



Post-Partition Communal Riots In The East And West Punjab: Causes And Impact

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the partition of British India in 1947, the communal riots in East and West Punjab left a deep imprint on the region's history. Rooted in historical animosities and exacerbated by political tensions, these riots led to immense loss of life and mass displacement. Decades later, their impact still resonates through the socio-political fabric of Punjab. This study explores the causes, scale, and lasting repercussions of these riots. It emphasizes the need for reconciliation, interfaith dialogue, and concerted efforts towards peace to ensure that the scars of the past do not define the future of the region.

Key Word: Indian subcontinent, 1947 independence, East and West Punjab, Massacre, Migration.

Introduction

The partition of British India in 1947 marked one of the most tumultuous chapters in South Asian history, leaving a trail of violence, displacement, and communal strife. The division resulted in the creation of two independent nations, India and Pakistan, along religious lines, with Pakistan comprising two geographically distinct regions: East and West Pakistan (now Bangladesh and Pakistan respectively). Amidst the chaotic partition process, the provinces of Punjab, located in both the east and west,

witnessed some of the most intense communal riots, characterized by brutal violence and mass migrations.

The causes of the post-partition communal riots in East and West Punjab are deeply rooted in the complex interplay of historical, socio-political, and religious factors. Decades of British colonial rule had exacerbated communal tensions by employing a policy of "divide and rule," fostering mistrust and animosity between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. The demand for separate Muslim nationhood, championed by the All India Muslim League under Muhammad Ali Jinnah, further polarized communities along religious lines, laying the groundwork for the eventual partition. Moreover, the geographical contiguity of Punjab to the proposed borders of India and Pakistan made it a focal point for competing nationalist aspirations. The partition plan, outlined in the Indian Independence Act of 1947, called for the delineation of boundaries based on religious majorities in districts. However, the arbitrary drawing of borders failed to account for the intricate religious demographics of Punjab, leading to widespread uncertainty and fear among minority communities about their safety and future.

The immediate trigger for the communal violence in Punjab was the mass migration of populations across the newly demarcated borders. As millions of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs embarked on perilous journeys to reach the safety of their respective nations, they became vulnerable targets for violence perpetrated by opposing religious groups. Incidents of mass killings, abduction, rape, and forced conversions scarred the landscape of Punjab, leaving behind a legacy of trauma and distrust that continues to reverberate through generations.

The impact of the post-partition communal riots in East and West Punjab was profound and far-reaching, shaping the socio-political landscape of the region for decades to come. The violence resulted in the loss of countless lives and the displacement of millions, as families were uprooted from their homes and ancestral lands in search of safety. The communal polarization further deepened, leading to the segregation of communities along religious lines and the erosion of the shared cultural fabric that had once bound them together.

In this academic exploration, we delve into the causes and impact of the post-partition communal riots in East and West Punjab, seeking to unravel the complex web of historical forces that shaped this tragic chapter in South Asian history. Through a multidisciplinary lens, we strive to understand the underlying dynamics of communal

violence and its enduring repercussions on the collective memory and identity of the people of Punjab.

Revenge and Retaliation

Deep grudge had been nurturing in the minds of the Sikhs since the March massacre of the Sikhs and Hindus in Rawalpindi Division and they had vowed to avenge it by massacre of the Muslims in East Punjab. Since then, the preparations for retaliation had begun.¹ In a secret letter to Mountbatten dated 9 April 1947 Evan Jenkins, governor of the British Punjab had warned against Giani Kartar Singh and Master Tara Singh's (leaders of the Sikhs) appeal for Rs. 50 lakh towards a "war fund" and an organized attack of the Sikhs against Muslims. A pamphlet in Gurmukhi exhorted, "Oh, Sikhs, read this and think yourself, what have you to do under the circumstances? In your veins, there is yet the blood of your beloved Guru Gobin Singhji. Do your duty." On Jenkin's inquiry, Giani said "the Sikhs would do no such thing until after the British left India." The Sikhs had no intention of "fighting a war on two fronts nor would it be in their interest to annoy the British unnecessarily at the present stage." These statements were clear proof that the Sikhs were prepared for revenge. After partition, those living in rich canal colonies of the West Punjab were to march out to the border causing destruction and dislocation on the way. Those in East Punjab were to slaughter and expel their Muslim neighbor in alliance with the RSSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh).²

