

Independence and Partition of India

India's freedom struggle entered a new phase by the end of the Second World War. This period was extremely uneasy and difficult because the Indian National Army (INA) had met an unfortunate end, memories of Quit India Movement were still fresh and the Muslim League was vociferously demanding for the creation of a separate state of Pakistan. Lord Wavell announced the 'Wavell Plan' which included granting dominion status to India and the provision of drafting the Constitution of India by the Indians.

Events Leading to the Cabinet Mission Plan

Changes in Britain

- After the Second World War, USA and Russia emerged as two supreme powers in the world. Both countries supported India's demands for freedom.
- In the parliamentary elections in Britain, the Conservatives were replaced by the Labour Party. Most of the members of the Labour Party supported the demands made by the Congress.
- The British soldiers had fought war for six years, and they had no desire to spend more years in suppressing the Indians in their demand for independence.

Revolts in the Administrative Agencies

- The government of Britain could no longer rely on Indians for any administrative work or for suppressing the Indian National Movement. The INA showed that patriotic ideas had entered the ranks of the Indian army too.
- The revolt of Indian Naval Ratings at Mumbai in 1946 also made it difficult for the government to maintain its control over the military ranks.
- There were also strikes by the Royal Indian Air Force.
- Patriotic sentiments were also creeping into the Police and Civil Services.

Labour Unrest

- Labour unrest was increasing in the country. In July 1946, there was an all-India strike by postal and telegraph workers.
- There was a strike by the railway workers in August 1946.
- Peasants in Bengal started the Tebhaga Struggle and decided that they would not pay one-half but one-third of the produce to the landlords.
- Struggles against high rent rates took place in Hyderabad, Malabar, Bengal, UP, Bihar and Maharashtra.

At this time, nationalist ideas were spreading to different parts of the country and people were demanding complete independence from British rule.

Cabinet Mission in India

Clement Attlee, the New Prime Minister of Britain, sent the Cabinet Mission Plan to India to discuss the transfer of power to the Indians. The Cabinet Mission arrived in 1946 in India and it consisted of three cabinet members.

Clauses of the Cabinet Mission Plan

- The Cabinet mission proposed the formation of the **federal union** of the British Provinces and princely states in India. The Central Government was to have control of the defence, foreign affairs and communications in the country.

- It was laid down that the Indian Union was to have its own executive and legislature and Provinces had the power to enjoy complete autonomy for all subjects other than union subjects.
- The British Provinces were to be divided into groups. There were three major groups and a province could opt out of any group and join another by a majority of votes.
- It proposed the setting up of a Constituent Assembly to frame the Constitution of India. It was to consist of 389 members. The members were to be elected by the Provincial Legislative Assemblies.
- Provision was made to give separate representation to the Muslims and the Sikhs.
- An interim government was to be formed at the Centre with 14 members.
- India had the choice to decide if it wanted to remain within the British Commonwealth or to secede from it.
- A treaty had to be made between the Constituent Assembly and Britain for settling matters which could arise out of the transfer of powers.
- The Cabinet Mission Plan rejected the demand for Pakistan because of the following reasons:
 - The Cabinet Mission Plan felt that the creation of Pakistan would not solve communal problems as the percentage of Muslims living in northwestern Pakistan would be 37.93%.
 - There can be no justification for including non-Muslim districts of Bengal, Punjab and Assam into Pakistan.
 - The princely states would find it difficult to decide to join India or Pakistan.
 - It would be difficult to divide the armed forces, and the post and telegraph system.

Reaction to the Cabinet Mission Plan

The Congress accepted the proposals with certain reservations. While it accepted the scheme which dealt with the Constituent Assembly, it rejected the proposals of the Viceroy to form an interim government as it would have limited powers.

The Muslim League accepted the proposals completely. It felt that the grouping together of Muslim majority provinces would anyway lead to the formation of Pakistan.

Conflicts between Congress and Muslim League

- Elections to the Constituent Assembly were held in July 1946 in which the Congress secured two-thirds majority. The Muslim League won 73 out of 78 Muslim seats.
- The League feared that it would be out voted in the Assembly elections. It also felt that once the British would leave, the power would be transferred to the Hindus. On 2 September 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru and other members were sworn as the members of the Viceroy's Council. The Muslim League did not participate in the event.
- The day was observed as 'a day of mourning' by the League, and it asked Muslims in the country to display black flags.
- After several efforts and negotiations by the viceroy, the Muslim League under Jinnah agreed to join the interim government to safeguard the interests of minorities. However, the members of the League refused to work with the leadership of Nehru.
- The Constituent Assembly met on 9 December 1946 without the members of the League.
- The Constituent Assembly passed a resolution to make India an independent sovereign republic.

