

ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 04 No. 01. July-September 2025. Page#.4910-4927

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23006298>



Punjab at the Crossroads of Partition: Demography, Communal Politics, Territorial Claims and Colonial Administrative Constraints

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Abstract

The partition of British India stands as a pivotal event in the political history of South Asia. While the subcontinent was not partitioned in its entirety, two major provinces Punjab and Bengal were divided. This division, particularly in the Punjab region, was carried out along religious lines; the British administration entrusted the implementation of the partition plan to the final Viceroy and Governor-General, Lord Mountbatten. Although Mountbatten held meetings with top political leaders from the Congress and the Muslim League, he failed to secure a complete consensus between the two major parties. Ultimately, having obtained approval from the British government, Mountbatten presented the "June 3rd Plan" of 1947. This plan centered on the partition of Punjab and Bengal. Sir Cyril Radcliffe was appointed to head the Boundary Commission tasked with demarcating the borders, assisted by four High Court judges' two Muslims and two Hindus from each province. The Boundary Commission's findings specifically the Punjab and Bengal Awards were announced on August 16, 1947. The partition of Punjab was a source of intense conflict between Sikhs and Muslims, as the demarcation was based on administrative compromises regarding territorial claims rooted in religious demographics. This article examines the issues that arose from the partition contrary to local aspirations including the Kashmir dispute, forced migration, and conflicts over water resources. It also covers the political landscape following the 1946 elections and the activities of the British administration regarding India's independence and partition. An analytical and descriptive methodology has been adopted in this research article.

Keywords: British India, Partition, Punjab, Communalism, Territorial Claims, Demography, and Boundary Demarcation.

Historical Background of the Partition of India

During World War II, the Congress launched the "Quit India" movement against British rulers to secure independence and end imperial Britain's domination. Britain attempted to grant greater political autonomy to the local population through the Cripps Mission (1942) and the Wavell Plan

(1945); however, India's two major parties—the Muslim League and the Congress—rejected both proposals. The Congress maintained its claim to be the sole representative of all communities in India and categorically rejected the Muslim League's Two-Nation Theory. Conversely, the Muslim League—as the sole representative party of Muslims—asserted its position based on the Two-Nation Theory in the period leading up to independence; by highlighting a distinct Muslim national identity separate from that of Hindus, it opposed the Congress's stance and the idea of a unified India. Gandhi viewed the partition of India as tantamount to dismembering "Mother India," whereas the Muslim League and its leaders considered the division of the country between Muslims and Hindus to be a legitimate course of action. Advocacy for a separate homeland based on the Two-Nation Theory was most prominent in Muslim-majority regions such as the North-Western Province, Punjab, Sindh and Bengal.

Clement Attlee became Prime Minister of Britain as the Labour Party candidate in 1945. To address the challenges facing the subcontinent in the aftermath of World War II, he deemed the appointment of Lord Wavell as the new Viceroy—with a focus on administrative management—to be a crucial step. At that time, India's economic situation was dire due to the war; the famine in Bengal, which claimed the lives of approximately three million people through starvation, had a particularly adverse impact on British politics. In the final years of the war, this famine was not viewed by Britain merely as a natural disaster, but rather as stark evidence of Britain's own ruin (Hickel, 2022).

Assessing the political tension between the Muslim League and the Congress, the British authorities decided to hold new elections in 1945. Both major parties campaigned on their respective manifestos; the Muslim League advocated for the creation of Pakistan, while the Congress maintained a narrative against the partition of India within the constituencies. The Muslim League won the 30 seats reserved for Muslims, whereas the Congress did not officially field any candidates for the Muslim-reserved seats. The Congress's decision not to field candidates in Muslim constituencies contradicted its own narrative of being a representative party for all religious communities (Rahman, 2008). The British government conducted the elections of 1945-46 in India under the separate electorate system. The elections to the Central Legislative Assembly were conducted under a system of separate electorates. Thirty seats were reserved for Muslim constituencies. Congress did not officially nominate candidates for these seats, although some nationalist Muslim candidates received Congress support in particular constituencies. The Muslim League contested the Muslim-reserved constituencies and won all thirty, thereby strengthening its claim to speak for a large share of politically mobilized Muslim voters (Rahman, 2008, p. 175).

In the provincial elections, Congress managed to secure only 23 out of 94 seats in the Muslim-majority provinces (Queshi, 1946). The electoral landscape was not homogeneous, but rather diverse in the four major provinces with a Muslim majority. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan—widely known as Frontier Gandhi or Bacha Khan—was a supporter of the Congress party through the Khudai Khidmatgar network. Indeed, the Congress secured 30 out of the 57 seats largely due to his backing, whereas the Muslim League won 17 seats in NWFP (Now KPK). Conversely, in Punjab, the Unionist Party aligned with the Muslim League. While the Muslim-majority population of Bengal also supported the League. Similarly, the Muslim League emerged as the dominant political force in Sindh. The League achieved remarkable success in Muslim constituencies,

securing a significant number of seats in the provincial assemblies—winning 425 out of the 441 reserved seats. Ultimately, by capturing 85 percent of the contested seats, the Muslim League established itself as the sole representative party of the Muslims. A chart detailing the seats reserved for Muslims is provided below (Aziz K. K., 1987).

Muslim-majority province	INC seats	AIML seats	Total assembly seats
Bengal	86	113	250
Punjab	51	73	175
Sind	18	27	60
NWFP	30	17	50

Due to the political tension between the Congress and the Muslim League, the prospects for a lasting constitutional settlement in India appeared increasingly slim. There was a looming threat of civil war arising from political instability; severe communal riots erupted in Bihar, Calcutta, and Noakhali, as well as in other regions. In light of this volatile situation, Lord Wavell sought permission from the British government for a "Break-up Plan." However, the British government rejected the proposal, insisting instead on resolving the political differences between the two parties and emphasizing the need to build a constitutional consensus—in consultation with other political leaders alongside the two major parties—on a roadmap for achieving independence (Chawla, 2009).

