

Partition of India

The Partition of India in 1947 was the division of British India into two independent dominion states, the Union of India and the Dominion of Pakistan. Today the Dominion of India is the Republic of India, while the Dominion of Pakistan is today the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

The Partition was carried out on religious lines in the provinces of Punjab and Bengal, based on district-wise non-Muslim and Muslim majorities. The Partition was outlined in the Indian Independence Act 1947 and resulted in the dissolution of the British Raj.

The Partition displaced between 10 - 12 million people, creating a refugee crisis marked with large-scale violence with the casualties ranging from several hundred thousand and two million. To this day the violent outcome of the Partition still plagues the relationship between India and Pakistan.

Background of the Partition

It can be said that the seeds of the Partition of India were sowed in the Partition of Bengal when the province was divided on a religious basis. Popular outrage and protests against this move forced the Viceroy, Lord Curzon, reversed the decision.

The protest against the Partition was predominantly led by the Hindu elite of Bengal. Fearing reforms that might favour the Hindu majority, led to the Muslim elite to ask for separate electorates for the Muslim community. With this demand, the All India Muslim League was formed in Dhaka in 1906.

The 1916 Lucknow session of the Congress was a scene of unprecedented mutual cooperation between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League. It was spurred on by the doubts of the Muslim League that the "religious neutrality" of the British was a farce. This was because of the fact that Britain was at war with Turkey. The Sultan of Turkey was regarded as the *Khalifa* or spiritual head of Islam as he was the custodian of the holy sites of Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. This only increased the suspicion of the British intention towards the Muslims of the subcontinent.

The Muslim League joined the Congress towards the goal of greater self-government; in return, the Congress accepted separate electorates for Muslims both in the provincial legislatures and the Imperial Legislative Council. This came to be known as the Lucknow Pact.

In the ensuing years, the full implications of the pact unfolded. The pact was seen as being more beneficial to a minority of Muslim élites from the provinces of UP and Bihar rather than the Muslim majorities of Punjab and Bengal. Despite this glaring fact, the pact was regarded as a major milestone of the Indian Independence Movement as it saw two of the biggest political parties of the subcontinent set aside their differences and work towards a common goal.

What Role did the Montagu - Chelmsford Reforms Play?

Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montagu and Viceroy Lord Chelmsford presented a report in July 1918 following a long fact-finding trip through India. Following another tour by Franchise and Functions Committee in order to identify who among the Indian population could vote in future elections, the Government of India Act of 1919 (also known as the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms) was passed in December 1919.

The Act enlarged both the provincial and Imperial legislative councils, repealing the Government of India's recourse to the "official majority" in unfavourable votes. Departments such as defence, foreign affairs, and criminal law were retained by the Viceroy and the central government while other departments like public health, education, land-revenue, local self-government were transferred to the provinces.

The Montagu-Chelmsford reforms offered Indians the chance to exercise legislative power at the provincial level. Yet such power was also restricted by the still limited number of eligible voters, by the small budgets available to provincial legislatures.

The reforms were a step towards giving Indians a better scope of autonomy under British rule. But nationalists from every spectrum felt that it was not enough and that it failed to accommodate the power of the provincial Muslims where they were a majority. This inadequacy would only prove that any negotiation with the Congress would only be an exercise in futility for the Muslim League. This realisation made their calls for a separate homeland even stronger.

What were the provisions of the Mountbatten Plan?

The division of British India between the two new dominions was carried out according to what has come to be known as the "Mountbatten Plan". It was announced at a press conference by Mountbatten on 3 June 1947, when the date of independence - 15 August 1947 - was also announced. The main details of the plan were as follows:

- Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims in Punjab and Bengal legislative assemblies would meet and vote for Partition. If a simple majority of either group wanted partition, then these provinces would be divided.
- The provinces of Sind and Balochistan were to make their own choice in deciding which dominion they wanted to be a part of.

- The future of the Northwest Frontier Province and Sylhet district of Assam was to be decided by a referendum.
- India would be independent by 15 August 1947.
- The separate independence of Bengal was ruled out.
- A boundary commission to be set up to draw up the borders.

The Indian leaders accepted the plan on 2 June. It did address the future of the princely states, but on 3 June, Mountbatten advised them that remaining independent will prove to be counter-productive and it would be more prudent to join either of the two dominions.

The Muslim League's demands for a separate state were thus accepted. The Congress' position on unity was also considered and taken into account with the objective of making the land area of Pakistan as small as possible. Mountbatten's formula was to divide India and to retain as much as unity as possible. With the passing of the Indian Independence Act, 1947, the dominion of Pakistan and India came to be on 14th and 15th August respectively. This event was marred by the bloodshed of the Partition that saw millions on both sides displaced, killed and missing.

The Legacy of the Partition of India

The Partition was and continues to remain a highly controversial arrangement along with being a cause of much tension in the Indian subcontinent today. Lord Mountbatten has not only been accused of rushing the process but also is alleged to have influenced the Radcliffe Line in India's favour. The commission took longer to decide on a final boundary than on the Partition itself. Thus the two nations were granted their independence even before there was a defined boundary between them.

Some critics allege that British haste for a relatively bloodless exit led to increased cruelties during the Partition. Because independence was declared prior to the actual Partition, it was up to the new governments of India and Pakistan to keep public order. No large population movements were contemplated despite the plan called for safeguards for minorities on both sides of the new border. It was a task at which both states failed. There was a complete breakdown of law and order; many died in riots, massacre, or just from the hardships of their flight to safety. What ensued was one of the largest population movements in recorded history.

However, many argue that the British were forced to expedite the Partition by events on the ground. Once in office, Mountbatten quickly became aware that if Britain were to avoid involvement in a civil war, which seemed increasingly likely, there was no alternative to Partition and a hasty exit from India. Law and order had broken down many times before Partition, with much bloodshed on both sides. A massive civil war was looming by the time Mountbatten became Viceroy. After the Second World War, Britain had limited resources, perhaps insufficient to the task of keeping order. Another viewpoint is that while Mountbatten may have been too hasty, he had no real options left and achieved the best he could under difficult circumstances.

Conservative elements in England consider the Partition of India to be the moment that the British Empire ceased to be a world power, following Curzon's dictum: "the loss of India would mean that Britain drops straight away to a third rate power".