

Sixty years of Partition: Celebration or lamentation

Sixty years ago the sub-continent was partitioned, bringing forth onto the world stage two new independent countries: India and Pakistan. The partition shaped the world we in the sub-continent all live in today, and reckoning with our Bangladeshi, Pakistani, or Indian identity means reckoning with partition and its aftermath. In this magisterial two-part essay, renowned columnist **K. Z. Islam** looks back after sixty years to provide a provocative, thought-provoking, and, above all richly researched and deeply considered analysis of how and why partition came about and what the consequences were for the sub-continent. This is the concluding part of the essay: first part was published yesterday.

BACK in Britain in the general elections in mid 1945 quite unexpectedly Labour Party had a landslide victory over Churchill's conservatives, which brought Attlee to power with a resounding majority of 200 in the House of Commons. This was a serious setback for the Muslims as

secured a United India and saved all the massacre. I do not believe he really worked for an understanding with the Muslims, when his influence might have secured it. He was always the lawyer and the bania who would drive a hard bargain and then find some legal quibble to deprive his opponent of what he had seemed to gain."

the Congress accepted it partially, rejecting the grouping system.

At this critical juncture on July 6, 1946 Azad was replaced by Nehru as Congress president. A few days later Nehru held a press conference at which he was undiplomatically blunt in insisting that Congress remained "absolutely free and uncommitted" to any

the Muslims, they have more honesty, courage and dignity than the Hindus, but cannot stand up to the power of the rupee and the superior education and chicanery of the Congress. Up to a point Jinnah played his cards well, but I think he has been too unyielding." During all the Cabinet Mission negotiations Cripps had made up his mind to replace Wavell who was neutral. Cripps wanted someone more pro-Congress. For the sake of appointing a new viceroy a sham meeting of the Indian leaders was summoned in London in the first week of December 1946.

The final nail

It is interesting to note that Mountbatten had offered to be Nehru's host in London, but Nehru decided it was best for him to stay at the Dorchester, where Edwina kept a suite for herself, overlooking Hyde Park. Perhaps it had already become known to Mountbatten that he was going to replace Wavell as the next viceroy.

Nehru had chosen to stay at the Dorchester and not at Claridge's where Jinnah and Liaquat were billeted. Dorchester would provide more restful hideaway for Nehru after those long, boring sessions with Attlee, Pethick-Lawrence and Cripps, about which Nehru did not care much anyway.

Wavell's visit to London for this summit would be his last. He still had no intimation, however, that he was on his way out of high office. Wavell, Nehru and Jinnah held fruitless talks with Pethick-Lawrence, Cripps and Attlee in early December 1946. The actual purpose of the visit was to arrange a meeting of Mountbatten and Nehru.

Irrefutable evidence has now come to light in the shape of so far undisclosed diaries of Stafford Cripps and his wife Isobel Cripps recorded in *The Cripps Version* by Peter Clarke. During the short visit of Nehru, Cripps arranged a dinner when Cripps, Nehru and Mountbatten met and the partition plan was hatched. Mountbatten was to carry out the Congress blueprint. Soon afterwards an announcement was made by Prime Minister Attlee appointing Lord Mountbatten as a new Viceroy to replace Wavell.

It is to be noted that on March 8, 1947 the Congress Working Committee passed some resolutions with the full support of Nehru and Patel. The message in the long-winded resolution was that Congress were willing to accept the principle of Pakistan provided only a few small pieces in the northwest and the northeast were acceded to Pakistan and the rest of India could then be built up into a strong and consolidated India. This entire message was conveyed to Mountbatten prior to his departure from London to take up his viceroyalty in India.

It is curious not many authors have elaborated on the discussions, which Krishna Menon had



October 15, 1947: Railway wagons packed with Muslim refugees fleeing to Pakistan as Hindus flee to India by train at the border city of Amritsar at the start of the first war between India and Pakistan.



