

Beyond Heroes and Villains

Reading V P Menon in the Fractured Times

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Republishing V P Menon's *The Transfer of Power in India* is a great opportunity to reread India's independence from constitutional and bureaucratic perspectives. The book was originally published in 1957. Post independence, Menon served as secretary of the Government of India in the Ministry of State. Prior to that, he also served under the British government as constitutional adviser to the viceroy and political reforms commissioner. Read in the context of current political claims and appropriation, and in light of new scholarly work on India's independence, the book offers a valuable corrective to debates that reduce the freedom struggle to blame and memory contests. In India's current political environment, public debates on the freedom struggle increasingly devolve into a blame game. Jawaharlal Nehru, MK Gandhi, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah are blamed for partition, betrayal, and the subsequent bloodbath. They are also implicated in modern crises, such as Kashmir, where the goal is to vilify them and gain political credit.

Other political leaders, like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, are treated no differently, praised as realists and greater visionaries in both domestic and international politics. On all sides, debates are reduced to binary positions that neglect the detail and intricacy of the events. It is in this context that the republication of this seminal classic, accompanied by a scholarly and engaging introduction by Partha Chatterjee, matters.

The Transfer of Power in India by V P Menon, with an Introduction by Partha Chatterjee, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2025; pp viii+612, ₹1,415.

Rather than assigning blame, this new edition emphasises the intricate historical processes underlying the freedom struggle, independence, and partition. It reminds us that these were shaped by constitutional negotiations, administrative choices, and political choices, rather than by simple narratives of heroes and villains. Read together with its account of the integration of Indian princely states, it offers one of the most detailed insider accounts we have of the making of modern India told from a bureaucrat's perspective.

Apart from the book's contemporary relevance, another important aspect is the detailed and critical introduction by Chatterjee. He correctly points out,

He (V P Menon) was not interested in the social history of the transition from British rule to the creation of independent India and Pakistan. Indeed, it is arguable that he did not believe in the relevance of such a social history. He was firmly convinced that the most decisive events shaping the history of modern South Asia took place in the meeting rooms and corridors of the highest state institutions, and that only a handful of key players were responsible for those decisions. The agitations of the masses and the passions that drove them were but epiphenomena. What ultimately mattered were the ambitions, intelligence, tact, courage, and frailties of statesmen, and the careful wording of declarations and statutes, which were sometimes precise and sometimes ambiguous, depending on the goals to be achieved and the people to be persuaded. Political history

for him was made in the highest echelons of the state; its chief architects were bureaucrats. (Menon 2025: 4)

Thus, Chatterjee's contribution highlights the complexities of Menon's perceptions of sociopolitical history rather than celebrating him as a definitive interpreter of the transfer of power or vilifying him as merely an "imperial" loyal bureaucrat. Instead, he shed light on some of the book's most critical political debates through new research on issues such as the individuals responsible for the partition, the roles of Congress, Nehru, and Patel in shaping modern India, and the actions of the British in India. By exploring these threads, it brings in new evidence and research by Sarvepalli Gopal (1976), Sumit Sarkar (1983), Ayesha Jalal (1985), R J Moore (1988), and Rajmohan Gandhi (1990).

Menon on Congress, Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah

Chatterjee notes that what separates Menon's account of the transfer of power from nationalist accounts is its focus on constitutional history rather than the lives and sacrifices of leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru; on popular participation from the Non-cooperation Movement to the Quit India Movement, or on the anti-colonial imagination. Menon instead focuses on the attempts of the British governments and their viceroys to change policy in India and to alter how people were governed. These attempts were reflected in various legislative reforms enacted by the British through acts and negotiations. He repeatedly calls them "reform" because he was part of the reform commission; therefore, it was a term he was familiar with. Chapter 1, titled "The Goal of British Policy," blames Congress and its leaders for their failed attempts to mobilise the masses and for not entering into constructive negotiations with the British, rather

than the British intent to exploit. The chapter also considers the Non-cooperation Movement as a kind of failure, and there is no mention of the words “Jallianwala Bagh massacre” or “Bhagat Singh” anywhere in the book.