Division of the Sikh Population and their Fertile Lands

Since 1942, the preservation of the Sikhs cohesion was in the mind of the Akali leaders. When the plan for the partition of India and the British Punjab was announced the Sikhs accepted it with their own plan of Sikh concentration. Giani Kartar Singh wrote to Mountbatten "the solidarity and integrity of our populace have been placed in jeopardy by the notional division of the Punjab" and hoped that the final boundary line would be fair and just to the Sikhs and would bring a substantial majority of Sikh population into East Punjab. The Sikhs would not be satisfied, he emphasized "unless 80 percent of their population is brought into the East Punjab by demarcating the boundary line properly."³ He also advocated sending an equal number of Muslims from East Punjab to West Punjab and separating the Hindi speaking area of East Punjab from the non-Hindi speaking population of East Punjab. The Sikhs wanted to secure the central tract i.e. Lahore Division, and Montgomery

¹ Secret Reports of Meeting, 1947, Reports of Meetings received up to the 31st May 1947, pp. 107-108; Rukhsana Zafar, Comp. Disturbances in the Punjab: 1947, A Compilation of Official Documents.

(Islamabad: National Documentation Centre, 1995), p. 342; Nicholas Mansergh, ed., The Transfer of Power, Vol. XII, (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1983), p. 703.

²Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), pp. 36-37; Anup Chand Kapur, The Punjab Crisis, An Analytical Study (New Delhi: Chand and Company 1985), pp. 125-127.

³ Nicholas Mansergh, ed., Constitutional Relations Between Britain and India, The Transfer of Power, 1942-47, The Mountbatten Viceroyalty-Formulation of a Plan 22 March-30 May 1947, Vol. X (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1981), pp. 174-176.

and Lyallpur districts of Multan Division and exerted utmost pressure upon the British to move the boundary to the East Punjab as far as possible.⁴

However, the boundary award did not meet their demand for concentration of their community and lands. On 16 August, one and half a million Sikhs found themselves divided from the rest of their community. The survival of the Sikh community as a compact and undivided community could only have been realized by the forcible expulsion of the Muslims from the East Punjab so as to provide accommodation to the two million Sikhs who would otherwise be left in Pakistan. Thus, they rose in their thousands, butchered and expelled the Muslim population of East Punjab by force to replace them by a planned exodus of the Sikhs from West Punjab. So, falling upon the Muslims in August, the Sikhs were not only gratifying their revenge but also ensuring the integral survival of the Sikh community.⁵ In addition, if the division of the Punjab had been postponed for another year, it would still have had the same impact, merely delaying the upheaval of 1947.⁶

Plan of Sikh Confederation

The Hindus and Muslims achieved Hindustan and Pakistan respectively, while for the Sikhs, Khalistan remained an empty dream. The Sikhs blamed the Muslims for bringing about the division of their community and the loss of their fertile lands. The Sikh plan of extensive sabotage and destruction of life and property of the Muslims and their elimination from the Sikh belt along the eastern border of East Punjab aimed at concentration of the Sikhs and the establishment of a sovereign Sikh State from Jamna to Chenab according to the various declarations of the spokesmen of the Shiromani Akali Dal (Sikh Political party advocating the rights of the Sikhs within the Indian Union).⁷ In fact they had started their efforts for its achievements after the announcement of the 3rd June Plan. The Chief Secretary's report for June said, "The [Shiromani Akali Dal] circular states that Pakistan means total death to the Sikh Panth [community] and the Sikhs are determined on a free sovereign state and it calls on all Sikhs to fight for their ideal under the flag of the Dal."⁸ The key figures of the plan were Master Tara Singh, Giani Kartar Singh, Udham Singh Nagoke and other leaders of the Akali Party. The main lines of the preparations were a) the collection of funds b) the manufacture and import of arms c) widespread and large-scale enlistment of Sikhs in private armies such as the Akali Fauj and the Shahidi Jathas and d) the development of a well-knit organization capable of swift murderous action according to a centralized plan. All sections of the Sikh community –the intelligentsia, religious

⁴ Kapur, *The Punjab Crisis*, p. 130; Chaudhri Muhammad Ali, *The Emergence of Pakistan* (Lahore: Services Book Club, 1988), p. 193; Satya M. Rai, *Punjab Since Partition* (Delhi: Durga Publications, 1986), p. 66.

