

Kashmir: Seeds of Conflict and the Role of Lord Mountbatten

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ABSTRACT: The unresolved dispute over Kashmir between India and Pakistan continues driving regional instability and complicating diplomatic relations in South Asia. It transcends territorial dimensions onto water security, hybrid strategies and national identities. Kashmir conflict has attained a life of its own and its origins can be traced back to the creation of both countries in 1947. This article is aimed at understanding what was the role of last Viceroy of India Lord Mountbatten in the Kashmir crisis and why he acquiesced to the conflict? The study is based on the recollections of the individuals who played a part in the crisis when it was brewing, historical records and the work of historians and analysts who have written about it extensively. Study concludes that the role of Lord Mountbatten in the integration of princely states, during the concluding months of British rule in India, remained controversial - as he showed apparent favouritism towards India in several contested cases. Especially, in Kashmir where his approach was different than from other princely state cases, casting shadow on his neutrality. The rushed nature of the transfer of power and unresolved territorial issues particularly of Kashmir created enduring problems between India and Pakistan that continue to shape geopolitics of the South Asia till today.

KEYWORDS: Mountbatten, Pakistan, India, Kashmir, British Empire, Kashmir Conflict, Partition of India

Introduction

The Kashmir conflict exists as one of the most consequential disputes in contemporary era that has resulted into multiple wars, numerous military confrontations and seven decades of diplomatic dead lock between India and Pakistan. Far from being a territorial dispute, the Kashmir issue encompasses critical dimensions of national identity, populace right of self-determination, strategic geography, water security and regional stability in South Asia. Understanding the origins of this protracted conflict requires examining the turbulent final months of British rule in India, when decisions made by stakeholders pursuing conflicting, often self-centred, interests in time compressed environment created faultlines that continue to destabilize the region till today. Central to this historical period was Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last British Viceroy of India, whose role in the partition process and particularly in handling the issue of princely states of India has been a subject of scholarly debate. Appointed in March 1947, he was mandated to oversee an orderly transfer of power from British colonial rule to independent successor states.

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However, he was accused of overstepping his mandate and acting beyond what the neutrality of his office demanded, thus becoming part of a political controversy especially in case of princely state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Objective of the Paper

This paper examines the role of Lord Mountbatten during the critical period of transition from British colonial rule to independence of India in 1947 and the impact it had on shaping the Kashmir crisis. The study examines Lord Mounbatten's decisions and actions analysing how his decisions, preferences, relationships and interpretation of partition framework contributed to the unresolved territorial dispute between India and Pakistan as we see it today. More specifically, the research investigates why Lord Mountbatten acquiesced to political developments, in divergence to the dealing with other princely states, that transformed Kashmir from a princely state to a regional flashpoint of conflict. Through careful examination of available material, this paper investigates the confluence of factors -including Mountbatten's personal relations with Indian leaders, his disdain for Mr Muhammad Ali Jinnah most likely for Jinnah's decision to become Governor General of Pakistan thus denying an opportunity for Mountbatten to become unified Governor General for both newly established dominions, his interpretation of partition framework, time compression induced during transfer of power due to Mountbatten's decision to advance the timeline from June 1948 to August 1947 and other strategic considerations that influenced his handling of Kashmir's accession issue. The objective is to provide scholarly insight into how colonial era decision making by the representatives of British Raj contributed towards sowing seeds of a conflict that continue to destabilize South Asian security environment till today.

Methodology

This research paper employs qualitative approach where historical analysis approach is utilized to examine role of Lord Mountbatten in initiation of Kashmir issue. The study analyses archival materials, biographical accounts of key actors involved in the partition process, scholarly monographs and reputed journal articles to reexamine key decision points including options available to princely states in Independence Act 1947, the decision dilemma for Maharaja Hari Singh, tribal invasion complications and controversy regarding accession instrument acceptance. The analytical framework applies process tracing methodology to establish causal relationships between decisions made by Lord Mountbatten and the subsequent outcomes. This data correlation across multiple information sources ensures analytical rigour while offsetting the inherent limitations of historical records and the potential biases of autobiographical accounts.

Princely State System of British India

The princely states in British India operated under British paramountcy, which granted them internal autonomy while the British Raj controlled defence, foreign affairs, and communications. The British government exercised its control through Political Agents or Residents who advised the princes and ensured that British interests are served. This was a complicated relationship based on ancient treaties, understandings and commitments. However, it served the British well as it reduced the administrative expenses while maintaining control and kept the rulers dependent on British support for legitimacy. This arrangement permitted the states varying degree of autonomy however, even their internal affairs remained subjected to the supervision by the British raj. A prime example of this arrangement was Kashmir, which became a princely state in 1846. It was one of the largest and most strategically significant of 565 princely states of British India at the time of its independence from British rule in 1947 (See Figure-1).

