

Wavell's Breakdown Plan, 1945-47: an Appraisal

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The Breakdown Plan was prepared by Lord Wavell and his closest circle of advisors to deal with the fast evolving political situation in India. Two main political tendencies had crystallized in post-War India: Keeping India as one geographic entity; the second one was diametrically opposed to it, espoused by the Muslims, who wanted an independent Muslim-majority state. Wavell's BP was formulated with two main goals in mind: Firstly, a safe withdrawal of the British from India; secondly, to avoid a partition of India by attempting to maintain it as one geographic entity. For the first goal Wavell suggested a 'phased withdrawal' from India, which would be initiated from the Hindu-majority provinces of the south. The second goal was to be achieved by proposing a partition of both the Punjab and Bengal, as a bargaining tool with the Muslim League to deter from pursuing its agenda of a separate Muslim-majority homeland on religious grounds. Although Wavell's overall plan was rejected by the HMG in London, parts of it were, however, incorporated in the final withdrawal plan laid down by Mountbatten, Wavell's successor, in his June 3 Plan. This included the partitioning of both the Bengal and the Punjab thus dealing a blow to Muslim interests in both those provinces. This article tries to detail the overall BP and its implications for the Muslims, particularly, as it ended up shaping the future course of the history of the Punjab. This, in the author's view, has not been attempted before.

Introduction

Lord Wavell, (the Viceroy of India October 1943-March 1947) conceived of India as a single geographic and administrative unit, and, therefore, was desirous of preserving its political unity. After the failure of the Shimla Conference in 1945, in pursuance of precisely such a goal, he came up with a secret scheme which has come to be known in history as Wavell's 'Breakdown Plan'. Although the final shape of this Breakdown Plan took some time to evolve, however, in its earlier forms, it strictly avoided any reference to the idea of Pakistan.

Wavell's proposed Breakdown Plan, so-called in its final shape, required two steps to be taken for a phased withdrawal of British authority from India: Firstly, a withdrawal from the four Hindu-majority provinces of Bombay, Madras, Orissa and the Central Provinces; secondly, a general withdrawal from the rest of the country, before March 1948.

Wavell believed that such a plan of withdrawal would not only avoid a division of India but also the civil war, which to all indications was looming clearly on the horizon. However, before he had a chance to put his plan into operation he was removed from his position as the Viceroy of India because of

the Labour government's reservations about some long-term implications of his plan.

A critical, historical understanding of Lord Wavell's Viceroyalty which lasted between October 1943 and March 1947, is important for gaining a true insight into the constantly evolving, dynamic relationship between the three leading political actors of India in that period, the British, the Congress and the Muslim League. While Wavell was stressing to the Attlee administration the need to accept and implement his Breakdown Plan the British government, in London, was simultaneously working on a departure plan of its own and it was this policy which was later on adopted by Mountbatten as well.

Voluminous historical literature about the vicerealties of Lord Linlithgow, 1936-43, and Viscount Mountbatten, March-August 1947, exists about the British government's ideas for the transfer of power into Indian hands during those two vicerealties, however, Wavell's period is often overlooked by the historians; consequently, the historical importance of his Breakdown Plan is not fully appreciated.

Wavell's Breakdown Plan, in this author's view, aimed at preserving the political unity of India by the tactic of denying undivided Bengal and Punjab to the Muslim League if the latter persisted in its demand for a totally independent Pakistan. He expected enough flexibility from both parties so as to reach a compromise for a united India, which was Wavell's desired goal. Although Wavell failed in his efforts for a united India via the implementation of his Breakdown Plan, parts of it, however, were incorporated into Mountbatten's June 3, 1947 partition plan resulting in a serious loss of territory for the newly created Muslim state of Pakistan.

Wavell's Breakdown Plan

Wavell, right from the beginning of his viceroyalty, discerned a variety of complex problems lining the Indian political scene. The main ones were the following: the ever-growing Hindu-Muslim friction on religious lines; the Muslim League's demand for a separate homeland for the Muslims on the basis of its two-nation theory and the expected complications flowing from it; lastly, a state of hibernation induced in the British government following the rejection by both the Congress and the League of the Cripps Proposals in 1942; London was not ready to initiate another attempt at breaking the political impasse in India.

Wavell considered India's geographical and political unity as 'natural' and was, therefore, dead-set against any division.¹ He thought of giving appropriate representation to various communities in the legislature, the new central executive and the services. He wished to see the same kind of treatment being given to the Princely States.²

Ian Stephens has written that Wavell had contemplated a date for the final British withdrawal from India and, therefore, "in fact, at any rate during that crucial December of 1946, his thoughts were evidently more progressive on this point than the Cabinet's."³

H. M. Close has written about Wavell that “consciously or sub-consciously, was not willing to promote a plan for partition on equality with a plan for unity, and therefore downgraded it with the unattractive name of “Breakdown”.⁴ Based on a rough mental sketch of his ‘Breakdown Plan’ Wavell directed his advisers Evan Jenkins, V. P. Menon and B. V. Rau to chalk out its details.