Attlee's Announcement

The interim government was not functioning properly because of the differences between the Congress and the League. Thus, it was decided by Attlee and the Parliament that powers should be transferred to the Indians at the earliest.

The Mountbatten Plan

For taking necessary steps for transferring power to the Indians, Lord Wavell was recalled and Lord Mountbatten was appointed as the new Viceroy of India. One of his immediate tasks was to restore peace between the Congress and the League. He realised that the partition of India was inevitable. He thus came up with his plan to transfer power from Britain to India.

Mountbatten Plan

Lord Mountbatten came up with the plan of partition of India. He presented his plan to seven prominent leaders—Nehru, Patel, Jinnah, Kripalani, Liaquat, Nishtar and Baldev Singh. The plan was accepted by Congress and the League. The main features of the Mountbatten Plan were

- To divide British India into India and Pakistan.
- It was for both countries to decide about their relationship with the British Commonwealth and with each other.
- The princely states would be free to join either India or Pakistan.
- Bengal and Punjab were to be partitioned provided the Legislative Assemblies of both states voted in favour of partition.
- A plebiscite was to be held in Northwest Frontier Province to decide if the people wanted to join India or Pakistan.
- A referendum was to be held at the Muslim majority province of Sylhet to decide whether it wants to remain in East Bengal or wishes to join Assam.
- A separate Constituent Assembly would be constituted for framing the Constitution of Pakistan.
- It was decided that power would be transferred much before June 1948. The British Parliament would have to pass an Act for the transfer of power before 15 August 1947.

Acceptance of the Mountbatten Plan

The Mountbatten Plan was received with mixed reactions from people and parties across the country. The nationalists were not happy with the partition of the country. The Muslim League and the Congress accepted the plan.

- The large-scale communal violence and clashes in the country convinced the people that the communal tension could only be eased by partitioning British India.
- The League had joined the interim government to obstruct the working of the Congress. The latter realised that it was not possible to work with the League.
- It was felt that the only alternative to partition was a federation with a weak centre. A smaller India with a strong central authority was better than a bigger state with a weak centre.
- Any further presence of the British on Indian soil could have been dangerous as they were instigating the Indian princely states to remain independent. Hence, partition was the price to pay for the immediate independence of the country.
- The leaders also felt that any delay in transfer of power could result in the outbreak of civil war in the country.

The Indian Independence Act 1947

After the Mountbatten Plan was accepted, the Indian Independence Act was passed by the House of Commons in Britain. Main provisions of the Act were

- Two separate dominions of India and Pakistan would be created. Pakistan was to comprise NWFP, Sind, Baluchistan, West Punjab and East Bengal. The Boundary Commission would demarcate the exact boundary between the nations.
- Bengal would be divided if it is desired by the people. The Provincial Assemblies of the Hindu majority districts and Muslim majority districts would decide through voting if they want the division of state or not.
- A plebiscite would be held in NWFP and Sylhet in East Bengal to decide if they want to join India or Pakistan. While the former joined Pakistan, the latter joined East Bengal or present Bangladesh.
- A Governor General would be appointed for each dominion till the Constitutions are framed for both countries.
- The legislative authority of the British Parliament would cease from 15 August 1947.
- Till the framing of the new Constitutions, both dominions would be governed in accordance with the Act of 1935.
- The right of the King to veto laws was given up, and this right was passed over to the Governor General.
- The princely states would become independent of the British rule, and they were free to join either India or Pakistan.
- Provisions were made to divide the Indian army and other assets and liabilities between the two dominions.
- The office of the Secretary of State for India was abolished, but provisions were made for safeguarding the interests of the officers appointed by the Secretary of State.

Two separate independent states of India and Pakistan were created on August 15, 1947. While Jawaharlal Nehru became the first prime Minister of India, Muhammad Ali Jinnah became the first Governor General of free Pakistan. Independence of India impacted the freedom movements in other countries. However, victory celebrations in India were marred by bloodshed which occurred during the partition of the country. India immediately after the partition faced many problems like backwardness of the Indian agriculture, low industrial development etc. It was only after careful economic planning and launching of several programmes by the government to improve agriculture, increase industrial development and to create employment opportunities that the Indian economy began to improve. Today, we not only export several agricultural commodities but are one of the major industrialised nations of the world.