⁵ Z. H. Zaidi, ed., *Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah Papers, Pakistan: Battling Against Odds, 1 October-31 December 1947*, Vol. VI (Islamabad: Quaid-i-Azam Papers Project, 2001), pp. 611-612.

⁶ Penderal Moon, *Divide and Quit* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 279-280,282.

⁷ West Punjab Government, *The Sikhs in Action* (Lahore: Superintendent Government Printing, 1948), p. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*

and political leaders, ex-INA (Indian National Army) men, peasants, teachers, and students were mobilized to execute the plan and extensive and elaborate arrangements were made to train men for staff work, murder, looting and arson. The Sikh States of the Punjab were also active members of the conspiracy. The militant section of the Hindus who in some cases were guided and trained by Hindu apostles of violence in other provinces of India, helped in the implementation of these designs, by collecting useful information and intelligence and carrying out underground terrorist activities.⁹ On 18 April, Master Tara Singh and Baldev Singh in an interview with Mountbatten hoped to bring Patiala, Nabha, Kapurtala, Faridkot, and Kalsia States into a Sikh States Confederation in addition to Malerkotla which they claimed to be Sikh State in spirit despite being ruled by a Muslim Nawab Raja of Nalagarh.¹⁰ The Sikh leaders had always strongly urged their coreligionists to take up arms as states are carved with the strength of arms and not with speeches or negotiations. So, the huge massacre and migration of the Muslims in August aimed at the concentration of the Sikhs to assert the formation of a Sikh State in East Punjab.¹¹ On 10 September 1947, Liaquat Ali Khan complained to the British Prime Minister Attlee that:

The object of the [Sikh] plan was to concentrate the Sikh population in East Punjab in order to lay claim to the creation of a Sikh State adjoining the Sikh States of Patiala, Faridkot, and others. Planning and preparation by the Sikhs for a concerted attack on Muslims had been in progress for a long time with the active assistance of the Sikh States.¹²

Delay in the Announcement of the Award

The five-day delay in publishing the award increased the risk of disorder, which was a betrayal to the people of the Punjab. Millions of non-Muslims in West Punjab and Muslims in East Punjab were waiting with the hope that the Boundary Commission would incorporate their areas into the Dominion of their choice. Giani Kartar Singh had requested Mountbatten on 13 July to announce the award before 15 August to stop panic and the mad hurrying to and fro of populations from one Dominion to the other. In the mounting glare of communal tension, the sooner they knew their fate the better. However, the Boundary Commission was not appointed till 30 June; Radcliffe did not reach India till 8 July and the Award, when announced after independence, was worse than the Sikhs had feared. In their madness, they killed every Muslim in sight, while the Muslims were content to drive the Sikhs out and only slaughter those who insisted on staying.¹³ Mosley, an author, believed that had the award been

⁹ West Punjab Government, Notes on the Sikh Plan (Lahore: Superintendent Government Printing, 1948), pp. 25, 28-29.

¹⁰ Mansergh, ed., The Transfer of Power, Vol. X, pp. 320-324.

¹¹ Mohammad Waseem, "Partition, Migration and Assimilation: A Comparative Study of Pakistani Punjab" in Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh, eds., Region and Partition, Bengal, Punjab and Partition of the Subcontinent (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 209.

¹² Alastair Lamb, Incomplete Partition, The Genesis of the Kashmir Dispute 1947-1948 (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 78.

¹³ H.M. Seervai, Partition of India Legend and Reality (Bombay: Emmenem Publisher, 1989), pp. 163, 140-142.

