

Mountbatten and the Partition of India: A Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

This paper is a study of *Mountbatten and the Partition of India* by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre which is a vivid account of the defining moments of the end of the British Raj, highlighted through interviews with Lord Louis Mountbatten. This paper intends to provide a post-colonial perspective. It also attempts to highlight the debate on the politics behind independence and the partition of India which was a major contributory factor in framing the history for the post-independence generations of India.

Keywords: Independence, British Raj, Postcolonial, Other, Empire, Politics, Memory

In this paper, I will be giving an introduction of the book *Mountbatten and the Partition of India* by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre. This description will be followed by a postcolonial study of the same through an analysis of the interviews of Lord Louis Mountbatten as narrated by the writers.

The British conquest of India marks the advent of Imperialistic endeavors of the West on a large scale. A postcolonial perspective tends to look at it as a representational conquest as it labeled India along with other colonized nations as exotic, and therefore, the 'Other' that ought to be civilized by the superior and civilized white man. The first rebellion against the colonizers took place in 1857 which was the first war of independence for the natives, and the first mutiny against British rule for the colonizers. Though the rebellion failed, it marked the beginning of a series of attacks on the colonialist government in order to procure an Independent India.

Mountbatten and the Partition of India by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre is a vivid account of the defining moments of the end of the British Raj, highlighted through interviews with Lord Louis Mountbatten. The credibility of Truth in these accounts is subject

to question. The writers/interviewers are of western origin, as well as the interviewee. The pivotal role granted to Mountbatten is repeatedly stressed upon through Mountbatten himself.

Mountbatten admits in the interview that the British had to let go of India because they did not have the means to go on. This growing lack of means led them to take steps in order to proceed further. His insight on the politics of Indian National Congress, the Muslim League, and other parties, makes a postcolonial reader conclude how the partition of India was not a result of the native voice, but that of the political voice. This is highlighted in his revelation on the stance of Jinnah who was adamant on partition and formation of a solely Muslim nation, and the Congress party which wanted independence but not on the cost of nation's division, while on the other hand, there were kings and princes who did not want the British to leave. This highlights the power praxis, how power circulates and is appropriated and re-appropriated: "When you have contending and conflicting parties, they go on forever. For instance, Mr. Jinnah would be quite happy to carry on under the British the whole time. The Princes didn't want the British to go. Congress wanted the British to go but absolutely not at the price of the partition of India (Collins and Lapierre 20)."

The postcolonial study of Mountbatten's interviews also highlights how memory fossilizes history. Throughout the interviews as recorded by Collins and Lapierre, Mountbatten stresses that he was never dependent on pen and paper during his conversations with Indian political leaders of various parties. His emphasis on solely discussing and committing to the written word only after these personal rendezvous makes one question the reliability of his accounts as memory is not infallible. Memory is fragmentary, as Salman Rushdie comments in "Imaginary Homelands", and therefore, it can never be reconstructed in the same form in which one lived it. The whole idea of representation of India through Mountbatten's account is subject to a fragmented memory, which highlights that it can never be a concrete account of the partition of India.

One must not blindly perceive that the partition of India was the sole consequence of power struggle between Indian political leaders. The superiority of the holy book of Christianity and its spread through missionaries had long ago sown the seeds of religious split among the natives. Thus, the onus of the consequences of partition did not merely lie on religious leaning of the natives as well as the power struggle between the aspiring political leaders, but the early British imperialistic endeavors of spreading Christianity.

The supreme ego of the west is evidently visible in Mountbatten's boastful account of himself acting as the savior, the "one man band" as he repeatedly mentions, thus highlighting himself as the superior, dominant, white man; who was going to transfer power and make them learn the tactics of administering a nation, which the native is ignorant of: "You see, you haven't understood me at all. You think I have moods or fears, whereas I have none. I have the most ludicrous self-confidence. I'm the chap who can never be wrong- everybody else is wrong (93)."

The two reasons that Mountbatten cites for the transfer of power are: first, that the ruling party, the Labor party believed in independent rule in the Commonwealth; and second, that the British did not have any means to administer India any longer. The British had to stop recruiting for Indian Civil Service in 1939. The Indian Civil Service had been an important means to administer India and consisted of people belonging to high class who "hadn't got to try and be 'on the make' in anyway, and they ran India by the means of benevolent autocracy

through the viceroy, which was the most efficient and best way of doing it (52).” Although a majority of population was satisfied with the British rule, it was this minority class they had raised themselves which realized that they need not let the occupying power run the nation, but rather do it themselves. It was the educated class which had seen the point and started questioning the relevance of British rule.