Figure 1

Princely States of British India in 1947.



Source: Edinburgh Geographical Institute; J. G. Bartholomew and Sons. - Oxford University Press.

Political Environment of Kashmir in 1947

The pre-partition political environment in the state of Kashmir was characterized by growing political activism, authoritarian resistance to change and increasing division along religious and regional lines. Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (JKNC) led by Sheikh Abdullah was the primary political party of Kashmir with a widespread support base (Bose, 2005). It had evolved out of All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference in 1939 and advocated a secular nationalist agenda. It was against the partition of India and had leaning towards Indian Congress. In case of inevitable partition of India, it showed inclination towards independent Kashmir. It had launched a “Quit Kashmir” movement in 1946 against Maharaja demanding an end to the Dogra rule (Whitehead, 2013). The state's political development was complicated by its religious demographics, economic disparities, and the Maharaja's reluctance to implement reforms. This complex political landscape set the stage for the crisis that would unfold during the partition of British India in 1947.

The Role of Lord Mountbatten in Kashmir Issue

Lord Mountbatten arrived in India in March 1947, as last viceroy to oversee the devolution plan worked out by British government in 1946. The partition of India in 1947 was principally based on religious demographics, specifically the "Two-Nation Theory" advocated by Mr Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the All-India Muslim League. This theory argued that Hindus and Muslims constituted two distinct nations that could not coexist within a single

state structure. Though by the time Lord Mountbatten arrived in India as its last viceroy (March 1947), the Congress leaders had resigned to the inevitability of partition of India and creation of Pakistan but getting them to agree to the terms of transfer of power was proving difficult. Nevertheless, based on this argument, areas with Muslim majorities generally became part of Pakistan, while non-Muslim-majority regions remained with India. This principle was applied particularly to the provinces of Punjab and Bengal, which were divided along religious lines.

The Mountbatten Plan

The crucial declaration that formalized the partition of British India was announced by the Viceroy on 03 June 1947 commonly known as “3 June Plan” or “Mountbatten Plan” (India Office, 1947). It was the political announcement of British intent for the grant of independence to India, and it formed the basis of Indian Independence Act of 1947 (Great Britain Parliament, 1947), that was passed by the British parliament on 18 July 1947. It set 15 August 1947 as the date for transfer of power to the new dominions of Pakistan and India, significantly accelerating the previous timeline of June 1948. This resulted in a considerable reduction in decision-making time available to the princes and to those who were engaged with them in complex negotiations to woo them to join either of the new dominions. It also announced establishment of two Boundary Commissions to determine the precise borders between the two divided provinces of Punjab and Bengal based on religious demography. Independence Act of India 1947, in its second schedule did identify the provisional areas to be included in West Punjab based on their majority Muslim population. It mentioned Lahore division including its district of Gurdaspur to be provisionally included in Pakistani Punjab. However, the Redcliffe Award, which was the Commission assigned to demarcate the actual boundaries between India and Pakistan, awarded three of Gurdaspur’s four tehsils namely, Gurdaspur, Pathankot and Batala to India with only western Shakargarh tehsil partially going to Pakistan despite Muslim majority in two (Gurdaspur & Batala) of the tehsils (Nawaz, 2013). This decision, as we shall see later, proved strategically significant in favour of India as Gurdaspur provided India with its only land access to Kashmir and many analysts believe that Lord Mountbatten, for his obvious partiality for India/ Mr Nehru, influenced Redcliffe for this decision (Copeland, 1993).

Mountbatten’s Disdain for Mr Jinnah

Lord Mountbatten’s partiality or liking for India stemmed from numerous factors. He had far more cordial personal relations with Mr Nehru and various other Congress leaders than he had with any of the Muslim League leaders including Mr Jinnah. He respected and admired Mr Gandhi as a world class leader while his initial optimism about Mr Jinnah lapsed gradually as the going got tough. His informal relations with Congress leadership extended to their family interactions and social gatherings (Mountbatten, 2007). Mountbatten felt that Congress leadership was open to him and courted his support whereas he felt just the opposite about Mr Jinnah. Mountbatten, post partition, had expected to become the Governor-General of both India and Pakistan. But his plans were scuttled by Mr Jinnah when he announced that he would become Governor General of Pakistan. This created an impression that Mountbatten was out of favour with Muslim League and vice-versa. Additionally, since British government favoured a unified India, Mr Jinnah was regarded as spoiler of their plans when he insisted on partition and creation of Pakistan on the basis of two nation theory. He also did not take, amassing of discretionary powers by Mr Jinnah that were much more than of any other constitutional Governor Generals, in good taste.

