

## Partition of Punjab

*Prof. (Dr.) Kirpal Singh\**

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\* Based on a lecture delivered at Punjabi University. Add:1288, Sector - 15B, Chandigarh. 1600015.

# SR Sept. 07 has Prof. Chhanda Chatterjee's critical appreciation of his book on Partition.

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The partition of Punjab in 1947 is a unique event as it enforced the movement of the people on a scale absolutely unparalleled in the history of the world.<sup>1</sup> "There must be many examples in the gory history of mankind where the extent of violence has been as great or even greater, but it is probably true that there has never been such a huge exchange of population", says Horace Alexander.<sup>2</sup> In the case of East and West Punjab, more than eight million people crossed the border within three months. According to Andrus, "The massive exchange of population that attended the partition of the sub-continent and conditions under which it took place are most unprecedented in the history."<sup>3</sup>

After more than half a century, the students of history often raise a very significant question as to whether partition of Punjab could be avoided? Or atleast the blood-shed attending this bloody event could be minimised. It may be noted here that Partition of Punjab resulted in huge loss of life. There is a difference of opinion with regard to casualties, but it is generally believed that there occurred half a million deaths and about fifty thousand women were abducted accompanied by untold misery - both in East and West Punjab. Could it be avoided or minimised: It is a tricky question and several writers have tried to answer this in their own way.

According to Malcolm Darling, "the tragedy of the Punjab could have been foreseen, and we should not have handed over millions of helpless peasants, for whose welfare we were responsible to anarchy and ruin."<sup>4</sup> Penderal Moon has rightly lamented as to **"Why the ending of British Raj, which we have so long foreseen and so long proclaimed as our goal, involved a last minute division of the country, the precipitate and forced migration of well over ten million people and casualties of the order of many lacs.** He has described this as singular want of prevision and failure of statesmanship".<sup>5</sup>

Malcolm Darling has observed: "Had the Hindus and Muslims alone been concerned, the division of Punjab might have been effected without bloodshed'. Sikhs were as determined to prevent the domination by the Muslim as Muslim domination by the Hindus."<sup>6</sup>

According to Cabinet Mission Plan, Sikhs had been recognised as 3rd important community in India besides Hindus and Muslims for the purpose of transfer of power.<sup>7</sup> It so happened that Sikh's point of view and the Sikh demand for exchange of Sikh population was ignored. On the 11th May 1947 Mountbatten convened a special meeting at Simla to resolve the Punjab problem. He invited Pt. Nehru, Mr. Jinnah and Sir Evan Jenkins who was considered an expert on Punjab affairs. In the meeting, Lord Mountbatten put the question that the Sikhs demanded exchange of their population and posed the question whether it was possible. Jenkins who was opposed to partition of Punjab, replied that it was not possible. Pandit Nehru and Mr. Jinnah kept silence.<sup>8</sup> **So the fate of Punjab was decided by a committee in which no Punjabi was represented. They could not gauge the situation and take some remedial measures.**

Partition of Punjab could be avoided if there had been some adjustments, or some communal understanding at the Centre. Maulana Azad was of the view that independence should be delayed for some time so that Indians could arrive at some communal understanding. Pt. Nehru and Patel insisted on immediate transfer of power

to Indian hands. Equally forceful was the Muslim League demand for Pakistan, so it was considered advisable to transfer the power immediately. **The target date for the transfer of power was June 1948 which was brought earlier to 15 August 1947. Decisions were taken in such haste that they could not make proper assessment of the situation in Punjab.** Had the Viceroy made an effort to explore every angle to the complex situation in Punjab, he would have surely devised some political arrangements in this regard. It was an open secret that Jinnah would have agreed to the proposal of transfer of population for Sikhs. But decisions were taken in such haste that nothing could be done to pacify the Sikhs who were forced to migrate from Pakistan to East Punjab.

