

THE MOUNTBATTEN PLAN

In February, 1947, Lord Mountbatten was sent as the Viceroy to India to ensure early transfer of power. He put up his plan on June 3, 1947 which included partition of India. Following the Mountbatten Plan, June 3, 1947, India was made free, but by partitioning India the new state of Pakistan was created.

BACKGROUND

The representatives of the Muslim League from the Muslim-majority provinces boycotted the Constituent Assembly formed to frame a new Constitution for India. Communal riots broke out in different parts of the country. The Congress, though, in power at the Centre could not control the situation, as law and order was the responsibility of the provinces. To solve the political and communal deadlock the Mountbatten Plan of June 3, 1947 laid down detailed measures for the partition of India, and the speedy transfer of political power in the form of Dominion Status to the newly-born Dominions of India and Pakistan.

LORD MOUNTBATTEN AS VICEROY

- In February 1947, following Attlee's declaration for "transfer of power", Wavell was replaced as Viceroy by Lord Mountbatten.
- He was the last Viceroy and charged with the task of winding up the Raj by 30th June 1948
- Mountbatten was given more powers than his predecessors to settle the matters on the spot so he was quick in decision making
- He was directed to explore the options of unity and division till October, 1947 after which he was to advise His Majesty's Government on the form transfer of power should take.
- He soon discovered that the broad contours of the scenario that was to emerge were discernible even before he came to India.
- Cabinet Mission Plan was a dead horse. Jinnah was obdurate that the Muslims would settle for nothing less than a sovereign state.
- A serious attempt at retaining unity would have involved identifying with the forces that wanted a unified India and countering those who opposed it.
- Rather than doing that, Mountbatten preferred to woo both sides.

PROVISIONS

The main points of the Mountbatten Plan of 3rd June, 1947 were as follows:

DOMINION STATUS

- The 3rd June, 1947 Plan, famously came to be known as the Mountbatten Plan.
- It sought to effect an early transfer of power.
- This transfer of power was to be done on the basis of Dominion Status to two successor states, India and Pakistan.

PARTITION

- The members of the Legislative Assemblies of Bengal and the Punjab should meet separately in two groups i.e. representatives of the predominantly Hindu areas, and representatives of the predominantly Muslim areas.
- If both sections of each of these Assemblies voted for partition, then that province would be partitioned.
- Partition will be followed by creation of two dominions and two constituent assemblies
- If Bengal decided in favor of partition, a referendum was to be held in the Sylhet District of Assam to decide its fate.
- Similarly, a referendum was proposed to decide the future of the North West Frontier Province.
- Sindh Legislative Assembly was to decide either to join the existing Constituent Assembly or the New Constituent Assembly.

BOUNDARY COMMISSION

- In case of partition, the viceroy would set up a Boundary Commission to demarcate the boundaries of the province on the basis of ascertaining the contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims.
- Thus a boundary commission was set up under the chairmanship of Sir Cyril Redcliff for demarcating the boundaries of new parts of the Punjab and Bengal

PRINCELY STATES

- The British suzerainty over these Princely states was terminated.
- They were given the choice to remain independent or accede to dominions of India or Pakistan.

TRANSFER OF POWER

- Mountbatten announced at a press conference that the British would soon leave India for good on 15 August 1947.
- Thus an early date was decided by the British to leave India as compared to 30th June 1948 as decided earlier

Thus, the League's demand for creation of Pakistan was conceded to the extent that it would be created, but taking Congress' position on unity into account Pakistan would be made as small as possible. Mountbatten's formula was to divide India but retain maximum unity.

RATIONALE FOR AN EARLY DATE

- One of the major reasons for an early date for withdrawal was the desperation of the British to secure Congress's agreement on dominion status.
- The British also wanted to escape responsibility for the rapidly deteriorating communal situation.

SEEKING GOODWILL OF CONGRESS

Since Congress was asked to concede their main point i.e. a unified India, all their other demands were met. Whether it was ruling out independence for the princes or unity for Bengal or Hyderabad's joining up with Pakistan instead of India, Mountbatten firmly supported Congress on these issues. He got His Majesty's Government to agree to his argument that Congress goodwill was vital if India was to remain in the commonwealth.

WHY CONGRESS ACCEPTED DOMINION STATUS

The Congress was willing to accept Dominion Status for a while despite its being against the spirit of Lahore Congress (1929) declaration of "Purna Swaraj" because:-

- Congress wanted a quick transfer of power in a peaceful manner
- It was important for congress to assume authority and power to check the explosive situation due to communal tension
- Dominion Status gave breathing time to the new administration as British officers and civil service officials could stay on till Indians get settled in their new positions.

For Britain, Dominion Status offered a chance of keeping India in the Commonwealth, even if temporarily. Though Jinnah offered to bring Pakistan into the Commonwealth, a greater store was laid by India's membership of the Commonwealth, as India's economic strength and defence potential were deemed sounder and Britain had a greater value of trade and Investment there.

AFTERMATH

- The seventy-two day timetable, 3rd June to 15th August 1947, given by the British in their hurry to leave India, for both transfer of power and division of the country, was to prove disastrous.
- In fact, a peaceful division could take a few years at the very least.
- The partition council had to divide the assets in a hurry and there were no transitional institutional structures within which the knotty problems spilling over from division could be tackled.
- Mountbatten had hoped to provide the necessary link between India and Pakistan by becoming common Governor-General of India and Pakistan.
- But this could not happen as Jinnah wanted the position of the Governor General of Pakistan for himself.
- Hence even the joint defence machinery set up failed to last beyond December 1947 by which time Kashmir had already been the scene of a military conflict
- The Boundary Commission Award was ready by 12th August, 1947 but Mountbatten decided to make it public after Independence Day, so that the responsibility would not fall on the British.
- The delay in announcing the Boundary Commission award compounded the ongoing problem of communal riots in India.
- Ultimately, the Indian Independence Act, 1947 was enacted by the British Parliament that provided for the end of the British rule in India, on August 15, 1947.