In view of the deteriorating situation in India, the British government sought to extend its rule for another ten years and formulated the Cabinet Mission Plan in 1946 to achieve this objective; however, neither the Muslim League nor the Congress supported it. Observing the worsening political situation, the British government replaced Lord Wavell with Lord Mountbatten, appointing him as the new Governor-General of India and entrusting him with the challenge of maintaining political unity and preserving British authority.

Review of Literature

Wolpert (1996) authored a biography of the Congress political leader Jawaharlal Nehru. He vividly described Nehru's relationships with Lord Mountbatten and, in particular, with Mountbatten's wife, Edwina. Although the work is considered an authoritative biography, Wolpert also explores Nehru's views regarding the events surrounding the Partition of India and his influence on them. He notes that Nehru was deeply interested in the Kashmir issue but showed less concern for the partition of Punjab and Bengal. Wolpert points out that the announcement of the Boundary Commission's decision—originally scheduled for August 9, 1947—was delayed until August 16, 1947, due to the relationship between Nehru and Mountbatten. Additionally, Wolpert mentions that Mountbatten characterized Nehru as a flexible political leader and highlights Nehru's feelings of antipathy toward Jinnah and Gandhi.

Hudson (1985) examined the final decade of the Colonial India. He had served as the constitutional advisor to the Viceroy of India, Lord Linlithgow, from 1941 to 1942. He has tried his hand to write the history of British India covering the politics of 1930 to 1947. During Lord Mountbatten's tenure, he enjoyed unconditional access to Mountbatten's personal papers, correspondence, and all records and documents related to the Partition of India. Consequently, he provided a detailed account of the political landscape in India during the 1930s and 1940s, as

well as the factors that led to the end of the British Raj. Furthermore, he presented a comprehensive review of the June 3rd Plan of 1947 and the entire process of Partition, while also shedding light on the role played by Lord Mountbatten. He also covered the Jinnah-Gandhi talks, the political differences between the Muslim League and the Congress, the failure of the Cabinet Mission, and the political dynamics of Partition involving Indian political leadership. This book by Hudson is considered a significant document for understanding the Partition of India; however, it also faces criticism for having been written to defend and highlight Mountbatten's decisions. Although the book is extensively researched, Hodson's interpretation is framed predominantly through a British administrative lens. His earlier service as Reforms Commissioner and his extensive use of British official and private papers gave him privileged access to policy-making, but also meant that British strategic calculations and official explanations occupy the centre of his narrative. Consequently, his defence of Mountbatten's and Radcliffe's neutrality should be read alongside Pakistani and Indian accounts that contest those claims.

Johnson (1997) presented his work on the independence of Pakistan and India, in which he recounted his firsthand observations. He arrived in India in 1947 and served as a press attaché to Mountbatten. Johnson credits him with ensuring a smooth transition during the partition process. While *Mission with Mountbatten* is a credible account of the period, it, like many other works by British historians, lacks objectivity due to its perspective being shaped by a British viewpoint. Campbell-Johnson attributes the achievement of the transfer largely to Mountbatten's intensive personal diplomacy, his direct negotiations with Congress and League leaders, and his ability to secure acceptance of a final constitutional settlement within a compressed timetable. This insider account is important because Campbell-Johnson observed the Viceroy's staff at close range. Nevertheless, his position as Mountbatten's press attaché requires caution: later scholarship has shown that official publicity also helped frame independence as a British administrative achievement. His account should therefore be used alongside more critical Indian, Pakistani and independent historical studies.

Ali's work on the Partition of India, written in 1973, is regarded as an insightful and highly authoritative source. He was an eyewitness to the partition of British India and was personally present during the administrative division as a member of the Steering Committee. Ali provides unique insights by focusing on the controversy surrounding the Radcliffe Award, noting that its boundaries were altered under Mountbatten's direction at the last moment of the partition (Ali, 1973). The author presents a compelling argument regarding the partition controversy from Pakistan's perspective. Chaudhri Muhammad Ali, a member of the administrative machinery managing partition, provides a detailed Pakistani account of the Radcliffe controversy (Ali, 1973, pp. 208–219, 218–219). He recalls seeing a map on 9 August that appeared to place Ferozepur and Zira on the Pakistan side, whereas the final Award assigned them to India. Regarding the Gurdaspur issue, Ali maintained that Gurdaspur's non-inclusion in Pakistan was the result of actual interference; he held this view because he was among the high-ranking Pakistani officials directly involved in the demarcation process. While the matter should be examined in light of contemporary documents and other significant statements regarding the transfer of power, his testimony nonetheless holds importance.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a combination of three approaches—descriptive, analytical, and narrative—to examine the process of partition. The descriptive method is used to outline the transfer of power, electoral developments, demographic distribution, constitutional restructuring, and the formation of boundary commissions. The analytical method is applied to assess political bargaining, administrative hurdles, demographic criteria, the roles of the British administration and Sikh leadership, the competing narratives of the Muslim League and the Congress, and the constraints of the extremely tight timeframe. The narrative approach is utilized to establish a historical chronology—tracing the evolution of plans for the transfer of power and documenting the preparation and publication of the Radcliffe Award. Together, these three approaches reveal the key political narratives of the time, the administrative decisions being made, and the subsequent interpretations offered by historians.

Primary sources include documents regarding the transfer of power, memoirs of individuals involved in the process, official plans, correspondence, Boundary Commission records, and newspapers and speeches from that era. These sources are utilized to examine administrative decisions and the political stances of the time. Since many individuals involved in the partition of British India and the transfer of power held specific political views or were affiliated with political parties—often reflecting their respective party manifestos—this study places special emphasis on incorporating primary sources to substantiate key claims and clearly articulate the various perspectives. Secondary sources comprise research journal articles on the Partition of India, historical works concerning the end of British colonial rule, studies on communal politics in Punjab, and other subsequently published literature.

