

UNIT 4 – UPSC - Mountbatten's plan of Partition

India's History : Modern India : Announcement of Lord Mountbatten's plan for partition of India : 3 June 1947

The Plan



The British government sent a Cabinet Mission to India in March 1946 to negotiate with Indian leaders and agree to the terms of the transfer of power.

After difficult negotiations a federal solution was proposed. Despite initial agreement, both sides eventually rejected the plan.

An interim government with representatives of all the Indian parties was proposed and implemented. However, it soon collapsed through lack of agreement. While the Muslim League consented to join the interim government the Indian National Congress refused. By the end of 1946 communal violence was escalating and the British began to fear that India would descend into civil war. The British government's representative, Lord Wavell, put forward a breakdown plan as a safeguard in the event of political deadlock. Wavell, however, believed that once the disadvantages of the Pakistan scheme were exposed, Jinnah would see the advantages of working for the best possible terms inside a united India. He wrote:



'Unfortunately the fact that Pakistan, when soberly and realistically examined, is found to be a very unattractive proposition, will place the Moslems in a very disadvantageous position for making satisfactory terms with India for a Federal Union.' This view was based on a report, which claimed that a future Pakistan would have no manufacturing or industrial areas of importance: no ports, except Karachi, or rail centres. It was also argued that the connection between East and West Pakistan would be difficult to defend and maintain. The report concluded:

'It is hard to resist the conclusion that taking all considerations into account the splitting up of India will be the reverse of beneficial as far as the livelihood of its people is concerned'.

Lord Mountbatten replaced Lord Wavell as Viceroy of India in 1947.

Mountbatten's first proposed solution for the Indian subcontinent, known as the 'May Plan', was rejected by Congress leader Jawaharlal Nehru on the grounds it would cause the 'balkanisation of India'. The following month the 'May Plan' was substituted for the 'June Plan', in which provinces would have to choose between India and Pakistan. Bengal and Punjab both voted for partition.



On 3 June 1947, Lord Mountbatten announced his plan. The salient features were:-

1. Mountbatten's formula was to divide India but retain maximum unity. The country would be partitioned but so would Punjab and Bengal, so that the limited Pakistan that emerged would meet both the Congress and League's position to some extent. The League's position on Pakistan was conceded to the extent that it would be created, but the Congress position on unity would be taken into account to make Pakistan as small as possible. 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.
2. The Mountbatten Plan sought to effect an early transfer of power on the basis of Dominion status to two successor states, India and Pakistan. For Britain,

Dominion Status offered a chance of keeping India in the commonwealth for India's economic strength and defence potential were deemed sounder and Britain had a greater value of trade and investment there.

3. The rationale for the early date for transfer of power was securing Congress agreement to Dominion status. The additional benefit was that the British could escape responsibility for the rapidly deteriorating communal situation.
4. A referendum was to be held in NWEP to ascertain whether the people in the area wanted to join India or not. The princely states would have the option of joining either of the two dominions or to remain independent. The Provinces of Assam, Punjab and Bengal were also to be divided. A boundary commission was to be set up to determine the boundaries of these states.

Reasons for the acceptance of "Partition" by the Congress

By accepting the Mountbatten Plan/Partition, the Congress was only accepting what had become inevitable because of the long-term failure of the Congress to draw in the Muslim masses into the national movement and stem the surging waves of Muslim communalism, which, especially since 1937, had been beating with increasing fury.



The Congress leaders felt by June, 1947 that only an immediate transfer of power could forestall the spread of Direct Action and communal disturbances. Sardar Patel rightly said, "a united India even if it was smaller in size was better than a disorganised and troubled and weak bigger India."

Difficulties created by the obstructionist policies and tactics of the League proved to the Congress that the leaders of the Muslim League were concerned only with their own interests and the future of India would not be safe with them in the government. They would act as a stumbling block in the path of India's progress. The Congress leaders also felt that the continuance of British rule never was and never could be in the good interest of Indians. Sooner they quit, the better it would be.