Winston Churchill’s Pro-Empire stance in not being in the favor of granting India independence is evident here as Mountbatten mentions, “To him, India is Kipling, it is polo, it is soldiery, it is glamour, it is everything. He does not want to see that go away and he thinks, in some way quite rightly, that India is happier under British rule (23).” However, by saying that majority of India was satisfied with British rule, one can acknowledge the use of hegemony to appropriate the will of the masses. These people who were happy with British rule were unaware that they were losing their identity through their consent to the British rule in India.

Edward Said, a postcolonial thinker, mentions how the West approached the Orient as a story-- exotic, mysterious, savage, the Other. The West defined itself as a contrasted image through power politics, a projection of their desires through the creation of this glamorous and mysterious Orient. This approach toward the colonized nation as a story is reflected in Winston Churchill’s view of India as a story, which he was never able to do away with.

Though ninety-nine percent of Indian population was satisfied with the British rule, the one percent population was composed of the ever-questioning literate people, the educated ones, political leaders who were not ready to give up and could not be silenced: “I mentioned that we ruled with the consent, with the affection, of the vast masses. No doubt about that. But the intelligent, educated class did not like it (57).” They served as the major threat to the Empire, and therefore, the British had to arrive at some solution due to lack of means to administer India any further and the threat posed by the rebelling voices of the educated class. The major figures included Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Liaqat Ali Khan, and Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who were great orators, and had an English education. They were all lawyers and had put their lifetime into the freedom struggle, and were thus subsumed in politics.

Mountbatten in his account of the details of partition of India explicitly blames Jinnah who was the leader of Muslim League. Jinnah’s tendency to close his mind to any suggestion or discussion, and his eagerness to get what he wanted makes Mountbatten conclude that Jinnah’s refusal to live under a Hindu nation highlights his insecurity in the power struggle and thus the partition of India and the formation of Pakistan: “Mind you, Jinnah is now forgotten. He was the man who did it (...) Bangladesh and all that misery which I forecast. It had to... it could not go on. All this misery and trouble was caused by Jinnah and no one else (62).” However, this also throws light on the point that while Nehru and Patel were maneuverable, Jinnah was not. His reluctance to any move that could deprive him of power is an indicator of his ability to not be manipulated into accepting others’ solutions, something that makes even Mountbatten to give in.

The need to divide India into Hindu and Muslim nations was problematic on the ground of the distribution of Muslim population all over the country. Many of them did not want to leave because of the fear of being uprooted from their land. Jinnah’s obstinate

attitude towards getting whole of Punjab and Bengal into Pakistan despite of these states having both Hindu and Muslim populations posed a problem in the cartography.

On major grounds, according to Mountbatten, it was difficult to divide a subcontinent as large as India was: “It is called a subcontinent because it is attached to the continent of Asia, but it is, in fact, a continent. It’s comparable to Europe in almost every way. The dimensions are not very far apart. The number of races, of languages, of dialects, of religions, is pretty near as great (58).” Mountbatten could not think of throwing India out of the Commonwealth. India was a big part of the British Imperialist conquest, and he could not bear the idea of removing the “brightest jewel” in the Crown of the British Empire. His vision of British Empire is analogous to a surrogate mother. He mentions that India could not survive without taking nourishment from the ways of British rule. The British could not let go of India, as according to Mountbatten, India was still in an age of innocence and it could not survive without the administrative capacities, which it thoroughly lacked., and thus the need to keep it in the Commonwealth. This necessity to keep India attached to British Crown like the umbilical cord that keeps the child attached to the mother for its nourishment further emphasizes the colonizer’s perception of the colonized nation as a meek, naive, and callow entity, which is always in the need of a civilizing and guiding force.

As far as granting democracy to India goes, the British never gave it fully; and whatever they reluctantly gave was obtained with difficulty from their grasp. Also, the elevation of British system of democracy in the eyes of the colonized was a result of that system being denied to them. This is why, during the talks of partition, the British system of democracy was in the mind of the political leaders of India. As a result, this led to mere replication of this system while building the Indian democracy. Shashi Tharoor, in an interview about his book *An Era of Darkness: the British Empire in India* mentions,

In India, however, we practically replicated the British system right down to the practice of shouting ‘aye’ rather than ‘yea’ or ‘yes’, for a vote. It is quite startling the extent to which we replicated it (...) Part of being colonized is the colonization of the mind. We had a myth about Britain, that the British assiduously cultivated, so that it became the embodiment of aspiration instead of tyranny (The Hindu, Sunday Magazine 5).

