

Research Report: Historical Commission

**"Negotiating Independence for the Partition of British India
(June 1947)"**





Forum: Historical Commission

Issue: Negotiating Independence for the Partition of British India (June 1947)

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Introduction

In June 1947, the Subcontinent of India stood as a historical crossroads, following two centuries of dominance economically and imperially by the British East India Company and subsequently the direct British Crown post-1858. On June 3rd 1947, the Indian National Congress (INC), All-India Muslim League (AIML), and Sikh Representatives enacted the "June 3 Plan" which accelerated the deadline for British Withdrawal from June 1948 to August 1947. This is the direct turning point of the partition of British India.

Great Britain, following World War II, had been depleted by continuous warfare, was financially insolvent and was burdened by crippling war debts. Therefore, it was lacking financially and militarily to be able to sustain an imperial apparatus in South Asia. Large rising colonial agitation led to widespread unrest.

British India contains many distinct linguistically, culturally, religiously and economically regions. This creates a large amount of pressure to split up heavily interconnected imperial structures in a short timeframe, which will require a large amount of administrative burden. The Political Consensus between India's major anti-colonial political movements had completely fractured. The INC led by Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel, champions a unified, secular democratic republic with a strong central authority. Whereas the AIML, spearheaded by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, argues that Muslims constituted a distinct nation within South Asia. The League believes that Muslims would face continuous political, cultural and economic subjugation under a Hindu-majority central government, demanding the creation of a sovereign Muslim State.





Attempts to bridge this gap, via constitutional compromises, such as the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946, which proposed a decentralized three-tiered federal union, were unable to hold due to mutual distrust, and conflicting interpretations of provincial grouping provisions. "The Direct Action Day" called by the Muslim League in August 1946, sparked the Great Calcutta Killings, triggering a reaction of communal massacres in Noakhali, Bihar, and the Punjab. In early 1947, large areas of northern and eastern British India were sliding into localized civil war.

Delegates that gather in this committee, must understand the fundamental decision to partition British India has been accepted in principle by the important political leaders, however the technical, territorial and operational mechanisms are unable to be resolved. The committee's primary objective then, is to negotiate the finer details of the transfer of power to ensure all sides are adequately addressed by the final agreement.

There are six critical challenges to be addressed:

1. Fair and equitable Boundary Demarcation, particularly in heavily contested areas due to economic and religious significance
2. Division of state assets and public liabilities to ensure equal access to resources
3. Partition of the 400,000-strong British Indian Army, Royal Indian Navy and Royal Indian Air Force
4. Fate of the 565 Princely States which pre-existing agreements with the British Empire will lapse, removing Paramountcy
5. Protection of minorities in the partition to ensure the ability to move and be free from discrimination
6. Constitutional Transition to ensure rights are properly upheld in both countries
7. International Status in bodies like the UN as well as treaty obligations





Definition of Key Terms

Partition:

The political and territorial division of the British Empire into two independent sovereign states, pursuing the Indian Independence Act of 1947

Mountbatten Plan:

The official statement of policy issued by the British Government on June 3, 1947, outlining the procedure for the transfer of power. It provided for the partition of Punjab and Bengal if their provincial legislative assemblies voted for division, established Boundary Commissions to demarcate borders, provided for referendums in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Sylhet, and set August 15, 1947, as the deadline for independence.

Two-Nation Theory:

The political ideology of Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the All-India Muslim League, asserting that Indian Muslims and Indian Hindus are not merely two religious communities, but two distinct nations with separate cultures, languages, historical traditions, and social systems. Consequently, it argued that Muslims were entitled to a separate sovereign state in Muslim-majority regions.

Dominion Status:

A constitutional arrangement within the British Commonwealth of Nations where a territory achieves full self-governing autonomy and legislative independence while retaining the British Monarch as nominal Head of State, represented by a Governor-General. Both India and Pakistan initially accepted Dominion Status to expedite the legal transfer of legislative authority before enacting their own permanent constitutions.





