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**The Mountbatten Plan (1947): A Just Settlement or a Hasty Partition****Maria Aftab**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The Mountbatten Plan is also called the 3rd June Plan, which is the biggest turning point in the subcontinent and creates two big states, Pakistan and India. This article provides a deep understanding about the 3rd June Plan and the other events that led to the formation of the 3rd June Plan. It finds out whether this plan is a fair solution, an easy path for two divided individuals in two parts, or just a rushed plan with poor planning that creates chaos. This work is based on primary and secondary data like articles, government reports, and books. A few research studies show that the 3rd June Plan provided a peaceful framework for the transfer of power, some scholars, like Stanley Wolpert, Larry Collins, and R.J. Moore, analyzed that the plan was fair, but the hurry created communal riots, mass migration, deaths of millions of people, unequal distribution, etc. As this essay examines, the position of the tense diplomatic game was indicative of a poorly thought-out decolonization process though it could have been a better process to reduce the political and humanitarian costs of partition. The significance of this research is to help to understand the deep root causes of the partition between Pakistan and India and the violence and administration failure during British rule. It also helps to understand whether the 3rd June Plan was a plan to solve the tension between Muslims and Hindus or a wrong decision that created problems between Pakistan and India till a date.*

**Keywords:** 3<sup>rd</sup> June Plan, Dominion States, Policy making, Unfair Decision, Fair Solution, Balkanization, Pakistan, India.

**Introduction**

The British India partition in 1947 is one of the most significant and debatable events in the South Asian history. The 3rd June 1947 Plan, also referred to as the Mountbatten Plan, officially divided the subcontinent into the independent countries of India and Pakistan and the British colonial rule ended after almost two hundred years. Although the Plan has frequently been described as a practical way out of increasing communal strains and political stalemate between the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League, it has also been judged as a premature withdrawal of the imperialists which did not look far enough to predict its horrifying human cost.<sup>1</sup> The historical scholars have profoundly diverse interpretations of the Plan. Imperialist or administrative views like those that R. J. Moore and V. P. Menon put forward attach importance

<sup>1</sup> Leonard Mosley, *The Last Days of the British Raj* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961).

to the political realism of the settlement which they propose while arguing that partition was the only practical option to civil war.<sup>2</sup> These interpretations have been found to be criticized on the basis that they give a priority to elite negotiations and underestimate the administrative unpreparedness and fragile nature of the rush transfer of power.<sup>3</sup> Revisionist historiographers like Ayesha Jalal and Stanley Wolpert on the contrary believes that this accelerated independence was an indication of imperial fatigue and a strategic withdrawal and not a constitutional design choice.

However, even these criticisms occasionally tend to exaggerate the degree of British guilt and downplay the role and other interests of Indian political leaders. In the same vein, other stories like *Freedom at Midnight* provide a dramatic and graphic description of the hurried departure, but the literary style has been subject to criticism as dramatized and selective. Conversely, the official version and memoir-driven literature are likely to explain the pace of transfer as the necessary crisis management, thus presenting the violence as an undesirable, yet inevitable, consequence of the polarization of the communities.

This paper states that despite the fact that the Mountbatten Plan solved a short-term constitutional crisis, its immediate application revealed the shortcomings of the late-colonial rule and turned a negotiated compromise into a humanitarian disaster. This research does not simply perceive the Plan as either a just measure or an irresponsible act, but rather puts it in the context of the larger forces of imperial withdrawal, political trade-offs, and crumbling administrative power. The article critically evaluates the degree to which the 3rd June Plan was a balance between political expediency and moral responsibility during the last phase of the British rule on the subcontinent by analyzing the primary documents and contradictory historiographer interpretations.

### **Methodology**

The research presently follows the qualitative research method when studying the Mountbatten Plan. It is a documentary study that makes use of primary and secondary sources. The primary goal of this research will focus on providing deeper understanding about the Mountbatten Plan of 1947 (3rd June Plan). Primary sources are official British documents and records of the constitution regarding the transfer of power. The secondary sources are scholarly articles and academic books that discuss the political, administrative, and humanitarian sides of the Plan. Through descriptive and analytical analysis, the paper assesses the key controversies that enveloped the Plan, especially on its political will, process and outcomes. This will make a critical and narrow comprehension of the historical and constitutional importance of the Plan.

### **The Mountbatten Plan**

The background of the Mountbatten Plan needs to be seen within the context of the weakening power position of Britain within the post-World War II India. British prime minister Clement Attlee declared on 20 February 1947 that the British would hand over power to Indians hands no later than June 1948.<sup>4</sup> This statement marked the intention to retreat by Britain and the fact that the imperial rule had become politically and economically untenable. Lord Lord Louis Mountbatten was then called to be the last Viceroy of India and charged with the responsibility of leading a peaceful handing over of power.

