



## Decolonization and division: British policies behind the partition

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### Abstract

The Partition of India in 1947 was not simply the outcome of communal tensions or nationalist rivalries but was deeply shaped by British colonial policies and strategies of decolonization. This paper critically examines how administrative decisions, political reforms, wartime pressures, and the accelerated withdrawal plan influenced the division of the subcontinent. By exploring constitutional reforms, divide-and-rule strategies, and the role of the final viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, this study analyzes the extent to which British policies engineered, hastened, or intensified the Partition process.

**Keywords:** British decolonization policy, partition of India (1947), colonial administrative strategy

### Introduction

The decolonization of British India culminated in the creation of two sovereign states—India and Pakistan—on 14–15 August 1947. Partition has long been debated by historians: was it an inevitable outcome of Hindu–Muslim antagonism or a direct consequence of British political expediency? Revisiting British colonial policies reveals that the administrative logic of division was embedded in decades of governance, long before nationalist tensions reached their peak. This paper examines the political and constitutional decisions that shaped the path to Partition.

### Colonial Governance and the Institutionalization of Communal Identities

The early nationalist debts apportioned the blame for partition solely among the British and the Muslim League. The Congress attempted to carry beneath its umbrella all sections of Indian society, however separate electorates, British coverage of divide and rule, the intransigence of Jinnah and the communal and reactionary grip over the League brought about the partition of the subcontinent. The Congress changed into not able to attain out to the Muslim hundreds and consequently reluctantly typical the needs of the bulk of the Indian Muslims to carve a country for themselves. This account has been challenged through strands in Indian history. Bipan Chandra argues that there has been a Hindu tinge within the Congress and that Hindu liberal communalists like Lala Lajpat Rai and Madan Mohan Malaviya have been able to create doubts approximately the inclusive nationalist credentials of the Congress party.

However, he believes that severe communalism changed into promoted through the League and that Congress didn't take care of the problem (Bipan Chandra). This changed into each due to the fact of stress from Hindu communalists and inadequate mass mobilisation.

### 1. Census and Category-Making

The decennial census, especially from 1871 onward, classified people rigidly into religious groups, turning fluid identities into fixed categories. This process sharpened communal boundaries and made religious identity the basis of political representation.

### 2. Separate Electorates and Communal Representation

The Indian Councils Act of 1909 (Morley–Minto Reforms) introduced separate electorates for Muslims, giving political form to communal identity. The Indian Councils Act of 1909 was introduced to increase Indian participation in governance. It expanded the legislative councils at both central and provincial levels and allowed the election of some non-official members. A major feature was the introduction of separate electorates for Muslims, enabling them to elect their own representatives independently. This marked the first legal recognition of communal politics in India. Although the reforms aimed to calm political unrest and satisfy moderate nationalists, they were criticized for being limited and divisive. The Act laid the foundation for communal tensions and further demands for self-government

This was expanded through the Government of India Act of 1919, The Government of India Act 1919 introduced dyarchy in provinces, dividing subjects into transferred and reserved categories. It expanded legislative councils and increased Indian participation in governance. The act promised responsible government in the future. However, limited powers and continued British control disappointed nationalists, leading to stronger calls for self-rule.

The Communal Award of 1932, The Communal Award, announced by British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald in 1932, was a scheme to grant separate electorates to various minority communities, including Dalits (Depressed Classes), Muslims, Sikhs, Indian Christians, and Anglo-Indians. Its most controversial provision was the creation of separate electorates for Dalits, which many Indian leaders believed would divide Hindu society permanently. Mahatma Gandhi opposed the decision strongly and undertook a fast unto death in Yerwada Jail. Ultimately, the issue was resolved through the Poona Pact between Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Gandhi, replacing separate electorates with reserved seats. The Award intensified communal politics in colonial India and representation formulas privileging religious groups. These policies deepened divisions and encouraged leaders to negotiate politics through communal blocs rather than shared citizenship.

### Constitutional Deadlocks and British Strategic Interests

#### 1. The Government of India Act of 1935

The 1935 Act created provincial autonomy, but the failure of the Congress–League cooperation after the 1937 elections

intensified Muslim League fears of majoritarian dominance. British officials often exaggerated these fears, strengthening the League's position as the sole representative of Muslims.

## 2. World War II and British Priorities

Britain's main priority was protecting its empire and defeating Axis powers. India was dragged into the war without consulting Indian leaders, causing resentment. Britain focused on using India as a military base, securing resources, soldiers, and finances for the war effort. Political reforms and independence demands were sidelined. During World War II, the British unilaterally declared India's participation without consulting Indian leaders. The Congress withdrew from cooperation, while the Muslim League, adopting a pro-British stance, gained political leverage. British wartime strategies amplified communal polarization and sidelined constitutional negotiations.

### British Plans of Transfer of Power: From Negotiation to Partition

#### 1. The Cripps Mission (1942)

The Cripps Mission offered dominion status after the war with provisions for provinces to opt out. Though rejected, it introduced the idea of territorial division into constitutional discourse.