Jenkins’s ‘reserve plan’ of 10 November 1945 had suggested the establishment of an Indian union with the right of a province(s) to secede from it and form a separate union. In case the Muslim-majority provinces decided to form a separate union, he suggested partitioning the Punjab, Bengal and Assam to make Pakistan small, weak and unattractive for Jinnah. He believed, “In the long run I think that the Punjab and probably Bengal might join the original Federal Union on terms- the prospect of partition would be less attractive when it became imminent.”⁵ However, he asked V.P. Menon to chalk out further details.

Abell’s input into the Breakdown Plan was that “Pakistan Provinces would be offered to continue for the time being under the present constitution with the British support they have now. They could watch the formation of Hindustan and they could decide later (by an unspecified procedure) to join the Federation or stay out. It would be made clear that H.M.G. would be ready to grant Dominion Status as under the Cripps Plan to the Pakistan Provinces if they wanted.”⁶

However, B. N. Rau agreed with the ‘reserve plan’ and suggested that it would be necessary to give large territorial units in the Pakistan Provinces the option of merging themselves into the neighbouring federating provinces of ‘Hindustan’. He thought that “this is the right sort of reserve plan and that it might be acceptable to the Congress.”⁷

V. P. Menon stressed the need for the establishment of a coalition government pledged to assist in the revision of the Constitution at the earliest possible moment. He also proposed the adoption of a time-table, so that everybody could see that His Majesty’s Government meant business. He disagreed with imposing a constitution suggesting instead convening a convention of important political parties, communities, groups and their representatives which would prepare a constitution. He opined that under the existing plan there was the hope of setting at least one union by the people themselves, as Nehru had suggested. Having got the union, he suggested that they would be in a position to know which units stood out and then to deal with them on that basis.⁸

The general elections (1945-46) had electrified the political atmosphere in India causing the political parties to grow further apart. Pethick Lawrence, Secretary of State for India (1945-1947), inquired of Wavell the actions that would be necessary in the event of their finding it impossible to bring agreement between the parties during the coming summer. Wavell informed him on 5 December 1945 that he and his staff had been considering the “breakdown plan” for some time but had not finalized it.⁹ Wavell’s request for a visit to India by Dr. Monteath to chalk out details with his own staff was refused.

Meantime Jinnah's expression of a willingness to accept "frontier adjustments where primarily Hindu and Muslim lands were contiguous to the Hindustan or Pakistan States, as the case may be"¹⁰ was seen as a welcome sign by Wavell as an opening for future negotiations.

According to Wavell's calculations, any contemplated plan for a division of India would affect at least two divisions (Ambala and Jullundur) of the Punjab and almost the whole of Western Bengal, including Calcutta, which could only be joined with the Indian Union. Wavell believed that adoption and enunciation of such a policy by Whitehall would diminish the attractiveness of Pakistan to Jinnah. Wavell, quoting Jinnah, said, "only the husk" then, would remain.¹¹ Faced with such a fait accompli and finding his power of negotiation vis-à-vis the Congress reduced drastically Jinnah would try to secure the best possible terms for the Muslims within the Union.¹² Wavell felt, "No-one believes that Pakistan is in the best interests of India from the practical point of view, and no-one knows where the partition of India, once it starts, will end short of Balkanisation."¹³

Wavell, on his part, wanted to remove the bargaining power of the Muslim League. He had no doubt that his Breakdown Plan would force the Congress and the League to come to terms, but the best panacea was that "the Constitution would be made sufficiently attractive to the Muslims to induce them to remain in the Federation from the start."¹⁴ It appears that Wavell, quite skilfully, had drafted a plan which would be unacceptable to the Muslims and Hindus, and violently opposed by the Sikhs so that each one of them would have to accept the unity of India.

However, the Labour Party had a number of reservations about Wavell's Breakdown Plan primarily because it felt that such a plan would greatly weaken any possibility of compromise on the basis of even a very loose federation. Further, how could it be enforced without an agreement between the two leading parties?¹⁵ They, like Wavell, wanted adoption of measures most helpful in securing a united India. For carrying out the necessary revisions to Wavell's Breakdown Plan, he was provided the services of David Monteath's Committee.¹⁶

Evan Jenkins had detailed knowledge about the Indian affairs with clear headedness and always showed great commitment for work¹⁷ and as result Wavell leaned heavily on him.¹⁸ Besides this, Jenkins helped Wavell chalk a comprehensive outline of the Breakdown Plan which he termed it as 'Reserve Plan'. Therefore, Evan Jenkins became ultimate choice of Wavell for the Punjab's governorship whose Governor Bertrand Glancy's term of office came to an end in April 1946. Wavell had a feeling that Glancy had tired man and lacking interest in the provincial affairs of the Punjab.¹⁹ He never discussed the Breakdown plan with Glancy rather relied heavily on his advisers including B. V. Rau, Menon and Evan Jenkins. He was not very happy with the Glancy's handling of the general elections in 1945-46 and food condition in the province.²⁰