announced two or three days before, it would have given time to the Punjab Boundary Force to amass its forces to the most threatened areas and the people to pack their bags and leave.¹⁴ A senior army officer, Brigadier Bristow posted in the Punjab in 1947 thought that the Punjab tragedy would not have occurred had partition been deferred for a year or so.¹⁵ Zeigler's view is that it was not the time but rather the award itself and the subsequent migration that caused the massacre.¹⁶ H.V. Hodson believes that migrations, riots, and massacres, that followed partition, were not the outcome of any particular frontier-drawing, but of partition itself and of the communal hatred that had led to it.¹⁷ The delay in announcing the award multiplied the tragedy that took place, causing the loss of lives due to the late disclosure of the award of the Punjab Boundary Commission.¹⁸ Repeatedly, Jenkins urged Mountbatten to announce the award of the Boundary Commission.¹⁹ Sir Rob Lockhart, then Commander in Chief of the Indian Army also endorsed Jenkins view in these words: 'had officials in every grade in the civil services and all personnel of the armed services been in position in their respective new countries before independence day it seems there would have been a better chance of preventing widespread disorder.'²⁰ In his Personal Report to the British government, Mountbatten clearly explained that the delay had been made in favour of British interest at the expense of the Punjabis. He wrote:

From the purely administrative point of view, there were considerable advantages in immediate publication, so that the new boundaries could take effect from 15th August and the officials of the right dominion could be in their places to look after the districts, which had been allotted to their side before that date. However, it was obvious all along that the later we postponed publication the less would the inevitable odium react upon the British.²¹

Private armies in the British Punjab

The fact that the British Punjab was the premier recruiting area was a crucial cause for the general militarization of the society. The systematic sabotage and stopping of trains, especially refugee trains, followed by the massacre of passengers in East and

¹⁴ Leonard Mosley, *The Last Days of the British Raj* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), pp. 207, 229, 233, 244.

¹⁵ Bipan Chandra et al., eds., *India's Struggle for Independence 1857-1947* (New Delhi: Penguin Book, 1989), p. 499.

¹⁶ Philip Ziegler, *Mountbatten, Including his Years as the Last Viceroy of India* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1986), p. 419.

¹⁷ H.V. Hodson, *The Great Divide, Britain-India-Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 355.

¹⁸ H. V. Hodson, "The Role of Lord Mountbatten", in C. H. Philips and Mary Doreen Wainwright, eds., *The Partition of India, Policies and Perspective 1935-1947* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970), p. 121; Shahid Hamid, *Disastrous Twilight, A Personal Record of the Partition of India* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986), pp. 180-181; S.M. Burke and Salim Al-Din Quraishi, *The British Raj in India, An Historical Review*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 547.

¹⁹ Richard Symonds, *In the Margins of Independence, A Relief Worker in India and Pakistan (1942-1949)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 138.

²⁰ Chandra et al., eds., *India's Struggle for Independence*, p. 499.

²¹ Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power*, Vol. XII, p. 760; Symonds, *In the Margins of Independence*, p. 138; Burke and Quraishi, *The British Raj in India*, p. 548.

West Punjab, indicates a level of planning and expertise which shows that the killings were not the work of uncontrolled mobs. The highly militarized nature of Punjab society bestowed the massacre a uniquely brutal and gruesome character, with soldiers and ex-soldiers, primarily Sikhs and Muslims, leading organized and well-armed bands thus complicating the efforts of the army and police forces to control the violence. The important private armies in the Punjab were the Hindu militant organization, the Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh [RSSS], orthodox Hindu but ready to support the Congress, the Muslim League National Guards, the Khaksars, the Sikh's Akal Sena (the recently revived Sikh Army) and Akali Fauj [the Akali Army]. There were jathas or bands, under recognized leaders called Jathedars. Carrying a sword was a religious duty. The Sikh's organizations were the most formidable of all.²² The objective of the Akali Fauj and RSSS was to launch attacks against the Muslims whenever they had the opportunity and throw them out of the Punjab. To accomplish their objectives, the Sikh launched a campaign to recruit volunteers to the Akali Fauj and the Shahidi Jathas (suicide squads). By June, the total strength of Akali Fauj was believed to have exceeded 10,000 men skillfully trained in the art of war.²³ The RSSS had 3,200 regular and 8,000 temporary members in the Punjab. It had 10 paid propagandists and Jammu was the center of their activities in the Punjab. The setting up of training camps and rapid recruitment in the RSSS and Muslim League National Guard in different cities of Punjab was an indication of their preparedness for the upcoming civil war.²⁴ Jathabandi (organization on a militant basis) had started in several districts of the Punjab. The armament of a typical Jatha consisted of one or two firearms, army and homemade grenades, axes, spears, and Kirpan-the Sikhs sabers, which are religious emblems of the Sikhs. A campaign was organized to arm the Sikhs with lethal weapons and manufacture explosives on a big scale.²⁵ The members of the Gurdwara Defense Force of Nankana Sahib were also active by taking daily exercises and practicing jatha and lathi fighting. Instructions were issued to install secret wireless transmitters in several important gurdwaras.²⁶ Master Tara Singh being dictator of the Hindu Sikh Council of Action in the Punjab collected a sum of 150,000 in a week during his tour from Rawalpindi up to Calcutta. Likewise, S. Waryam Singh of Baggowal district Gurdaspur collected a sum of 20,000 for organizing Shahidi Jathas. Thus, the whole fabric of Muslim society in East Punjab has

