
UNIT 24 TOWARDS FREEDOM-II*

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24.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit covers the period from the appointment of the new Viceroy to the achievement of independence. A time limit for British withdrawal was announced to bring urgency to the picture. The Cabinet Mission Plan cannot be retrieved despite talks in London in December 1946. Mountbatten comes out as the last Viceroy and soon moves to announcing partition of the country. The date for withdrawal is advanced to 15 August 1947. Congress moves to accepting partition while continuing to reject the two nation theory. Gandhiji too accepts partition, while calling for people not to accept it in their hearts.

24.2 TERMINAL DATE FOR WITHDRAWAL FROM INDIA

An important aspect of the British Government's decision to withdraw from India was the way it was presented. It was to come across as a step forward in the planned devolution of power, not as forced dissolution of imperial power. Accordingly, the 2nd January 1947 draft of the statement to be made by His Majesty's Government spoke of "the final stage in their achievement of self government", which "for the past thirty years...has been the policy of successive British governments."

At the heart of the new policy initiative was the appointment of a new Viceroy. It was announced that **Mountbatten was the last Viceroy**, and that the British would leave India by June 1948. In interviews for Lapierre and Collins' *Freedom at Midnight*, many decades after his term in India, Mountbatten asserted ownership of the idea of the time limit. However, this was incorrect. Wavell, the penultimate Viceroy, Prime Minister Attlee and members of the Cabinet were already in favour of a specific date for withdrawal, though for different reasons. Mountbatten insisted on its announcement, to convince the Indian public that the government meant business.

In December 1946, talks were convened by Prime Minister Attlee with Indian leaders to reconcile their opposed interpretations of the Cabinet Mission plan. Congress saw the plan as an alternative to partition and accepted compulsory

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grouping of provinces. This was partly because NWFP and Assam, despite having Congress governments, were placed in the sections which would make up Pakistan. In contrast, the Muslim League was all for grouping of provinces and accepted the Mission scheme in as much as compulsory grouping implied Pakistan. However, the London talks failed to bring agreement. The impasse remained despite Congress accepting His Majesty's Government's pro-League interpretation of the Mission scheme in the 6 December 1946 statement.

The Interim Government was intended to bring about agreement between the Congress and the League by virtue of jointly running the administration. Rather, it became a forum where the League waged civil war by other means. Nehru described the attitude of the League in the Interim Government as 'Non-cooperation from within'. The League opened battle on every front possible to somehow achieve Pakistan. The League members questioned appointments made by Congress ministers as well as most policy decisions. Congress members in the Interim Government found the functioning of the government to be severely compromised. Patel demanded that Leaguers should resign from the government given their intemperate speech.

This went on till 5 February 1947 when Congress members demanded resignation of League members. Though disruptionist tactics of the League members was the main ground for this demand, it was also pointed out that the Muslim League had refused to join the Constituent Assembly which had convened on 9 December 1946. This implied an ambiguous acceptance of the Mission Plan on its part. This in turn meant framing of the constitution was obstructed. The League only accepted the short term aspects of the Plan, namely the formation of an Interim Government, through which it hoped to reach its goal of Pakistan. When the Muslim League Working Committee met at Karachi on 31st January 1947, it asked for the dissolution of the Mission Plan. This was despite the 6 December 1946 statement by the Government accepting the interpretation of the League on grouping and asked Congress to assure that there would be a set procedure for the Constituent Assembly.

The statement issued on 6th December 1946 tried to resolve the conflict over grouping by putting forth the interpretation that the provinces had to necessarily group themselves into three sections and could only opt out afterwards. The government hoped to convince the Muslim League to join the Constituent Assembly. The Congress was divided on accepting the statement. Jawaharlal Nehru in a speech at the AICC meeting on 5th January 1947 proposed a resolution that the statement be accepted. The Congress Socialists and the Hindu Mahasabha opposed the statement. Sarat Chandra Bose feared that acceptance of the statement would mean surrender of rights of the Constituent Assembly and end of provincial autonomy. Congress eventually accepted the statement but urged the need to draft the constitution with agreement and without compulsion.