Lord Patric Spens, former Chief Justice of India, discussing with me the causes of bloodshed which followed the transfer of power, observed, "**the main cause was the haste with which we parted with India**". The connections of centuries were severed within days without any proper thought. This has never happened anywhere in the British Empire".<sup>9</sup> Lord Ismay, Chief of Staff to Lord Mountbatten told me in response to my query that the Partition Plan which was framed by him (Lord Ismay) was incomprehensive. He said, the Plan had been prepared within two months; for a comprehensive plan I needed more time.<sup>10</sup>

Lord Attlee, the then Prime Minister told me, in response to my query: why there was so much of bloodshed and why the Sikhs had not been satisfied, said: Jinnah was really a very little man. He did not agree to anything. It would have been much better had Liaquat Ali Khan been there in his place." To my question as to why the date of transfer of power, which was originally June 1948, was brought forward to August 1947, he replied: "The Indian parties did not agree and the things were moving from bad to worse".<sup>11</sup>

The valid question why the British were in a hurry to transfer power to Indian hands in 1947 had been asked by Lt Col V F Evaskine to Lord Ismay. Ismay stated in reply, "On the question whether power was transferred in a great hurry, I think there were three reasons which made any other course highly dangerous, if not impossible:

1. "Communal tension throughout the country was extreme.
2. The power to deal with disturbances had almost ceased (an exhausted civil service, on one hand, and only a handful of British troops, on the other)
3. Most important of all, Nehru specifically said unless Muslim members were dismissed from the Interim Government, he would resign. The position would have been impossible having special regard to (2) above.<sup>12</sup> As a matter of fact, Wavell Plan for Transfer of Power has not been paid adequate attention. I have published its full text and discussed it in my recently published book: **Sikhs and Transfer of Power**. (Published by Punjabi University, Patiala).

Lord Wavell proposed to devote more than six months in the proposal for the northern states which were to be affected by creation of Pakistan. Mountbatten looked towards Nehru and Jinnah for every proposal for Punjab. For instance, Sikhs demanded the transfer of their population to East Punjab. **Mountbatten referred to this proposal to Nehru and Jinnah. Nehru gave an evasive reply and Jinnah did not reply.**<sup>13</sup> No action was taken. In Wavell's proposals there was ample time and scope for

### **negotiation and decision making.**

The Punjab Boundary Award brought a lot of criticism from Pakistan. Mr Jinnah, the Governor General of Pakistan, stated: "It is an unjust, incomprehensible and even perverse award".<sup>14</sup> The case of the Ferozpur District rendered the entire award of Lord Radcliffe suspicious in the eyes of Pakistan. Justice Mohammad Munir stated, "when I was replying to the Sikh case: I was told by Mr Radcliffe in the most unequivocal terms that the tehsils of Ferozpur, probably, Ferozpur, Zira and Fazilka were coming to Pakistan and that it was unnecessary for me to discuss that part of the case with them. I still remember description of the terrain he gave me to the Nawab of Mamdot" (Lord Radcliffe told this writer that his private talk always leaked out to the Muslim press).

He was jubilant, but was disappointed a few days later, when according to the Award, which came three days after the scheduled time, these tehsils went to India.<sup>15</sup>

The important communication which caused a lot of misunderstanding was the letter of Sir George Abell, Private Secretary to Lord Mountbatten. It was addressed to Abbott, private Secretary to Sir Evan Jenkins, the Governor of Punjab. It was dated 8 August 1947, and it read as follows:

"I enclose a map showing roughly the boundary which Sir Cyril Radcliffe proposes to demarcate in his Award and a note by Christopher Beaumont describing it. There will not be any great changes from this boundary, but it will have to be accurately defined with reference to village and zila boundaries in Lahore District. The Award itself is expected within the next 48 hours and I will let you know about the probable time of announcement. Perhaps you would ring me up if H.E. the Governor has any views on this point."<sup>16</sup>

According to the communication tehsil Zira and Ferozpur had been placed in Pakistan.