²² "Collection of Papers of the Governor of the Punjab, Sir Evan Jenkins Record of the Punjab disturbances and Constitutional Affairs from March 2nd onwards. Also a record of very confidential letters, interview notes, etc. (March to August 1947)", F- IOR R/3/1/178, Jenkins Papers, OIOC/ NDC, p. 44.

²³ Z. H. Zaidi, ed., Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah Papers, Pakistan: Pangs of Birth, 15 August- 30 September 1947, Vol. V (Islamabad: Quaid-i-Azam Papers Project, 1996), p. 324; The New York Times, 28 February 1947; The Civil and Military Gazette, 1 March 1947.

²⁴ Bakhshish Singh Nijjar, Punjab Under the British Rule, (1849-1947) [Vol. 1--1849-1902], (Lahore: Book Traders, n.d.), p. 203; Bakhshish Singh Nijjar, History of the United Punjab, Vol. 111 (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1996), p. 203; Punjab Police Secret Abstract of Intelligence for the Year 1947, Vol. LXIX, [12 and 19 July and 2nd August], pp. 369, 379, 400.

²⁵ Ziaul Islam, East Punjab's Blood Bath (Karachi: Pakistan Publishers, 1948), p. 20; S. Moinul Haq, A History of the Freedom Movement (in Four Volumes 1707-1947), Vol. IV, 1936-1947 Part 1 and 11 (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1970), p. 166.

²⁶ Punjab Police Secret Abstract of Intelligence for the Year 1947, Vol. LXIX, [26 July] p. 413.

shattered in a systematic, planned, and organized manner by the Akali Fauj, RSS, and INA.²⁷

Communal Riots in the Punjab: Role of the Sikh States

The Maharaja of Patiala was entertaining the idea of having half of the Punjab. With this idea in mind, he warned Mountbatten on 3 May 1947, that if the boundary line was not drawn based on Sikh landed property, shrines, and interests, the Sikhs would fight. Mountbatten replied that in that case, the Sikhs would fight with the whole might of the armed forces of India. Mountbatten gave the same warning to the Maharaja of Nabha and the Raja of Faridkot on another occasion.²⁸ On 21 May, S.E. Abbot, Private Secretary to the Governor of British Punjab, disclosed an intelligence report compiled by him from various sources saying that:

The Sikhs are determined on an offensive against the Muslims where they are in a majority in the area, which the Sikhs are demanding, and that most of the Sikh States and some others are also involved. Patiala is said to have agreed to supply arms and ammunition as well as explosives. He is supposed to have sent some of his soldiers armed and in mufti, already to Amritsar. Faridkot held back but gave way on being promised Ferozpur districts. Nabha is not in the business himself but his Dewan is and some of the Nabha Sardar. Alwar, Dholpur, Bikaner, and Bharatpur have all promised arms and ammunition. Kapurtala has given money and shelter to Sikh refugees but is not prepared to go further at the moment.²⁹

Rulers of the Sikh states were in close contact with the Akali leaders. There were reports that Master Tara Singh was collecting arms through Sikh Army officers and dumping them in gurdwaras and Sikh States. The Sikh rulers recruited INA personnel and trained them in the use of these arms. Moreover, these States had their armed forces under their control and were ready to support the Sikh plans by any means.³⁰ Likewise, rulers of some Sikh States permitted their Sikh subjects to carry firearms without a license. The Faridkot State authorities were reported to have supplied arms and trained 50 Sikh volunteers in the use of firearms from each of five villages falling along the State border in Police Station Mamdo and Guruharsahi of the Ferozpur district.³¹ The Sikh states of Kapurtala and Patiala had provided sanctuary to the raiding Sikh Jathas to send them across the state border for raiding purposes. Many

²⁷ Punjab Police Secret Abstract of Intelligence for the Year 1947, Vol. LXIX, [26 July] pp. 387,413; Haq, A History of the Freedom Movement, Vol. IV, 1936-1947 Part 1 and 11, p. 166.

