

Mountbatten and the Partition of British India: A Role Analysis

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The year 1947 brought to the people of Indian subcontinent partition, and in its wake, the creation of two independent states. In many ways it was a unique event unfolding new and different episodes of long-term significance and far reaching consequences. Apart from the redistribution of boundaries, it also redefined the concepts of leadership, thus giving new perceptions of its standards and perpetuating new ideals.

In the context of partition, few would deny the primacy of the role assigned to and played by Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of United India. His personality has been analysed and discussed by a number of scholars in a variety of ways and from different angles. His royal blood, remarkable naval career, and high ranking contacts coupled with his personal charm, captivating glamour, and youthful looks have led many to attribute heroic qualities to his being. British and even certain Indian circles have depicted him as a "super statesman-cum-Prince charming who solved the subcontinent's problems in record time through a combination of military forthrightness, sheer personality, and tact."¹ Above all the circumstances of his appointment and arrival in India as the Viceroy designate have further added to the appeal and enigma that he himself was conscious enough to convey, for he was extremely mindful of the manner, his acts and decisions

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1. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 1857-1947* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), 452.

would reflect in history.² The image thus put across does in no way fall short of a great leader with extraordinary powers to execute the destiny of one fifth of humanity. However, the extent to which this garb of leadership suited his person remains a question to be viewed and analysed in all its manifold dimensions.

Leadership is a strangely unique and singularly powerful phenomenon, which is easily stamped but vaguely understood. It is a form of art that combines genius and luck requiring both force and vision to an extraordinary degree in varying circumstances of time and place. Moreover, it operates in the form of a triangle, to the existence and successful functioning of which the other two elements of "followers" and "goal" are indispensable. Most of the literature on leadership is unitarian, often confusing it as a single self-sufficient whole, functioning as an independent entity, more or less in a vacuum.³ This is a misconception. The nature and character of leadership is trinitarian. A leader, therefore, is one who shows exceptional capability to mobilize other towards a goal that is commonly shared by the leaders as well as the followers.⁴

The usual qualities attributed to great leadership are discipline, self-confidence, and intelligence of a high calibre, hard work, and above all a fiery zeal to mould a dream into reality notwithstanding the magnitude of adverse implications. Charged with a great vision, inspired by a goal and drive by an unseen force of energy and zest, the leader moves the nation and ignites the flame of courage and struggle in the masses. Almost invariable the product of tumultuous times, the leaders can both be loved and hated by the people for the very same acts. One thing, however, is certain: they are seldom indifferent toward him.⁵

Leadership does not attempt to vaguely influence others. It is rather actually focused and struggles for the joint quest of a specific ideal that, in turn, spells out the "kind" of leadership in question. War, natural disaster, management crisis, revolution,

2. Richard Hough, *Mountbatten: Hero of Our Time* (London: Widenfeld & Nicholson, 1980), 206.

3. Gary Wills, *Trumpets: The Call of Leaders* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 17.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Richard Nixon, *Leaders* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 5.

economic breakdown, or any other emergency calls for a person of high stature and resolute will. Peacetime planning requires men with potentials of a totally different nature. The challenges of peace are often greater but since they do not carry the inherent drama of wartime crisis, the leader's triumph over them is neither heroic nor visible. It is less trumpeted and goes without much celebration. However, the fact that wartime leaders are ranked higher than peacetime leaders or that histories dwell so largely on wars must not detract from the calibre of the one whose followers are not men in uniform bound, by the nature of duty, to obey. A great leader first inspires, then commands which in turn becomes the general inspiration.

Finally, the essential and a very delicate element often missed by many is the difference that exists between leadership and management. Contrary to general belief, they are two very significantly separate entities. Management aims at doing things right whereas leadership attempts to do the right thing.⁶ Managers with their task accomplished exist no more, but leaders even out of picture command a respectful following, for they once represented a force that changed the flow and direction of events, and thus dominating the verdict of history, acquired for themselves an immortal existence. Hence, these two phenomena differ in image, style, method, symbolism, expectations, response, and even accomplishments, since they operate at very different levels. It speaks for all arenas of human activity: social, economic, or political, and more so for the latter because it is here that the real test of leadership is conducted and the often confused difference between the two institutions is highlighted.

