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A Post Colonial Reading of Mountbatten & The Partition of India by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre

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Abstract:

The country was partitioned in the year 1947 and two separate states India and Pakistan were formed. Lord Mountbatten was the viceroy of India when the transfer happened from the two hundred year long British rule to the people of the sub continent. It was a watershed moment in the life of the two nations, but at the same time it was as painful as creating two babies out of a single womb. Though not a single reason but multiple factors were responsible for this partition, yet the whole orchestra could be seen from a post- colonial perspective, and how the forces could be mapped on the basis of the post- colonial theories. This paper is an attempt to look into the role played by the Viceroy along with his troop of bureaucrats and ministers, who very well played the part of the colonizers and on the other side were the people of this country who were neo- anglicized, equipped with the language of their masters and had acquired a hybridized culture from the British.

Key words: Post- Colonization, Hybridity, Ambivalence, Partition, Language, Culture, Power

Introduction

'*Mountbatten & The Partition of India*' is a book written by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre. This is a vivid account of the defining moments of the end of the British Raj, the independence of a nation which had been long suppressed by the colonial rule, and the partition of the country into two nations- India and Pakistan. The significance and the importance of this lies in the fact that the entire episode has been narrated through none other than the architect of the transfer of power, Lord Louis Mountbatten. Lord Mountbatten was the last viceroy of India from 12th February 1947 to 15th August 1947, for merely a period of six months but he was the connecting link between the transfer of power from the colonizers to the natives of the country. Hence the man was a privy to some landmark decisions, historical moments and also the dynamics of the transition which took place. The mentioned book offers fascinating insights into the last days of the British Raj, the political situation of the country and the power centers in England as revealed by Mountbatten through a series of interviews given to the authors. This book is in continuation to the previous best-sellers of the same authors named - *Is Paris Burning?* and *O Jerusalem!*

History can never be distorted as it is scientific and based on the dates and the series of events which happens at that particular time and era. But the interpretation of the events, the study of the aftermath and the various pros and cons of the episode can be done in numerous ways, in various perspectives and also different contexts. Further, an interview is not always reliable because the things are from the perspective of the person interviewed and also that he is at ease and convenience to manipulate the things from his end. Without denying the fact that the interviews in this book are highly fascinating, which not only speak of the depth and intelligence of the questions posed to the last viceroy, but the interviews also speak a lot of the man, his caliber, his personality and the various Indian statesman who were his contemporary. A post colonial reading of the interviews and the book reveals yet another scene and picture, which though doesn't falsify the history but gives us an excellent understanding of the political situation of the country, the relationship of the Indians with their colonial masters, the psychology and the thought process of the colonizer and also their individual strengths and weaknesses. This study and the interpretation has been done under different heads for presenting the things in an understandable manner.

A General Study

In his interviews Mountbatten has mentioned a number of times that he loved India and its people. He has also stated that he had an emotional attachment with the Indians which went very deep. It is felt and understood that this attachment was without any meaning. This attachment was not in any way altruistic in nature. It was purely the relationship of a colonizer and a meek and docile subject. The colonizer had got a very good colony in the form of India.

“.....because we loved the country and the people .therefore we had an emotional involvement with India which psychologically went very deep. We loved India and we loved Indians and we kept close contact with our friends there, many of the princes were our friends.”(Collins and Lapierre 20)

On a contrary note, Mountbatten is diplomatic, cunning and shrewd. He wanted to get as much help as possible by flattering the Indians. He utilized the personal clash of Nehru and Menon to suit his own ends. It was in the same pattern in which Clive used the local rulers like Shiraj-ud Daula and Mir Jaffer in the battle of Plassey. Similarly, he also used Gandhi to apply his method of fast to dispose off the sterling balances from the Government of India to Pakistan.

“Now I wanted to get you here as soon as possible because I know I can get nowhere without your advice and help. Unless you give me guidelines, and tell me how you think and how I should proceed! You see?”(Collins and Lapierre 39)

Edward Said has defined the concept of orientalism as a political, social , military, ideological , scientific and imaginary construct by the West. Rather, it is an epistemological and ontological distinction made between the orient and occidental. While we go through the interviews we do get a feel of the distinction which is being created by the viceroy between the Indians and the English people. The colonial powers came to foreign states and destroyed main parts of native tradition and culture; furthermore they continuously replaced them with their own ones. This often led to conflicts when countries became independent and suddenly faced the challenge of developing a new nationwide identity and self- confidence. For the colonizers, India was an exotic land with a strange culture and tradition, whose civilization and the society was far inferior to theirs. About Churchill , Mountbatten says-

“.....he was there as a young subaltern in the Fourth Hussars in 1897 or something of the sort. To him India is Kipling, it's Polo, it's glamour, it's everything. He doesn't want to see that go away and he thinks in some ways quite rightly , that India is happier under British Rule.(Collins and Lapierre, 23)

