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Q12

Assess the role of British imperial power in complicating the process of transfer of power during the 1940s.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2019 · GS I · 15 marks · Modern Indian History

Modern Indian history from about the middle of the eighteenth century until the present - significant events, personalities, issues.

Core demand of the question

- Assess the role of British imperial power in the 1940s
- Show how that power complicated the process of transfer of power

Revision summary

Wartime India was used as a base while Cripps and earlier offers withheld a firm independent union.

Separate electorates, Simla, and the Cabinet Mission groups turned imperial arithmetic into a League-Congress trap.

INA trials and the 1946 naval revolt sped British exit but did not create a united force for transfer.

Princely paramountcy and a thin Punjab Boundary Force left maps ungoverned.

The June 1947 Plan and Radcliffe awards were haste, not careful decolonisation.

Introduction

In the 1940s the Raj was a wartime empire, not a neutral umpire. London's need for Indian men and money, its delay of a real timetable, and its old habit of balancing communities and princes made the transfer of power hurried, communal, and incomplete.

Body

War and the refusal of a clear timetable

- India was declared a party to the Second World War in 1939 without the elected provincial ministries, which resigned and left a trust gap that never fully closed.
- The August Offer (1940) and the **Cripps Mission (1942)** promised dominion talk after the war but kept defence and a right of provinces to opt out, which Congress read as empire first.
- Winston Churchill's cabinet treated India as a war base; the 1942 Quit India crackdown filled jails while the Bengal famine of 1943 showed how little wartime logistics cared for subjects.
- A delayed, conditional promise of freedom taught League and Congress to prepare for a bargain, not for a shared state.

Divide, weigh, and delay

- Imperial policy had long used separate electorates and the Communal Award; in the 1940s that arithmetic became the Cabinet Mission's groups and the League's claim to speak for all Muslims.

- The Simla Conference (1945) and the Wavell Plan broke on who would nominate Muslim members, which was an imperial veto dressed as fairness.
- The Cabinet Mission (1946) offered a three-tier union, then London's statements and Wavell's use of an interim government without full League cooperation raised the temperature.
- Direct Action Day (16 August 1946) and the Calcutta-Noakhali-Bihar killings showed that delay had already communalised the street.

Army, civil service, and princes

- The Indian Army and the ICS were still imperial instruments; Indianisation was late, so there was no agreed all-India force ready to hold a united transfer.
- The INA trials and the Royal Indian Navy ratings' revolt (1946) frightened London into speeding exit, but also into fearing a united radical India.
- Paramountcy over some 500 princely states was an imperial leftover; its lapse without a firm all-India plan left Hyderabad, Junagadh, and Kashmir as open sores.
- The Boundary Force in Punjab was too thin for the Radcliffe lines drawn in weeks, which was an imperial administrative failure as well as a political one.

The last year: haste as a method

- Clement Attlee's February 1947 deadline and Lord Mountbatten's 3 June Plan advanced Independence to 15 August 1947, leaving ten weeks for partition of Punjab, Bengal, and the services.
- Cyril Radcliffe's awards, announced after 15 August, turned maps into riots because the empire chose calendar politics over census-grade borders.
- Sterling balances, the division of the army and the treasury, and the hurried split of cadres were imperial bookkeeping under fire, not a planned decolonisation.
- British officials often presented themselves as referees; in practice they had shaped the teams, the clock, and the pitch.

What the assessment should hold

- The Labour government did transfer power; that is not the same as saying London managed a fair, orderly, united exit.
- Imperial war needs, communal constitutional design, princely paramountcy, and a last-minute calendar together complicated every step from Cripps to Radcliffe.
- Indian party choices also mattered, but the question asks for the British role, which was structural, not a late accident.

Way forward for policy

- Treat 1940s transfer as war empire plus divide-and-quit, not as a sudden British gift.
- Name Cripps, Cabinet Mission, Mountbatten haste, princes, and Radcliffe as the chain that made 1947 violent.

Flow diagram

World War Two Raj -> Cripps Cabinet Mission delay
Communal Award separate electorates -> League Congress deadlock
Cripps Cabinet Mission delay -> Mountbatten haste 1947
League Congress deadlock -> Mountbatten haste 1947
Princes army ICS -> Mountbatten haste 1947
Mountbatten haste 1947 -> Radcliffe partition violence

Conclusion

British imperial power in the 1940s used India for war, delayed a clear independent union, played community and princely cards, and then quit on a short clock. That mix, more than a neutral handover, complicated the transfer and helped turn freedom into partition.

Facts & figures

Cripps Mission, 1942

War-time offer of post-war dominion status with a provincial opt-out, rejected by Congress and unsatisfactory to the League.

Cabinet Mission, 1946

Three-tier union plan whose grouping clauses and later British statements deepened distrust.

Direct Action Day, 1946

Muslim League hartal that opened a wave of Calcutta and later Bengal-Bihar killings.

3 June Plan, 1947

Mountbatten plan that accepted partition and set 15 August as the transfer date.

Radcliffe Line

Hastily drawn Punjab and Bengal boundaries announced around Independence, with mass displacement.