The ambiguity of the Mission was evident. The Congress perspective was one of regions inhabited by interwoven communities, which ruled out rigid territorial boundaries. However this position was not accepted by the British or by the League. The grouping scheme created problems for Assam in the North-East and Punjab in the North-West. The Congress leader, Bardoloi, feared that if Assam went into the Constituent Assembly dominated by Bengal, the Constitution would be written by Bengal, and Assam would not be able to break out because of

Bengal's numerical majority. Md. Tayabullah of the Assam State Congress feared that grouping would weaken the Congress.

Jawaharlal Nehru made it clear that grouping would not be imposed upon provinces. He was afraid that the Sikhs in the Punjab would get a bad deal in the constitution-making process. The Pratinidhi Panthic Board passed a resolution on 11th January 1947 urging the Congress to support the Sikh demand for communal veto on constitution making. The Muslim League termed the Statement as 'a jugglery of words' in a resolution passed at its meeting in Karachi on 31st January 1947. It withdrew its acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan. With this, the Congress members of the Interim Government demanded the resignation of Muslim League members, but this did not happen.

Gandhiji tried to break the impasse with a new proposal to Mountbatten. He gave Jinnah the option of forming the government and offered Congress support. This plan met with protest and support. Eventually, Gandhiji withdrew the plan, declaring to Mountbatten his inability to carry the Congress along. Congress feared its followers would see this as Congress forsaking responsibility and worse, in favour of a person who had not given up the politics of violence and hatred.

For the Congress leaders the experience of office in the Interim Government worsened over time, given the obstructionist attitude of the League. Congress leaders felt it best to control some part of the country rather than have their writ run thinly over the whole country. Non Cooperation by the League in the Interim Government took the country closer to Partition. Nehru's appeal to Liaquat Ali Khan, the League leader, to meet and discuss differences as the British were fading out of the picture, got no response.

On the one hand, the government's statement was a response to the decline of authority of the colonial state and its instruments; on the other, it was a notice to the League that agreement had to be worked out by the given time limit. The government wanted to convey the message that it was no longer willing to give the League a veto on the political process. The statement was not clear about to whom power was to be transferred. Would India be united or divided? A clause in the statement said that if there was no agreement at the Centre, power would be handed over to whoever was in power in the provinces. The League went ahead to bid for power in the Punjab and overthrew the coalition government. This set Punjab on the path to civil war. Congress was convinced of the intention of the British to quit. Gandhiji said that the Congress provinces, if wise, will get what they want.

The direct action in Punjab brought about the downfall of the coalition ministry. The trouble in the Punjab began on 24th January 1947, when the ministry prohibited the volunteer bodies of the Muslim League and the RSS. The League called for a mass 'civil disobedience movement'. League leaders courted arrest in protest against the attack on the Muslim National Guards. They saw this as an attack upon the party. The government decided to withdraw its order four days later. The coalition ministry in Punjab, with Khizar Hayat Khan Tiwana of the Unionist Party as its premier, resigned on March 3rd 1947. Negotiations were carried on to get the Muslim League to form the government amidst opposition from sections of Sikhs and Hindus. The demand for partition of the province by the Hindu and Sikh minorities picked up in the context of the League's extra-constitutional assault on a duly elected ministry.

The Congress Working Committee accordingly passed a resolution on 8 March pointing out that the provinces of Punjab and Bengal would be partitioned if the country was partitioned. If Muslims could not be coerced, non-Muslims could not be coerced too. By March 1947, and after the Rawalpindi riots, it became obvious that the Sikhs preferred partition of the province to domination by Muslims. By the beginning of April, Central Legislative Assembly members conveyed to Nehru their opinion that there was no alternative to partition.

The demand for partition of Bengal went back to the riots in Calcutta and Noakhali in 1946 when Hindus grew to distrust the Chief Minister. The communal disturbances in Bengal since 1946 centred on Calcutta, Noakhali and Tippera. There were killings and looting in cities like Calcutta, Rajshahi and Dacca. Violence was especially directed against women. On 5th March 1947 the Legislative Assembly called for action against the rioters. There was talk of dividing the province into Hindu and Muslim majority areas. This was more so among the minorities distrustful of the government. Gurkha policemen were attacked by Muslims, and Hindus targeted Punjabi Muslim policemen believed to have been brought in by the Chief Minister to Calcutta.

