LORD CURZON AND THE CREATION OF THE NORTH-WEST FRONTIER PROVINCE (1901): AN APPRAISAL

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Introduction

The North-West Frontier region (presently Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and the Tribal Areas) owing to its strategic topography played an important role in the history of Indo-Pak sub-continent. In 1849 the British annexed Punjab and formally absorbed it into their own domain. Once across the Indus, the British came into contact with the Pukhtun tribes that ushers a new chapter in the history of the British rule in India. The North West Frontier was the most sensitive strategic frontier, defined topographically as strategic zone of defence of the British Empire, which posed a complex defence problem throughout the British rule in India. The area was integral part of the Great Game played by the British to counter internal insurrection and external threats to India coming from the direction of North West Frontier of India. The British for their administrative convenience divided the Frontier region into settled and Tribal Areas. The aim was to keep complete control in the hands of the central government so that international as well as domestic issues can be handled quickly and directly, because the ultimate aim of the British whole frontier policy was the “security of India.” In 1901, the British Government in India under Lord Curzon, the Viceroy decided to divide Punjab into two parts and as result a new province was formed which came to be known as the ‘North-West Frontier Province.’ This paper will critically evaluate the motives, factors and its purpose, with special reference to Lord Curzon’s efforts in the creation of North-West Frontier Province.

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Background

The North-West frontier had simmered and over-boiled ever since the Company had first annexed the Punjab and the areas west of the Indus. John and Henry Lawrence made frontier administration their life-work and chosen and preferred officials of daring and resolute. With the lapse of years such a system brought about inevitable and avoidable consequences and repercussions, the work of officers became overlaid with that waler and flurry of reports, meetings, memoranda and dispatches endemic in every bureaucracy. Knowledge of the frontier and its languages became a less weighty qualification than it once had been. Most delicate and thorny and complicated branch of the administration of India was in the hands of a group of provincial officials, already overwhelmed by the growth of their internal duties, and unable to give either the time or the care which was necessary to the proper control of the frontier.

Ever since the British had come into contact with the frontier, the idea and proposal of a separate frontier province had been repeatedly and frequently suggested. Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General, had at first intended and planned to create it at once, but he abandoned the proposal because Colonel Mackeson, to whom he had desired and preferred to entrust and assign the new province, was assassinated at Peshawar. Viceroy Lord Lytton also propounded and put forward a scheme with a view to give the central government a more direct control over the Frontier administration and policy. In this regard he stated:

The frontier districts are separated from the Punjab by almost every possible kind of distinction. They are separated geographically, historically, by race, by institutions, and by customs. The Indus, for a great part of its course, forms a natural and little traversed boundary between two essentially distinct territories….the tribal system prevalent throughout the greater portion of them differs widely from the institutions of the cis-Indus population.

\[3\] Frazer, India Under Curzon & After, p. 58.
The outbreak of second Afghan War, however, prevented this scheme being carried into effect. Lord Northbrook, who became the Viceroy after the assassination of Lord Mayo, considered several schemes. One was for a new province stretching from the Himalayas to Karachi. In 1893 when Mortimer Durand came to an agreement with the Amir AbdurRahman about the demarcation of the political frontier between India and Afghanistan, the project for a separate province was once more brought forward.

Lord Lansdowne, the Viceroy was struck by “the extent to which the policy of abstention has been pursued by the Punjab Government in dealing with the tribes along that portion of the Frontier for which it is responsible.” He was in favour of a single frontier charge, but left India before he was able to deal with the question. The author of the article *Little Wars on the Indian Frontier* Published in the Edinburgh Magazine in 1895 has explained the inconsistent British policy in the frontier region:

…Frontier policy is entirely guided by *de facto* principles and moves on *ex post facto* lines. Its details have always been regulated by hand-to-mouth arrangements, and officials have always shrunk from the consideration of any comprehensive scheme of settlement. The financial issues involved have been the great excuse for keeping up a disorderly and disorganised country immediately outside our own border...

But the real issue was: could an arrangement be devised which, while preventing a reappearance and recurrence of outbreak like 1897 would permit and allow the continuation of an administrative border well behind the political? Or would it be indispensable, in order to eradicate a liability and responsibility which might prove serious and fatal during a military advance through these Tribal areas into Afghanistan, to attempt

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7 Frazer, *India Under Curzon & After*, p. 58. In 1889, when Lansdowne was Viceroy, the Baluchistan Agency was created with Robert Sandeman as his first head; Sind ceased to be a Frontier province.

annexation? Lord Salisbury, writing to Curzon just before the tribal uprising of 1897:

Mountaineer neighbours force you to fight them: and you will get tired of the annoyance in the long run and strike a strong blow to have done with it. It is quite right to avoid a forward policy if you can, but you cannot...our policy is Jingo and penitence in alternate doses. Unluckily the penitence usually coincides with a period of exhaustion on the part of our opponents; so that we miss our chance of settling the trouble once for all.¹⁰

Lord George Hamilton, the Secretary of State for India in 1898, impressed upon Lord Elgin, the Viceroy, that the Government of India must exercise a more direct control over the frontier tribes. He said that the Punjab government was 'quite unsuited to the conduct of frontier policy and had taken Khyber affairs out of their hands.'¹¹