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<sup>2</sup> V. P. Menon, *The Transfer of Power in India* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957).

<sup>3</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> M. Gwyer and A. Appadorai, eds., *Speeches and Documents on the Indian Constitution, 1921–47*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 2:667–69.

Earlier constitutional proposals such as the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946 before the coming of Mountbatten was unable to succeed in the divergent visions of the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League.<sup>5</sup> The Congress had tended to prefer a strong central power but the League demanded constitutional guarantees and more and more an independent homeland of the Muslims. By early 1947, the situation of communal tensions had escalated, especially in Punjab and Bengal which destroyed chances of a united federal setup.<sup>6</sup> When Mountbatten took office in March of 1947, he soon came to the conclusion that the hope of having a united India with one constitutional framework was fading. His meetings with the important political figures, such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, showed that there was mistrust and opposing political goals.<sup>7</sup>

Early ideas, such as the later termed Balkan Plan, included relocation of power to provinces at the possibility of making decisions independently.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, this was a strategy that ran the risk of additional dividing and this strategy was highly unpopular among Congress leaders who were afraid of the territorial disintegration of India. With a sense of the urgency of the law-and-order situation, Mountbatten ditched the provincial formula and began to head in the direction of a more centralized formula of partition. The updated proposal, which was announced on 3 June 1947, proposed the formation of two dominion states India and Pakistan- to be demarcated by boundaries and legislative approval.

This move-to-move power further to 15 August 1947 as opposed to June 1948 announced earlier meant that the administration preparation time frame had been greatly condensed.<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that the proponents regarded the Plan as a viable response to political gridlock and the threat of civil war, those who opposed it believe that the drive to independence was one of imperial impatience rather than institutional preparedness. The tight timeline did not have much time to determine boundaries, division of army, allocate resources, and handling refugees. The Mountbatten Plan was therefore a diplomatic compromise between political elites and a dangerous administrative roll-dice at a time when communal instability was increasing.

### **Balkan plan**

The Balkan Plan was a transitional constitutional plan which was discussed in April 1947 by Lord Louis Mountbatten amidst the mounting political crisis in India. Faced with the growing communal bloodshed and seemingly the inability of the Cabinet Mission structure, Mountbatten at first considered the issue of handing over power not to a central leader but to individual provinces and princely states.<sup>10</sup> This would be based on the proposal that provinces would be given the discretion to either be part of India, Pakistan or even stay independent. This was a strategy of increasing British anxiety that a common constitutional settlement was becoming impossible.

The decentralization in the Plan was meant to minimize the conflict in the short term between the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim league. There were however, major risks in the proposal. It endangered India territorial integrity because it promoted provincial fragmentation, thus increasing the likelihood of having multi-successor states, instead of a binary divide.<sup>11</sup> The proposal was vehemently opposed by the Congress leaders especially Jawaharlal Nehru on the basis that the plan will result in Balkanization of the subcontinent and a weakening

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<sup>5</sup> V. P. Menon, *The Transfer of Power in India* London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957

<sup>6</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

<sup>7</sup> Gwyer and Appadorai, "Speeches and Documents on the Indian Constitution", 2:667-69.

<sup>8</sup> R. J. Moore, *Escape from Empire* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Leonard Mosley, *The Last Days of the British Raj* London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961.

<sup>10</sup> R. J. Moore, *Escape from Empire* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983

<sup>11</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985

of central authority. To Congress partition into two dominions was unwillingly better than the destruction of India into little semi-sovereign states. In the meantime, Muhammad Ali Jinnah was seeing the changing debate as a possibility of gaining an independent Pakistan though he was wary of a deal that would weaken the Muslim League requirements.

The Balkan Plan failed not just by the procedures but by the structure. It showed the incompatibility of the British crisis-management policies and the Indian nationalist priorities. The proposal showed that too much decentralization might have a destabilizing experience instead of holding the situation. As a result, Mountbatten gave up the provincial formula and proceeded towards a more specific partition formula, which resulted in the 3rd June 1947 Plan.<sup>12</sup> In this regard, the Balkan Plan is a decisive transition point in decolonization. It also shows how the British government became uncertain and improvised in the last months of empire, as well as shows how congress opposition to disintegration had an indirect effect on adopting a two-state solution. The repudiation of this project finally quickened the transition of federal experimentation to a territorial demarcation partition.