In the meantime the protracted negotiations regarding the Cabinet Mission Plan's proposals for both the long and the short-term components further

estranged the Hindu-Muslim relations. The delay in forming the Interim Government had caused communal as well as administrative problems. The Calcutta riots following the "Direct Action Day" turned it even bloodier. The riots once let loose could not be stopped. The Interim Government (September 1946-August 1947) caused more frustration than satisfaction for Wavell.²¹ Therefore, he pointed out to Whitehall that they must be ready with a plan which could be put into effect if Congress and League failed to reach an agreement or in case both rejected the Mission's Proposals.²²

Though Wavell had teamed up with the Cabinet Mission Delegation in presenting the Cabinet Mission Plan, deep inside him was not optimistic about its success, expecting a sudden outbreak of violence owing to unbridgeable differences among the leading parties. Therefore, he suggested to Whitehall an adequate consideration of his 'Breakdown Plan' as well. Details of that plan included handing over the Hindu majority provinces of Bombay, Madras, C.P, UP, Bihar and Orissa, by agreement and as peaceably as possible, to the Congress followed by the withdrawal of troops, officials and European nationals in an orderly manner from these provinces.

Wavell was not unaware of the flaws in his Breakdown Plan and, therefore, suggested means to deal with them. Firstly, he thought that the Muslim League might decline the British offer. Secondly, even if it accepted the Plan the plan would result in a division of the Indian army. Thirdly, the actual military operation of withdrawal from Hindustan into Pakistan could be difficult and possibly dangerous. Fourthly, it was an equally grave problem to deal with the large minorities, Hindus and Sikh, in the Muslim provinces. Even at that stage, he still favoured that maximum efforts be exerted to bring about a union of India on the best terms possible and then affect a total withdrawal.

On 6 June 1946 in a Cabinet meeting presided by Attlee at London Wavell's Breakdown Plan was discussed at length. It disapproved the idea of withdrawal from India by a specific date. The Cabinet remarked:

We are anxious to give India her independence and have put forward plans for achieving it. Unfortunately the Leaders of the political Parties of India cannot agree among themselves on a plan for independence. We cannot in these circumstances allow a situation to develop in which there will be a chaos and famine. Accordingly we must maintain our responsibilities until the Indian leaders can find a basis for accepting our offer of independence. Our proposals still remain open.²³

However, seeing the difficulties facing the Cabinet Mission's proposals and feeling especially pessimistic about Congress's general attitude and supported by a realisation that the continuous attrition faced by the essential services and the army.

The Congress-League disagreement over the long-term and short-term parts of the Cabinet Mission Plan particularly the formation of the Interim Government caused disharmony, discontent and disappointment and it paved the

way for further division among the Muslims on one hand and the Hindus and the Sikhs on the other. With all his good intentions Wavell was convinced that a coalition government would not only help to bypass the demand for Pakistan but help avoid a civil war as well.

Wavell warned that one party rule would lead to a certain civil war, as was obvious from the carnage on the 'Direct Action Day';²⁴ Gandhi pounded the table and said, "If a bloodbath was necessary it would come about in spite of non-violence." Gandhi in his letter on 28 August told Wavell that Congress would not bend itself and adopt what it considered a wrong course because of "brutal exhibition recently witnessed in Bengal. Such submissions would itself lead to an encouragement and repetition of such tragedies."²⁵

The Muslim League decided to declare 2 September 1946, the day the Congress-led Interim Government started its tenure, as a day of mourning and Jinnah instructed the Muslims to display black flags which led to communal riots in Bombay, Punjab, Bengal and Bihar. Jinnah's response to Nehru's broadcast was a bitter attack on the Congress and the British Cabinet.²⁶

Wavell, aware of the repercussion and the backlash it would bring to induct one party rule in a multi-religious country with hostile feelings. He recorded:

Though the consequences may be serious I think it is as well that things have come to a head. Calcutta with its 4,400 dead, 16,000 injured and over 100,000 homeless showed that a one-party government at the Centre was likely to cause fierce disorders everywhere. Far from having any sobering effects, it had increased communal hatred and intransigence. If Congress intentions are as Gandhi's letter suggests the result of their being in power can only be a state of virtual civil war in many parts of India while you and I are responsible to Parliament.²⁷

Penderel Moon has recorded that "During the period acute tension that followed the failure of the Cabinet Mission, Khizar's Government remained uneasy in the saddle. Though there were isolated communal incidents, there was no widespread outbreak of violence in the Punjab such as occurred in Bengal and Bihar. But this outward tranquillity deceived no one. All the major communities-Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs-were collecting arms and getting ready for open war."²⁸ Evan Jenkins reporting to Wavell informed him that "It has suggested to me that in Lahore the Hindus now feel that they are well prepared and wish to provoke a conflict."²⁹ He imposed Punjab Public Safety Ordinance on 19 November 1946 to curb communal unrest created by Rashtryia Aawayam Sewak Sing (RSSS) and the Muslim League volunteers.³⁰

