

OCCASIONAL PUBLICATION 46

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The Punjab Bloodied, Partitioned and Cleansed in 1947: How and Why?

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The Occasional Publication series is published for the India International Centre by Cmde. (Retd.) R. Datta.

Designed and produced by FACET Design. Tel.: 91-11-24616720, 24624336.

The Punjab Bloodied, Partitioned and Cleansed in 1947: How and Why?*

The density and the intensity, the enormity of the tragedy of Partition has been talked about by great writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Krishan Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Balwant Singh, Ashfaq Ahmed and many others, but the intriguing thing is that academic scholarship has shied away from it. At best, what most people have done is to play the blame game. If you are on the side of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, then you would transfer all the blame to the Muslim League and Mr. Jinnah and vice-versa. And that is easily done because all their speeches are in the public domain and you can put the story across with some skill in the manner you want. My intention was to find the real truth of how people experienced Partition in the Punjab. The problem was that there was no model, no template to follow. There is no book on the Partition of the Punjab. There are scattered collections of oral histories from a village or maybe a city, but for the whole of Punjab, including the princely states, there was nothing to follow. Further, anybody wanting to do a holistic study had political impediments in the way. A Pakistani Punjabi or, for that matter, any Pakistani wanting to come to East Punjab would never be given the

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* Lecture delivered at the IIC, on February 26, 2013 by Professor Ishtiaq Ahmed

opportunity. And an Indian scholar going to our part of Punjab would also be denied this access.

Fortunately I happen to have Swedish citizenship and I talked to the Indian embassy in Stockholm and they said, 'Sir, you can go there as a tourist and if you behave yourself, you can do your research'. So that is exactly what I did. My intention was entirely honourable and I met people and recorded what they remembered of this traumatic event. I myself was born on 24 February 1947, so although I was not witness to it, I grew up listening to stories of the Punjab Partition. On 12 August 1947, when my mother just happened to look outside the window of her house on Temple Road, Lahore, she saw some of the local *goondas* gathering in one corner of our road. There was an intersection there, and looking to the left, she saw a big burly Sikh coming on a motor cycle. It seemed that these people wanted to attack and kill him. But then the Sikh gentleman pulled out a gun and they dispersed. She says that fifteen or twenty minutes later, another Sikh came along, this time an old emaciated carpenter on a cycle with a *potli* of food attached for the day; he was probably going to work as he had always done in his life. He was pounced upon by these people and killed mercilessly.

My mother died on 16 February 1990 in Stockholm where we lived and till the last day she could not overcome this tragic incident which she saw and felt guilty about. I have been listening to many other stories as I grew up. And since Lahore has been at the very centre of the Partition process, I thought that I must do something and try to find out the truth. It is not possible to go through the three stages of the Partition of Punjab. So what I will do instead is to basically present the argument and the framework. I would pose it this way. What is the puzzle that I have tried to solve? The puzzle is that as compared to many other parts of the Indian subcontinent, the Punjab had a very rich pluralist tradition; five hundred years at least, even more, as a result of the poetry and social work of the Sufis, the Gorakhnathi Yogis, the Bhakti Sanghs, and of course the Sikh guru's statement '*Na koi Hindu, na koi Musalman*', was an indication that he looked at the corruption in society with an eye which saw just the truth.

So that is a part of the story of the Punjab, but the question is, how do we explain the atrocities which unfolded there? The figures are always disputed, but roughly,

most scholars would agree that if the figure for those killed in India as a whole is one million, the number of people killed in the Punjab is anywhere between half a million to 800,000—about 50 to 80 per cent of the people who lost their lives. About 14 to 15 million people across India were forced to leave or left to save their lives on their own assessment, and this is not disputed. Of these, 10 million people were forced to flee from the Punjab alone. This too is a figure on which there is consensus. Therefore, the enormity of what happened in the Punjab is very clear, and I argue that this is the first case of ethnic cleansing after the Second World War. We have heard about ethnic cleansing in the context of the Yugoslavian disaster and then Rwanda, but when I looked further into the literature, it goes back all the way to the Assyrian and earlier civilizations. But coming back to our own times; let us say that the Second World War is when ethnic minorities were targeted and genocide, ethnic cleansing took place on a massive scale. The Punjab, then, is where this happened because in that one year that I have studied, Muslims became conspicuous by their absence in East Punjab, except for Malerkotla.