Paramountcy and the Doctrine of Lapse:

Paramountcy referred to the suzerainty exercised by the British Crown over the semi-autonomous Princely States through treaties, sunnads, and political practice. Under the Indian Independence Act, Paramountcy was set to lapse on August 15, 1947, theoretically returning full legal sovereignty to individual rulers and dissolving their subordinate relationship with the Crown.

Instrument of Accession:

A legal document executed by the rulers of the Princely States acceding their territories to either the Dominion of India or the Dominion of Pakistan, specifying the surrender of jurisdiction over three core subjects: Defense, External Affairs, and Communications.

Boundary Commission (Radcliffe Line):

Two judicial commissions created in June 1947 chaired by British barrister Sir Cyril Radcliffe. The commissions were tasked with demarcating the international borders based on majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims, while taking into account "other factors" such as canal headworks, railway networks, and sacred sites.

Cabinet Mission Plan (1946):

A proposal put forward in May 1946 by a delegation of British Cabinet ministers (Pethick-Lawrence, Cripps, Alexander) proposing a three-tiered federal structure for India: a minimal central government handling defense, foreign affairs, and communications, alongside three "Groups" of provinces (Group A: Hindu-majority; Group B & C: Muslim-majority). The plan failed due to disagreements regarding the mandatory nature of provincial grouping.

Interim Government of India:

The provisional executive council was established in September 1946, led by Jawaharlal Nehru as Vice President of the Executive Council. It functioned as an





interim cabinet responsible for day-to-day administration, though its effectiveness was compromised by intense rivalry between Congress and Muslim League ministers

Direct Action Day:

August 16, 1946, declared by the Muslim League as a day of mass rallies and strikes to demonstrate Muslim resolve for Pakistan following the breakdown of the Cabinet Mission Plan. The day triggered severe communal riots in Calcutta ("Great Calcutta Killings"), resulting in over 4,000 deaths and escalating widespread sectarian violence across northern India.

Major Parties Involved

British Crown and Colonial Administration:

Represented by Lord Louis Mountbatten and Clement Attlee. The objective of the government of Britain is to execute an orderly and rapid exit from South Asia, avoiding engaging in a colonial uprising or civil war. Britain also wishes to maintain strong relationships diplomatically and economically with both of the successor states, ensuring both states remain a part of the British Commonwealth. Britain wishes to maintain South Asia particularly as a buffer against potential Soviet expansionism in.

Indian National Congress:

Represented by Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Mahatma Gandhi. The INC is a broad-based nationalist movement committed to establishing a secular, democratic and united republic. While Gandhi steadfastly opposed partition, Nehru and Patel accepted partition in May 1947 as a necessary evil to eliminate Muslim League veto power over central governance, prevent an impending civil war, and build a strong centralized state capable of developing and reform.





All-India-Muslim League (AIML):

Represented by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and Liaquat Ali Khan. The AIML operated as the sole representative of Indian Muslims, advocating for the sovereign state of Pakistan under the Two-Nation-Theory. Jinnah sought a sovereign state, encompassing the provinces of Punjab, Bengal, Sindh, Balochistan, North-West Frontier Province and Assam. The league accepted the June 3 Plan as the only mechanism to secure an independent state.

Sikh Leadership and the Panthic Party:

Represented by Master Tara Singh, Giani Kartar Singh and Sardar Baldev. The Sikh community was concentrated in central and eastern Punjab. Geographically interlinked with Muslim and Hindu populations, Sikhs lacked a majority in any administrative district, but held large agricultural lands, historical religious shrines and representation in the British Indian Army. Sikh leaders were unwilling to be included in a Muslim Majority Pakistan, fearing eventual oppression. They sought to partition Punjab along boundary lines that would account for land ownership and revenue contribution.