### **A Delicate Man oeuvre**

On 8 April 1947, Mountbatten met with Baldev Singh, who was the defense minister of India at that time. Mountbatten talked with them and told them if India completely left the Commonwealth, all the Britishers would leave the country, and the Indian army would face instability. The defense minister of India agreed with Mountbatten for their defense. He said that at least India would be remained under the Commonwealth for 10 years. At that time the Indian army also trained. Baldev Singh convinced the other leaders for this demand and supported Mountbatten, and he feels good because he thought it was good for India's future.

Mountbatten wanted this plan as a secret plan. But after the meeting, Baldev Singh discussed this thing with Nehru, who strongly disapproved of the plan. He said that India would be stronger after leaving the Indian Commonwealth. 16 April: Mountbatten and Baldev Singh meet each other and discuss the matter; Mountbatten suggests he discuss this openly later on in May. He also discusses the idea of Jinnah, who wanted Pakistan under the British Commonwealth. Two days earlier, Nehru wrote to Baldev Singh, He said that India will get complete freedom from the British Commonwealth. because this will help the whole nation, not only me. After independence it will create a problem for India to stay connected with the British.

Therefore, you should try to complete freedom from the British next year<sup>13</sup>. He wanted complete freedom from Britishers after got independence. After many discussions, Mountbatten made another alternative plan because the other plans did not work. He applied everything for United India, but this was not possible, and tension grew day by day. The Muslim leader Jinnah wanted six Muslim provinces with one state, but Patel and Nehru did not want to break India into small pieces. On Sunday may 11 Nehru write letter to Mountbatten and it became a bombshell. Nehru, who wrote a letter to Mountbatten and said the plan was totally changed from others like the Cabinet Mission Plan and Simla. And he said that this was too much power to give to provinces and princely states because it breaks India into many pieces. That's why the partition was only between two states, like Pakistan and India.

However, Mountbatten's alternative plan suggested quickly transferring the power, and it became the dominion status like Canada and Australia. But on the other side, Gandhi wanted a united India; he totally disagreed with the division of India. In mid-May 1947, the viceroy of India and V.P. Menon both tried to manage both sides peacefully and calmly, he presented the 3rd

<sup>12</sup> V. P. Menon, *The Transfer of Power in India* London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957

<sup>13</sup> Moore, "Mountbatten, India, and the Commonwealth," 191.

June Plan, which means India will be divided into two states. The last viceroy of India, Nehru, decided to divide India without any discussion with Muslim leaders, and now this plan is known as the Mountbatten Plan and the Nehru Plan, which was replaced by the earlier Balken Plan, which allowed the provinces and princely states to choose whether they would join India or Pakistan or remain independent. Nehru did not like the other plan because it gave too much freedom, and the result would be that India would be divided into many pieces. Therefore, Mountbatten agreed with his statement and made a new plan that was called the 3rd June Plan. Mountbatten sent the new revised plan to the British cabinet for approval; they accepted it but asked for an explanation. Mountbatten went to London and told them the situation in detail. He told them how someone wants a different state or someone never agrees on partition. Those discussions were held between 19 May and 28 May with Nehru, and now he wanted a dominion state like Canada and Australia.

Even if the Prime Minister of British India, Attlee, clearly said to Lord Mountbatten that India would be free till June 1948, Mountbatten thought that if we were waiting for betterment, it might cause a mess. So, he wanted to control the uncertainty and instability. The congress leader Nehru supported Lord Mountbatten because he knew that delaying would lead to violence and unrest. But the Muslim leader Jinnah and his party demanded a separate state from India. At that time Mountbatten faced challenges because both parties demanded separate things, like one said dominion state and one said fully independent. After the failure of many plans, he decided to make a plan with Nehru in Simla for two dominion states. The name of this plan is the Mountbatten Plan, and it will be announced on 3rd June 1947; therefore, it is also known as the 3rd June Plan. Both parties finally accepted it, and Britain also congratulated Mountbatten for his skill. On 4 June, he said that he was successful in helped the both parties and agree them and also warn and praise them.: "You and your magic tricks."<sup>14</sup>

#### **Fair solution?**

The 3rd June 1947 Plan has frequently been justified as a practical measure to resolve the political stalemate and communal conflicts between the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League. Proponents state that, the Plan offered a legal and constitutional framework to transfer power amicably, avoid civil war and accommodate the competing national interests of the two parties. R. J. Moore views the Plan as a matter of realistic compromise which made British strategic interests meet the pressing necessity to end Indian political impasse.<sup>15</sup>

In the same way, V. P. Menon considered it as a well-negotiated compromise that enabled the establishment of two dominions and administrative continuity and stability.<sup>16</sup> Pragmatically, there are a number of benefits to the Plan. It enabled India and Pakistan to inherit working institutions of administration, namely the military, fiscal and civil services by creating two dominions under the umbrella of the British Commonwealth. Stanley Wolpert argues that the setup also created a clear time frame on how power would change hands and, in the process, minimize the possibility of long political stalemate and an immediate large-scale war.