Therefore, the enormity of what happened in the Punjab is very clear, and I argue that this is the first case of ethnic cleansing after the Second World War.

In Malerkotla, a statement by Guru Gobind Singh said that in any future conflict with Muslims, you are not to harm the Muslims of Malerkotla. An ancestor of the Nawab of Malerkotla had not allied with the Mughal emperor and had refused to arrest Guru Gobind Singh's children. Therefore, he gained the Guru's respect. I believe that the Sikhs upheld this instruction. In my book there is a statement by a Sikh who admitted killing many Muslims saying: '*Bauji, sadak de as paase jeda Musla si onnu assi... chhadiyani te jeda oss passé Malerkotla chala gya onnu assi hath nahin layaa...*' (So anybody who crossed into Malerkotla was spared, but till then, you were legitimate target for elimination. As a result, hardly any Muslims remained in East Punjab).

Similarly, and even more dramatically, nowhere in West Punjab did any Hindu or Sikh survive. So it is not simply people being forced out of their homes, but being forced out in a way that a whole territory is emptied of people you don't want. This is why I described it as ethnic cleansing. One could have even used the word genocide. In my book I have discussed both the concepts and I think it is ethnic

cleansing which is the more appropriate term because neither in East nor in West Punjab was it the intention to destroy a people; but it was definitely the intention to throw out a people from a particular territory.

So how do we explain the Partition of the Punjab? I would say that with about one million Punjabis demobilized after the Second World War and returning to their villages without work, without a future, there is evidence that many of them got

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involved in the nexus of local criminals, former soldiers, local politicians, and of course biased officials in administration. Their crimes were against humanity.

The second explanation is that unlike the rest of India, the Sikhs and the Muslims of Punjab both had a tradition of what is called martial activity, so both sides were prepared to fight it out if it happened. And in 1940, when the Muslim League demanded Muslim states, and later, just one Muslim state to emerge as a result of India being divided on a religious basis, the Sikhs of Punjab immediately said that if India is divided on a religious basis, the Punjab too should be divided on a similar basis. In such ethnic conflicts where groups are engaged in a sort of struggle to win political power, the end result can be extremely bloody if both sides lack the will to resist. This is what happened in the Punjab ultimately.

A mindset is created where you dehumanize the opponent before you can destroy, or kill, or eliminate that person. And this started happening most certainly from 1945 onwards when the election campaign in the Punjab started. The Muslim League had no hesitation in using extremely communal slogans to mobilize support for the Pakistan project. They wanted to wrest power in the Punjab from the Punjab Unionist Party. Somebody has said that we had a model of communal harmony which, apart from what the Sufis did, was very much a fact of the twentieth century. The Punjab already had established a model of power sharing between the three communities, but then a number of things happened which are the accidents of history about which we can do nothing. In 1939, for example, the Congress resigned its ministries and Lord Linlithgow encouraged the Muslim League to demand Pakistan. They wanted Congress to support them in the Second World War, and because that support was

not forthcoming, they approached Mr. Jinnah who was willing to do it. In 1942, the Quit India movement virtually eliminated all opposition to the Muslim League in the Muslim majority provinces because the whole Congress leadership was in jail.

These are sins of omission because Partition is not the intended result; but it does provide an opportunity for the opponent to step in and capitalize on it. From 1942 to 1945, the Muslim League put their energy into telling the Punjabi Muslims that their economic liberation will be guaranteed if they were to get rid of the Hindus and Sikhs (who, incidentally, were economically far more advanced than the Muslims). The British introduced a capitalist economy that was based on modern banking and investments. Traditional Islamic society bans interest and modern banking. Moreover, the Muslims, rightly or wrongly, believed that they were the ruling people of this region and that the British, as also the Hindus and Sikhs, had taken power from them. This is a familiar story anywhere in India, but definitely in the Punjab, the Hindus and Sikhs were ahead of the Muslims in education, industry, and business and trade. So, we have a Punjab ruled by the Punjab Unionist Party with the Muslim landlords at the centre, first under the leadership of Sir Fazle Hussain who was himself not a landlord but he allied with this strong and powerful class of the Punjab. Sir Fazle Hussain died in 1936 before the elections. In the 1937 elections, the Muslim League won only two seats in the Punjab, of which one of its elected members then crossed the floor and joined the Punjab Unionist Party. In the 1945 elections, the Muslim league won 73 seats out of the 86 reserved seats for the Muslims.