These works are used to place the primary evidence within broader historiographical debates and to compare British, Indian, Pakistani and Sikh interpretations. The study therefore treats secondary literature not simply as factual authority but as competing historical interpretation, with particular attention to the author's evidence base, institutional position and period of writing.

DISCUSSION

Partition of India and Influence of Lord Mountbatten

Lord Mountbatten arrived in India in March 1947 as the last Viceroy, backed by the full support of the British Parliament; he quickly grasped the political situation in the country. Following the rejection of Lord Wavell's proposal, it was decided that the British withdrawal would be finalized by June 1948. The British Cabinet granted Mountbatten extensive and extraordinary administrative powers, enabling him to make decisions regarding the transfer of power on the spot rather than referring back to London (Wavel, 1974). Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, held extraordinary administrative powers because British Prime Minister Attlee had instructed him to ensure the termination of the British Raj peacefully and the transfer of power at all costs. Driven by the deteriorating situation in India, Mountbatten was determined to make timely decisions. He enjoyed complete freedom to select his own trusted staff; he appointed Lord Ismay as Chief of Staff, Sir Eric Mievile as Principal Secretary, Campbell-Johnson as Press Attaché, George Abell as Private Secretary, and Ronald Brockman as Personal Secretary. His influence was further bolstered by direct and rapid access to London, which facilitated both the governance of India and the transfer of power. He possessed full authority to reshuffle his team;

for instance, Pethick-Lawrence was appointed Secretary of State for India and the Viceroy's Chief of Staff, General Ismay, were replaced. To ensure the prompt handling of political and administrative matters, Mountbatten was the only Viceroy who was granted the authority by the British Cabinet to make sweeping changes in line with his own priorities (Menon, 1957).

At this time, Lord Wavell was in London and was not given any indication of an impending appointment (Ziegler, 2001). There were rumors circulating that Nehru had requested Mountbatten to replace Wavell, as Nehru accused Wavell of supporting the Muslim League's partition stance. However, neither Lord Mountbatten nor any other British officials were in favor of partition (Lapierre, 1982). At the outset of Mountbatten's viceroyalty, the formal British preference remained a transfer of power through a united constitutional arrangement broadly consistent with the Cabinet Mission framework. Partition was viewed as administratively and strategically costly because it required division of the armed forces, finances, services, communications and mixed provinces. By April–May 1947, however, the continuing Congress–League deadlock and worsening communal situation led Mountbatten and the British Cabinet to accept partition as a practicable route to an early transfer of power.

On February 20, 1947, the British Prime Minister announced that the final transfer of power would take place by June 1948. He further stated that this power would be handed over to Indian political leaders by the British authorities. Due to the tense political situation in India, Mountbatten was appointed as the last Governor-General of India. Before Mountbatten departed from England for India, Prime Minister Attlee instructed him to implement the Cabinet Mission Plan—which envisaged a unified government for the Indian states and British India via a Constituent Assembly, operating within the framework of the British Commonwealth. Mountbatten was authorized to exercise flexibility regarding the transfer of power scheduled for June 1948 and to communicate this to local political leaders; however, his primary focus would be remained on ensuring the transfer of power by the date already announced June 1948 (Menon, 1957, p. 861).

Negotiations on Communal Interests and Territorial Claims for Partition of India

Before his departure, Lord Mountbatten consulted Lord Wavell, who apprised him of the political turmoil in British India and warned that the political situation could escalate further if a united India were not partitioned and power transferred to local political leaders. Mountbatten arrived in Delhi on March 22, 1947, and assumed office as the last Governor-General on March 24, 1947. In view of the rapidly deteriorating political tension and security situation on the ground, Lord Wavell proposed a "breakdown plan" for the British withdrawal and sought the British government's approval to transfer power in a phased manner (Joshi, 2006). A major challenge in this process was the risk of severe communal violence and conflict associated with the transfer of authority to local Indian leaders. Lord Wavell had assured the British government that maintaining long-term political or administrative control over India—or persuading local Indians to agree on a unified constitutional settlement—was exceedingly difficult. Consequently, plans were formulated to accept the partition of British India and to design a military withdrawal (Chawla, 2009).

Mountbatten already had established ties with prominent Indian figures—such as the Maharaja of Bikaner, the Nawab of Bhopal, and Pandit Nehru—prior to assuming office as the last Viceroy of India on March 24, 1947; subsequently, he sought to foster these friendly relations and set a

new standard for cordiality in Anglo-Indian interactions. (Tenzelmann, 2007). Even though a meeting between Mountbatten and Jinnah could not be arranged on the day of the ceremony, Mountbatten inquired about Jinnah from Nehru. Nehru responded by noting that, while Jinnah had achieved financial success, his legal abilities were average. Nehru also expressed doubts about Jinnah's genuine commitment to Islam or Pakistan, suggesting that his separatist position was primarily a strategy to gain attention and political influence (Joshi, 2006, p. 11). He also mentioned that Jinnah was opposed to participating in meetings, responding to inquiries, or making any forward-looking statements. Subsequently, in April, Mountbatten met with Jinnah, influenced by the image of him crafted by Nehru, and described him as "the most frigid, haughty, and disdainful" (Wolpert, 2006).