August 15, 1947: India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, delivers his famous "tryst with destiny" speech at Parliament House in New Delhi.

Churchill was always solidly behind them.

Wavell's reactions to Pethick-Lawrence's appointment as secretary of state "fear he may have fixed and old fashioned ideas derived mainly from Congress contacts." In India too there were elections to the provinces, which gave substantially increased seats for the Muslim League. Apart from Bengal, however, it was not able to form a government elsewhere.

A parliamentary delegation was sent early in 1946. This was followed by the Cabinet Mission, which comprised of Lord Pethick-Lawrence, Secretary of State for India, Sir Stafford Cripps, President of Board of Trade and Mr. A.V. Alexander, First Lord of the Admiralty. The Cabinet Mission entered into tortuous negotiations with the Indian leaders mainly centring around Gandhi.

Cripps was under the impression that the key to the Indian

The fact is the pivotal role in the negotiations was being played by Cripps in favour of the Congress. Cripps and Nehru were in League against the Muslim League. The failure of the Cabinet Mission was not simply historic testimony to the complexity of the problem they tackled but one of the great tragedies of India's history, for its aftermath brought the traumas of partition and almost continuous South Asian war. On May 16, 1946, the Mission conceded that "that if there is to be internal peace in India it must be secured by measure that will assure to the Muslims a control in all matters vital to their culture, religion, and economic and other interests." But it rejected the League's demand for Pakistan.

The Cabinet Mission solution, therefore, was to propose a union embracing British India and the Princely States, with central powers limited to foreign affairs, defence, communication and the

details of the plan.

As for the matter of grouping Nehru suggested there was "a big probability" that there will be "no grouping." The grouping was the most fundamental aspect of the Cabinet Mission's proposal and its rejection by the Congress resulted in Jinnah withdrawing his approval of the Mission's plan and directed the Muslims for "direct action."

This was one of the darkest periods of the prelude to Pakistan. The horrors of "Direct Action" day on 16 August 1946 in Calcutta are well-known and resulted in complete break-down of Hindu-Muslim relationship India-wide.

One of the clauses of the Mission's plan was to initiate an Indian interim government. Despite the fact that Congress had not accepted the Mission's plan completely it was invited by Viceroy Wavell to form the interim government on September 2, 1946. The Muslim League was excluded.

This move no doubt executed at

bad faith in the extreme for Mountbatten to be hobnobbing closely with one party to the dispute to the total exclusion of the other? The elaborate brief of Krishna Menon is contained in the *Transfer of Power* documents. No such brief appears from the British side.

It is quite curious to note that the letter was written from the India House. How India was permitted to use the India House facilities to give pro-Congress advice to Mountbatten is indeed baffling. In March 1947 Menon had no official status except as an envoy of Nehru.

Mountbatten arrived in Delhi on March 22, 1947 and took up the viceroyalty from Wavell on the same day. From day one Mountbatten got down to business with a great deal of vigor and energy.

On April 15, 1947 Mountbatten met the provincial governors and in the meeting as one of his policies he "pointed out that a quick decision would also give Pakistan a greater chance to fail on its merits. The great problem was to reveal the limits of Pakistan so that the Muslim League could revert to an unified India with honour. Their excellencies the governors all agreed the necessity for an early decision was paramount."

We can see that Mountbatten was giving the highest priority to carry out the Congress blueprint involving the entire British administration in India.

While the initial dialogue was going on, Suhrawardy along with Kiron Shankar Roy and Sarat Bose initiated a proposal to keep Bengal united and independent. Mountbatten warned Suhrawardy

Pakistan. What a come down for Jinnah!

He had overplayed his hand to such an extent that only a year ago he was rated a fifty-fifty with Congress and now he was just an adjunct. The series of meetings culminated in Mountbatten wanting to meet the Indian leaders in the rarified atmosphere of Simla.