The book also carries a strong anti-communist tone throughout. It blames Nehru and his “socialist friends” for several failures and the breakdown of negotiations. His vision of the nation is more aligned with a constitutional and bureaucratic entity than with the imagined political community that embodies a sense of belonging and shared history, as envisioned by the leaders of the freedom struggle. This approach owed more to his role within the British Empire’s bureaucracy than to the freedom struggle itself. Thus, when he wrote this account of the transfer of power, he drew on his experience as a British government officer. Readers should, therefore, stay alert to this tension while working through the book. It is a history of the transfer of power and the making of postcolonial states written by an insider who was working with colonisers, steeped in their vocabulary and sympathies. But this historical account is still valuable to modern history students, as it is one of the few insider accounts.

Chapter 3 shows that his position in the colonial government also shaped his interpretation of partition, a process that began to take a concrete form from the 1940s onward. This chapter focuses on the start of World War II, the British government’s attempts to persuade Congress to support it, and Congress’s policy of withdrawing from the government. According to him, resigning from the ministry was a great mistake on the part of Congress and “it was widely regretted” (Menon 2025: 96). Congress’s resignation, followed by the launch of the Quit India Movement, cleared the way for the Muslim League to gain ground and consolidate its influence over key decisions, ultimately leading to partition and the creation of Pakistan. In Menon’s account, Congress erred, but it was not responsible for the partition; instead, Jinnah and his Muslim League were. Patel, by contrast, is praised for his farsightedness and for his acceptance of partition as a pragmatic, realistic choice. He emerges as

a reluctant pragmatist who came to it only after constitutional alternatives had collapsed. Menon’s admiration for Patel is unmistakable throughout the narrative.

Contesting Visions on Partition and Independence

Here, Chatterjee’s introduction performs an important role. Instead of celebrating Menon, Chatterjee critically examines Menon’s central claims and analysis in light of research conducted after the original publication on the transfer of power. Thus, it becomes more than an introduction and, more specifically, a historiography of the transfer of power.

Chatterjee’s introduction further shed light on Menon’s claim through Gopal’s *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography* (1976), Sarkar’s *Modern India* (1983), Jalal’s *The Sole Spokesman* (1985), Gandhi’s *Patel: A Life* (1990), and Moore’s *Endgames of Empire* (1988). These works are important because they contest several charges against Nehru. Chatterjee writes,

A comparison of their views with Menon’s (2025: 14) brings out once more the importance of the historian’s location within the discursive field constituted by the archives.

Drawing on Gopal, Chatterjee shows, against Menon’s claim, that Congress was ready to cooperate in the war effort had the British given firm assurances on India’s post-war independence. He further argues that Congress was not responsible for the mission’s failure and that blaming Nehru for the partition is unfair since the creation of Pakistan resulted from far more than just a handful of his statements.

Gopal, notably, is silent on Menon’s claimed role in proposing the idea of two dominions. Sarkar’s “Modern India” is useful in the debate as it offers a social-historical account of the causes for the partition rather than one centred on a handful of personalities (Sarkar 1983). It likewise disputes the claim that Nehru failed to cooperate with the British on the war front. By the time Mountbatten arrived in Delhi, Sarkar argues, the idea of Pakistan was already a reality, rooted in the social realities of the time. Menon had done no more than propose dominion status before the partition. Through Jalal (1985), the introduction illuminates Jinnah’s role in the partition and his earlier preference for a unitary

India with a loose federation. This position was abandoned only when the parity principle at the centre proved unattainable, and once he came to fear, under pressure from his own followers, that Congress was subverting the three-tier plan. Jalal concludes that “it was Congress that insisted on partition. It was Jinnah who was against partition” (Jalal 1985: 262).

Gandhi’s book, *Patel: A Life* (1990), is significant in this debate because it highlights Patel’s swift acceptance of partition and his efforts to persuade fellow Congress leaders to accept dominion status alongside it. Menon claims to have met Patel at the end of December 1946 and early January 1947 and to have convinced him of this plan, though there is no proof of this beyond Menon’s own claims. It cannot be denied that Patel, in the end, was far more willing to accept the partition along religious lines as a practical choice, untethered as he was from Nehru’s and Gandhi’s idealist views of a united “secular India.” But to argue that he had no interest in representing Muslims goes too far. The claim that he disliked Nehru’s socialist friends is consistent with what we know of his thinking, but the claim that he was ambivalent about wanting Kashmir has no documentary evidence. Gandhi’s (1990: 439) claim in the book that Patel had no objection to Kashmir acceding to other dominions rests on a misreading of Patel’s letter to Baldev Singh dated 13 September 1947 (Patel 1971: 37). The complete lines of the letter read,