The Viceroy thought that the partition of provinces would reveal the limits of Pakistan and tried to convince Jinnah to this effect. Jinnah, on the other hand, saw the demand for partition of provinces as a bluff by Congress. Jinnah argued against the partition of these provinces on the ground of the cultural unity of Bengalis and Punjabis. Mountbatten turned the argument on Jinnah, saying that Jinnah's arguments about Bengali and Punjabi culture applied even more to the whole of India. He promised to revise his ideas about the partition of India. In the words of the Viceroy, Jinnah demanded his Pakistan be made viable and threatened to demand the partition of Assam. If Punjab and Bengal did not join the Constituent Assembly, while some parts of these provinces did, partition of Punjab and Bengal would ensue. This is how Nehru explained the decision of the Congress to demand the partition of the two provinces to Gandhiji. The division of provinces was the only answer to the Pakistan as demanded by Jinnah. Nehru made the comment that obviously the two nation theory was not meant to be applied in Punjab and Bengal.

Then came up the campaign for united Bengal, begun by Suhrawardy, the League premier of Bengal, and supported by the Viceroy. Gandhiji was against partition on any account. He was hence optimistic about the United Bengal scheme as it would question the two-nation theory. But on 9 June 1947 All India Muslim League Council accepted the 3rd June plan, which included partition of Bengal. It clarified that it was not in favour of the partition of the province but accepted it as part of the plan as a whole.

24.3 THE MOVE TOWARDS PARTITION

For the first two months after coming to India, Mountbatten tried to build agreement between the political parties. Very soon he realised that the Mission Plan was over. He found Jinnah stubborn about getting Pakistan and impossible to argue with. The alternatives before Mountbatten were few and he soon came around to the view that Partition was to be implemented.

The 3rd June Plan or the Partition Award advanced the date for withdrawal to 15 August. Boundary Awards were to be announced on or after 15 August 1947. When the date of 15 August 1947 was announced, there were only 72 days to quit and divide. This was to prove totally inadequate given all that had to be done. Even the exercise of drawing the boundary was both botched and rushed, with the Chairman, Cyril Radcliffe, drawing criticism across the board. Delaying announcement of the Boundary Commission awards to a period after the date of independence compounded the chaos and mayhem as many a village and town did not know which side of the border it was on. People found themselves on the wrong side of the border on 15 August 1947 and flags of both India and Pakistan were flown in areas claimed by communities pitted against each other.

To go back to early June 1947, Mountbatten's intention in advancing the date for transfer of power was to get Congress to agree to dominion status. Secondly, it was to let the British government escape responsibility for the worsening communal situation. The concern of the government was how best to come out of the crisis in the eyes of world public opinion. They did not care what happened to Indians. His Majesty's Government desired a gracious, smooth withdrawal from the colony and setting up relationships with both dominions, India and Pakistan. It could be said that **partition was not only the closing scene of Divide and Rule; it was also the first act of Commonwealth diplomacy**. His Majesty's Government wanted to demonstrate that their policies were characterised by impartiality and fair play. Also, since there was no agreement on a solution, an award was dressed up as an agreed solution. A point worth noting is that the 3rd June Plan was an award, whatever its projection by the British as a plan agreed to by Congress and League.

The British professed that they tried their best to keep India united. In fact, they took the easy way out by trying to please everyone, as Gandhiji pointed out to Mountbatten: "I suggest that the attempt to please all parties is a fruitless and thankless task. In the course of our conversation I suggested that equal praise bestowed on both the parties was not meant. No praise would have been the right thing." The British government did not really make a bid for unity. That would have involved supporting the forces for unity and opposing those against it. This they were not willing to do. They merely dressed up division as the maximum unity possible. As the British did not accept the main proposition of the Congress, namely unity, they limited Pakistan and met other demands of the Congress. For example, its stance on not permitting the princes to be independent, on Hyderabad or on Andaman and Nicobar Islands was accepted.