Invitations were prepared for several leaders but ultimately only Nehru and Krishna Menon turned up. Why was that? Just for public consumption Mountbatten had sent a plan for transfer of power in India with Lord Ismay to London. This approved plan was received by him during his sojourn in Simla. Mountbatten had shown the approved plan to Nehru.

One does not know really what actually went on in the conspiracy but reportedly Nehru rejected the plan approved by the British Cabinet. Mountbatten then asked V.P. Menon his reforms commissioner to redraft it.

In all the chronicles it is usually stated that V.P. Menon had drafted the Partition Plan in two hours after Nehru had rejected Mountbatten's Draft Plan. As Menon states in his *Transfer of Power in India*:

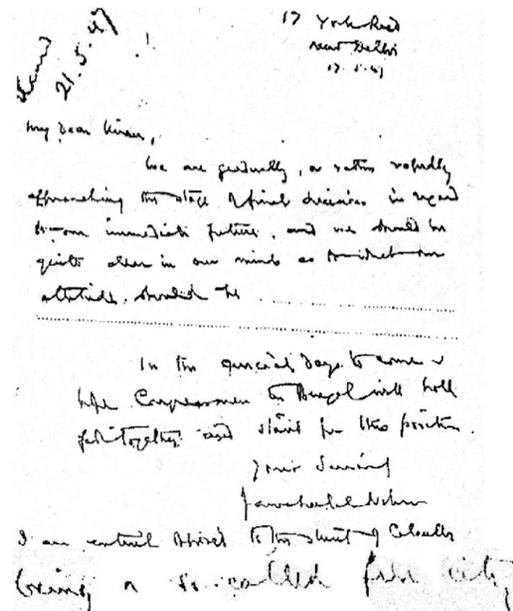
"After the meeting with Nehru I returned to my hotel. I had only two or three hours in which to prepare an alternative draft plan and I set to work on it at once. The Viceroy was anxious to show the draft to Nehru and to ascertain his reactions before he left Simla that evening, and I had barely got the draft into shape when Sir Eric Miéville came and took it away." Readers to note that the plan had to be approved by Nehru before it was sent to London.

The facts, however, of V.P.

seems hardly credible. V.P. had been working on this Plan in collusion with Patel since late 1946.

Mountbatten was summoned to London to explain the revised plan that he had forwarded. With his co-conspirator Cripps playing the leading role the plan was approved in minutes with Mountbatten getting all the plaudits for a brilliant

access to Kashmir. This was the genesis of the Kashmir problem, which unfairly and under dubious circumstances acceded to India. Beaumont Secretary to Cyril Radcliffe the chairman of the Boundary Commission confessed in public that Mountbatten had personally influenced the changing of the borders as approved by the



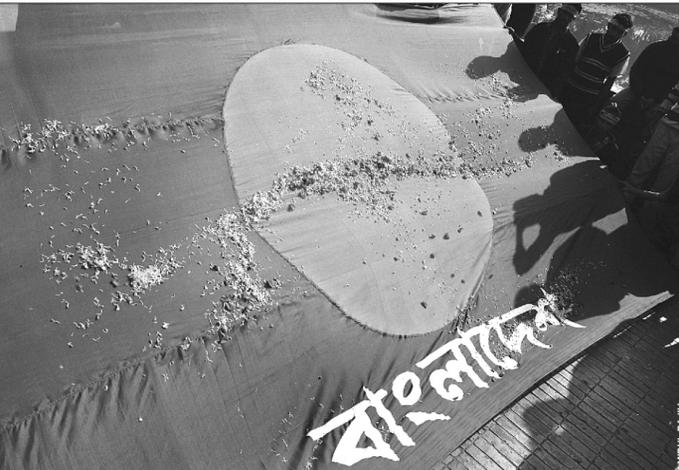
Nehru's letter against United Bengal to Kiron Shankar Roy.

performance before the cabinet.

With Mountbatten's wheeling and dealing the plan was approved by Muslim League and Congress on June 2, 1947. Where was the

Indian Independence Act 1947.