Complexities of Princely States

Soon after his arrival in India, Mountbatten found himself embroiled in complexities of partition related issues confronting intransigence from both Congress and Muslim League leadership. Indian Independence Act 1947 while

being elaborate about the Indian provinces, was ambiguous on the key question of princely states' constitutional future - that resulted in significant confusion. The issue of 565 princely states was rather complex; options available to princely states were not straight forward. By terminating British paramountcy without providing a clear succession mechanism, the act created uncertainty about the legal status of the princely states. Ostensibly, they were given the option to join either India or Pakistan, or theoretically remain independent, though practical considerations made the third option virtually impracticable (Lumby, 1954). By May-June 1947, Mountbatten realized that the princely states may be the key for an agreeable settlement with Congress leadership and winning their goodwill. His constitutional advisor, V. P. Menon, a shrewd bureaucrat who later became secretary for States Ministry of India responsible for the integration of princely states with the newly established dominion of India, astutely put to him that wounds of partition for Congress leadership and Hindu population of India might to some extent be healed by the states' accession to India as the combined population of states was more than the population of the districts those were designated to be part of Pakistan. This argument touched Mountbatten deeply. In consultation with his advisors and V. P. Menon, the Viceroy worked out a plan that states be asked to accede to India but only in three key state functions that is Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications – the domains in which states had already ceased to exercise authority owing to British paramountcy (Menon, 1956). Thereon Mountbatten focused his energies for the cause and somewhat overlooked that as Crown's representative he had certain obligations towards princes, and his office was dutybound to be neutral. Lord Mountbatten's partiality for Congress leader Mr Nehru was well known to his close aides. Hence the outcome of his abdication policies was ultimately in favour of India and served the interests of Indian dominion.

Lord Mountbatten addressed the Chambers of Princes on 25 July 1947 and advised the rulers to acceded to either of the dominion with regard to subjects of Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications. He stressed upon them and made it clear that while technically they are at liberty to choose either of the dominion but there are certain geographical compulsions that could not be ignored. He tactfully used all his charm and eloquence and created an environment during the subsequent ceremony that left rulers with the distinct impression that Indian accession was the presumed path forward. He forestalled princes' aspirations of remaining independent solely or by formation of states unions by stating that British government has no intentions of granting them Commonwealth membership. He acted skilfully by not letting the princes make a reasoned choice. Rulers were also given the impression that it would be more difficult for them to get a better bargain from Indian government and therefore it was in their benefit to make accession decision before 15 August, thus imposing a time compression on their decision making. It is true that because of geographical compulsion many states with Muslim majority could simply not consider opting for Pakistan, but the handful of those who were geographically contiguous to both the dominions and could join either of the dominion conveniently, such as Kashmir, Jodhpur and Bikaner and the fact that all of them acceded to India casts a shadow on the neutrality of those orchestrating the partition process.

The Issue of Kashmir's Accession

Despite persuasion by Lord Mountbatten that states should make accession decision before the date announced for culmination of British rule i.e. 15 August 1947, Maharaja Hari Singh remained indecisive. Lord Mountbatten visited Kashmir in the third week of June 1947 and told Maharaja that independence was not a feasible option as British Government was unlikely to recognize state as a Dominion. Maharaja's predicament and indecision regarding Kashmir's accession stemmed from few complex factors; as a Hindu ruler of a Muslim majority state, he had a difficult choice to make. Acceding to India was clearly to anger his Muslim subjects in the Valley and Gilgit, while acceding to Pakistan would contradict his own religious identity as well as resented by influential Dogra elites and Kashmiri Pandits. Personally, he harboured hopes of maintaining independence for Kashmir under such

arrangements that he could maintain relations with both the newly established countries and preserve his own authority and if possible, dynasty. He had strong apprehensions that accession to either of the dominion would reduce or abrogate his authority and princely powers altogether as both India and Pakistan were establishing democratic systems. The Maharaja was toying with a notion of an Independent Jammu & Kashmir and was hoping for the best while doing nothing in micawberish state of mind. His indecisiveness proved costly. The law-and-order situation deteriorated rapidly especially in Poonch and Maharaja had troubles maintaining control over his own areas. After the tribesmen invasion, Maharaja made an urgent appeal for help to Indian government on 24 October 1947. Now as Governor General of India, chairing Defence Committee meeting, Lord Mountbatten insisted on the document of accession from the Maharaja of Kashmir before any military assistance could be sent. Sensing gravity of the situation, Maharaja signed the document of accession on 26 October at Jammu [Alastair Lamb maintains that it was done on 27 October after the deployment of Indian troops had started (Lamb, 1991)]. The accession of Kashmir was accepted conditionally. To be fair to Lord Mountbatten, he emphasized, considering Kashmir's demographic composition, that accession should be temporary and conditional contingent upon will of Kashmiri people ascertained through a plebiscite when situation stabilizes in Kashmir. This was agreed by Prime Minister Nehru and other Congress leaders present at the meeting (Menon, 1956). While the fighting continued in Kashmir, several meetings were held between the leaders of Pakistan and India however, nothing came out of these meetings. Lord Mountbatten proposed that United Nations might be involved to mediate between India and Pakistan. Upon his persuasion, Government of India formally approached United Nations on 31 December 1947 over Kashmir issue (Schofield, 2022).