Lord Hamilton proposed a twofold responsibility for the Commissioner of Peshawar, who would be appointed by and answerable and responsible to the Central government for frontier affairs, but to the Punjab on other matters. The Cabinet too favoured a shift of responsibility, so as to avoid what Salisbury termed ‘the red tape and paper administration’ of the Punjab.¹²

Lord Curzon in his speech in the big Indian debate of Parliament of 1898 said “It is clear that at some time or other we may have to advance to the external frontier of which I have been speaking (the Oxus), or at any rate to take up a forward, although a less forward position on the line of Kabul Ghazni and Kandahar.”¹³

On August 5, 1898, Lord Hamilton wrote to the Government of India that “Her Majesty's Government is of opinion that the present arrangements are not satisfactory, and that it is desirable that the conduct of external relations with the tribes of the Punjab Frontier should be more directly than heretofore under the control and supervision of the Government of

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⁹ Ibid.
¹¹ Dilks, Curzon in India I. Achievement, p. 225.
¹² Ibid., pp.224-5.
India.” A general atmosphere of chilly hesitation and timidity in regard to political affairs seems to pervade the Punjab hierarchy. Writing on the inefficiency and unpredictability of the system, Curzon remarked, “It is of no use to have a Warden of the Marches unless you give him a free hand. Sandeman’s policy had been one not of spasmodic and retributive interference, but of steady and unaltering conciliation…”

**Lord Curzon and the issue of a Separate Province**

On taking over, as a Viceroy in 1899, Lord Curzon was confronted with copious files, endowed with contradictory opinions. He immediately turned his attention to the consolidation of an imperial frontier and believed that the ‘conduct of the external relations with the tribes of the frontier should be more directly … under the control and the supervision of the Government of India’. Lord Curzon, who had been supplying almost weekly fresh examples of the Punjab’s inability to manage the frontier, wrote to George Hamilton:

> My dear George, I cannot work a Government under this system. I cannot spend hours in wordy argument with my Lieutenant-Governors as to the exact meaning, purport, scope, object, character, possible limitations, conceivable results of each petty aspect of my frontier policy. If they deliberately refuse to understand it, and haggle and boggle about carrying it out, I must get some fairly intelligent officer who will understand what I mean and do what I say.

Lord Curzon pointed out that five successive Lieutenant-Governors and five Chief Secretaries of the Punjab had, with one limited exception, had no political experience about the frontier. In 1901 Lord Curzon,

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14Secretary of State to Government of India, 5th August 1898, Curzon Collection.MSS.EUR. F.111/301.
15Ibid.
16Ibid.
19Curzon quoted by Dilks in *Curzon in India. I. Achievement*, p. 228.
20In his famous lengthy Minute of 27th of August 1900, Lord Curzon wrote:

… In practice it is found that as a rule neither the Lieutenant Governor nor his Chief Secretary knows anything of the Frontier at all; and that they are selected by
reviewed the Frontier’s administrative structure in the light of the tribal uprisings, the fragility of the Durand Line and the putative strategic designs of the Russians.\textsuperscript{21} He knew very well the inertia and apathy and the positive resistance which he had to overcome.

For fifty years people had talked of the reform, but no one had done anything. He was determined to complete his scheme of frontier policy by the creation of a new province. Curzon’s review concluded that the Frontier required more prompt, more imperative and direct imperial control and he thus removed what he called the obstacle of the ‘elaborate organisation’ of the Punjab government.

The remedy he proposed was to make a province consisting of the trans-Indus districts of Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu, and Dera Ismail Khan, together with the political agencies of Dir, Swat, and Chitral, the Khyber, the Kurram, the North and South Waziristan. To these areas was afterwards added the cis-Indus district of Hazara, because its population was chiefly tribal.\textsuperscript{22}

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\textsuperscript{21} Lord Curzon, Minute on the Frontier Administration, 27 August, 1900, p. 2 (Curzon Papers) MSS/EUR.F.111/319.

Finally, despite opposition, the Viceroy created the new province and named the land east of the former Durrani Empire, The North-West Frontier.\textsuperscript{23} The new Province was inaugurated on King Edward's birthday on 5th November 1901. The term North West Frontier refers to the territory bounded by Afghanistan on the west and north, by Kashmir, Gilgit, and the Punjab on the east, and by Baluchistan on the south,\textsuperscript{24} with an area of 38,665 square miles, of which 13,193 was within the administrative frontier.\textsuperscript{25}

The regulatory structures of the administered districts were not extended and the Tribal areas were left as a non-administered region. Earlier features of the colonial relationship with the tribes of north-west were confirmed and maintained with the modified organisation of the NWFP.\textsuperscript{26} In Peter Mayne, words Tribal areas or Tribal belt became a 'protectorate' lying as a buffer between N.W.F.P. and the Durand Line frontier of Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{27} The creation of the new province by the British was to secure closer and more immediate supervision of the frontier. According to J.W. Spain 'the border tribes have always played an important role in determining who was to hold power in Afghanistan.'\textsuperscript{28} The British could use it to shake or knock across the Durand Line. Olaf Caroe, made these remarks about the creation of the new province:

> The creation of the new province provided...greatest justification, greater even than the outward seeming needs of defence and foreign policy, for only a people whose aspirations are reasonably free of frustration can provide the conditions in which confident defence structure may be erected....NWFP provided first an administrative, and later a political soil in which this idea could take root, and, carefully nurtured, grow into active life. It laid out this idea at a time when the allegiance of the Frontier people was uncertain and groping.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{25} Frazer, India Under Curzon & After, p. 60.
\textsuperscript{26} Haroon, Frontier of faith: Islam in the Indo-Afghan Borderland, pp. 24-5.
The head of the new administration would be a Chief Commissioner (later on Governor) an Agent to the Viceroy, appointed by and directly subordinate to the Government of India. The first Chief Commissioner was Lieutenant-Colonel Harold Deane, a frontier officer of great experience. The Chief Commissioner Deane, in a speech hoped that with the creation of the new province, an era of happiness and prosperity will commence. He died in 1908, and was succeeded by George Roos-Keppel.

To T.C. Coen, "It has been said of Curzon that everything he did was right but was done in wrong way. Certainly the partition of the Punjab was carried out with little tact, the Lieut- Governor of the Punjab being by-passed in the negotiations with scant courtesy." Lord Curzon visited the new province in the spring of 1902 and for the first time, a Viceroy addressed the notables of the frontier in a ceremony with simplicity and frankness, he said ‘You are the keepers of your own house. We are ready enough to leave you in possession. But if you dart out from behind the shelter of the door to harass and pillage and slay, then you must not be surprised if we return quickly and bat the door in.’ He further said:

There are always people ready to whisper in my ear that it is dangerous policy and that it is putting weapons into an enemy’s hand. But I say in reply, why should he be an enemy? What is there to fight about? And if I put a knife into the hands of a Pathan, why should he, more than anyone else, stab me with it in the back?”

As a mark of confidence in the new arrangements, Curzon and his wife traversed the Khyber and slept at LandiKotal, guarded exclusively by the Afridi militia. Lord Curzon in his famous budget speech said that ‘it is a
policy of military concentration as against dispersion, and of tribal conciliation in place of exasperation.” Curzon’s policy was to concentrate forces in British territory, avoid interference with the tribes and not to take any new responsibility had a major effect on Frontier tribes. This was what he had to say about the new measures or system introduced in the new province:

You will all remember the outcries of the prophets of evil. It was going to inflict an irreparable wound upon the prestige of the Punjab Government. It was to overwhelm the Foreign Department with tiresome work. It was to encourage ambitious officers to gasconade upon the frontier. It was the symbol of a forward and Jingo policy, and would speedily plunge us in another Tirah campaign.... I am content with the simple facts that for seven years we have not had a single frontier expedition, the only seven years of which this can be said since the frontier passed into British hands; and that, whereas in the five years 1894-9 the Indian taxpayer had to find 4.5 million pounds sterling for frontier warfare, the total cost of military operations on the entire North-West Frontier, in the last seven years has only been £248,000, and just that was for the semi-pacific operation of the Mahsud blockade.

According to Elliot “he gave the Pathan the feeling, after fifty years of playing second fiddle, that he was once again of first importance in the land in which he lived.” The British knew fully well that finality could never be reached on the north-western frontier. As Curzon stated ‘...I do not say it will save us from frontier warfare or from occasional expeditions, or from chronic anxiety…’ Kitchener, the Commander in-Chief was of the opinion that it was very necessary for the British to control the hill tribes up to the Afghan border, because the tribes were capable to endanger the routes to Kabul. He strongly urged that ‘control

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35Lipsett, Lord Curzon in India 1898-1903, pp. 33-34.
39Lipsett, Lord Curzon in India 1898-1903, p. 34.
required the gradual incorporation and absorption of the Frontier tribes.\footnote{Kitchener cited by Baha, in \textit{N.W.F.P. Administration under British Rule 1901-1919}, p. 56.}

So by the creation of NWFP, Curzon ended the bewilderment and confusion and expense of frontier policy, veering as it was between rival schools of thought and puzzled by the lines of communication to both the Government of India and that of the Punjab, which had hitherto been in charge for frontier affairs.
Conclusion

The creation of North-West Frontier Province was an important episode in the history of British Raj in India. The North West Frontier was the most sensitive area for the British policy makers as far as their imperial policies were concerned at that time. Credit goes to the Viceroy Lord Curzon, who took great interest, despite strong opposition from a segment of British officials against the formation of the new province, although he was not the first Viceroy or high British official who favoured the creation of a separate province. It was since the time of Lord Dalhousie that the idea and proposal of a separate frontier province was repeatedly and frequently suggested. The responsibility to govern was bestowed upon the people who were experienced and well-acquainted with the region and psyche of the people. This province was created out of strategic consideration, geographical location and the character of the populace. The British believed that with the creation of the new province they will be in better position to govern and administer the region more methodically and more professionally which was essential for the defence and security of India.

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