In the context of on-going debate on the partition of the subcontinent of India and the role of Mountbatten, the last Viceroy, definitely assumes a place of special significance. This was a time when the Indian subcontinent was ablaze with cries for freedom. It was a difficult situation with people rioting, Princes falling out among themselves, the Indian Civil Service crumbling, losing faith and trust and the British sceptical and full of foreboding.⁷ The

6. *Ibid.*

7. Alan Campbell Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten* (New York: Dutton & Co., 1963), 40.

authorities in London were somewhat unfavourably disposed to Wavell's administrative acumen that, they feared, might lead India not only to civil war but also to political movements of a "definitely totalitarian character."⁸ An urgent action was required to break the political deadlock preferably in the form of a "new personal approach,"⁹ perhaps as the only hope. The principal members of the cabinet agreed on Mountbatten. "His liberal ideas made him generally acceptable to labour and his royal blood more than acceptable to Conservatives."¹⁰

The idea of Mountbatten's appointment to the highest office in India, which Attlee later referred to as an "inspiration",¹¹ was initially evaded and battled against by the appointee. This battling reluctance, however, begged for him dictation of his own terms, including his insistence on fixing a date for the handing over of power to the Indians. He got away with most of his demands quite remarkably. Besides, he successfully conveyed the impression that it was not his wish that he be appointed to carry out such a preeminent mission as Viceroy. It has also been suggested that Mountbatten had "set his own sights on the viceroyalty of India even before the end of the war and asked Wavell to permit Nehru to leave India in order to help him placate the still restless and disturbed overseas Indian communities in Burma, Malaya and Singapore."¹² Many, therefore, still believe that the stiff opposition that he put up with Attlee's administration on this issue was feigned and that "he had taken the task for its grandeur and pomp, ceremonial and uniform, and for the historical record."¹³ Moreover, in the existing scenario with all its explosive tendencies, the time frame announced for the transfer of power was too short and thus laden with the threat of catastrophic consequences. In the

8. Stanley Wolpert, *Jinnah of Pakistan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 304.

9. Alan Campbell Johnson, 17.

10. Stanley Wolpert, 304.

11. Philip Ziegler, *Mountbatten: The Official Biography* (Glasgow: Harper & Row, 1985), 353.

12. Stanley Wolpert, *Nehru: A Tryst with Destiny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 358.

13. Richard Hough, 209.

House of Commons, Winston Churchill articulated his concern in a categorical tone.

Everyone knows that the fourteen months time limit is fatal to any orderly transfer of power and I am bound to say that the whole thing wears the aspect of an attempt by the Government to make use of brilliant war figures in order to cover up a melancholy and disastrous transaction.¹⁴

The announcement of February 20 1947, giving a timetable was not matched by any decision about the "procedures or forms and substance of such a transfer of power."¹⁵ The hell let loose on the migrants in that hot and humid summer proved the verdict of history. The great operation was, in fact, an "ignominious scuttle" enabling the British to extricate themselves from the awkward responsibility of presiding over India's "communal madness."¹⁶ It was destined to be a grand retreat, giving away the jewel in the crown and for precisely the same purpose the new arrangement had been made. "Keep India united if you can, if not, try to save something from the wreck; whatever happens, get Britain out,"¹⁷ was the essence of Mountbatten's orders. It was a task that had to be accomplished, a duty that had to be performed. It came with the office and the seat, and not because an individual charged with zeal and high national ideals, with peoples' support and sacrifices wanted to alter the destiny of an oppressed and suffering lot through his personal commitment and dedication. It was no doubt a mission but more of an official than a revolutionary nature, requiring abilities of an administrative genius rather than a spirited leader.

Mountbatten's outstanding naval career and his remarkable feats during the war, no doubt, contributed to the respect and merit he was accorded by his countrymen for whom his personal charisma doubled manifold by the style of "war leadership" that he exhibited. His previous assignments, however, carried little weight in the tense scenario of Indian politics. The contention, therefore,

14. *Ibid.*, 211.

15. Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 244.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Philip Ziegler, 359.

that Mountbatten was "exactly the right man in the right place at the right time",¹⁸ does not come up to the standards and expectations of a time, a place and a people whose demands and requirements went far beyond a mere change in the long list of outside rulers. He was sent by Attlee to do a "particular job and he did it."¹⁹ To ask more of him or to attribute more to him would not be fair on the part of the contemporary observer or the historian.