During a meeting, Jinnah urged Mountbatten to partition India—specifically calling for the creation of Pakistan and the division of the armed forces—to ensure lasting political stability (Menon, 1957, p. 176). Mountbatten disagreed with Jinnah's proposal for partition, dismissing it as sheer folly; he believed Jinnah's "Two-Nation Theory" lacked any sound basis and feared that partitioning Punjab and Bengal along religious lines would trigger perpetual communal conflict. Jinnah, however, held a different view, arguing that the populations of Punjab and Bengal had already defined their identities through their respective regional and religious affiliations. He also warned that the partition of British India was inevitable and carried the risk of massive upheaval and bloodshed (Lapierre, 1982, p. 39), effectively making peace in the region contingent upon the creation of Pakistan (Mansregh, 1982, pp. 137-39).. Although their initial meetings failed to foster a close or enduring rapport, Mountbatten later remarked on his impression of Jinnah, noting, "My God, he was cold!" (Ziegler, 2001, p. 367).

Mountbatten held a specific mandate to transfer power from the British Raj to the local Indians. The aim was to resolve local political tensions through a mutually agreed-upon constitutional settlement and to devise a way to ensure that India's link with the Commonwealth was maintained; making this possible was part of Mountbatten's formal directives (Ali R. U., 2009). When Mountbatten assumed power, civil strife and communal tension in India were at their peak. In the last week of March, he sent a report to British Prime Minister Clement Attlee highlighting the deep communal rifts among the political leaders within the Indian cabinet. He further noted that the prospects of achieving a consensus among the leaders of India's political parties in the near future were virtually non-existent. He attributed this to the fact that local political leaders were unwilling to consider proposals from the British authorities, insisting instead on the acceptance of their own proposed solutions. Mountbatten signaled his intention to take immediate action based on the mandate given by the British Prime Minister to curb the political tension and civil strife.

Abul Kalam Azad as a political leader of the Congress, advocated for a unitary form of government in the subcontinent. He argued that the Congress was justified in increasing political pressure on the British Indian administration to accelerate the transfer of power. Personally, he opposed the partition of India; he was well aware of the fact that if the United India were partitioned and granted independence, communal riots and regional tensions would persist. Consequently, alongside his opposition to partition, he supported a unitary constitutional structure and a strong central government (Azad, 1960).

Mountbatten held meetings with Jinnah and concluded that Jinnah's cooperation (Dar, 2008) could not be secured for any constitutional framework other than the creation of Pakistan. The establishment of Pakistan, under any circumstances, was possible only through the partition of India. Although Mountbatten met with Jinnah (Lapierre, 1982, p. 123) in an effort to keep India united, he failed to persuade Jinnah to agree to any political or constitutional solution. Mountbatten concluded that the League would accept partition only if a sovereign Pakistan were conceded, but the Pakistan eventually offered was territorially narrower than the League's broader demand. The Pakistan whose establishment Jinnah was advocating comprised Assam and Bengal, as well as the Muslim-majority units of Punjab, the Frontier Province, Sindh, and Balochistan. Under the final settlement, Punjab and Bengal themselves were partitioned, Assam as a whole was not included, and referendums were used in the NWFP and Sylhet. Jinnah therefore characterized the proposed state as a 'truncated' or 'moth-eaten' Pakistan. Mountbatten believed that any compromise less than this would not persuade Jinnah to alter his stance. Without Jinnah's agreement, maintaining unity in India would likely necessitate the use of force (Ziegler, 2001, p. 371). Mountbatten realized that if the Muslim League's demand—to base the partition of India on religious majority areas—were accepted, Sikh leaders and the Congress could use that same principle to press for the partition of the mixed-population provinces of Bengal and Punjab. Consequently, Mountbatten faced a highly difficult situation regarding the division of Bengal and Punjab, as these two Muslim-majority provinces were integral to the proposed state of Pakistan (Lapierre, 1982, p. 123).

Competing Independence Plans and Divergent Political Positions

By mid-1947, the Viceroy and his cabinet were deliberating on two plans regarding the partition of India and the transfer of power (Menon, 1957, p. 243). The first was a plan for a united India—specifically the "Union Plan," which resembled the 1946 Cabinet Mission Plan—aimed at transferring power without partitioning the country. The second option was the "Balkan Plan," which envisaged the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan within a limited geographical area (Dar, 2008). Secret meetings were being held at the Viceroy's residence to discuss the transfer of power and the partition of India, and negotiations concerning both potential plans were underway. By early April 1947, Mountbatten's staff was considering alternatives to the Cabinet Mission framework. On 11 April, Ismay sent V. P. Menon an outline of the proposed transfer scheme for elaboration. A draft—later commonly described as Plan Balkan—was placed before the provincial Governors on 15–16 April for comments (Menon, 1957, pp. 176-177, 242). A further confidential staff meeting on 19 April considered the revised scheme. On 2 May, Ismay and George Abell carried the draft to London for Cabinet consideration. After further modification, Mountbatten showed the scheme to Nehru at Simla on 10 May. Nehru objected strongly to provisions that could permit extensive provincial fragmentation or 'Balkanization.' His rejection prompted another rapid revision, drawing on V. P. Menon's alternative of transferring power to two central Dominion governments. The resulting settlement became the basis of the 3 June Plan. Jinnah's opposition to the partition of Punjab and Bengal should be discussed after this chronology rather than presented as evidence that both leaders reacted to one identical draft in the same way (Hodson, 1985).

Congress leaders were initially opposed to the partition of the subcontinent, but they eventually agreed to divide Punjab and Bengal along communal lines to ensure a political resolution and the

transfer of power; however, Jinnah condemned this shift in the Congress's stance as a reprehensible move rooted in bitterness and malice. (Menon, 1957, p. 355) and rejected the idea of a "moth-eaten Pakistan" (Waheed Ahmed, 2000), which would result in "terrible consequences, confusion, and bloodshed" (Ali R. U., 2009, p. 86). Jinnah's words were vehement; he voiced his political criticism by describing the proposed partition as 'moth-eaten' Pakistan and a 'sinister move'. He expressed the apprehension that if the provinces of Bengal and Punjab were partitioned based on economic considerations, the resulting new majority regions would prove economically weak. Regarding the partition of British India, he pointed out that dividing the non-Muslim majority areas of Punjab and Bengal based on this economic logic signaled a process of repeated fragmentation—leading to further splintering—and was inherently contentious. Furthermore, applying the principle of self-determination at a geographical level in this manner would expose the administrative frailty of British India.