²⁸ Z. H. Zaidi, ed., Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah Papers, Pakistan at Last, 26 July – 14 August 1947, Vol. IV (Islamabad: Quaid-i-Azam Papers Project, 1999), p. 405; Burke and Quraishi, The British Raj in India, p. 617; Hamid, Disastrous Twilight, pp. 168-169.

²⁹ Mansergh, ed., Transfer of Power, Vol. X, p. 942.

³⁰ Kapur, The Punjab Crisis, p. 126; Ali, The Emergence of Pakistan, p. 193.

³¹ Punjab Police Secret Abstract of Intelligence for the Year 1947, Vol. LXIX, [26 July] p. 413; Haq, A History of the Freedom Movement, Vol. IV, 1936-1947 Part 1 and 11, p. 166.

Sikh Jathas from Sikh States repeatedly attacked Muslim towns and accompanied the Hindu mobs in an onslaught on the Meo villages.³² The genocide campaign staged against the Muslims by the Maharaja of Patiala led to the complete extermination of the Muslim population in the Sikh States of Patiala, Nabha, Jind, Faridkot, and Kapurtala. According to the 1941 census Patiala had 436,539 Muslims; Nabha 70,373; Jind 50,972, Faridkot 61,352; and Kapurtala 213,754 Muslims. In Kapurtala, the Muslims were in majority and constituted 56.5 percent of the total population. By the end of 1947 there was not a single Muslim left there.³³ According to an estimate, the number of Muslims reduced to approximately 250,000 in Patiala and 50,000 in Nabha. The same campaign of extermination of the Muslims was launched in the Hindu States of Bharatpur and Alwar, which spread to Gwalior, United Provinces, Meerut, Saharanpur, and ultimately to Delhi.³⁴ It was not a communal rage but a calculated action organized by the rulers of the Sikh States to get rid of the Muslim population in these states. The casualties could have been minimized, had the Sikh Princely States restrained their subjects but they chose to ignore them, thereby implying a degree of state approval for the massacres. Thus, the Sikh Princely States were key to the communal riots in Punjab due to their strategic locations, the large Sikh populations within their borders, and the support that they gave to the idea of a separate Sikh homeland.³⁵

The Role of Mountbatten in the Communal Riots in Punjab

Mountbatten has been charged by his critics for his failure to prevent the communal riots. Some of his measures escalated the communal riots rather than restoring peace in the area. Mountbatten's hastened transfer of power exacerbated communal tensions in Punjab, leading to widespread communal riots. With more time, a planned partition of Punjab could have been executed, reducing the violence. Arrangements for orderly migration, including escorts, troops deployment, and police presence in volatile areas could have mitigated the chaos, preventing mass massacre and migration.³⁶ The counterargument posits that the British influence in the army had diminished, rendering the police unreliable. Given the prevailing communal bitterness, impartial law enforcement was improbable. Once partition was agreed upon, communal tension was bound to escalate. Delaying the transfer of power would have heightened the risk of widespread violence, potentially magnifying the carnage.

³² Francis Tucker, *India's Partition and Human Debasement*, Vol.11 (Delhi: Akashdeep Publishing House, 1988), p. 449; Haq, *A History of the Freedom Movement*, Vol. IV, 1936-1947 Part 1 and 11, p. 170.

³³ Z.H. Zaidi, ed., *Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah Papers, Prelude to Pakistan, 20 February-2 June 1947*, Vol. 1, Part 11 (Islamabad: Quaid-i-Azam Papers Project, 1993), p. 154; See Mian Iftikharuddin statement, *The Light* (Lahore) 8 October 1947; Iftikharuddin was then the minister for Refugees in the West Punjab Government.

³⁴ Haq, *A History of the Freedom Movement*, Vol. IV, 1936-1947 Part 1 and 11, pp. 169, 171.