Thus the role assumed by Lord Mountbatten, as a result of the onerous responsibility laid on his shoulders, called for administrative capability of the highest order. Its demands had to be attended to in a spirit of integrity, impartiality and efficiency. The leaders of various political parties in India at that time looked up to him for a peaceful settlement, an attitude of understanding with a wise approach to work through the communal problem. He was also quite conscious that the issue carried every potential for a volcanic eruption if mishandled or ignored. His assignment to try to preserve the unity of India and transfer power peacefully was in itself a difficult task. But within a short time after reaching India, Mountbatten made it almost impossible by compromising his neutral status and that of his office. In the opinion of many, his compromise made his role ineffective and morally vulnerable.²⁰ His personal leanings towards the Congress leaders further strengthened, to the detriment of the equally significant party, the Muslim League. Jawaharlal Nehru was one of his closest advisers and personal friends in India. This closeness went against the interests of Muslim India. For a viceroy with publicly pronounced intentions of negotiating equal and fair terms between the opposing parties, it was quite unbecoming. His inability to successfully convince Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah stemmed mainly from his pro-Congress attitude. Therefore it was quite impossible for the Muslim League leaders to either trust him.

In this atmosphere, Mountbatten was left with very few options. Therefore, started making preparations for a rapid

18. Brian Hoey, *Mountbatten: The Private Story* (London: Sidgewick & Jackson, 1994), 190.

19. *Ibid.*, 200.

20. Akbar S. Ahmad, *Jinnah, Pakistan and Islamic Identity: The Search for Saladin* (London: Oxford University Press & Routledge, 1997), 119.

departure that would enable His Majesty's Government "to cut loose from India under the guise of delivering liberty."²¹ The actual process of partition that started unfolding itself after 3 June 1947, further exposed the intentions and policies of the last Viceroy. The implications of what had been agreed to in the Plan became glaringly obvious to the politicians and administrators of New Delhi as the hectic countdown began. The issue of joint Governor-Generalship, the fate of the Princely States, and the division of assets between the two newly created states of India and Pakistan occupied much of Mountbatten's time and energy. Each added a chapter of woe to the history of the birth of Pakistan. The sufferings of the Muslims further aggravated because of the partisan and biased attitude of the British, not to say anything of the long and painful experience of Hindu highhandedness. However, the worst handled affair that converted the entire process of transfer of power into a melancholy episode with a long lasting impression on the hearts and minds of people all over the subcontinent, was the Award of the Boundary Commission. The establishment, composition and working of the Commission, though apparently uncontroversial, betrayed some of the priorities of the major players in the negotiations for the transfer of power. Jinnah's proposal of appointing three UN recommended non-Indians as members of the Commission did not find favour either with the British or the Congress leadership. The British authorities considered it as an insult to their neutrality and capability to execute the partition process. The Congress thought that it would cause unnecessary delay. It was Nehru, once again, whose suggestion of nominating an independent chairman and four other persons of "high judicial standing", two from the League and two from the Congress, was accepted by Mountbatten. This is enough to testify the extent to which Mountbatten was prone to Nehru's advice and influence.²²

It might be true that Mountbatten, left the Chairman of the Commission Sir Cyril Radcliff to interpret his own terms of

21. Patrick French, *Liberty or Death: India's Journey to Independence and Division* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 296.

22. Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh (eds.), *Region and Partition: Bengal, Punjab and the Partition of the Subcontinent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 174.

reference but it can hardly be denied that most of these terms were dictated by none other than the Viceroy himself. The latter's opinion, in this instance too, was determined by the Congress or more precisely Nehru whose conviction that the Award be completed as quickly as possible, very conveniently suited Mountbatten's own insistence on speed. Their contention was that if the Commission set down to ascertain the wishes of the people across the various borders, its work would be unnecessarily prolonged, making the deadline of August 14 an unachievable target. "The fact that the border was never intended to be anything other than a rough-and-ready improvisation was impressed upon Radcliff, and the result of his labours bore all the marks of the rush job that it was."²³