In mid April 1947, it was decided that provinces would only be allowed to join India or Pakistan, and that they would not be allowed to be independent. His Majesty's Government wanted the option of independence to be kept open, as it was keen that the mode of transfer of power was seen to flow from Indian, rather than British will. The Viceroy on his part was clear that partition must be limited to two successor states, and not lead to Balkanisation.

When shown the proposals in a draft form in May 1947, Nehru reacted in alarm, pointing out that they 'threw overboard the Cabinet plan...invited balkanisation, would provoke civil conflict and demoralise the police and central services'. Large Muslim majority areas would be free to opt out of the Union, something which the Congress had been against. He also expressed doubts over states

entering into treaties with the British if they so favoured, as this could jeopardize the territorial integrity of India. On the other hand, Jinnah stuck to his vision of Pakistan. The chances of a settlement did not appear bright.

Mountbatten proposed that he be the Governor-General of both India and Pakistan to ensure a common link between the two dominions. He was confident that Jinnah would welcome Mountbatten's presence, but Jinnah decided to be Governor-General himself, partly to show his independence from the British. Joint defence machinery was set up to act as a link between the dominions. But the Kashmir conflict in October 1947 ended any future prospects of joint defence.

24.4 WHY DID CONGRESS ACCEPT PARTITION?

Why Congress and Gandhiji accepted Partition is a question which continues to be asked today. Partition is seen as the result of the British policy of divide and rule or the supposedly age-old rift between Hindus and Muslims, depending on the ideological stance of the writer. Some left-wing writers have described independence as a deal between the imperial and Indian bourgeoisie, for which the nation paid the price of partition. Or else, that Congress leaders chose to have a strong centre rather than share power with the League. Or that partition took place because of the Congress leaders' lust for power, leaving the people betrayed and Gandhiji no longer wishing to live for 125 years. Why did Congress and Gandhiji accept partition despite their opposition to the two nation theory and the politics of Jinnah and the Muslim League?

Gandhiji's position was different from Congress but not opposed to it. He proposed to the Viceroy that Jinnah be Prime Minister. Gandhiji's hope was that this would satisfy Jinnah's ambition and help him give up his demand for Pakistan. Gandhi was right in thinking that this appealed to Jinnah's vanity. But by this time Pakistan was bigger than Jinnah. Even Jinnah could not withdraw the demand for Pakistan, had he so wished. Moreover, the Congress leaders felt the proposal was too risky. Handing over control to Jinnah would mean leaving the field open to reactionary forces. Also, many followers of the Congress would see it as betrayal by the party. Accordingly Gandhiji withdrew his offer.

In mid-April 1947, Gandhiji and Jinnah jointly appealed for peace. However, Patel pointed out that Jinnah must withdraw Direct Action for the peace appeal to be effective. Patel's suggestion was that Jinnah was not sincere in his appeal. This assessment was shared by Gandhiji. By the summer of 1947 Congress leaders had realised that it was impossible to conciliate communalism. Nehru described Jinnah as always wanting more. Elsewhere he said of Jinnah, "We are up against something which is neither political, nor economic, nor reasonable, nor logical." Patel was clear that there would be no more appeasement of the Muslim League. He also pointed out that independent India would not have communal weightages or communal electorates.

An alternative to partition was imposing unity by force. P.D. Tandon, Congress leader and Speaker of the UP Assembly and Ram Ratan Gupta, Congressman from Kanpur, propounded this view. Both condemned the "betrayal" by the Congress in accepting partition. But Congress leaders chose to accept Pakistan rather than compel unity. Nehru was clear that use of the sword and the *lathi* (long staff) could not stem the communal forces. It would lead to civil war,

which would have long-term consequences. He stressed this at the All India Congress Committee session on 15 June 1947. A couple of months earlier, Congress President, Kripalani, had told the Viceroy that “Rather than have a battle we shall let them have their Pakistan.” It must be noted that Congress did not have state power at this point in time. Hence imposing unity would have meant fighting it out on the streets against volunteer armies of the communal parties. Hence when partition seemed inevitable, Congress tried to present it as based on the principle of self-determination, rather than as a communal demand. Gandhiji stated that the decision had been arrived at after taking into account the views of the people of all communities, be they Muslims, Sikhs or Hindus. Nehru explained partition as the outcome of the will of some sections to separate from India.