You know the difficulties of the state, and I feel that at this juncture it would be most useful to have an officer of our army as commander-in-chief of the Kashmir forces. The officer selected is the son of the prime minister of Kashmir, General Janak Singh, and has opted for the services of the Indian Dominion. It would be best, therefore, to lend his services for a period of three years on the condition that, if the state decides to join the other Dominion, Col Katoch will revert to the Indian Dominion. (Patel 1971, Vol 1: 37)

Read in full and contrary to what Gandhi and others have claimed, the letter reveals Patel’s determination to retain control over Kashmir. His proactive role in installing Meharchand Mahajan as prime minister and his sustained engagement with the Maharaja and the state’s affairs point to a deep, abiding interest in keeping Kashmir within the Indian Union. Moore’s

The Endgame of the Empire contradicts several of Menon's accounts, especially Menon's words about the British Viceroy and their approach to India's independence (Moore 1988). Menon writes,

Lord Linlithgow had come to India full of zeal for the federal plan which he hoped to inaugurate during his time. His efforts were partly frustrated by the princes, who had put forward various demands which were difficult to meet, and by the Congress, which wanted no whittling down of responsibility at the centre. (Menon 2025: 187)

In comparison to this, Moore writes that Linlithgow was inherently conservative and "loath to hasten democratic change." (Menon 2025: 23)

Limitations and Omissions: Ambedkar's 'Absence'

Read together, these newer accounts complicate any single narrative of responsibility and blame for the partition, shifting the focus from individual leaders to multiple actors and forces at play in British India during the 1940s.

Seen in this light, the greatest achievement of this new edition, with Chatterjee's introduction, is its refusal to reduce history to identifying villains and heroes, a besetting problem of Menon's own account, in which Jinnah is cast as a villain and Patel as a hero. It restores the sense that historical actors operated within shifting constraints and opportunities, and that outcomes owed much to historical contingency than to individual will.

Yet, both the introduction and Menon's original text have limitations. At several points, Chatterjee leans on his sources' conclusions and tends to agree with them without probing into the underlying

evidence closely enough. His treatment of Patel, for instance, draws heavily on Gandhi's *Patel: A Life* (1990)—the most authentic and researched work on Patel—but as noted above, that book itself contains a few misleading interpretations that read more like opinions than evidence-based conclusions. These claims need further scrutiny from students of history and politics. This perspective is important because figures like Patel and issues like Kashmir are easily appropriated and politicised for political gains. The historian's task is to resist being carried along by these narratives rather than reinforce them.

A further important limitation shared by both the original book and the new introduction is the complete absence of Ambedkar's work and actions. This is a significant gap because he played a substantial role not only after independence; he was also a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council during World War II and maintained a sustained engagement with the ideas of the nation, nationalism, and formation of Pakistan. He had published a monograph titled *Pakistan or the Partition of India* (1940), participated in round table conferences in London, and shaped the Poona Pact of 1932, of which Menon (2025: 79) writes that "the Poona Pact was more generous to the Depressed Classes than was the Award of His Majesty's Government." The Poona Pact was not Ambedkar's idea, and Ambedkar was principally opposed to it, a fact that Menon's account elides. Engagement with Ambedkar's record would have strengthened Chatterjee's deep dive into several claims about the roles of Congress, Nehru, Patel, and Jinnah in the transfer of power, constitutional

development, and the partition. Another gap in the introduction is its failure to engage with Basu's (2020) biography of Menon—*VP Menon: The Unsung Architect of Modern India*. This engagement was necessary because the book brings to life several new aspects of his personal life, including Menon's reflections on Gandhi, Nehru, and Patel.

None of these criticisms diminishes the value of this new edition. The value of *The Transfer of Power in India* lies not in offering a definitive account of the partition but in documenting, with unmatched precision, the constitutional mechanics of decolonisation. Chatterjee's critical introduction, in turn, ensures that this constitutional history is neither dismissed as a dated administrative memoir nor accepted uncritically as historical truth. Instead, it breathes new life into old questions, answering them with more informed and critical scholarship.

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