Mountbatten's ignorance of and inexperience with administrative matters, more particularly of a civilian nature, brought about the greatest amount of harm as he singularly brushed aside the warning of Evan Jenkins, Governor of Punjab, who could clearly see the clouds of acute disorder, appalling confusion and complete breakdown of government machinery in controlling the tide of impending violence. In his opinion the time frame set for the transfer of power was too short rendering it almost impossible to "make a clean job of partition."²⁴ The delay in announcing the Award intended as a delaying tactic also backfired the moment it became public. The plan had been finalized by August 12, but it came to the knowledge of all those whose lives it was to effect, almost permanently, on the 17th of the month. The security of millions was, thus, put at stake. The motives could have been many. In the first place, it probably aimed at buying time so that the glamour and grandeur of the transfer of power ceremonies would not be disturbed by the sufferings of those it intended to displace, as Mountbatten thrived in pomp and glory, and this apparently was to be his last chance in India. "It was a strange order of values that put the fleeting emotions of Independence Day celebrations above the lives and honour of the people."²⁵ Secondly,

23. *Ibid.*, 176.

24. *Ibid.*, 177.

25. Ch. Muhammad Ali, *The Emergence of Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 220.

it might very well have been intended to save the British government from the rude shocks of a violent withdrawal. Finally, it could simply be an attempt to avoid facing reality on the ground, in the futile hope of a miracle that a little more time would lessen the impact of the great tragedy, its architects knew they had failed to avert. With very little knowledge and virtually no experience of India, its people and its terrain, they demarcated boundaries of an unknown world and thereby sealed the fate of millions.

The attempt to combine communal with some economic and strategic considerations caused a number of anomalies: Muslims resented the loss of Gurdaspur in Punjab and of Murshidabad and Nadia (as well as Calcutta) in Bengal; Hindus and Sikhs that of Lahore and the canal colonies of Khulna and Chittagong Hill Tracts.²⁶

In haste the Boundary Commission attempted the unnatural and by ignoring local details of geographical or communal bonds rooted far and deep in history, set the tide for a violent and tragic saga of cross-border migrations, unmatched in modern times.

The Award led to an acute and permanent sense of loss and injury among the people of Pakistan, a new state trying to stumble its way to creation. It came to be looked upon as a cleverly manipulated conspiracy of the last Viceroy, and the Chairman of the Award Commission in favour of the Congress leaders. It has also been suggested that Sir Cyril Radcliff was offered a *fait accompli* by Mountbatten and his assistant V.P. Menon to announce an award that was more geopolitical than judicious.²⁷ Though the Award aimed only at the demarcation of boundaries, some of its decisions led to major harm, in particular to the prospect of amicable relations between the two states of India and Pakistan. The case of its verdict concerning the Gurdaspur district of Punjab was significant for the future evolution of the Kashmir dispute, an issue that has never allowed either of the two neighbours to rest in terms of military preparedness, which consequently remains a constant burden on their respective economic resources and political agenda. The sense of grievance about the Award's lack of impartiality was not misplaced and in the recent years has been

26. Sumit Sarkar, 452.

27. Alistair Lamb, *Kashmir: Birth of a Tragedy* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 37.

confirmed by Radcliff's secretary Christopher Beaumont's revelations regarding Mountbatten "tampering" with it.²⁸ The historical evidence bears ample testimony to this fact. "Outside interference" did exist and the "only ones in a position to influence Radcliff were Mountbatten and his staff."²⁹ For Pakistan, the Award amounted to yet another blow in the series of injustices inflicted upon it in the course of its struggle for independence. The Quaid's reaction to it, clear and candid, was quite characteristic of that strong and forthright leader who unhesitatingly called it "an unjust, incomprehensible and perverse award."³⁰ His approach, however, did not entertain an opposing stand at this very crucial juncture of Indian history. Knowing well that the Muslims were being given a "moth-eaten and "truncated" Pakistan, he urged his future countrymen to abide by the settlement as honourable people. "It may be our misfortune but we must bear up this one more blow with fortitude, courage and hope."³¹

The last Viceroy of India, hence, left much to be desired in his role of an impartial arbiter. In his attempt to perpetuate the glory of Britain, and enhance the aura of personal glamour, Mountbatten overstepped the requirements of neutrality thus becoming a major participant and a culpable player. He was, no doubt, an accomplished man with much to his credit that he could be justly proud of "But not of those months in India."³²

28. Ian Talbot & Gurharpal Singh, 2.

29. Ch. Muhammad Ali, 217.

30. *Ibid.*, 221.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Richard Hough, 230.