This letter was written in response to Sir Evan Jenkins' letter demanding advance information regarding the Boundary Award. His Private Secretary had contacted George Abell for this advance information. He had pleaded that it had been the previous practice of the British administrators, to give advance information to the government concerned regarding administrative decisions likely to effect them so that they might make necessary arrangements.

Sir Evan Jenkins, while asking for advance information, forgot that the information required was relating to an international boundary, and it was no longer an internal problem of the province of which he was the Governor. Secondly, Sir Evan Jenkins left the letter and the map with Sir Francis Mudie, his successor, the Governor of West Punjab. By showing these documents to Mr Jinnah and Mr Liaquat Ali Khan, the Governor General and Prime Minister of Pakistan, Sir Francis wanted to prove that the original award had been changed by Lord Mountbatten and that was the cause of the delayed announcement. Lord Mountbatten wrote to Lord Ismay regarding Abell's letter on 2 April 1948:

"So far as my memory serves me, the first indication I had that the Award was almost ready was when George Abell informed me (it must have

been on the 9th August), that he had sent up a note to Jenkins the night before, giving him a preliminary forecast of where the boundary was likely to be drawn. He did not consult me before sending the forecast, nor did he show it to me because he said that it was done on staff level and that he had obtained it from Beaumont (Radcliffe's secretary) to give Jenkins an early warning of what was likely to be coming.<sup>17</sup>

Lord Mountbatten concluded, "But the assumption that can be drawn is that the line indicated in the document attached to Abell's letter was only a tentative one and it was amended subsequently to balance the Bengal boundary line."<sup>18</sup>

Sir Cyril Radcliffe (later on Lord Radcliffe) told this writer in 1964 that he had drawn several lines to determine the boundary between East and West Punjab. One such line was sent to Lahore but was not the final line. The final line was in the Punjab Boundary Award.

Lord Mountbatten, in a personal letter dated 2 April 1948 which has been discovered from the Military Archives, King's College, London", wrote to Lord Ismay:

'I shall always be grateful to you for having cautioned me not to try and bring any direct influence to bear on Radcliffe concerning the actual award beyond expressing the following general view. So far as I remember, I said to him that Sikh attitude had become rather worse than we had anticipated, and when he was balancing the boundaries of East and West Pakistan, **I sincerely hoped that he would bear the Sikh problem in mind. I think I went, so far as to say that if he was really satisfied that overall decision on both East and West was absolutely fair to both the communities, then I trusted that any generosity to Pakistan should be more in Bengal than in Punjab since there was no Sikh problem in Bengal.**<sup>19</sup>

My personal findings also confirmed that these two Tehsils were first allocated to West Punjab, then finally they were allocated to India.

I had not known about the Sketch Map incident when I presented my paper on the Punjab Boundary Commission to Mr Justice Mehar Chand Mahajan and Mr Justice Teja Singh. Mr Justice Mahajan advised me, during 1959, that I should contact S Harnam Singh who had pleaded the Sikh case and he would throw some light on the Punjab Boundary Award.

In January 1960, Justice Harnam Singh told me that these two Tehsils have been allocated to India after he and Giani Kartar Singh pleaded with Major Short who contacted Lord Mountbatten and persuaded him to satisfy the Sikhs. In a written statement, Major Short stated to me: **'My impressions on getting to Delhi on 22 July 1947 were that the Sikhs did not like the Plan (Partition Plan) ... I reported accordingly to our authority in Delhi.** They felt, as I did too, that they would not now alter the course but so far as they could trim a trifle to meet the Sikhs, they would"<sup>20</sup>

This is confirmed by Christopher Beaumont's recent disclosure. Beaumont was the Secretary of Sir Cyril Radcliffe, the Chairman of the Punjab

Boundary Commission. In an article in a recent issue of the *Time* New York, dated August 11, 1997, his deposition that the Punjab Boundary Award was altered without his knowledge is significant as he was associated with the preparation of the Award at various stages. It was he who had sent the advance information about the Award to Sir Evan Jenkins, the Punjab Governor.



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