Nevertheless, critical views note the weakness of the positioning of the Plan as a solely equitable solution. Revisionist historians like Ayesha Jalal argue that the Plan gave too much importance to the elite negotiation at the expense of the real lives of millions of common citizens. Although it might have solved political differences at the top, it failed to provide sufficient explanations on communal violence, mass migration, or the issue of demarcating a boundary.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the

<sup>14</sup>Philip Ziegler, *Mountbatten and the Partition of India*, 193– (London: Collins, 1985), 193.

<sup>15</sup> R. J. Moore, *Escape from Empire Oxford*: Clarendon Press, 1983.

<sup>16</sup> V. P. Menon, *The Transfer of Power in India London*: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957.

<sup>17</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman Cambridge*: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

excessive use of administrative expediency instead of consultative participation with provincial populations can be regarded as a top-down solution to the problem that ignored social and humanitarian outcomes. When considering the fairness of the Mountbatten Plan, the distinction between political pragmatism on the one hand and moral or social justice on the other therefore becomes necessary. Although the Plan was arguably successful in putting legal sovereignty on the ground and avoiding the immediate institutional breakdown, its inability to predict the huge human cost of the Plan underscores the constraints of elite-based settlement in violently divided societies. Consequently, even in its own structure, the Plan shows the virtues of diplomatic compromise, and the failures of a hasty and tunnel-visioned political formula.

### **Hasty Decision**

The Mountbatten Plan of 3 June 1947 has been massively condemned as a hasty and poorly thinking settlement despite its political motive. Historians like Ayesha Jalal and H. V. Hodson have suggested that the expedited schedule was not only focused on the withdrawal of the British but also on proper preparation of an administrative regime to manage the humanitarian and political consequences, which further intensified the humanitarian and political consequences.<sup>18</sup> The tight timetable did not allow the Radcliffe Boundary Commission enough time to delimit borders in a prudent manner, the sharing of military and civil resources, or even to arrange population migrations.<sup>19</sup>

According to historical records like the *Freedom at Midnight*, the human toll of this rush was very dramatic: almost 15 million individuals lost their homes and more than a million people were killed as a result of communal violence. In a similar manner, *Shameful Flight* highlights the structural administrative failure and points out that both the British and the Indian authorities had no harmonized plans on how to handle the refugees and curb the lawless actions in the newly demarcated nations. All these studies help to emphasize the point that although formal settlement was reached in the Plan, social stability and humanitarian issues were sacrificed.<sup>20</sup>

Analytically, the hastiness with which the decision was made is an expression of imperial panic, as well as the constraints of the institution. British government under pressure back home needed to get out of India as soon as possible, whereas Mountbatten tried to juggle the conflicting interests of Congress and the Muslim league. But, the reversion to an elite bargaining process and the lack of strong preparatory systems turned a legal settlement into an anarchic shift. The rush implementation of the Mountbatten Plan, then, turned what could otherwise have been a gradual change of power to a humanitarian tragedy, with a legacy of inter communal tensions in both India and Pakistan and administrative burdens.

### **Conclusion**

The Mountbatten Plan officially brought about the termination of the British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent, yet the rush adoption of the policy changed a constitutional change into a humanitarian disaster. Although the Plan seemed to provide a realist political compromise involving the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League, the rush in which it was implemented was imperial rather than statesmanlike. In promoting the handing over of power between June 1948 and August 1947, the British administration offered an inadequate time in undertaking vital preparations that included restructuring of its administration, demarcation of its boundaries and security.

This hasty withdrawal, as discussed by Stanley Wolpert in *Freedom at Midnight* and *Shameful Flight*, brought national tragedies of unprecedented communal bloodshed, political anarchy, and

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<sup>18</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman Cambridge*: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

<sup>19</sup> H. V. Hodson, *The Great Divide London*: Hutchinson, 1969.

<sup>20</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *Shameful Flight Oxford*: Oxford University Press, 2006.

to this day, the movements of close to fifteen million persons and the deaths of over one million people. Hence, despite the fact that the 3 June Plan managed to overcome the constitutional stalemate between political elites, it could not protect the human and administrative aspects of Partition. Instead of a well-thought-out blueprint of peaceful decolonization, the Plan actually turned out to be an emergency operation to evading collapsing imperial order and crumbling law and order. It is in this regard that the Mountbatten Plan is a historical paradox: a diplomatic triumph that delivered the subcontinent independence, but is at the same time a moral and humanitarian tragedy whose catastrophic effects are still present today in the minds of the region population.

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