³⁵ V. P. Menon, *The Transfer of Power in India* (New Delhi: Sangam Books Press, 1981), p. 419.

³⁶ Ziegler, *Mountbatten*, pp. 438-439; Moon, *Divide and Quit*, pp. 277-278.

From Punjab, violence could have spread across India, resulting in significantly higher casualties, possibly reaching millions.³⁷

Authorities initially anticipated minor disturbances in Punjab, believing they could be managed by the Punjab Boundary Force. However, those familiar with Punjab particularly after the March Massacre, understood that dividing the Punjab would result in catastrophe, though they lacked a solution to prevent or mitigate it. Mountbatten and key leaders from Congress and League underestimated the severity and scope of the unrest in Punjab.³⁸ The partition massacre marked a significant indictment against Mountbatten. Ismay, Chief of Staff to Mountbatten (March-December 1947) wrote to his wife on 16 September, 'our mission was so very nearly a success: it is sad that it has ended up such a grim and total failure.'³⁹ Lord Mountbatten himself admitted:

I had expected some disturbances in the Punjab at the time of transfer of power. However, I freely confess that I did not anticipate the scale and extent of what was going to happen, nor, so far as I am aware, did anyone in authority in India, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom anticipate this. Even the Governor of Punjab had based his hypothesis on the assumption that partition would be imposed, not agreed to by the parties and communities, and was much less anxious if there were to be such an agreement.⁴⁰

On 5 August, Mountbatten disclosed the involvement of Master Tara Singh, some other Sikh leaders, and rulers of the Sikh States in sabotage plots including the assassination of Jinnah. he pledged to suppress the rebellion forcefully. However, Sardar Patel, one of the leaders of the Congress, Sir Chandulal Trivedi, and Sir Francis Mudie, Governors designate of East and West Punjab opposed the arrest of the Sikh leaders due to the potential escalation of violence. Mountbatten's failure to apprehend Master Tara Singh and curb Sikh violence drew severe criticism from Pakistani Authorities.⁴¹ On 16 January 1948, Sir Zafarullah, Pakistan's first foreign minister, accused Mountbatten in his speech leveling serious allegations against him:

Lord Mountbatten was aware of what the Sikh plan was. Subsequent confidential reports from the Government of Punjab to the Central Government . . . which have become available indicate that the Sikh plan

³⁷ Frank Moraes, *Witness to an Era, India 1920 to the Present Day* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), p. 148; Ziegler, *Mountbatten*, p. 439.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 147, 149.

³⁹ Ziegler, *Mountbatten*, p. 439; Bipan Chandra et al., eds., *India's Struggle for Independence 1857-1947* (New Delhi: Penguin Book, 1989), p. 499.

⁴⁰ Hodson, *The Great Divide*, pp. 403-404.

⁴¹ Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power*, Vol. XII, pp. 636-637; Alan Campbell-Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten* (London: Robert Hale, 1953), pp. 148-149, 152.

as it subsequently unfolded itself in actual practice was already known to Lord Mountbatten.⁴²

Mountbatten never urged the Sikhs to align with the League to evade the massacre. Instead, he advocated for their collaboration with the Congress to gain favor.⁴³ In April 1947, Abul Kalam Azad, leader of the Congress, also warned Mountbatten that if the country was divided in an atmosphere of communal strife, “there would be rivers of blood flowing and the British would be responsible for the carnage.” Mountbatten without a moment’s hesitation replied, “At least on this one question, I shall give you complete assurance. I shall see to it that there is no bloodshed and riot. I shall adopt the sternest measures to nip the trouble in the bud. I will order the Army and the Air Force to act, and I will use tanks and aeroplanes to suppress anybody who wants to create trouble.”⁴⁴

Azad held Mountbatten accountable for the sufferings endured by the people of the Punjab, attributing Mountbatten’s failure to protect them as the primary cause. Referring to the “complete assurance” given to him by Mountbatten, Azad wrote: The whole world knows what was the sequel to Lord Mountbatten’s brave declaration. When partition actually took place, rivers of blood flowed in large parts of the country. Innocent men women and children were massacred. The Indian Army was divided and nothing effective was done to stop the murder of innocent Hindus and Muslims.⁴⁵