But Wavell was quite aware of the growing disorder and hostility between the major communities in northern parts of India. Defending his phased withdrawal from the south to north he argued, "After all the Congress would be receiving unqualified and immediate power over a very large proportion of India, and it would hardly be to their interest that those provinces should be thrown into chaos. I think that there is prospect that the position might be

accepted, and that the Congress would acquiesce in an orderly transfer, whether the Central Government were dismissed or not."³¹

Therefore, Wavell once again reiterated the implementation of his Breakdown Plan.³² Called to London in December 1946 along with the Muslim League and Congress leadership to try to sort out their differences over the interpretations regarding the Cabinet Mission Plan, Wavell in his private talks with the leaders of His Majesty's Government and the Whitehall insisted upon implementing his proposals for the 'Breakdown Plan' or else get ready to face serious consequences.³³ He had reached this conclusion because, firstly, Congress had not accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan in full, and secondly, His Majesty's Government by an inadequate expression of its position regarding the 'Grouping Clause' had allowed the political deadlock to continue with the resultant increase in communal tensions; feeling, therefore, that the Cabinet Mission Plan had lost its efficacy he felt it was time to look for alternate solutions.³⁴

Wavell reiterated that his Breakdown Plan was intended for use not merely in case of a widespread administrative deadlock, but also in the event of a political breakdown. He believed that the plan would enable the government to take a firm line with Congress, since it had a reasonable alternative on which to fall back; such a course of action might also enable it to avert a political breakdown.

Since 1945 His Majesty's Government had considered Wavell's ideas about the Breakdown Plan in several meetings of the India and Burma Committee and the Cabinet Committees and Wavell personally pleaded his case on 5 December 1946. Attlee, pointing out the necessity of new legislation, was not optimistic about its outcome. Although granted a personal appearance before the India and Burma Committee, Wavell still felt that his proposed Breakdown Plan did not get the wholehearted approval it deserved.³⁵

It was again discussed at 10 Downing Street on 11 December 1946 and it was felt that if either of the two communities refused to cooperate in carrying out the Mission's Plan, then a situation would arise which would justify and necessitate a fresh statement of policy by the government.

Wavell held that if the League refused to participate in the Constituent Assembly, the government would be ready to accept a constitution, drawn up by the present Constituent Assembly, as valid for the Hindu majority provinces only. He pointed out that an announcement by the Government favouring the establishment of Pakistan would at once arouse great opposition on the part of Congress. On the other hand, he hoped that "if they realised that continued intransigence on their part would lead to the establishment of Pakistan, the Congress leaders might become more reasonable."³⁶

Wavell explained that under his 'Breakdown Plan' the Hindu Provinces of Bihar and the United Provinces would not be handed over to the Congress in the first stage. Although, politically, they were the most difficult provinces, he had the full concurrence of the Commander-in-Chief on this matter and proposed their retention so as to avoid giving any impression that they were only

retaining hold on the Muslim Provinces. In the end, Wavell's Breakdown Plan, failed to bypass the Pakistan issue completely though it did succeed in postponing it for a while.³⁷

In later discussions of Wavell's Breakdown Plan, issues concerning the religious minorities in either of the two groupings or new territories and agreements with one or more new successor authorities were discussed.

Issues concerning the position of the army were particularly awkward as its control and functioning, in the initial stages, both at the central and the provincial levels could spark conflicts in its modes of operations. At a later stage, control of the Indian army would have to pass under the command of some specified authority. If no central authority for the whole of India came into being they could not hand all of it over to a government for the Hindu provinces only; therefore, they would be compelled to divide it.³⁸

India and Burma Committee remained unclear about the future of the Princely States. They were unsure about the action with regard to the states adjoining the provinces in which sovereignty was to be handed over and at what stage Paramountcy in respect of those states would have to be surrendered. The rights of minorities would also have to be dealt with and eventually all this would require new legislation in the British Parliament.³⁹

Wavell emphasised the importance of announcing at the earliest, in fixed and unequivocal terms, the decision to leave India by a specified date. He believed this would force the leading political parties to come to terms. He said, "the shock of this announcement might be of value in inducing a sense of responsibility in their minds they still had the sense that in the last resort the British would always be there to maintain law and order."⁴⁰

Therefore, the British Ministers forwarded their own line of action. They suggested that most of the objections raised were due to the suggestion that there should be a formal transfer of power to the provinces. The 'constitution' of India could be preserved intact until the later stages. The first stage would consist in the removal of the remaining officers of the Secretary of State Services in the four southern Provinces and the withdrawal of all British troops from there. The British governors could also be recalled unless the provincial governments specially asked for their retention and Indian governors appointed in their place on the advice of the provincial ministers. There would thus be a complete and absolute 'Indianization' of the services in the provinces while the existing constitution would continue to operate and provinces' relationship with the central government would continue as before. The troops of the Indian army would also remain in the provinces to help avoid the division of India into separate units. Similarly, the termination of Paramountcy of Indian States could also be avoided.

The third sitting of India and Burma Committee took place on 19 December 1946. Now, Wavell put forward a different version of his Breakdown Plan. He proposed that it should immediately become clear that if the Muslim League were not be represented in the Constituent Assembly, government would withdraw the governors, Secretary of States Services and British troops from the provinces of Orissa, the Central Provinces, Bombay and Madras within a

period of three or four months. The present status of central government and the constitution should be maintained but fresh governors would be appointed on the advice of ministries. In his concluding remarks in favour of the Plan, he said that it would enable him to concentrate his administrative forces and limit his responsibilities. It would cause psychological effect on the two communities and they might go for some form of cooperation.⁴¹

The India and Burma Committee considered the revised Wavell Plan and held that legislation would be necessary because it completely disregarded the government of India Act 1935. The Secretary of State and the Viceroy could not rid themselves of their responsibilities under that Act without an Act of Parliament. It was, however, desirable to avoid legislation before the final transfer of sovereignty. They thought that such legislation would be difficult to get through the Parliament and, therefore, it might be possible to use the 'convention' that governors would always accept the advice of their ministers. Alternatively, it might be possible to obtain the approval of the parliament to some 'blanket resolution' which would give the government sufficient authority to act. Without such authority they might be charged with abandoning their responsibilities towards the minorities and neighbouring states.

Since the cooperation of the Congress was crucial for any implementation of the Breakdown Plan it was felt necessary that its introduction be made through a carefully worded statement since an impression, in spite of the retention of Bihar and the United Provinces, of the British withdrawal from southern provinces as implying a tilt in favour of Pakistan could easily be created. The probability was that the following the British withdrawal southern provinces would continue to hand over to the central government the taxes necessary for financing the essential services.

The India and Burma Committee resumed its discussion of the Wavell's Breakdown Plan on 20 December.³³ Wavell stressed, feeling the heat from the prime ministers of the four southern provinces, that announcement of a definite date for British departure could lessen their enthusiasm for an immediate, full independence in essential services. The date decided upon was 31 March 1948.

Concerning the transfer of power it was felt that it could be easily carried out to a central authority representing the Congress-led provinces while concerning the other provinces the power could be handed over individually or to a separate central government for them; it would also result in splitting the Indian army.

The India and Burma Committee in its meeting of 3 January 1947 rejected Wavell's Breakdown plan. The Ministers held that "it was wrong to press too far the analogy of a military withdrawal. The operation now to be begun was not so much a military as a political operation of great delicacy. It must be regarded not as a withdrawal under pressure, but as a voluntary transfer of power to a democratic government. To an increasing degree the Viceroy would assume the position of a constitutional ruler and he and the British officials would act in conformity with the policy of that

Government.”⁴² All this was, however, not conveyed to Wavell before his departure for India.

Next meeting of India and Burma Committee took place on 6 January 1947.⁴³ Although the Committee showed appreciation of the fact that the area under the control of the Viceroy would be lessened, thereby reducing his risks, they however, disagreed with Wavell's argument that he would remain unaffected. They felt that his argument was not conclusive enough.

The second argument that the Breakdown Plan would deserve implementation in case a law and order situation arose was also rejected on the ground that the Committee's plan for vacating India should not be based on the assumption that law and order would be broken. It thus failed to appreciate the ground realities of a serious communal conflict, just around the corner, in India. In general the Committee desired a friendly atmosphere for transfer of power to Indian authorities. They were of the opinion that the Plan would result in the division of India into two or more parts and this would lead straight in the direction of Pakistan. Therefore, the Committee decided that the Viceroy's plan should be held in reserve for use only in case of an emergency.

Some recommendations concerning the transfer of some members of the Secretary of State Services at present serving in the southern provinces to other provinces and movement of some troops from south to north so as to concentrate them in the north were made.⁴⁴ These changes should be carried out in such a way as not to imply a complete withdrawal of British authority from these provinces.

Attlee conveyed the Cabinet's decision to Wavell on 8 January 1947.⁴⁵ He invited Wavell to London as soon as possible for a review of the situation. But Wavell had returned to India and thought it would be useless to plead his Breakdown Plan any more.⁴⁶ His termination a short while later ended all hopes of its implementation.⁴⁷

Implications of the Breakdown Plan

The Breakdown Plan fell short of the desirable level of acceptability in the British political circles because it could have created a conflict between the central government and the provinces due to ambiguity in the central and provincial subjects; Wavell's suggestion to overcome this weakness that withdrawal should be made only from four provinces instead of six Hindu-majority ones, to obviate a 'pro-Pakistan' bias was also deemed unsatisfactory.

The main reason for the failure of acceptance concerning Wavell's Breakdown Plan, however, lay with a majority of the British ministers who disliked any scheme that included evacuating the largest and most important colony, India. It was also considered desirable to leave India in the hands of those leaders who could make economic and political treaties with the British Government but, they also felt, that the Plan did not guarantee such peaceful transfer of power to a legitimate authority or authorities. Additionally,

a chain reaction of other colonies demanding their freedom as well was very worrisome to many leading members of the British political leadership.⁴⁸ Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary, felt that "the defeatist attitude adopted by the Cabinet and by Field-Marshal Wavell is just completely letting us down."⁴⁹ He was against the fixing of a specific date for withdrawal as it could cause problems for them in the Middle East and suggested Attlee to replace Wavell due to his defeatist approach.⁵⁰

The British government was also apprehensive of the communist involvement in the region. They did not wish to leave their former possessions in an unfriendly atmosphere which would force the colonies to reach out to the USSR.

Wavell's Breakdown Plan needed legislation from the British parliament to put it into force. Labour Party feared that new legislation would not get approval in the Parliament on the lines proposed by Wavell as he was considered a 'defeatist' by the Labour party and an advocate of scuttle.⁴⁴ Attlee himself never had a positive opinion of Wavell's political insight and doubted whether he had the finesse to negotiate the next step. Since one of the main aims of the Breakdown Plan was to avoid the blackmailing by the Congress ministries from the four provinces, as Viceroy was obliged to act upon the advice of the ministers.⁴³ Although the Labour Party rejected the Wavell's Breakdown Plan, they agreed in principle to leave India lest the Indians forced them to vacate the country. They announced the date of their final withdrawal as March 1948, a date which Wavell had suggested.⁵¹

All this delay in settling the communal problem and winding up the British rule had the most adverse effect in India particularly in the province of the Punjab. The loyalties of the police and the army towards British authority became doubtful. According to Noor-ul-Haq, "it seems that, by January 1947, the communal feelings in the Armed Forces had grown very strong....Because of the growing communalism in the Armed Forces, Prime Minister Attlee, who stood for the unity of India, got worried that Indian unity, could not be achieved if the Indian Armed Forces were spilt on communal lines."⁵²

The country had been heading towards a civil war which could have been avoided by implementing the Breakdown Plan. Victoria Schofield has recorded:

Since partition formed part of the eventual solution, it may be conjectured that the Breakdown Plan-taking place over more than a year under Wavell's schedule-would have provided more time for tempers to subside; under Mountbatten, their were less than three months between the announcement of partition in June 1947 and independence celebrations in August. Mountbatten argued that once the plan had been announced time was of the essence, but within Wavell's longer time-frame it is possible the violence that accompanied partition could have been considerably lessened, if not averted.⁵³

Thus the civil war that broke out during the last days of Raj in India, in which numerous innocent people were slaughtered, might have lost a major part of its fury if Wavell's Breakdown Plan had been implemented, the division of India and also the partition of the provinces of Punjab and Bengal would most likely, have taken place peacefully.

According to the instructions of His Majesty's Government, Mountbatten acted as a constitutional head of the government and, therefore, could do nothing to stop bloodshed; rather, he left everything in the hands of the Interior Minister Sardar Patel who made scant efforts to control it. Wavell, on his part, had been impartial and conscious of the rights of all communities and was determined, as an executive head, to suppress all such threats. After his dismissal, extremists became uncontrollable and shed the blood of innocent people in India in presence of the new Governor-General and British forces, police and army.

During Wavell's Viceroyalty, devolutionary process of British authority in India was accelerated.⁵⁴ Whitehall rejected his Breakdown Plan because they believed that it was a weak plan of a defeatist soldier and would result in a clash with the Congress. Attlee thought, "Partition would bring us into immediate conflict with the Congress and permanently embitter our relations with the larger part of India."⁵⁵ This kind of approach emboldened the Congress which promoted violence and bloodshed against the Muslims.⁵⁶

It proved a great error on the part of Whitehall to ignore the Breakdown Plan as Ian Stephens has recorded, "he put forward a 'Wavell (Breakdown) Plan', politically and militarily clear-cut, whereby British authority would have been withdrawn from the subcontinent much more gradually; that this was turned down; and that had it not been, much of the appalling slaughter at Partition-time, and resulting ill-will between the two successor-States, might have been avoided."⁵⁷

It is obvious that Wavell's personal relations with Attlee were strained and uneasy. Wavell's insistence on carrying out his Breakdown Plan put the Labour government in an awkward position. Although Wavell was allowed to return to Delhi following the meetings of December 1946 the fact was that Attlee had already decided to replace Wavell during his stay in London but did not dare tell him personally.⁵⁸ The Congress leadership was annoyed with him too and had been continuously asking the Labour Government to replace him. In the last days of the transfer of power, he had become unacceptable both to the Congress and the ruling Labour Party in England. H. C. Close has already challenged the myth that Wavell had become a spent force. But he has concluded wrongly that Wavell was insisting on establishing a 'Lesser Pakistan'. As a matter of fact, Wavell in his Breakdown Plan had developed a strategy to force the Congress and the League to come to terms on the basis of the Cabinet Mission Plan but he was not allowed to carry it through in its entirety. The Labour Government rejected some of Wavell's main recommendations as put forward in the Breakdown plan but accepted some others which were embodied in it but dismissed him from the viceroyalty.

Wavell can also be credited with strongly apprising the British government of the widespread backing by Muslims of the 'Pakistan' scheme so that it could

be dealt with effectively before it became unmanageable. He considered the Cabinet Mission Plan as the best antidote to the spreading popularity of the Pakistan scheme and, therefore, wanted the British Government and Whitehall to press the Congress strongly in order to gain concessions which would have prevented the emergence of Pakistan; in the end, however, he failed in his attempt.

Conclusion

Wavell was not original in his ideas about the partition of India because Rajagopalachari and Gandhi had earlier suggested the division of the Punjab and Bengal on communal lines as well if Pakistan were to be created. However, Wavell prepared the Breakdown Plan to reduce the attractiveness of the 'Pakistan Scheme' for the Muslims. In his Breakdown Plan he suggested the division of Punjab, Bengal and Assam on communal basis something which was not clearly mentioned either in the Rajagopalachari Formula (1944), Gandhi-Jinnah talks (1944), Cripps Proposals (1942) or the Cabinet Mission Plan (1946). His suggestion in the Breakdown Plan that Punjab and Bengal should be divided on a communal basis if Jinnah insisted on the Pakistan demand, was only envisaged as a bargaining point with the Muslim League and never intended for actual implementation because he was dead sure that the League and the Congress would come to terms on a formula for a united India based on the Cabinet Mission Plan. However, since neither of the parties was willing to compromise enough he was proved wrong. In the meantime his Hindu advisers had drawn up an unjust demarcation of the Punjab and the Bengal boundaries on maps, which, when actually implemented during Mountbatten's brief tenure as the Viceroy, later on, caused tremendous territorial losses to the newly created state of Pakistan.

Notes

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- ¹ Qazi Saeed-ud-Din, "Is India Geographically One, in Rafique Afzal, ed., *The Case for Pakistan* (Islamabad, 1988), pp. 67-76.
 - ² *Transfer of Power, Constitutional Relations between Britain and India*, Vol. IV, pp. 331-38.
 - ³ Ian Stephens, *Pakistan*, (London: Ernest Benn), p. 125.
 - ⁴ H. M. Close, *Wavell, Mountbatten and the Transfer of Power*, (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1997), p. 86.
 - ⁵ Jenkins to Wavell, 10 November 1945, R/3/1/108: ff 8-11.
 - ⁶ Minutes by Wavell and Abell, 29-30 November 1945, R/3/1/108: ff 16-17.
 - ⁷ Ibid.
 - ⁸ Menon to Abell, 6 December 1945, R/3/1/108: ff 24-29.
 - ⁹ Wavell to Lawrence, 5 December 1945, L/PO/10/22.
 - ¹⁰ Wavell to Lawrence 18 December 1945, Ibid.
 - ¹¹ Wavell to Lawrence 27 December 1945, L/P&J/ 8 / 525: ff 248-51

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- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Minute addressed to Gibson, undated, Turnbull Papers, MSS. EUR/ D. 714/72.
- ¹⁴ Wavell to Lawrence 27 December 1945, L/P&J/ 8 / 525: ff 248-51.
- ¹⁵ Minute addressed to Gibson, undated, Turnbull Papers, MSS. EUR/ D. 714/72.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Before being selected to be Wavell's private secretary Evan Jenkins was an outstanding member of the Indian Civil services, who had been Chief Commissioner of Delhi, 1937-40, and the Secretary, Department of Supply, 1940-3.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. p.108.
- ¹⁹ Ibid. p. 178.
- ²⁰ Ibid. p.210.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² It suggested that a policy should be adopted to ensure there would be minimum loss of face to the image of His Majesty's Government and no ultimate prejudice to conflicting aims of Indians. The condition of a provisional constitution for India must be based upon in the 1935 Act and such a constitution must continue to provide a unitary framework. It also pointed out that means should be applied to retain India as single state, without prejudice to interests of Indian Muslims. Draft by India Office, undated, *Transfer of Power*, Vol., VI, pp. 1213-28.
- ²³ Attlee to Wavell, 6 June 1946, Ibid., pp. 830-32
- ²⁴ Wavell Collections, 1946, 134-5
- ²⁵ Wavell, *Viceroy's Journal*, 342-3
- ²⁶ Tara Chand, *Freedom Movement in India*, volume 4, p. 486
- ²⁷ *Wavell to Lawrence, 28 August 1946, R/3/1/117: f 145*
- ²⁸ Penderel Moon, *Divide and Quit*(London: Chatto & Windus Limited, 1961), 74
- ²⁹ Jenkins to Wavell, 31 October 1946, L/PEJ/5/249:ff 34-5
- ³⁰ Jenkins to Colville, 30 November 1946, L/P&J/5/249 : 22-3s
- ³¹ Wavell to Lawrence, 23 October 1946, L/PEJ/10/46: ff 490-6
- ³² Wavell told Lawrence that the British government should hand over, after a stated plan, the Congress majority provinces to Congress but maintain the present constitution and British control in the North West and North East India. Wavell predicted that under such conditions if British government was not prepared to change their policy, the British control in India could be maintained for maximum one and a half-year or till the spring of 1948. Therefore, a definite plan should be worked out in order to wind up British control in India. He suggested that withdrawal should be completed not later than the spring of 1948 because from the administrative point of view government could no longer exercise control beyond that date.

However, he made it clear that the Breakdown Plan was intended primarily for use in the event of a deadlock before 1 January 1947. He held that the plan should come into operation no later than 1 March 1947.

- ³³ Lawrence to Attlee 13 September 1946, L/PO/6/117: ff 42, pp. 45-82.
- ³⁴ Note by Wavell, 2 December 1946, L/P&J/10/111: ff 86-90.
- ³⁵ India Conference in London, 5 December 1946, *Transfer of Power*, Vol. IX, p. 374-9
- ³⁶ India and Burma Committee. I.B. (46) 8th Meeting, 11 December 1946, *Transfer of Power*, Vol. IX, pp. 332-7
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Wavell was sure that it would no longer be possible for Congress to put pressure upon him by threatening to withdraw ministries from the provinces. This threat had in the past been a source of embarrassment because he at that time was in no position to administer the provinces under section 93 of the government of India Act 1935 because of growing control of the popular governments under the Congress party. India and Burma Committee. I. B (46)11th Meeting, 19 December 1946, *Transfer of Power*, Vol. IX, pp 383-6.
- ⁴² India and Burma Committee. I. B. (47) 1st Meeting, 3 January 1947, L/P&J/10/46: ff 48-51
- ⁴³ India and Burma Committee. I. B. (47) 2nd Meeting, 6 January 1947, L/P&J/10/46: ff 23-6.
- ⁴⁴ Memorandum by the Secretary of State for India, 6 January 1947, India and Burma Committee, Paper I.B. (47)3. *Transfer of Power*, Vol. IX, pp.472-4.
- ⁴⁵ Attlee said that "in even of the Muslim League failing to enter the Constituent Assembly it would be desirable to announce a time limit for the continuance of British rule in India; it was considered that it would not be advisable to fix a day. While it was considered that the plans might be made for that event and that troops might be moved, there was strong confirmation for the view expressed by the India Committee that the proposal for the abandonment of all responsibility for four Southern Provinces was unacceptable. The Cabinet did not approve the approach to the problem on the basis of a military evacuation. It was considered that a different approach was required-viz that if close co-operation with the Indian Governments at the Centre and in the Provinces in order to work out with them plans for handing over the Government in India, as a going concern. There was a feeling that withdrawal by stages was an encouragement for fragmentation." Attlee to Wavell, 8 January 1947, L/PO/8/9: ff 66-8.
- ⁴⁶ Michael Edwards. *The Last Years of the British India* (London: Cassel, 1963), pp. 147-149.

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- ⁴⁷ Attlee to Wavell, 12 January 1947, Telegram, L/PO/8/9j: ff 42.
- ⁴⁸ Sir O. Sargent to Sir D. Monteath, 7 December 1946, L/P&J/10/122: ff 105-6.
- ⁴⁹ Bevin to Attlee, 1 January 1947, R/30/1/8a: ff 72-7.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ The new Viceroy Mountbatten did not like to delay the process of demitting the British authority. Therefore, he claimed the maximum powers from the government to settle issues in India. He learnt from the experiences of the previous Viceroy and acquired plenipotentiary powers.
- ⁵² Noor-ul-Haq, *Making of Pakistan: The Military Perspective* (Lahore: Army Education Press, reprinted, 1995-96), pp. 158-9.
- ⁵³ Victoria Schofield, *Wavell, Soldier and Statesman*, p.400.
- ⁵⁴ The newspaper wrote that “widespread sympathy with Viscount Wavell, who is regarded as having been given an impossible individual task, and is now made to appear a scapegoat for the failure of the Government to bring the Indian parties together.” *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 March 1947.
- ⁵⁵ Attlee to Mr. Mackenzie King 13 February 1947, Telegram, L/P&J/10/77: ff 325-8.
- ⁵⁶ Wavell to Lawrence, 8 January 1947, L/PO/10/24.
- ⁵⁷ Ian Stephens, *Pakistan* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1963), p. 122.
- ⁵⁸ *News Chronicle* indicates that from a present point of view Lord Wavell’s departure will be regretted, but there is no need to gloss over the fact that certain errors of judgment have been attributed to his political inexperience in dealing with the astute Indian politicians. *News Chronicle*, 22 March 1947.