The absence of the Congress party from the political scene in the country for these three years provided the Muslim league an opportunity to expand and to propagate its populist mission—get rid of Hindus and Sikhs and this will be a panacea for all who live here, primarily Muslims. Islamic justice as practised by the Caliphs of Islam and by the Prophet would be re-established. I believe this proved very attractive to people, not only those who had the right to vote but even others who joined in the demonstrations. The elections of 1946 gave us a Parliament. The Muslim League got 73 seats in a house of 175, the Congress won 50 seats (after Sir Chhotu Ram, the Jat Hindu leader who belonged to the Unionist Party died, they voted for the Congress), and the Sikhs got all the 23 reserved seats for them. It was a polarization in terms of the three major communities of the Punjab. Now it was a

question of who would form the government. The Muslim League felt that it had received a massive mandate from the Muslims of Punjab and it was their rightful claim to form the government. However, it couldn't find partners from either the Sikhs or the Congress who said they would never let the Muslim League come to power in the Punjab. They formed a coalition government with the remnants of the Punjab Unionist Party under Sir Khizar Hayat Tiwana with the Muslim League in the opposition and threatening direct action.

In January 1947, the most crucial and fateful year, things began to go wrong. On 24 January, the government of Khizar Hayat Tiwana banned the Muslim League National Guard as well as the RSS. This was followed by police raids on their offices in Lahore, and it was for the first time in the history of the Muslim League that their people came into conflict with the authorities. Until then, they had always been allied with the authorities. There was no tradition of the Muslim League opposing

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either the British or anyone else in power. Of course when the Congress was in power, they were in the opposition, but not against the British. They were arrested and a mass movement and agitation ensued. But on 26 February, a sort of peace was agreed on whereby the members of the Muslim League were released and Khizar was given the choice to continue. But just a few days earlier, on the 20th of February, the British government had announced that they would be leaving by mid-June 1948. Mr. Tiwana knew that his politics with his close alliance with the British had no future. As a gentleman, he stepped back and let the Muslim League and Congress decide what they wanted to do to the Indian sub-continent.

But in the context of the Punjab, it created a political crisis because both sides had taken extreme positions and no government could come into power. On 2 March, Khizar resigned and this created a political crisis. On 3 March, Master Tara Singh came out to the steps of the Punjab Assembly and waved a *kirpan* saying, 'finish off the whole idea of Pakistan, we will never let Pakistan come into being.' That very evening, Hindu and Sikh leaders met in Purani Anarkali and gave the call to never let the Muslim League form the government because it was they who wanted to divide India and bring Pakistan into being.

The first clashes took place in Lahore and Amritsar on 4 March and gradually got out of control. The worst part of this initial clash was that on 5 March, the Hindus and Sikhs who were a minority in Multan were killed by the Muslims in large numbers and their property destroyed.

In Rawalpindi, incidentally a Muslim majority district, the Hindus and Sikhs together formed a majority. So, the first two days of conflict in Rawalpindi were even-handed, but on the evening of 6 March, thousands of people went towards the Sikh dominated villages in and around Rawalpindi district, Jhelum district and Attock or Campbellpur as it was then called, and that was the first organized massacre of a religious group by another group. This is where I think we are still looking for more clues as to what happened. Two thousand people killed over ten to twelve days was the official figure given by the British; the Sikhs claimed that at least 7,000 people were killed and about 80,000 Sikh and Hindu families left their homes and sought refuge in the princely states or in eastern Punjab. It was at this point that they decided that if the Punjab was not partitioned according to their conception of a divided Punjab, they would resist that partition.

Clearly then, and this is also brought out in my book,* the first organized, planned slaughter of people was carried out by the Muslims. There is absolutely no doubt about this. Some people tried to link it to the great Calcutta killings, and then to the massacre of Muslims in Bihar. There is some evidence to suggest a connection, but largely this was a local problem in which the Muslim League leaders, as also the police, of the Rawalpindi area were definitely involved. For a very short while the British were able to bring things under control, but in Lahore and Amritsar things never returned to normal and stabbings and arson continued.

