

Mountbatten and the post Partition Communal Riots in Punjab

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Abstract

In 1947, one of the greatest massacres and migration in the history of mankind occurred in the Indian Sub-Continent. Mountbatten was the last Viceroy of the Indian Subcontinent and later on the first Governor General of India at the time of this massacre and migration. The purpose of this article is to find out that why and how Mountbatten failed to stop this grave massacre and migration of the history of mankind.

Keywords: Indian Sub-Continent, 1947 Partition, Communal Riots, Punjab

Speeding Up the Transfer of Power

Mountbatten expedited the transfer of power, which created the circumstances for the communal riots in the East and West Punjab. A little more time and planning for the partition of India on the part of Mountbatten, would have led to the division of the Punjab with less carnage. There would have been time to prepare people to the idea, to persuade them to stay if they insist to move, the migration could have been planned with arrangements of escort if necessary, troops and police could have been deployed to the dangerous spots on time. No doubt, there would have been disorder, however, mass massacre could have been avoided (Ziegler, 1986, 438-439; Moon, 2002, 277-278). A senior army officer, Brigadier Bristow posted in the Punjab in 1947, was of the opinion that the Punjab tragedy would not have occurred had partition been deferred for a year or so (Chandra, 1989, 499).

Delay in the Announcement of the Boundary Award

Mountbatten's delay in announcing the Boundary Award multiplied the tragedy that took place. The late disclosure of the Punjab Boundary cost extra Punjabi lives (Hodson, 1970, 121; Hamid, 1986, 180-181; Burke and Quraishi, 1997, 547). Jenkins had repeatedly urged Mountbatten to announce the award of the Boundary Commission before the transfer of power so that troops could be transferred to the affected areas (Symonds, 2001, 138).

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Sir Rob Lockhart, then Commander in Chief of the Indian Army also endorsed this view: ‘had officials in every grade in the civil services and all personnel of the armed services been in position in their respective new countries before independence day it seems there would have been a better chance of preventing widespread disorder’ (Chandra, 1989, 499). In his Personal Report to the British Government, Mountbatten frankly accepted that the postponement had been made in favour of British interest at the expense of the Punjabis. He wrote:

From the purely administrative point of view, there were considerable advantages in immediate publication, so that the new boundaries could take effect from 15th August and the officials of the right dominion could be in their places to look after the districts, which had been allotted to their side before that date. However, it was obvious all along that the later we postponed publication the less would the inevitable odium react upon the British (Mansergh, 1970-83, 760).

Failure to Arrest the Sikh Leaders on Time

Authorities were expecting slight trouble in the Punjab, which they thought would be effectively controlled by the Punjab Boundary Force. However, those who had acquaintance with the province especially after the March massacre were fully aware that the division of the Punjab must end in a catastrophe. Nonetheless, they had no suggestion of how to avoid or minimize it (Hodson, 1970, 121; Hamid, 1986, 180-181; Burke and Quraishi, 1997, 547). In a secret letter to Mountbatten dated 9 April 1947 Evan Jenkin, Governor of the British Punjab had warned against Giani Kartar Singh and Master Tara Singh’s (leaders of the Sikhs) appeal for Rs. 50 lakh towards a “war fund” and an organized attack of the Sikhs against Muslims. A pamphlet in Gurmukhi exhorted, “oh, Sikhs, read this and think yourself, what have you to do under the circumstances? In your veins there is yet the blood of your beloved Guru Gobin Singhji. Do your duty.” On Jenkin’s inquiry, Giani said “the Sikhs would do no such thing until after the British left India.” The Sikhs had no intention of “fighting a war on two fronts nor would it be in

their interest to annoy the British unnecessarily at the present stage” (Menon and Bhasin, 1998, 36-37; Kapur, 1985, 125-127).

On 5 August, Mountbatten revealed the involvement of Master Tara Singh, some other Sikh leaders and rulers of the Sikh States in sabotage plots including the plot to assassinate Jinnah and assured to crush the rebellion with an iron hand. However, Sardar Patel, one of the leaders of the Congress, Sir Chandulal Trivedi and Sir Francis Mudie, Governors designate of East and West Punjab opposed the arrest of the Sikh leaders for fear of further deterioration of the situation (Mansergh, 1970-83, 636-637; Johnson, 1953, 148-149, 152).

Failure to Take Strict Action against the Troublemakers

Communal violence raged most in the Punjab, Delhi and adjacent areas during August and September of 1947. Countless people were murdered, driven out of their homes and had to seek refuge on the other side of the divide (Zaidi, 1996, 457). This mass murder is rightly regarded as “one of the most appalling massacre of world history.” The killings of Muslim masses were “not stray incidents” but the “massacre of unarmed population.” It was a preplanned and systematic slaughter. In fact, the Government of India and the Punjab had plenty of warning of the intention of the Sikhs. Despite that, the authorities in Delhi failed to grasp the gruesome events happening in central Punjab (Jaffer, 1992, 75-76).

Abul Kalam Azad, leader of the Congress, had informed Mountbatten in April 1947 that if the country was divided in an atmosphere of communal strife, “there would be rivers of blood flowing and the British would be responsible for the carnage.” These were clear proofs of the Sikhs intention of revenge. Mountbatten without a moment’s hesitation replied,

At least on this one question I shall give you complete assurance. I shall see to it that there is no bloodshed and riot. I shall adopt the sternest measures to nip the trouble in the bud. I will order the Army and the Air Force to act and I will use

tanks and aeroplanes to suppress anybody who wants to create trouble (Azad, 1959, 190).

