

The Radcliffe Commission / Award (1947)

Background

After the June 3 Plan confirmed partition, the British needed to draw borders between India and Pakistan. For this purpose, the Radcliffe Commission was set up in 1947. Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a British lawyer who had never been to India, was chosen as chairman. The commission had two sections, one for Punjab and one for Bengal, with equal members from Congress and the Muslim League. However, if the members disagreed, Radcliffe had the final authority.

Objectives

The main purpose of the commission was to divide Punjab and Bengal between India and Pakistan before independence. It aimed to separate Muslim-majority and Hindu/Sikh-majority areas while also considering geography and administration. The commission was expected to provide clear boundaries, reduce future disputes, and complete its work very quickly within five weeks.

Work and Challenges

The Radcliffe Commission worked under great pressure and shortage of time. Population records were often outdated, making decisions difficult. Both Congress and the Muslim League tried to influence Radcliffe in their favor, while Sikhs also demanded protection of their areas. Major disputes arose over cities like Lahore, Amritsar, and Calcutta. Radcliffe faced the tough task of balancing fairness, speed, and political demands.

The Radcliffe Award (Decisions)

The award divided Punjab and Bengal between the two new states. Lahore went to Pakistan, while Amritsar and Calcutta went to India. The Gurdaspur district was controversially given to India, which later allowed access to Kashmir. A referendum in Sylhet decided in favor of joining Pakistan. The borders were drawn in such a hurry that they cut through villages, rivers, and transport routes. The final award was announced on August 17, 1947, two days after independence.

Impact and Importance

The Radcliffe Award had huge consequences. It caused the largest migration in history, as about 14 million Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs crossed borders. Tragically, nearly one million people were killed in communal violence. The decision over Gurdaspur contributed to the Kashmir conflict. Even Radcliffe admitted later that he was unhappy with the fairness of the award. The borders drawn in 1947 remain a source of tension between India and Pakistan to this day.