A very important phenomena, that is the concept of hybridity is very well seen while going through the text. In fact , postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha developed the term “hybridity” to capture the fusion of both the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized. A very striking example is seen in the case of Jinnah , who is very well influenced by the British culture during his stay in London and reveals his hybrid identity and the impact of imperial culture. About Jinnah, Wavell says-

“Don't forget this about Jinnah: he is a pure Englishman by education, by outlook and by affection. He speaks English and, as far as I know , talks no other dialect of any sort.”(Collins and Lapierre, 30)

Apart from this, there are many different approaches to the topic of intercultural exchange between the British and the Indian population. Numerous instances deal with the ambiguous relationship(ambivalence)

between the rulers and the ruled. The famous novelist Salman Rushdie has elaborately written about these social and cultural exchanges in his book “*Midnight’s Children*”. His funny, brave, metaphoric and sometimes even ironical way of writing offers a multi-perspective approach to the post-colonial complex. We also have another post-colonial novel “*Heat And Dust*” (published in 1975) by Ruth Prawer Jhabwala that contains two plot set in two different times: One about a British lady starting an affair with a local Indian prince in the 1920s, the other one set in the 1970s, featuring young Europeans on a “hippie trail” who claim they have left behind Western civilization and are trying to find some spiritual home among Indian Gurus. Even in the interviews we can see how the English Culture has seeped into the Indian society and the masses, who have already imbibed the practice of shaking hands instead of the age old culture of Namaste or ‘namaskar’.

“And of course, the people were scrambling on board, trying to shake hands, things the Indians had never done before. It was very very exciting.” (Collins and Lapierre, 113)

Superstitions have always prevailed in our society, and somewhere this superstition has always taken us backward. This superstition among us was fully utilized by the Europeans in exercising their control and dominance over us. Moreover, this became an aspect of exoticism in us, and at the same time undermined and treated our culture with contempt, which was in fact the otherwise. This aspect has been very well judged by Mountbatten, and is illustrated here.

“The crowd rushed up and said,” Even the horse won’t take you – stop- this is a sign of God, you must remain!” That sort of thing.....”(Collins and Lapierre, 94)

The contradiction of two clashing cultures and the wide scale of problems resulting from it is in fact a major theme in post-colonialism. For centuries the colonial suppressor often had been forcing his civilized values on the natives. But when the native population finally gained independence, the colonial relicts were omnipresent, deeply integrated in the natives’ minds and were supposed to be removed. So decolonization is a process of change, destruction and, in the first place, an attempt to regain and lose power. While natives had to learn how to put independence into practice, colonial powers had to accept the loss of power over foreign countries. However, both the sides have to deal with their past as suppressor and suppressed. This complicated relationship mainly developed from the Eurocentric perspective from which the former colonial powers saw themselves. Their colonial policy was often criticized as arrogant, ignorant, brutal and simply naïve. Their final colonial failure and the total independence of the once suppressed made the process of decolonization rather tense and emotional. In the book by Collins and Lapierre, we do get an idea of this in the interview.

“And I felt they couldn’t run the three services yet by themselves, nor did the three services wish to sever their link”(Collins and Lapierre, 74)

“From every point of view, it began to become more and more clear to me that the only way they could develop, was not by- I was going to say by cutting the umbilical cord too soon – but they had to continue to take nourishment and strength from us.”(Collins and Lapierre, 75)

The Partition

“A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance.”

Jawaharlal Nehru, “Tryst With Destiny” speech celebrating Indian Independence

There were several reasons for the birth of a separate Muslim homeland in the subcontinent, and all the three parties- the British, the Congress and the Muslim League- were responsible. The British colonizers down played the synthesis and homogeneity of Hindu- Muslim cultures under the Mughals. The British are shown as exploiting and playing upon the differences in religion, culture, language and customs between the Hindus and the Muslims, as part of their strategy to ensure the dominance of their culture to perpetuate their rule. Jean – Paul Sartre in preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* by Fanon, refers to the multiplication of divisions of opposing groups and classes in the colonized societies. The British conquered province after province and state after state by the time tested policy of divide and rule. Non fiction writers often point out that Hindu- Muslim conflicts in India are in part of the heritage of attempts by the British administration in India to play the two groups against each other.

Also, whenever there was any issue of voting, it was the Congress which won, and it was always vehemently opposed by the Muslim League. Thus, things used to come to a standstill, and it used to be a kind of impasse situation. Even the British found themselves stuck in this kind of scenario. We also get an idea of this state through the interview of Mountbatten-

“Don’t forget that this idiotic Indian government with which I was saddled, which consisted of 15 members, six Muslim League, six Congress, three others, the point is, any vote was always 9-6 in favour of what the Congress wanted. Therefore, you couldn’t govern because the Muslim League wouldn’t accept it.”(Collins and Lapierre, 69)

There was also an ideological divide between the Muslims and the Hindus of India. While there were strong feelings of nationalism in India, by the late 19th century there were also communal conflicts and movements in the country that were based on religious identities rather than class or regional ones. Some people felt that the very nature of Islam called for a communal Muslim society. Added to it were the memories of power over the Indian subcontinent that the Muslims held, especially in old centres of Mughal rule. These memories might have made it exceptionally difficult for Muslims to accept the imposition of

colonial power and culture. Many refused to learn English and to associate with the British. This was a severe drawback as Muslims found that cooperative Hindus found better government positions and thus felt that the British favored Hindus. In the words of Louis Mountbatten-