#### 2. The Cabinet Mission Plan (1946)

This plan attempted to maintain a united India through a federal structure, but the British, Congress, and the League interpreted it differently. The lack of clarity—especially regarding group autonomy—created further mistrust.

#### 3. Direct Action Day and the Collapse of Law and Order

Direct Action Day, observed on 16 August 1946, was called by the Muslim League under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah to demand the creation of Pakistan after negotiations with the Congress failed over the Cabinet Mission Plan. The League announced a nationwide strike and demonstrations to show Muslim unity and strength. However, in Calcutta (Kolkata), the protest turned into a horrific communal riot known as the Great Calcutta Killings. Violence erupted between Hindus and Muslims, resulting in large-scale arson, looting, and brutal killings. According to estimates, over 4,000 people were killed and around 10,000 injured within a few days. The violence quickly spread to other regions, including Noakhali (Bengal) and Bihar, leading to further communal clashes and mass displacement. The outbreak of riots showed the deep communal divide and made the British and Indian leaders believe that coexistence within a united India had become extremely difficult. Direct Action Day ultimately accelerated the decision for Partition in 1947.

### Mountbatten's Accelerated Withdrawal and the Road to Partition

When Lord Louis Mountbatten became the last Viceroy of India in March 1947, he found the political and communal situation rapidly deteriorating. Widespread violence following Direct Action Day (1946), the failure of earlier negotiations like the Cabinet Mission Plan, and growing mistrust between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League convinced him that immediate action was necessary. Mountbatten concluded that delaying transfer of

power would lead to civil war. Therefore, he abandoned the original British timeline of 1948 and announced an accelerated withdrawal, deciding to transfer power by 15 August 1947.

He proposed the Mountbatten Plan (June 3, 1947), which accepted the demand for Partition and the creation of two independent dominions—India and Pakistan. The plan also allowed provinces like Punjab and Bengal to be divided based on majority populations. Although intended to stop violence, the hasty division created massive displacement, triggering tragic riots and one of the largest refugee crises in history. Mountbatten's Role

Lord Mountbatten, appointed in February 1947, arrived with a mandate to withdraw quickly. His decision to advance the transfer of power from June 1948 to August 1947 left little time for planning, consultation, or conflict prevention.

The Radcliffe Line The task of drawing borders was given to Sir Cyril Radcliffe, who had never been to India and was given just five weeks.

The resulting Radcliffe Award ignored demographic realities and economic networks, leading to chaos, mass migration, and violence. British Priorities Over Human Consequences British officials prioritized their own exit strategy, seeking a quick, orderly withdrawal rather than a stable post-colonial arrangement. The speed of decolonization magnified the scale of suffering.

### “Divide and Rule”: Myth or Reality?

Historians debate whether divide-and-rule was intentional or a by-product of imperial governance. However, evidence suggests that communal electorate differential treatment of religious groups manipulation of political rivalries and reluctance to support united nationalist movements created structural conditions for division. As the British Empire weakened after World War II, policymakers sought a strategic withdrawal that would safeguard long-term geopolitical interests. Partition, for some British officials, offered a convenient solution to political deadlock.

### Consequences of British Policies on Partition

The Partition of India in 1947 had far-reaching and tragic consequences that reshaped the political and social landscape of South Asia. The division of British India into India and Pakistan triggered one of the largest and most chaotic human migrations in history. Nearly 14–15 million people were displaced as Hindus and Sikhs migrated to India and Muslims moved to Pakistan. The journey was marked by horrific communal violence; trains full of refugees arrived with all passengers massacred, and villages were burned. The Punjab and Bengal regions witnessed unprecedented brutality, with an estimated 1 to 2 million deaths.

Partition also left deep emotional trauma for survivors who lost their families, homes, and identity. The crisis created refugee camps struggling with disease, starvation, and lack of resources. Economically, the division of assets, industries, military resources, and irrigation systems created tensions. The Kashmir dispute emerged immediately after Partition, becoming a long-standing conflict between India and Pakistan.

Politically, Partition weakened India's unity and strengthened communal politics, shaping future relations between the two nations. Cultural ties, shared heritage, and

centuries-old social bonds were broken. Families were permanently separated by borders, creating lasting pain and memory. Thus, Partition was not only a political event but a profound humanitarian disaster. Long-Term Impact of Partition created enduring India–Pakistan hostility, competing nationalisms, and later, the conflict over Kashmir—strongly shaped by British handling of princely state accessions.

### Conclusion

British decolonization policies were central to the Partition of India. While communal tensions and political disagreements among Indian leaders contributed significantly, the structures of colonial governance—separate electorates, communal representation, and administrative categorization—laid the foundations for division. The accelerated withdrawal under Mountbatten further ensured that Partition would be rapid, chaotic, and violent. Understanding British policies helps place the Partition not merely as a communal conflict but as a consequence of colonial statecraft and imperial priorities.

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