Princely States and the Chamber of Princes:

Represented by the Chancellor of the Chamber of Princes and the Nawab Of Bhopal. This comprises 45% of India's land mass and 24% of its population, the Princely States are legally bound to the British Crown by the treaties of Paramountcy, with the announcement that this would lapse on August 15th, several powerful rulers argued that states would revert to fully independent sovereign entities, that could negotiate with either party.

Major Past Actions:

Negotiations of June 1947 were shaped by a decade of failed constitutional changes, political mistakes and escalating inter-communal violence.

The Government of India Act 1935, introduced provincial autonomy and expanded the electoral franchise to 30 million people, in the 1937 provincial elections, the INC won decisive





majorities in eight of eleven provinces. The AIML performed poorly, winning only 4.8% of the total Muslim Vote across India and failing to form governments even in Muslim majority provinces like Punjab. Following their victory, congress rejected AIML, proposals to form-coalition governments in the United Provinces under the League leadership that democratic parliamentary systems based on simple majority rule would permanently disenfranchise Muslims.

In 1940, during the annual session of the AIML, they adopted the resolution that laid the foundation for Pakistan, drafted by Zafarulla Khan and presented by A.K. Fazlul Huq. This resolution formally transformed the AIML's demand from minority right protections within a united India to a demand for full territorial statehood

In March 1942 the Cripps Mission, as Japanese forces advanced across Southeast Asia toward Burma, Sir Stafford Cripps arrived in India with a British Cabinet proposing offering full dominion status after World War II in exchange for immediate war support. Congress rejected the plan as a "post dated check on a failing bank" and launched a response under the "Quit India Movement" in August 1942. The British Colonial government responded by arresting the entire top leadership of Congress, including Gandhi, Nehru and Patel. Imprisoning them for the duration of the war.

Following the end of WWII in Europe, Viceroy Lord Wavell, convened the Simla Conference in June 1945 to form an executive council, composed entirely of Indian Political Leaders. The conference collapsed when Jinnah insisted that the Muslim League had the exclusive right to nominate all Muslim Members of the council, which was rejected by congress because it included prominent Muslim Leaders.

The Cabinet Mission Plan May 1946, In a desperate attempt to preserve the unity of India, the British government dispatched three Cabinet ministers to Delhi in March 1946, the mission rejected a fully sovereign and independent Pakistan as geographically impractical, but proposed a complex three-tier federal structure. The first tier being a union center dealing





strictly with foreign affairs. Defense and communication. Tier 2 groups of provinces, Tier 3 Provinces

Both the INC and the AIML initially accepted the plan in June 1946, though with differing interpretations, on July 10th, Nehru held a press conference in Bombay where he declared that Congress was uncommitted to any compulsory grouping scheme and would enter the Constituent Assembly. Interpreting this as a rewriting of the core compromise, Jinnah withdrew League acceptance of the plan and called for "Direct Action"

Direct Action Day and the Spiral of Communal Violence (August 1946 - March 1947). On August 16th, the Muslim League observed the "Direct Action Day", in Calcutta, political rallies escalated into coordinated sectarian clashes. Over four days, the killings resulted in over 4000 deaths, and 15000 injured, as mobs targeted residential areas without effective riot management. The violence triggered retaliation across Noakhali in October 1946, followed by widespread anti-Muslim pogroms in Bihar in November 1946, resulting in over 5000 deaths. By March 1947, extreme communal violence engulfed the Punjab, where armed clashes between Muslim, Sikh and Hindu militias in Rawalpindi and Multan destroyed rural villages and forced hundreds of thousands of refugees to flee.

Attlee's announcement on February 20th, 1947. Prime Minister Clement Attlee made a statement in the House of Commons. He announced that the British Empire would transfer power to Indian hands no later than June 1948. Regardless of whether Indian Political Parties had agreed on a constitution, Mountbatten conducted intensive interviews and seeing tensions, accelerated the timetable by 10 months, setting August 15th 1947 as the final date for independence.