As Mountbatten had promised a quick partition so that Pakistan was disadvantaged he brought the date of Transfer of Power forward from



problem was with Gandhi. The minutes of the complex negotiations with the Indian leaders runs into over 1,000 pages in the *Transfer of Power Documents*.

Wavell records in his diary on April 3, 1946: "I was frankly horrified at the deference shown to Gandhi, when he expressed a wish for a glass of water, the secretary was sent to fetch it himself, instead of sending for a chaprassi; when he didn't come at once Cripps hustled off himself to see about it."

Gandhi's attitude to the negotiation is also summed up by Wavell: "[B]ut he wrecked the plan of the Cabinet Mission which might have

powers necessary to raise the finances required.

All other subjects and residual powers were to be vested in provinces that would be free to form groups, to be called A, B and C. Group B and C were to embrace Muslim majority areas and Group A was the Hindu majority areas.

It was a remarkable scheme, the last rational hope for a non-violent transfer of power from British to Indian authority. After this declaration the Muslims were jubilant. There was also a clause for the immediate formation of an Indian interim government. The Muslim League accepted the proposal but

the behest of Cripps was a serious setback for the League. The most important portfolio of the Home Department was taken by Patel who became in-charge of not only the police but also the intelligence services.

By mid-October Jinnah relented, following a personal appeal from Wavell to the extent of permitting Liaquat and four of his colleagues to join the new Cabinet. The interim government never function as there was complete deadlock among the Congress and League members in the Cabinet.

Wavell records in his diary on October 30, 1946: "I am sorry for

with Mountbatten before he left London. The writer feels certain that many a meeting took place clandestinely between Menon and Mountbatten.

Had it not been for the publication of the *Transfer of Power* documents this fact would never have been known. Krishna Menon gave an elaborate note to Mountbatten. We do not know what must have transpired between the two in their secret meetings. The fact that the meetings took place comes to light in the letter, which Krishna Menon wrote to Mountbatten on March 13, 1947:

Now, is it not a demonstration of

that Nehru was not in favor of an independent Bengal unless closely linked to Hindustan, as he felt that the partition would anyhow bring East Bengal into Hindustan in a few years. The statement of Mountbatten is corroborated by a handwritten letter to Kiron Shankar Roy by Nehru (reproduced below) which states the same things, thereby confirming the blueprint.

There was a series of meetings with the Indian leaders just to put up a face that a negotiated settlement was being arrived at. In his inimitable style he had convinced Jinnah that the best he could expect was a truncated and moth-eaten

Menon finishing the job in two hours are contradictory. V.P. being the reforms commissioner was deeply involved in day-to-day assignment with all constitutional, political, and geographical issues relating to the transfer of power. He had been polishing up a plan with the full concurrence of Patel from the end of 1946.

The plan on the basis of which power was actually transferred in India is only marginally different from the plan, which has been referred to as the "Menon Plan" in the *Transfer of Power* documents. So as we shall see V.P. bringing out a plan out of the hat like magic

arrogant Jinnah? He nodded submissively in front of Mountbatten accepting the barebones of the Pakistan that he had fought for. Ninety million Muslims were let down by one person.

Next began all the gerrymandering with the approved borders of Pakistan in the Indian Independence Act 1947. Nadia, Malda and Murshidabad were not given to East Pakistan quite arbitrarily. The sub-division of Karimganj in Sylhet was given to India to provide access to Tripura.

In the West Gurdaspur was awarded to India thereby giving

June 30, 1948 to August 15, 1947. This resulted in an estimated twelve million people being dislodged from their homes to cross the borders within a month with over of million never getting to their destination alive. General Francis Tuker then GOC Eastern Command writes in his *While Memory Serves* that 80% of the casualties were Muslims.

The trauma of partition still haunts the sub-continent as the wounds of the partition have not healed even in sixty years. What a legacy left by Jinnah, Nehru, Gandhi, and the British government!