisaged the transfer of power to separate provinces (or to a confederation, if formed before the transfer), with Punjab and Bengal given the option to vote for partition of their provinces. The various units thus formed along with the princely states (rendered independent by lapse of paramountcy) would have the option of joining India or Pakistan or remaining separate. The plan was quickly abandoned after Nehru reacted violently to it.

■ Problems of Early withdrawal

The breakneck speed of events under Mountbatten caused anomalies in arranging the details of partition and totally failed to prevent the Punjab massacre, because

- there were no transitional institutional structures within which partition problems could be tackled;
- Mountbatten had hoped to be the common Governor-General of India and Pakistan, thus providing the necessary link, but Jinnah wanted the position for himself in Pakistan;
- there was a delay in announcing the Boundary Commission Award (under Radcliffe); though the award was ready by August 12, 1947 Mountbatten decided to make it public after August 15 so that the British could escape all responsibility of disturbances.

■ Integration of States

During 1946-47 there was a new upsurge of the State People's Movement demanding political rights and elective representation in the Constituent Assembly. Nehru presided over the All India State People's Conference sessions in Udaipur (1945) and Gwalior (April 1947). He declared that the states refusing to join the Constituent Assembly would be treated as hostile. In July 1947, Vallabhbhai Patel took charge of the new States Department. Under Patel, the incorporation of Indian states took place in two phases with a skilful combination of baits and threats of mass pressure in both.

Phase I By August 15, 1947, all states except Kashmir, Hyderabad and Junagarh had signed an instrument of accession with the Indian government, acknowledging central authority over defence, external affairs and communication. The princes agreed to this fairly easily because (i) they were 'surrendering' only what they never had (these three functions had been a part of the British paramountcy) and (ii) there was no change in the internal political structure.

Phase II The second phase involved a much more

difficult process of 'integration' of states with neighbouring provinces or into new units like the Kathiawar Union, Vindhya and Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan or Himachal Pradesh along with internal constitutional changes in states which for some years retained their old boundaries (Hyderabad, Mysore, Travancore-Cochin). This phase was accomplished within a year. The principal bait offered was a generous privy purse while some princes were made governors and *rajpramukhs* in free India.

This rapid political unification of the country after independence was Patel's greatest achievement.

Inevitability of Partition

■ Why Congress Accepted Partition

- The Congress was only accepting the inevitable due to the long-term failure to draw the Muslim masses into the national movement. The partition reflects the success-failure dichotomy of the Congress-led anti-imperialist movement. The Congress had a two fold task—(i) structuring diverse classes, communities, groups and regions into a nation, and (ii) securing independence for this nation. While the Congress succeeded in building up sufficient national consciousness to exert pressure on the British to quit India, it failed to complete the task of welding the nation, especially in integrating the Muslims into the nation.

- Only an immediate transfer of power could forestall the spread of 'direct action' and communal violence. The virtual collapse of the Interim Government also made the notion of Pakistan appear unavoidable.

- The partition plan ruled out independence for the princely states which could have been a greater danger to Indian unity as it would have meant Balkanisation of the country.

- Acceptance of partition was only a final act of the process of step-by-step concessions to the League's championing of a separate Muslim state.

Views

The British were neither the foes of the Hindus nor friends of the Muslims. They set up Pakistan not as a gesture of friendship towards the Muslims, but under the compulsions of their international policies.

Wali Khan

It was not so much that Britain pursued a policy of divide and rule as that the process of devolving power by stages in a politically and socially desperate country was inherently divisive.

R.J. Moore

The truth is that we were tired men, and we were getting on in years too. Few of us could stand the prospect of going to prison again—and if we had stood out for a united India as we wished it, prison obviously awaited us. We saw the fires burning in the Punjab and heard every day of the killings. The plan for partition offered a way out and we took it.

Jawaharlal Nehru

I felt that if we did not accept partition, India would be split into many bits and would be completely ruined. My experience of office for one year convinced me that the way we have been proceeding would lead us to disaster. We would not have had one Pakistan but several. We would have had Pakistan cells in every office.

Sardar Patel

Congress, as well as the Muslim League, had accepted partition...The real position was, however, completely different...The acceptance was only in a resolution of the AICC of the Congress and on the register of the Muslim League. The people of India had not accepted partition with free and open minds. Some had accepted it out of sheer anger and resentment and others out of a sense of despair.

Maulana Azad

— During Cripps Mission (1942), autonomy of Muslim majority provinces was accepted.

— During Gandhi-Jinnah talks (1944), Gandhi accepted the right of self-determination of Muslim-majority provinces.

— After the Cabinet Mission Plan (1946) Congress conceded the possibility of Muslim majority provinces

setting up a separate constituent assembly. Later, the Congress accepted, without demur, that grouping was compulsory (December 1946).

— Official reference to Pakistan came in March 1947, when CWC resolution stated that Punjab (and by implication, Bengal) must be partitioned if the country was divided.

— With the 3rd June Plan, Congress accepted partition.

● While loudly asserting the sovereignty of the Constituent Assembly, the Congress quietly accepted compulsory grouping and accepted the partition most of all because it could not stop the communal riots.

There was nevertheless much wishful thinking and lack of appreciation of the dynamics of communal feeling by the Congress, especially in Nehru who stated at various times—

“Once the British left, Hindu-Muslim differences would be patched up and a free, united India would be built up.”

“Partition is only temporary.”

“Partition would be peaceful—once Pakistan was conceded, what was there to fight for?”

The communalism of the 1920s and the 1930s was different from that of the 1940s. Now it was an all-out effort for an assertive ‘Muslim nation’. Congress leadership underestimated the potential of this type of communalism.

■ Gandhi’s Helplessness

Gandhi felt helpless because there had been a communalisation of the people. He had no option but to accept partition because the people wanted it. How could there be a movement to fight communalism involving a communalised people? He asked the Congressmen, however, not to accept it in their hearts.

View

I alone with the help of my Secretary and my typewriter won Pakistan for the Muslims.

M.A. Jinnah

Summary

- **Attlee's Statement (February 20, 1947)**

June 30, 1948 as deadline for transfer of power
Power may be transferred to one centre or in some areas to existing provincial governments

- **Mountbatten Plan June 3, 1947**

Punjab and Bengal Assemblies to take decision on partition.
Sindh to take its own decision
Referendum to be held in NWFP and Sylhet district
Two dominions to be created if partition is to take place, with two Constituent Assemblies
Freedom to be granted on August 15, 1947

- **July 18, 1947**

The Indian Independence Act 1947 got royal assent, and it was implemented on August 15, 1947

- **Why partition was seen to be inevitable**