He argued that this would undoubtedly pose greater difficulties for the British government than any other issue, as it would necessitate a similar division of all the other nine provinces (Menon, 1957, p. 355). He remarked that "Punjabis and Bengalis would resent seeing their unified provinces being divided" (Ali R. U., 2009, pp. 86-87). Critics from the Sikh community and the Congress argued that if the Muslim League's endorsement of partition were accepted as valid, the principle of partition could logically be applied to the regions of Punjab and Bengal. If a territorially concentrated community should not be permanently governed by another majority, then non-Muslim-majority districts could claim separation from a Pakistan-oriented province. Jinnah rejected this recursive application of partition. He argued instead that Punjab and Bengal possessed provincial unity, shared economic systems and common regional identities, and that further subdivision would generate continuing fragmentation. The Lahore Resolution itself referred to geographically contiguous Muslim-majority zones and allowed 'territorial readjustments,' which made the precise scale of those readjustments a matter of intense political dispute. Mountbatten and the Congress aimed to place Jinnah in a difficult position. They anticipated that if Jinnah accepted the partition of Punjab and Bengal, it would provoke a violent backlash from the Muslims in those provinces. This unrest could potentially lead to a split within the Muslim League, a situation Jinnah could ill afford (Zaidi, 2000).

In addition to Jinnah, the Governors of both Punjab and Bengal also opposed the partition of their provinces (Ali R. U., 2009, p. 87). Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, the last Chief Minister of Bengal, proposed establishing "a sovereign, independent, and undivided Bengal within a divided India" (Menon, 1957, p. 355), advocating that the province be granted dominion status. Jinnah ultimately accepted the plan, despite opposition, apprehensions, and the prevailing atmosphere; the Muslim League had no other recourse. However, Jinnah insisted that the fair division of Pakistan's legitimate share (Jinnah's statement on partition, 1947) and assets be ensured while British control over India still remained in place. Regarding the anticipated exchange of populations, he made it clear to both the Indian and Pakistani governments that measures must be taken to execute this process effectively. He further argued that, to avoid potential conflicts, the division of the armed forces between the two new independent and sovereign states should also be carried out along communal lines (Menon, 1957, p. 355). However, Mountbatten refused to accept this proposal for the division of military forces, a stance supported by the Congress Party (Aziz Q. u. D., 1997). Mountbatten was well aware that denying the new state of Pakistan

military strength would leave it weaker, thereby allowing India to appear more powerful and establish dominance in the wake of independence.

Constraints and Failures of Colonial Administration

On May 2, 1947, Lord Ismay and his aides Goege Abell departed for London to seek the British Cabinet's approval for the plan regarding the partition of India and the transfer of power. After deliberating on the matter, the British Cabinet approved the proposal and sent the revised plan back to India. Mountbatten shared the Cabinet-approved partition plan with Nehru, who raised objections and proposed several changes. Mountbatten addressed Nehru's concerns by incorporating amendments and making the "Dominion status" framework the foundation of the new draft. Mountbatten himself traveled to London on May 18–19, 1947, to secure approval. After holding discussions with the British Cabinet and key political leaders, he returned to India on May 31, 1947, with the approved and finalized partition plan. (Ziegler, 2001, pp. 378-379).

Upon his return from London, Mountbatten convened a meeting with the political leaders of the Sikh community, the Muslim League, and the Congress to discuss the approved partition plan. Jinnah insisted on consulting his party regarding the new plan, but Mountbatten did not grant permission for such consultation with the Muslim League. Instead, he warned that Pakistan might have to face consequences if the plan was not approved through consensus (Johnson, 1997, pp. 102-103).

On June 3, 1947, Mountbatten issued a statement detailing the plan for the partition of British India into two separate entities: Pakistan and India. Clandestinely, Mountbatten believed that if a joint military force were established, India would wield greater influence than Pakistan, thereby alleviating Pakistan's security concerns regarding India; this arrangement would have enabled India to easily dominate the new state of Pakistan. Although the Congress and the Muslim League had agreed to the partition of British India, Jinnah was not entirely satisfied with accepting this specific settlement; nevertheless, he had no alternative but to accept the new state of Pakistan (Wolpert, 2006, p. 152). The announcement of June 3, 1947, stipulated that the transfer of power would be affected on August 15, 1947. This was a deadline allowing a mere ten weeks for the transfer of authority (Tenzelmann, 2007, p. 171) from British India to two independent dominions: India and Pakistan.

Actualization of 3rd June Plan

The June 3rd Plan was essentially a blueprint for the partition of the subcontinent. It outlined that the will of the people in Assam and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) would be ascertained through referendums. The plan proposed that if members of the existing Constituent Assembly were not accepted by the two new independent nations, the countries would be authorized to form their own separate constituent assemblies. Similarly, military assets were to be divided based on the size and population of the respective countries. The June 3rd Plan agreed upon the establishment of a Boundary Commission to handle the partition and demarcation of Punjab and Bengal; furthermore, it stipulated that borders would respect Muslim-majority and Hindu-majority areas, while also taking specific "other factors" into account. It granted the princely states the option to accede to either of the new sovereign nations based on geographical considerations. The plan also proposed dividing the legislative assemblies of Bengal and Punjab into two sections; the representatives for the partitioned areas—comprising members from Muslim-majority districts and those from the remaining regions—would be determined by the

assemblies from which they had originally been elected (Mansregh, 1982, pp. 89-94). Punjab and Bengal were major provinces in terms of their Muslim populations; it is also essential to note that the minority communities residing there were taken into consideration. At the insistence of the Indian National Congress, the provincial assemblies held debates regarding the division of the provinces, and both the Punjab and Bengal assemblies voted to join Pakistan. Consequently, the demarcation of their boundaries had to be determined based on this Muslim majority (Menon, 1957, p. 388).