The partition of India was carried out in a hurried manner as Cyril Radcliffe, a British judge, was only given a period of barely forty days for remaking the map of India and Pakistan. Although Mountbatten only wanted him to meet the time table, the rush only aggravated the chaos. In saying that he needed “best national boundary line” which would not cause violence to the population, he was later proved wrong as the repercussions of this rush in drawing the map to meet the time table were much worse than anyone could have imagined.

The hurried formulation of national boundaries in drawing the map also raises a question on the cartography of India. In response to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “Problems in Current Theories of Postcolonial Discourse”, Benita Parry argues that, unlike Spivak’s argument about the exclusion of subaltern voice in the cartography of India, the voice of the native was heard in drawing the boundaries. However, her argument can be countered by saying that the voice that was heard was not the native voice, but the political voice. It was the mediated voice of the brown “babu” class. Therefore, they were not the

authentic Indian voices, but were a merely mediated, suspected Indian voice. This political voice determined the cartography of India.

Furthermore, this brings the question of History, that history represents those who write it. Dipesh Chakrabarty highlights in “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History” that history is mere artifice and has been a tool of appropriation of the thought process of the colonized. This written history has been a major yardstick to measure and erase all the other histories in order to mark the narrative of the colonizer as the embodiment of supremacy: “it is that insofar as the academic discourse of history- history as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university- is concerned, ‘Europe’ remains the sovereign theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian’, ‘Chinese’, ‘kenyan’, and so on (*The Postcolonial Studies Reader* 383).”

We can see how this is reflected in the context of *Mountbatten and the Partition of India*. The politics of inclusion and exclusion in framing the thought process of the idea behind this book is evident and thus the book in which the interviewers and interviewee are both English, highlights it as very Eurocentric in itself. The politics of inclusion and exclusion is also underlined in Mountbatten’s formulation of the plan of providing a solution to the question of partition. For instance

Remember that the plan I sent home on 2 May 1947 had never been seen by any of the Indian leaders at all. But I had personally created the plan by constantly talking about it, clause by clause, with every leader and getting his reactions, to the point at which I felt reasonably confident that I had not included anything to which they would object (Collins and Lapierre 78).

Mountbatten’s major obstacle in getting the plan of partition of India approved was, according to him, Gandhi. He mentions that his concern lied with Gandhi’s stance on partition because the Independence of India meant a lot to him and Mountbatten was aware of that. Gandhi wanted to keep India unified, and the fact that he could only have independence at the price of unity was making the situation deplorable for him. The re-drafted plan which he came with returning from England was not something that Gandhi would have wholeheartedly agreed to: “when I landed in Karachi, I was met by Mudie who said to me, ‘you are going to have Gandhi against you, we have been warned’ (92).” Also, Gandhi as a leader was revered by many, and Mountbatten was one of them. Though sometimes he found his advice nonsensical, he still listened to his views. However, postcolonial encounter is a political encounter. It is highlighted in Mountbatten admitting that he utilized Gandhi to get out the sterling balances of Pakistan from the government of India by taking the matter to Gandhi, who decided to fast to death until the balances were handed over to Pakistan.

I, in fact, as the Constitutional Governor-General felt myself in a position to try and make the Indian government behave in a way that would stand up in history-statesmanlike, very adult way of behaving, and I think I succeeded. But you see I used tactics like getting Gandhi to fast and kicking Patel to sign. But it did succeed (50).

The native’s reverence for the superior White race is highlighted in the welcoming as well as departure of Mountbatten from India. Mountbatten mentions India as a land of ceremonial splendor which was charged with nth degree of emotion when he and Edwina Mountbatten were officially installed as Viceroy and Vicereine of India. Similarly, at the time of departure, the farewell in June 1948 saw the crowd begging Mountbatten to stay. This

highlights how the native is mesmerized by the Superior other that he elevates the White skin above everything else. On the one hand, the native is trying to get rid of the British rule because of his scorn for it, and on the other hand, the ambivalence is evident in his antics of adoration of the elevated status of the White man.

The superior 'I' is also exercised by Mountbatten as he penned his last deed as a viceroy in granting the Begum of the Nawab of Pallanpore the status of a Highness, which in the past the state had never agreed to because of her foreign origin. The megalomania in the guise of a noble deed is very much present: "“God!’ I said, ‘I know! I will make the old Begum of Pallanpore a Highness’ (109).”

In this manner, *Mountbatten and the Partition of India* is, therefore, a perspective on the colonial encounter which was a major episode in the history of Indian struggle of independence. Through a postcolonial critique, we are thus able to conclude that the politics behind independence and the partition of India was a major contributory factor in framing the history for the post-independence generations of India.

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