The Manchester Guardian in a leading article under the caption ‘Indian Massacre’, ‘were these horrors not preventable?’ asserted that the tension leading to the disaster in India intensified during British rule, with no effective remedies provided by British authorities, including the Governor General and the commander in Chief who were still present in India.⁴⁶

Mountbatten possessed significant authority, including control over the air force, which could have mitigated killings and protected refugees. However, he opted to withdraw British soldiers on 9 August, leaving the Indian political leaders to oversee the divided armed forces.⁴⁷ Mountbatten also failed to issue a call for non-violence, shifting the responsibility to Congress and Muslim League leaders.⁴⁸ Ayesha Jalal ended her book “The Sole Spokesman, Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan” with the words:

⁴² Zaidi, ed., Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah Papers, Vol. V, p. 416.

⁴³ H. V. Hodson, “The Role of Lord Mountbatten”, in C. H. Philips and Mary Doreen Wainwright, eds., The Partition of India, p. 121; Hamid, Disastrous Twilight, pp. 180-181; Burke and Quraishi, The British Raj in India, p. 547.

⁴⁴ Abul Kalam Azad, India Wins Freedom (Calcutta: Orient Longman, 1959), p. 190.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Francis Tucker, India’s Partition and Human Debasement, Vol.11 (Delhi: Akashdeep Publishing House, 1988), pp. 450-451.

⁴⁷ Seervai, Partition of India Legend and Reality, pp. 165-166.

⁴⁸ H. V. Hodson, “The Role of Lord Mountbatten”, in C. H. Philips and Mary Doreen Wainwright, eds., The Partition of India, p. 121.

While Punjab writhed and turned under the impact of decisions taken in distinct places, Mountbatten boldly claimed credit for having accomplished, in less than two and a half months one of the 'greatest administrative operations in history.' The historian must challenge Mountbatten's contention and ask whether this 'great operation' was not an ignominious scuttle enabling the British to extricate themselves from the awkward responsibility of presiding over India's communal madness.⁴⁹

The Role of Civil Authority in the Communal Riots in the Punjab

During most of August and September 1947, communal violence raged in Punjab, Delhi, and adjacent areas. A huge number of Muslims lost their lives in the celebrations of murder by Sikhs and Hindus. Countless people were driven out of their homes and had to seek refuge on the other side of the divide.⁵⁰ This mass murder is rightly regarded as "one of the most appalling massacres in world history." The killings of Muslim masses were "not stray incidents" but the "massacre of unarmed population sponsored by the Indian government." It was a preplanned and systematic slaughter. The Government of India and the Punjab had plenty of warning of the intentions of the Sikhs, but the authorities in Delhi failed to grasp the gruesome events happening in central Punjab.⁵¹ No preparation had been made by the administration to cope with violence. The Sikh plan of driving the Muslims out of East Punjab was known to Mountbatten and Auchinleck, yet they did not take any action to counter it. Ismay in a personal note dated 5 October 1947 stated that 'there is a general impression, which I entertain, that the Sikhs are the root of all trouble.' He advocated Jinnah's stance in this connection that: "the Government of India could if Patel so minded suppress the whole Sikhs movement in a week and that until this was done there was no hope of peace, the fire of hatred and revenge will not die down for a generation or more."⁵²

On the other hand, Sardar Patel held press conferences merely to analyze the forces and factors of the deplorable situation. Except for Nehru, no other member of the Indian government even uttered a word of sincere condemnation of mass extermination of the Muslims. Nehru was of the view that the highly influential Sikhs could be called off by Master Tara Singh. While, about two to three thousand terrorist organizations mainly supported by the Sikh rulers of the Punjab States could be controlled by the Sikh supreme religious authority.⁵³ Liaquat Ali Khan rightly proposed to Mountbatten on 27 August 1947, that 'the only way to restore law and order is the application of force against the Sikh Jathas who are roaming about

⁴⁹ Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman, Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 293.

⁵⁰ Zaidi, ed., *Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah Papers*, Vol. V, p. 457.

⁵¹ S.M. Jaffer, *Kashmir Sold and Resold* (Lahore: Book Traders, 1992), pp. 75-76.

⁵² Zaidi, ed., *Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah Papers*, Vol. V, p. 416.

⁵³ Zaidi, ed., *Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah Papers*, