

CEASE FIRE J&K OPS 1947-48 – THE INSIDE STORY - I

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The Indian Government's commitment to a referendum in Kashmir under the influence of Lord Louis Mountbatten, at the time of accession, was God-sent for Pakistan. It had indeed created an all-advantageous-Pakistan situation. By invading Kashmir, Pakistan had gambled and failed and yet it was not to suffer the consequences of its failure. A fresh third option of securing the accession of Kashmir through referendum had been opened up for Pakistan. Interestingly Pakistan, whose only chance of securing the accession of Kashmir, if chance it ever had, lay in granting the choice to the Muslim majority people rather than the Hindu Ruler, did not at any stage demand that the accession of the State be decided in accordance with the wishes of the people. To the contrary Mr Jinnah had it repeatedly conveyed to the Maharaja that he alone could decide the issue without reference to his people. Pakistan's stand on the issue may appear to be at variance with the stance adopted by Mountbatten. But this was probably a diplomatic move. With Mountbatten pressing the "wishes of the people" concept vigorously, there was no real need for Pakistan to do so. Moreover with Pakistan and Mountbatten openly acting in unison, Mountbatten would have laid himself open to the suspicion that he was acting in the interest of Pakistan making it impossible to get his proposal through with India. In any case the "wishes of the people" option was to be of last priority for Pakistan, to be exercised only if the top priority option of use of force failed, the need for which, Pakistan was confident would never arise. But when the use of force did fail, Mountbatten's fore-thought paid and Pakistan was provided with the option of "wishes of the people" as something to continue fighting for.

After making the Indian leaders to commit themselves to holding of a referendum in Kashmir, Mountbatten was now to make sure that they would not wriggle out of this commitment. He was quite aware that leaders like Sardar Patel had accepted his advice to this effect only under pressure of the urgent need for sending troops to Kashmir immediately and that there was a chance of them backing out after the troops had been sent and Kashmir saved. He no doubt had great influence over Nehru and could get him to do what he wanted to, but he was "worried that Nehru might find himself slipping unwittingly, by sheer force of circumstance, into a state of mind where he could actually be influenced by adulation and flattery". Knowing Nehru's weakness he seems to have decided to exploit it himself before somebody else (from among Nehru's colleagues opposed to Mountbatten) could, to make sure that there would be no going back on the commitment. Being confident of handling Nehru, through "adulation and flattery", if need be, Mountbatten, during his meeting with Jinnah at Lahore on 01 November '47, made a suggestion of a UN controlled plebiscite in Kashmir – ostensibly to allay the fears of Mr Jinnah regarding India's good intentions but in actual fact to bind the Indian leaders to their commitment on ascertaining the wishes of the people before the final settlement of the issue. Jinnah naturally pounced on the suggestion and, as expected, back in India Mountbatten had no major problem in getting Nehru to accept the same and make a "big broadcast" to this effect. Nehru was even made to once again affirm his Government's commitment to a referendum in Kashmir, to repudiate, what Mountbatten considered, a "dangerous suggestion of Sheikh Abdullah that there might now be no referendum".

Mountbatten's worry, however, was not Nehru but Patel who had begun to oppose all negotiations with Pakistan in view of reports of "large scale concentration of tribals for a renewed attack on Kashmir and continuing stories of ghastly atrocities including the whole-sale murder of non-Muslims and the selling of Kashmiri girls in Pakistan" and Nehru seemed to be

slipping under the influence of Sardar Patel. The resultant hardened attitude of the Indian Government convinced Mountbatten that “the dead-lock was complete ... and that only the introduction of a third party with international authority, acting in an agreed capacity, could break it”. Consequently during the meeting of the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan on 08 December, which had obviously been arranged by him for this purpose, Mountbatten “injected the suggestion that the United Nations Organisations might be called up to fill the third party role”. The suggestion, as might have been expected was at once welcomed by Liaqat Ali, but Nehru wanted time to consider the details.

Once back in Delhi Mountbatten seems to have brought Nehru round to his way of thinking, though only to the extent that his “attitude to the idea now [became] less negative than it was at Lahore”. The change was, nevertheless, enough for Mountbatten to continue working upon. The main resistance seems to have been coming from Sardar Patel, who evidently, was still in a position to exercise influence over Nehru. Patel seems to have convinced of Pakistan’s connivance at the raiders’ operation in Kashmir and that as Pakistan would not stop the raiders, India would have to do it even if meant open war between the two countries. The result of Nehru’s “positive attitude” interacting with Patel’s “negative attitude”, (as Mountbatten would have wished to term them), was, therefore, that on 20th December 1947, the Indian Cabinet decided to make only a limited appeal to the United Nations, accusing Pakistan of helping the raiders. This was not what Mountbatten had wanted. He knew that Pakistan was not in a position to withstand an open war with India, and in event of one breaking out, it was likely to lose all that it had gained in Kashmir as a result of its invasion. Mountbatten’s aim in suggesting that the UNO might be called in to fill the third party role, was to seek its mediation and thereby prevent India from starting an open war, as Patel appeared to have been contemplating. That would have also paved the way for cease-fire to the existing hostilities and provided Pakistan with a chance of retaining at least some of the fruits of its aggression.

The Cabinet decision had, however, given him a breathing time, which he utilised in pressurising Nehru to make him act the way he had wished him to. He sent another letter to Nehru, warning him of the great danger of the Kashmir conflict escalating into a full fledged war between India and Pakistan, and urging the over whelming need for caution and restraint. Taking advantage of the fact that Nehru “derived the deepest satisfaction in pursuing his particular brand of foreign policy”, a paragraph was added to emphasise “how embroilment in war with Pakistan would undermine the whole of [his] independent policy and progressive social aspirations”. He also got the British Prime Minister to send an “excellently worded message to Nehru urging caution”. Interestingly while all this pressure was being exerted on Nehru and his Government, no effort was made to make Pakistan yield even a wee bit for the sake of peace in the sub continent.

Mountbatten’s opportunity finally came when the draft of the complaint to the UN was to be made out. Luckily for him serious differences had by then developed between Nehru and Patel over the approach to the problem and Nehru was quite agreeable to keeping Patel out of the draft making process. Consequently the draft was prepared in the absence of Sardar Patel when he was unwell, under the plea that the decision in this regard could not be postponed owing to the “urgency of the matter”. Because of Patel’s absence Mountbatten seems to have had a free run in the matter of preparation of the draft. The earlier decision of the cabinet was set aside and making out a strong case of India’s legal and moral rights in Kashmir, the draft went on to unnecessarily commit the country to a plebiscite, which “might be held under international auspices”. Mountbatten had, indeed, achieved what he had wanted to. The small impediment that

the Government of India had tried to place against the scheme of things, in that the plebiscite was to take place only after the “soil of the State had been cleared of the invader and normal conditions restored”, could, he knew, be taken care of by the strong pro-Pakistan lobby – the Anglo-American block – at the United Nations. And so it did. The Anglo-American block grabbed the opportunity provided by India to help Pakistan out of its difficult position. Pakistan’s aggression, about which India had complained in the main, was thus aside-tracked by the Security Council while India and Pakistan were put on the same pedestal by asking India also to withdraw the bulk of its forces, though only after Pakistan had withdrawn all of its own. It is another matter that even this one sided verdict of the Security Council in its favour was not acceptable to Pakistan, that was at that time more interested in delaying matters than in an immediate plebiscite. With the memories of the atrocities committed by the Pakistani raiders still fresh in the minds of the people of Kashmir, an immediate plebiscite could not have gone the Pakistan way.

The rationale behind India’s complaint to the Security Council about Pakistan’s aggression in Kashmir at a time when the invaders were on the run and would have, in any case, been cleared within a matter of months if not weeks, was beyond comprehension. Subsequently there was all round disillusionment in India over the “unashamedly pro-Pakistan” attitude adopted by the British. Even Sardar Patel found it “difficult to follow British diplomacy in this affair”. But all that is now history.

(To be continued)