For the issue of accession, the theory of geographic contiguity could not perfectly be applied to Kashmir as it shared boundary with both the dominions. Kashmir's infrastructure alignment, with its primary transportation links and exclusive rail connection oriented towards Pakistan, and Muslim majority population made compelling strategic logic favouring accession to Pakistan. However, these factors proved insufficient to convince Maharaja most probably because of his apprehensions about his own status and position in future. Secondly, legally it was the ruler who had to make the decision regarding accession, but it was stressed by the departing British authorities including Lord Mountbatten that the aspirations of the people should also be considered. Here the ascendancy of Sheikh Abdullah and his National Conference complicated Kashmir's political landscape by advocating Kashmiri independence and resisting India's division—positions at odds with broader Muslim aspirations. This divergence from popular Muslim demands created a narrative of split Muslim opinion in Kashmir, challenging the Muslim Conference's representative legitimacy that was supporting accession to Pakistan based on nearly 77% Muslim population of Kashmir. Whereas National Conference favoured accession with India in case nothing else worked out (Dawson, 1994).

Kashmir's accession became one of independence's most traumatic chapters, sowing the seeds for enduring hostility between India and Pakistan that resulted in three wars and numerous conflicts defining their relationship for decades. The expectation of Muslim League leaders that following the principal of communal allegiance, the Muslim majority state of Jammu and Kashmir would automatically join Pakistan - remained unfulfilled. While Congress leaders were making efforts and were in contact with Maharaja of Kashmir and were writing letters to British authorities expressing their concerns regarding the future of state of Kashmir, similar efforts were made by Muslim League leadership albeit with less enthusiasm. It is reasonable to believe that Lord Mountbatten's intervention and leveraged persuasion greatly facilitated majority of states' accession to India. But were the methods used were in line with the mandate of his office or were they even proper? The answer is clearly - No. His actions were out of step with the assurances given to the princes by the British government and it was commonly believed that he violated the moral obligations of his office and betrayed the British traditions. States' right of independent choice doomed in July 1947; Mountbatten just not only encouraged them to join India; he in fact pushed them to

do so and, in the process, lost his neutrality and put the honour of his office in line. All this confusion and uncertainty prevailing in the political and constitutional environment was further exacerbated by the time compression as the independence was fast approaching and rulers had minimal time to make consequential decisions about their States' future. These ambiguities contributed directly to several post-independence conflicts most notably in Kashmir and created the confrontational environment that would shape the political landscape of South Asia for decades.

Conclusion

The genesis of Kashmir issue lies in the overambitious though understandable approach of Maharaja to somehow maintain independent state of Kashmir or if that was not possible to achieve some special status for his state and himself. However, under the existing political environment of that time, it remained a frail possibility only. Guided by the compulsions of geography, economy, religious composition of its population and wishes of majority of its population; every rational consideration warranted Kashmir's accession to Pakistan. At the time of partition both India and Pakistan were vulnerable to British influence, and she was well suited to influence the course of events leading to the issues stemming out of partition process (Dasgupta, 2002). The British officers dealing with the sensitive subject of partition and freedom of India especially in the last few years of united India (1946-47) gave mixed signals to the rulers of princely states regarding the realistic options available to them (Gates & Roy, 2017). Especially Lord Mountbatten, the last viceroy of India, seemingly acted beyond the mandate of his office to create conditions for the states' accession to India. The methods employed by him to persuade rulers to accede to India were out of step with the British government policies and his approach was too favourable to the Congress party position. His decisions contributed towards Kashmir conflict that has attained the life of its own. It has resulted in two wars between India and Pakistan (1947-48 & 1965), numerous clashes (Balakot Feb 2019) and few limited conflicts (Siachen, Kargil, Op Sindhur/ Op Bunyan-ul-Mursoos May 2025) that we have seen and possibly few more that we may see in future.

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