Hasty and Mismanaged Actualization of 3rd June Plan

The Viceroy had to establish a Boundary Commission for the separation of Assam and Sylhet alongside Bengal (Hudson, 1985, p. 346). Jinnah proposed that three senior British judicial officials (Lords) or three representatives nominated by the United Nations be involved (Menon, 1957, pp. 320-329) in the division of the provinces; however, Mountbatten did not agree to this suggestion. Instead, two Boundary Commissions were appointed, each comprising two Muslim and two non-Muslim (Hindu) High Court judges from the respective provinces slated for partition. The Congress proposed including a Sikh member (Quraishi, 1995)—who had served as a High Court judge—alongside the Hindu members. Sir Cyril Radcliffe was agreed upon as the British judge and joint chairman of the Boundary Commission. Radcliffe had never previously visited India in an administrative or high-ranking official capacity, yet he was entrusted with the responsibility of determining the geographical boundaries of two provinces: Punjab and Bengal. He faced immense challenges, including administrative hurdles, technical complexities, communal tensions, the vastness of the territory, and a very tight timeframe. After the partition, he acknowledged that he had been given very little time; he had arrived in India on July 8, 1947. He admitted that had he been granted more time, he could have discharged his duties regarding the demarcation more effectively (Roberts, 1994). To assist Sir Cyril Radcliffe, Christopher Beaumont—a senior official from the Indian Political Service—was appointed as his Private Secretary, while V.D. Iyer, an official from the Viceroy's Office, was appointed as his Assistant Secretary (Gupta, 2002).

Communal Interests and Political Positions as Opposed to Partition Plan

In accordance with the 1941 census, districts with Muslim-majority populations served as the basis for determining provincial boundaries. Radcliffe established his headquarters in Delhi. Meetings of the Bengal Award (or Bengal Boundary Commission) were convened in Calcutta during July and August 1947, while meetings of the Punjab Award (or Punjab Boundary Commission) were held in Lahore in July 1947 (Golant, 1975). According to the 1941 census of British Punjab, Muslims constituted the largest demographic group, comprising 57.1 percent of the population—totaling 16,217,742 individuals. Hindus formed the second-largest group at 22 percent, with a population of 6,301,737. Sikhs, the third-largest group, numbered 3,757,401, while Scheduled Castes and other castes accounted for approximately 5.6 percent of the population, totaling 1,592,320 individuals. At that time, Punjab spanned a total area of 138,414 square miles, ranking it among the largest provinces in terms of population (Mitra, 1947; Chauhan, 1995).

In Punjab, the Sikh and Hindu populations were distributed across the eastern and southern regions, while the Muslim population was concentrated in the northern and western parts (Close, 1997). From 1923 to 1947, the Unionist Party—representing the diverse religious demographics

of the province—remained in power; however, after 1930, significant internal tension emerged following the passing of key leaders such as Sir Chhotu Ram, Sir Sikandar Hayat, and Sundar Singh Majithia. This instability was exacerbated by intense political rivalry among the Muslim League, the Akali Dal, and the Congress, which prevented religious harmony from taking root. Notably, the intensity of communal strife in Punjab did not match the levels seen in other parts of British India. Furthermore, the Muslim League's alliance with the Unionist Party enabled it to successfully secure victories for its candidates in the seats reserved for Muslims in the province (Moon, 1961).

By securing the support of Muslims in Punjab and Bengal, the Muslim League demonstrated that it was the sole representative party of the Muslims, as its leaders had worked tirelessly for the cause of Pakistan following the 1940 resolution. Regarding the partition of Punjab, Jinnah was aware that the Muslim and Sikh populations would be the most significantly affected; he attempted to persuade Sikh leaders to support the Muslim League and the cause of Pakistan by assuring them of peace and prosperity and dispelling fears of Muslim dominance (Ispahani, 1959). However, the Sikhs insisted on the allocation of a specific region for themselves within Punjab rather than acceding to the province's integration into Pakistan. When the Boundary Commissions were established, both major groups—Muslims and Sikhs—voiced concerns based on demographics and the composition of the districts. Hindus proposed the partition of Punjab based on certain "other factors," while the Sikhs focused on their own interests regarding the division, prioritizing the development of their region, their extensive landholdings, and religious sentiments; they sought to have the borders drawn in accordance with their own wishes. Consequently, demographic, political, religious, commercial, and economic aspects were all impacted. The Sikhs were actively striving to safeguard their lands and secure control over their holy (Butalia, 1999). Sites. However, the prevalence of Muslim-majority areas effectively ruled out any possibility of Sikh demographic dominance (Lapierre, 1982, p. 125).

In Punjab, the Sikhs were emerging as an influential and highly active minority group; by enlisting in the army and distinguishing themselves through their service, they sought to gain the government's favor. The number of Sikhs serving in the British Army—whether within India or abroad—exceeded two million (Parkin, 1945); this figure was seven times higher than their proportional share of the population, and they constituted 10 percent of the total force. In Punjab, the Sikhs played a prominent role regarding land ownership and the economy (Ali R. U., 2009, p. 88), particularly as the region had developed into a fertile area with an extensive canal network. The vast majority of the Sikh population resided in Punjab, where the community—concentrated in areas such as Patiala, Kangra, Lahore (Davis, 1951), and their environs—participated in politics as a significant political entity. Sikhs opposed any partition plan that threatened their interests by potentially separating them from their holy sites, jeopardizing their economic well-being, fragmenting their community, or leading to the division of their agricultural assets (Wolpert, 2006, p. 154).