Timeline

Date	Event	Significance
August 2, 1935	Government Of India Act 1935 passed	Established provincial autonomy and separate electorates; laid legal framework for 1937 elections
March 22-24, 1940	Lahore Resolution Adopted	Muslim League formally demands independent sovereign states for Muslims in northwestern and eastern zones
August 8, 1942	Quit India Movement Launched	Congress leaders arrested, British colonial suppression leads to a political vacuum
June 25, 1945	Simla Conference Opens	Fails over representation disputes between Congress and Muslim League regarding executive council seats
Dec 1945-Jan 1946	Central and Provincial Elections	Polarizes Indian Political landscape; Congress wins non-Muslim areas; Muslim League sweeps muslim seats
Feb 18-23 1946	Royal Indian Navy Mutiny	20,000 Indian sailors mutiny in Bombay; signals to the British government that indigenous armed forces are





		unreliable for colonial rule
May 16, 1946	Cabinet Mission Plan Published	Proposes 3-tiered federal union with provincial grouping to preserve Indian unity
August 16, 1946	Direct Action Day	Over 4,000 killed in Calcutta, sparking brutal reaction of massacres
September 2, 1946	Interim Governments Formed	Jawaharlal Nehru sworn in as Vice President; AIML joins in October but boycotts Constituent Assembly, causing paralyzed governance
February 20, 1947	Attlee Announcement	British PM sets deadline for British exit by June 1948, appoints Lord Mountbatten as Viceroy
March 24, 1947	Mountbatten Sworn in as Viceroy	Begins rapid consultation series with Nehru, Jinnah, Gandhi, Patel and Baldev Singh
May 10-18, 1946	Collapse of "Plan Balkan"	Mountbatten's initial plan to transfer power directly to individual provinces rejected by Nehru; replaced by June 3 Plan
June 3, 1947	Mountbatten Plan Broadcast	Formal announcement advancing Independence to





		August 15, 1947. Codifies partition of Punjab and Bengal
June 10-12, 1947	Party Endorsements	All-India Congress Committee and Council of All-India Muslim League formally ratify June 3 Plan.

Possible Solutions:

Boundary Demarcation and Boundary Commissions; The core challenge facing the Boundary Commissions is translating vague demographic guidelines into enforceable international borders within six weeks. The primary directive is to trace borders along majority areas of Muslims and Non-Muslims, but the clause regarding "other factors" creates major points of contention: Primarily within the Punjab Sector and Bengal Sector, with keys in Punjab disputed areas including Gurdaspur and Ferozpur districts. Allocating Gurdaspur to India provides the sole overland road access to Jammu and Kashmir, allocating it to Pakistan could insulate the Muslim majority in surrounding areas. The Bengal Sector, is an economic hub, disputing the area where the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the district of Murshidabad.

Asset Division and Financial Mechanism: Dividing the assets and liabilities of the government. The total balances of British India stand at roughly 4 billion rupees, there must be a fair split of the existing reserves, existing proposals have included a roughly 80-20 split, providing 80% to India and 20% to Pakistan based on revenue contributions and demographics. Physical assets and Public Infrastructure, immovable objects like railway tracks and government buildings, naturally remain within the territory they were built.





Mobile assets, such as locomotives and military vehicles must be divided to suit both sides operational requirements.

Partition of Military Forces, including infantry, cavalry and artillery units of an army 400 000 strong, division based off of units, with majority muslim units proportionally being allocated to Pakistan, whereas Non Muslim majority regiments remain with india, Individual Muslim soldiers in Non-Muslim regiments and vice versa may be granted a voluntary right to opt for the army of their choosing.

Protection of Minorities and Refugees: With an estimated 15 to 20 million non muslims in future Pakistan, and Muslims in future India set to become religious minorities, human rights guarantees are vital to be maintained. The implementation of Bi-lateral minority charters between India and Pakistan, committing both governments to guarantee equality to citizens would help reduce the likelihood of oppression

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