At the Congress Working Committee meeting on 1 June 1947, Congress President, Kripalani reminded the gathering that since 1942 it had been accepted that no part of India would be forced to stay on in India against its will. On 15 June 1947, at the All India Congress Committee session, he again said that acceptance of partition flowed from the clause of no coercion in the Congress resolution on the Cripps Plan. The fact that the settlement was final was crucial for Congress leaders in accepting Partition. Patel accepted the partition award on the ground that there was no further uncertainty. However, he was apprehensive at Jinnah’s communal standpoint in his broadcast over All India Radio and the doublespeak in All India Muslim League’s response, which made settlement unlikely.

The hope of India and Pakistan being reunited after some years reconciled leaders to the reality of division. It was hoped that once passions died down, common interests would bring people together and partition could be revoked. Hence Nehru appealed to people not to accept Partition in their hearts: “We have often to go through the valley of the shadow before we reach the sunlit mountain tops.” However, if the two countries were to be reunited, any measure that cemented Partition was to be avoided. This could be dividing the army, transfer of population or parliamentary sanction for transfer of power to two dominions. The AICC resolution on the 3rd June Plan made it clear that partition was accepted as a temporary measure that would bring violence to an end. This was again repeated in Gandhiji and Nehru’s speeches at the AICC meeting on 14-15 June. It is interesting that Gandhiji, who swore by non-violence, would rather “Let [the] British leave India to anarchy, rather than as a cock pit between two organized armies.”

One positive aspect of Partition for Congress was that they would get a free hand in the rest of the country. Nehru spoke of 80 or 90 % of India moving forward according to the map of India he had in mind. Patel spelt out further what this freedom could be used for — to consolidate the armed forces and have a strong central government. Jayaprakash Narayan, the socialist leader, appreciated the “emergence of a strong Union Centre” that would follow Partition. However, Congress leaders continued to be apprehensive. Nehru felt that the plan could lead to fragmentation. This was because a large number of successor states would be allowed to emerge first and then given the option to unite. The British government wanted to show that provinces and princely states were free to choose their future. But the Viceroy limited fragmentation to partition into two dominions.

Congress accepted partition on the grounds that it reflected the will of the people and that it was the only way out. On 4th June, Gandhiji explained to the audience

at his daily prayer meeting that the Congress Working Committee had agreed to the vivisection of Hindustan as there was no way of getting round the Muslim League. It was not done under threat of violence. They hoped that Partition was temporary and could be undone once the imperialists were out of the picture and Muslim League realised its mistake in demanding Pakistan. Only options left before the Congress were waging an anti-communal struggle and using force, both of which could not be taken up. In the end, Partition was accepted by Congress as the failure of its strategy to draw in the Muslim masses into the national movement.

Gandhiji's reading of the communal situation was that both Hindus and Muslims had moved far away from non-violence. During his prayer meetings, he was asked why he did not start a mass movement. Those who asked him to give the call believed that a movement could either be against the British, whose fallout would be Hindu-Muslim unity or it could be an anti-communal movement. They believed that both movements would bring about unity. However, the potential of anti-communal struggle was limited as both the party cadres and the ordinary people had become communalised. Gandhiji was aware of his limitations: 'I have never created a situation in my life... People say that I had created a situation, but I had done nothing except giving a shape to what was already there. Today I see no sign of such a healthy feeling. And therefore I shall have to wait until the time comes.'