The Sikhs demanded the establishment of a separate state, which they called "Khalistan". They showed and attached great importance to this demand because the region housed the Golden Temple and the birthplaces of several Gurus. Sikhs sought to leverage their religious identity to secure a significant portion of Punjab and expand their political influence. However, British rulers rejected this demand, arguing that the Sikh population in Punjab was smaller than that of

Muslims and Hindus and was geographically dispersed across India. The Sikhs further proposed that the partition of Punjab be aligned with the locations of their holy sites. But this proposal was also excluded. Ultimately, the Sikhs decided to align themselves with the Congress rather than the Muslim League, opting to support the former politically. In doing so, they signaled a desire to forge closer ties with Hindus, drawing upon a history marked by conflicts with the Mughals and shared historical grievances. Some historians argue that the decision of the Akali leadership to join India rather than pursue a separate state was the most prudent choice during the partition (Sandhu, 2012). Despite their strong ties with the British as employers in the armed forces, the Sikhs' dispersed presence weakened their position. In July 1947, the Sikhs submitted a proposal to the Boundary Commission suggesting that the areas of Sialkot, Gujranwala, Lyallpur, Lahore, and Montgomery be handed over to the Sikhs and incorporated into Sikh territory (M. M. Saadullah, 1993).

The Sikhs were aggrieved by Mountbatten's decision to partition Punjab; they were trying to understand why the partition—supported by the Indian National Congress—was limited specifically to Punjab and Bengal (Lapierre, 1982, p. 168). Regarding the partition plan, Mountbatten had instructed the Boundary Commission to prioritize the interests of non-Muslims—and the Sikh population in particular—alongside "other factors". However, in the absence of mutual consensus, the chairperson of the Punjab Award Commission proceeded to divide the majority-populated areas based on his own judgment. Ultimately, at a meeting held at the Services Club in Simla, Radcliffe contented to mark the Punjab Award and issued orders for the implementation of the decision (Gupta, 2002, p. 24).

During the partition process, Radcliffe awarded several Muslim-majority areas located east of the Ravi River to India based on "other factors." These included Gurdaspur (52% Muslim population), Batala (55%), Jalandhar (51%), Nakodar (59%), Zira (65%), Ferozepur (55%), and Pathankot-Ajnala (59%). Conversely, the contiguous areas of Kasur, Lahore, and Shakargarh (Sherwani, 1984), with Muslim populations of 57%, 62%, and 51% respectively, were incorporated into Pakistan. However, history records no instance where a Hindu-majority area was awarded to Pakistan during the partition of Punjab. Furthermore, control over key canals and headworks linked to the Sutlej, Ravi, and Beas rivers (Rai, 1956) was handed over to India, effectively depriving Pakistan of water access. This jeopardized the economic stability of the newly formed West Punjab, which had become part of Pakistan (Ali C. M., 1973, p. 215).

Similarly, regarding other factors, areas of Bengal, specifically Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, and two thanas of Jeysore, were awarded to India. Approximately six thousand square miles of Muslim-majority territory in Assam were also handed over to India. Furthermore, the entire area of Calcutta, which was a major economic hub of Bengal, was awarded to India to curtail Muslim economic influence, despite the city having a non-Muslim majority (Zaidi, 2000, p. 379). Radcliffe had resolved to complete his task within a tight timeframe, finalizing all boundary awards by August 9, 1947. He announced the award on August 16 and published it on August 17, 1947. Before leaving India, he prohibited the public release of the Boundary Commission's records. A day prior to his departure, he expressed apprehension that eight million people would be outraged, feeling he had acted contrary to their expectations, especially since they would not find him in India to confront him. Radcliffe also stated that he had worked tirelessly, day and night, to discharge the responsibility of implementing the partition (Gupta, 2002, p. 24).

Accusation on Lord Mountbatten and Cyril Radcliffe for “Unfair Play”

Amendments and alterations made to the Boundary Commission's work at Mountbatten's behest turned Muslim members into his critics. They accused him of modifying the Punjab and Bengal awards to benefit India. Non-Muslim members also observed that Mountbatten held greater decision-making authority than Radcliffe. Within British official circles, too, Mountbatten faced allegations that the changes to the Radcliffe Award smacked of an intent to weaken and harm Pakistan. Scott, Mountbatten's private secretary, stated that on July 22, 1947, while the Boundary Commission was meeting in Lahore (Dar, 2008, p. 113), Mountbatten personally intervened (Mahajan, 1963) to persuade Radcliffe to revise the draft and incorporate proposed amendments. Although Radcliffe completed his work by August 10, Mountbatten did not announce the award until August 16, 1947. Even though, the independence of the two new states had already been proclaimed on August 14 and 15, 1947 (Ali C. M., 1973, p. 209). It is also speculated that releasing the altered Radcliffe Award earlier might have further escalated communal violence. Thus, Mountbatten planned to delay the announcement until August 16 (Menon, 1957) to ensure an orderly British withdrawal from India and avoid last-minute complications. Conversely, Mountbatten claimed that the award was not finalized by August 13. Mountbatten states that he attended the Independence Day celebrations of Pakistan in Karachi on August 14 and India in Delhi on August 15, 1947. Due to these engagements, he was unable to discuss the award (Seervai, 1989) with Muslim and Indian leaders. However, the Viceroy's staff indicated that Radcliffe had finalized his report by the evening of August 9, 1947. It showed that Mountbatten deliberately delayed the announcement of the Radcliffe Award to avert communal riots and regional unrest.