“They(Hindus) enjoyed serving the British- they preferred to serve the British, don’t forget, than to serve the Muslims who were prepared to be gracious as hosts and go hunting and that sort of thing, but did not like the idea of toeing the line to the British at all. They were prepared to enter the army and so forth , but in fact the Hindus got into the whole machinery; they got into it because the Muslims weren’t prepared to work in that sort of with us.”(Collins and Lapierre, 57)

The actual division of British India between the two dominions was accomplished according to what has come to be known as the 3rd June Plan or the Mountbatten Plan. It was announced at a press conference by Mountbatten on 3rd June 1947, when the date of independence was also announced- 15th August 1947. The Plan’s main points were:

Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims in Punjab and Bengal legislative assemblies would meet and vote for partition. If a simple majority of either group wanted partition, then these provinces would be divided.

Sind and Baluchistan were to take their own decisions.

The fate of North West Frontier Province and Sylhet district of Assam was to be decided by a referendum.

India would be independent by 15th August, 1947.

The separate independence of Bengal was ruled out.

A boundary commission to be set up in case of partition.

Conclusion

It is quite true that the Europeans often arrogantly dismiss their own roles in creating the political messes of postcolonial nations around the world. Throughout the interviews we get the impression as if Mountbatten has washed his hands off the whole matter, though ironically he has been the architect of this construction. Though these accusations against the colonizers is hardly to promote the welfare of this country, yet, the actions and decisions of the English throughout their rule are guilt ridden, and they need to reflect upon those. It may make European scholars feel better to dissociate themselves from the crimes of their ancestors(which are admittedly, enormously bloody and oppressive, and should be acknowledged and studied, but people struggling for freedom in oppressed nations are more likely to draw inspiration

from the quintessentially European Enlightenment concept of rights under natural law than they are to turn to postcolonial theory.

In a post colonial perspective, we can still realize the importance of the bureaucracy today, which is the de facto ruler of the country. But there is contrasting difference with respect to colonial India. Today we have a bureaucracy which is more involved into filling its own coffers rather than working for the country, which has resulted in unequal distribution of wealth in the society. Instead of the colonizers, their masters today are the leaders, and a selfish collusion exists between the two. The exploitation of the masses still continues, and the common man runs from pillar to post to have his things done which obviously and naturally should have been provided to him. There is still colonization, only the colonizers have changed. Bureaucracy, during the time of pre-independent India was quite strong, transparent and truly carried out its administrative functions.

“The miracle of India was the extraordinary efficient British administration. We administered because we had the Indian Civil Service, which was the most efficient service in the world. Everybody tried to get into it. All the people in it were extremely high class. It was very small, I think there were 1200- 1500 people to control a fifth of humanity.”(Collins and Lapierre, 52)

The Indians gradually adopted and assimilated the imperial culture. The interviews give us an insight of the role and repercussions of the presence of British in the subcontinent, and also social, cultural and political circumstances which prevailed in united India, and the forces and factors which led to partition. Peaceful co-existence existed between the Hindus and Muslims in spite of having differences on social, cultural and religious grounds. This harmony gradually got eroded by the intervention of the colonial rulers, who followed and practiced a policy of ‘Divide and Rule’. They played a vital role to accentuate the differences between the Hindus and Muslims for their own vested interests, to a point of no return. The adamancy of the leaders of the Muslim League and Jinnah, and the callous attitude of the Congress led to a situation of deadlock, and thus led to the partition of the country.

In postcolonial India and Pakistan, the involvement of people with politics to the point of obsession still remains, which was the same in the colonial era. People are keen about the political happenings in their countries. Today the masses are educated and they have their voice to speak. But how far is this true? We come to the famous question asked by Gayatri Spivak in her essay, “Can the subaltern speak?” Using Antonio Gramsci’s arcane label for oppressed people, she points out that anyone who has achieved enough literacy and sophistication is almost certainly by that fact disqualified from speaking for the people he or she is supposed to represent. The “Subaltern Group” of Indian scholars has tried to claim the term to support their own analyses, but the nagging question asked by Spivak remains.

To give a conclusion of it all, one might say that post-colonialism is a vivid discussion about what happened with the colonial thinking at the end of the colonial era. What legacy arose from this era? What social, cultural and economical consequences could be seen and are still visible today? A glaring example is the concept of “problematic nationalism”(given by the postcolonial critic Partha Chatterjee) which has cropped up and is somehow checking the overall progress and development of the nation. In these contexts, one examines alternating experiences of suppression, resistance, gender discrimination, migration and so forth. While doing so, both the colonizing and colonized side are taken into consideration and related to each other. The main target of post-colonialism remains the same: To review and to deconstruct one-sided, worn-out attitudes in a lively discussion of colonisation.

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