It has often been said that Gandhiji was ignored by his colleagues in the talks with the British ministers over transfer of power. Some argue that Gandhiji was helpless because of his disciples' alleged lust for power. It is sometimes said that Gandhiji was alienated from the Congress. However, Gandhi was not neglected by his colleagues, as often argued. His opinion on significant policy matters was sought even when he was in Noakhali by the Congress President, Kripalani and Nehru. They went there to meet him and persuade him to come to Delhi. Nehru appealed to Gandhiji when the latter was in Noakhali: "But I have an overwhelming feeling that vital decisions are being made and will be made in Delhi affecting the whole of our future as well as of course the present, and your presence at such a moment is necessary." Gandhiji acceded to his request subsequently but explained his position: "But I proceed the other way. I had learnt when still a child the formula, "As in the microcosm, so in the macrocosm." He hoped that if ahimsa could be shown to work in one small place, it could provide the answer to the problem of Hindu-Muslim unity in the entire country. In Delhi he met the Viceroy and participated in the Congress Working Committee meetings of 1 May, 25 May, 2 June and in the AICC meeting of 14 & 15 June 1947.

However, before the Congress leaders and Gandhiji came to accept partition, Gandhiji put in all he could to stop the communal violence. He toured the riot affected areas of Noakhali and Bihar from October 1946 to April 1947, applying balm to the victims of both Hindu and Muslim communal violence. The weapons he used were those of non-violence and 'satyagraha'. He wanted to dispel the fear and distrust between the communities. Complaints of Hindus in Noakhali and Muslims in Bihar were alike. Communal attitudes even permeated relief and rehabilitation work, as refugee camps in Bihar became centres of League propaganda. What was remarkable was the courage of those Hindus or Muslims who stood by Gandhi.

While Gandhiji's efforts were heroic, their impact was limited. Hindu refugees were slow to cast off fear and return to their villages. Muslims were hostile to him in Noakhali and elsewhere. Critics and colleagues alike were critical of his methods. Hindu and Muslim communal organisations expanded their influence in the atmosphere of communal distrust. If we look at the challenge posed by Hindu communal forces, we find that it took two forms, majority assertion and minority fears. Assurances could not take care of the insecurity of minorities. Hindu communal elements pressurised the Congress to place the interests of Hindus first and function as a Hindu body. After the creation of Pakistan on the basis of the two nation theory, the demand for a Hindu state became more strident. The demand then was for Congress to accept it was a Hindu, not a national body. Interestingly this was the same as the position of the government that the Congress should accept that it was a caste Hindu body. Congress leaders had refused to do so, recognising this was an issue of legitimacy, of its national character, not one of pragmatism as made out by those who argued for this. Even when it accepted the creation of Pakistan as unavoidable in the given circumstances, the Congress did not accept the two nation theory, the communal principle on which Pakistan was demanded.

India became independent on 15th August 1947. Nehru made his 'tryst with destiny' speech at the midnight session of the Constituent Assembly on the night of 14th August 1947. The session began with the singing of *Vande Mataram* and the President's address. The next morning messages of congratulations were received from countries across the world. Gandhiji spent the day in Calcutta, praying, fasting and spinning. Political prisoners were released to mark the coming of freedom. Public ceremonies were held in all major cities to mark the day. Most celebrations on this day took note of the harsh reality of partition. 15 August 1947, then, was an occasion for both mourning and celebration. It marked independence and partition, which in turn reflected the success and failure of the anti-colonial movement—success in wresting independence, and failure in not being able to bring the majority of Muslims into the national movement.

24.5 SUMMARY

The period 1945-47 was one of the most volatile in Indian history. Anti-colonial popular upsurges, huge demonstrations against colonial rule, elections which starkly revealed a communal division in the country, decision by the British to leave India, large-scale communal riots in Bengal and Bihar, acceptance of partition by all major parties, followed by even bigger riots in Punjab, and finally the attainment of independence were all witnessed in such a short time-span. The dawn of freedom elicited contrary reactions – triumph and anguish and the creation of new identities and the questioning of old ties. In this Unit, we have tried to convey a sense of the period which was extremely decisive in the long history of our country.

24.6 EXERCISES

- 1) Why did the Congress accept the partition of India?
- 2) What did Gandhi do to pacify the sentiments during the riots of 1946? How far he was successful?
- 3) Discuss the role of the Muslim League during this period.