One story merits narration. Mountbatten arranged for the Sikh leaders, Master Tara Singh, Giani Kartar Singh, the Maharaja of Patiala, Hardit Singh Malik and others to meet Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan in Delhi on 15–16 May to assess whether the Punjab could be kept united. Jinnah offered that the Sikhs could write down all their demands to remain in Pakistan and he would sign it blindly. Upon this Hardit Singh Malik remarked, 'Mr. Jinnah you are being very generous. But, supposing, God

* *The Punjab Bloodied, Partitioned and Cleansed: Unravelling the 1947 Tragedy Through Secret British Reports and First-Person Accounts* (Delhi: Rupa, 2011; Karachi: OUP, 2012)

forbid, you are no longer there when the time comes to implement your promises?’ Jinnah replied, ‘My friend, my word will be like the word of God’. Thereafter the talks broke down as the Sikhs were not willing to live in Pakistan. The reason seems to be that when the Sikh villages in north-western Punjab were attacked in March 1947, neither Jinnah nor any other leader of the Muslim League issued a condemnation. The Sikhs probably decided not to remain in Pakistan and demanded the Partition of the Punjab so that the non-Muslim majority areas of East Punjab could be separated and given to India.

Mountbatten then came to the conclusion that India could not be kept together and on 3 June he announced that India would be partitioned. Up until then it was not clear if India would be partitioned. This plan also included the idea that the Punjab and Bengal assemblies would be asked to give their verdict on whether they wanted

The final boundary which was declared was not acceptable to either the Muslim League on the one hand, nor the Sikhs or Hindus on the other. When power was transferred on 15 August, there was a tacit, if not explicit, understanding on both sides that the minorities had to go.

to keep their provinces united or not. The procedure adopted was that the Punjab and Bengal assemblies were organized into two blocks, the Muslim block and Hindu-Sikh block, and voting took place along this line. If either voted in favour of Partition, it would be carried out. The Hindus and Sikhs of Punjab voted for the Partition of Punjab, and the Hindus of Bengal voted for the Partition of Bengal.

The Muslim League wanted the Partition of India but not the Partition of Punjab and Bengal, both provinces that they wanted. The Congress checkmated the League, threatening that if they demanded this, they would support the Sikhs who declared that ‘If India is divided, then the Punjab would be divided.’ And that came about on 8 March 1947, when the Congress approved the Sikh demand for the Partition of the Punjab. It was implemented according to procedure and ceremony, with the British presiding and Mountbatten assuring people that he was confident that the transfer of power will be peaceful. This was ludicrous, ridiculous. The Punjab governors continuously warned that if there is a Partition of Punjab to which the three communities have not agreed, there will be a bloodbath. And there was no natural way of partitioning Punjab. Any line you draw would be arbitrary and would hurt some community. The final boundary which was declared was not acceptable to either the Muslim League on the one hand, nor the

Sikhs or Hindus on the other. When power was transferred on 15 August, there was a tacit, if not explicit, understanding on both sides that the minorities had to go. But the minorities were not leaving; the Sikhs were not leaving, the Muslims on the other side were not leaving. Tell a peasant that he has to leave the piece of land on which he was born and where he raised his family, and see how he resists. This is what happened and resulted in atrocities only multiplying. Had people not resisted and voluntarily left, maybe the number of people killed would be much lower. But that is not the psyche of the peasant who is tied to the land for good or bad. At the end of the day, the Punjab was bloodied, partitioned and cleansed.

Let me point out something quite unique. I have on many occasions traced people who were witness to or victims of incidents on both sides. I have even traced people who were part of the conspiracy to attack. For example, the Hindus of Punjab and the Sikhs know that the Shahalmi fire broke the back of the non-Muslims in Lahore. Up until then they were resisting and refusing to leave. It happened on the night of the 21st and 22nd of June. I have traced the people who were involved, their admission with minute details of how this was done, and the gentleman even allowed me to have his photograph. With his permission I have used it in the book. Then I have the admission of people from East Punjab as well because that is only fair. They said, '*ke assi apne dharam waste maraiya see varna maarna te paap honda hai*' (We know this is wrong, a sin, but we had to do it in the interest of our community). Whether or not they feel remorse I cannot say, but they seemed to want to lift a weight off their chest.

The evidence and the stories are in my book. Altogether, I counted 232, but others who have read through it say it is 259. There are more than 300 actual stories but not everything could be included. And it covers the whole of Punjab, 34 million people, the whole territory including the princely states. I went to Patiala, to Kapurthala, and to Nabha. I then covered the whole of West and East Punjab. If any one human being could put this story together it seems that person is me. And I am convinced that I will live in history for this book.

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