Mountbatten was also concerned about how the Muslim League would react to the Award. He believed that delaying its announcement would make them more willing to accept the decision. Furthermore, he felt he needed extra time to make certain adjustments. In the map prepared on August 8, the Muslim-majority areas of Zira and Ferozepur had been included on the Pakistani side. However, at the last minute on August 9, following pressure from Indian National Congress leader Nehru, demands were made to alter the Radcliffe Award so that Ferozepur and Zira would be transferred from Pakistan to India. Additionally, Mountbatten awarded Gurdaspur to India instead of Pakistan, thereby granting India direct access to Kashmir (Ali C. M., 1973, pp. 218-219). Gurdaspur had previously served as a vital link connecting Pakistan directly to Kashmir. But its transfer to India deprived Pakistan of this route. The underlying reason was that the Indian National Congress and Nehru did not want Mountbatten to hand over the entire Gurdaspur region to Pakistan; they sought to ensure their own objectives were met while minimizing Pakistan's territorial gains. India accepted Mountbatten as its first Governor-General and joined the Commonwealth, partly to garner support for these modifications to the Award (Menon, 1957, pp. 870-71).

In contrast, Jinnah rejected Mountbatten's proposal to serve as the joint Governor-General of both Pakistan and India (Johnson, 1997, pp. 128-29). Instead, in consultation with the Muslim League, Jinnah was designated for the position of Governor-General of Pakistan (Menon, 1957, p. 879). Jinnah's decision deeply offended Mountbatten (Stephen, 1963). Consequently, Mountbatten fostered closer ties with the Congress and created difficulties for the nascent state of Pakistan, most notably by awarding the Gurdaspur region (Quraishi, 1995, p. 346), (which

provided a route to Kashmir) to India. A decision that subsequently led to wars between the two nations.

Jinnah termed the Radcliffe Award "incomprehensible" and "unjust," criticizing (Ali C. M., 1973, p. 220) it as a political rather than a judicial decision. The award presented significant challenges for Pakistan; nevertheless, Jinnah pledged to accept it—despite his reservations—in the hope that the terms of the agreement would be honored (Zaidi, 2000, pp. 648-651). The partition of British India triggered a massive humanitarian crisis, leaving 10 million desperate refugees homeless, while approximately 200,000 people lost their lives during the migration to their new homes (Wolpert, 2006).

Aftermaths of the Punjab Award 1947

Mountbatten announced the independence of both nations—in Karachi, Pakistan, on August 14, 1947, and in Delhi on August 15, 1947. An atmosphere of jubilation prevailed everywhere; the euphoria in both countries knew no bounds. However, this joy was short-lived. For a mere 48 hours later, on August 16, 1947, the Radcliffe Award was announced. Following the Radcliffe announcement, a storm of violence erupted in Punjab. A wave of communal riots swept through the region, and the slaughter of people reached its peak along the routes leading into and out of Punjab. News of these riots was reaching the capital. Large mobs of Sikhs and Hindus from East Punjab began targeting Muslim villages, setting homes ablaze and massacring innocent men, women, the elderly, and children—even newborns.

Similarly, reports of slaughter and carnage were emerging from Western Punjab, where Muslims subjected Sikh and Hindu men, women, and children to violence. Punjab became the epicenter of the killings and devastation. Yet, amidst these events, it can be said that Muslims were the group most severely affected by the destruction and loss of life, as they faced opposition from Mountbatten while simultaneously being targeted by Sikhs and Hindus (Dar, 1999).

A surge in communal violence was witnessed in East Punjab when Sikhs began a campaign of religious cleansing against Muslims, prompting a mass exodus of people from the region. During this period, Sikh militias, Akali leaders, (Suhail, 1991) and the Hindu organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) orchestrated large-scale communal riots that resulted in the massacre of Muslims (Ali C. M., 1973, p. 254). Despite the intense communal tension, many families crossed the border drawn between the two nations in 1947. Approximately 12 million people were displaced from their homes, around 5 million were killed, and 7 million (Suhail, 1991, p. 88) migrated to Pakistan. Amidst these genocidal riots, the British authorities appeared helpless to take effective action against Hindu and Sikh extremists, and no large-scale measures were undertaken to curb their activities.

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion leads to the conclusion that Mountbatten's plan of June 3, 1947, precipitated an extraordinarily hasty partition process, with the Radcliffe Award—which delineated the borders—being announced only after independence had been granted. The rapid division of Punjab and Bengal created a climate of profound uncertainty. Punjab presented a highly complex migration challenge due to its demographic composition. While Muslims formed the majority, the Hindu and Sikh populations held deep political, cultural, and broad economic ties across the region. Conflicting territorial claims by the Sikh leadership, the Muslim League, and the Congress imbued the partition of Punjab with critical strategic and administrative

significance. Factors such as insufficient demographic data, the waning authority of the colonial administration, time constraints, and political pressure compelled the British government to adopt an administrative compromise, aimed at balancing competing claims rather than securing a solution acceptable to all political stakeholders. The hasty implementation and delayed announcement of the Radcliffe Award resulted in inadequate arrangements for the transfer of power; consequently, public anxiety escalated to such an extent that social upheaval and mass migration stained history crimson.

The Punjab Award highlighted long-standing tensions involving Pakistan and India, as political ambitions created a conflict of interest between the two nations. The arbitrary nature of the settlement and the partition of Punjab not only pitted Muslims and Sikhs against each other but also fostered an atmosphere of unease between the two countries. Whether driven by political objectives or economic interests, the partition of these two groups has historically drawn significant criticism. Although the British colonial administration exercised great caution in overseeing the borders and managing the transitional phase, it achieved only limited success. The transfer of power did not occur peacefully, and the influence of local organizations profoundly impacted the partition process. Demographic realities necessitated administrative restructuring, while the division of territories exposed the limitations of the administrative system—which proved ill-equipped to handle the communal riots of 1947. Ultimately, the Punjab Award stands as a controversial historical decision; the deep-rooted conflicts and the inevitability of partition left a legacy that continues to shape the political narratives and bilateral relations between Pakistan and India in South Asia today.

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