Despite all these warnings, Mountbatten revealed that:

I had expected some disturbances in the Punjab at the time of transfer of power. However, I freely confess that I did not anticipate the scale and extent of what was going to happen, nor, so far as I am aware, did any one in authority in India, Pakistan and the united Kingdom anticipate this. Even the Governor of Punjab had based his hypothesis on the assumption that partition would be imposed, not agreed to by the parties and communities, and was much less anxious if there were to be such agreement (Zaidi,1993-2001, 623-624; Zaidi,1996: 457; Hodson,1985, 403-404).

On the other hand the Pakistani authorities revealed that the Sikh plan of driving the Muslims out of East Punjab was known to Mountbatten and Auchinleck, yet no action was taken by them to spoil the plan (Zaidi,1993-2001, 623-624; Zaidi,1996: 457). Zafrullah Khan refuted Mountbatten's confession in his speech on 16 January 1948 in these words:

Lord Mountbatten was aware of what the Sikh plan was. Subsequent confidential reports from the Government of the Punjab to the Central Government . . . which have become available indicate that the Sikh plan as it subsequently unfolded itself in actual practice was already known to Lord Mountbatten (Zaidi,1996, 416).

The Manchester Guardian in a leading article under the caption 'Indian Massacre', 'were these horrors not preventable?' wrote that the tension, which had caused the disaster, grew under the British rule and the British produced no remedies while the British Governor General and a British Commander in Chief were still in India (Tucker, 1988, 450-451).

It was the duty of the concerned state to give protection and full right of citizenship to those living in India and Pakistan [to which they were entitled to] irrespective of being Muslims or non-Muslims and to bring the wrong doers to book if there was any attack on the minorities (Zaidi, 1996, 463). Mountbatten could minimize the slaughter and protect millions of fleeing refugees because he was responsible for law and order. He was armed with vast power and could use the Air Force (Moraes, 1973, 148; Ziegler, 1986, 439). Liaquat Ali Khan suggested to Mountbatten on 27 August 1947, that ‘the only way to restore law and order is the application of force against the Sikh *Jathas* who are roaming about murdering, crushing looting and burning. The only effective way of applying this force is by operational use of aircraft’ (Zaidi, 1996, 463). Ismay, Chief of Staff to Mountbatten (March-December, 1947) in a personal note dated 5 October 1947 stated that ‘there is a general impression, which I myself entertain that the Sikhs are the root of all trouble.’ He further endorsed the view of Jinnah that “the Government of India could if Patel so minded suppress the whole Sikhs movement in a week and that until this was done there was no hope of peace, the fire of hatred and revenge will not die down for a generation or more.” Despite all this, Mountbatten did not take any action against the Sikhs (Zaidi, 1993-2001, 623-624; Zaidi, 1996, 457).

Furthermore, Mountbatten relieved the British soldiers on 9 August and put responsibility on the inexperienced political leaders of India, to be charged with Armed Forces, which had recently divided (Seervai, 1989: 165-166). In the prevailing communal bitterness, the Hindu and Muslim elements could not be relied to administer law with impartiality (Moraes, 1973: 148; Ziegler, 1986: 439).

Lastly, when the call to stop the violence was needed, Mountbatten did not make it himself rather did it with leaders of the Congress and Muslims League (Hodson, 1970, 121). At no stage did Mountbatten encourage the Sikhs to come to term with the League to avoid the massacre. On the contrary, encouraged them to stay with the Congress to earn their goodwill (Hodson, 1970, 121; Burke and Quriashi, 1997, 547).

Commenting on Mountbatten’s ‘complete assurance’ to stop the communal riots, Azad wrote:

The whole world knows what was the sequel to Lord Mountbatten's brave declaration. When partition actually took place, rivers of blood flowed in large parts of the country. Innocent men women and children were massacred. The Indian Army was divided and nothing effective was done to stop the murder of innocent Hindus and Muslims (Hodson, 1970, 121; Burke and Quraishi, 1997, 547).

Ismay admitted the failure of Mountbatten to avoid the massacre and migration in a letter to his wife on 16 September, 'our mission was so very nearly a success: it is sad that it has ended up such a grim and total failure' (Ziegler, 1986: 439; Chandra, 1989: 499). Ayesha Jalal ended her book *"The Sole Spokesman, Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan"* with the words:

While Punjab writhed and turned under the impact of decisions taken in distinct places, Mountbatten boldly claimed credit for having accomplished, in less than two and a half months one of the 'greatest administrative operation in history.' The historian has a duty to challenge Mountbatten's contention and ask whether this 'great operation' was not in fact an ignominious scuttle enabling the British to extricate themselves from the awkward responsibility of presiding over India's communal madness (Jalal, 1994: 293).

It can be concluded that Mountbatten underestimated the force and dimensions of the turmoil in the Punjab. The massacre and migration of 1947 could have been minimized by Mountbatten's stern action against the troublemakers on time. However, several of Mountbatten's actions contributed to massacre and migration in the East and West Punjab. Speeding up the transfer of power, not arresting those Sikh leaders who were creating troubles, delay in the announcing the Boundary Award and not taking strict measures against the trouble makers despite knowing about their plans were some of the factors which led to the post partition massacre and migration in Punjab in 1947.

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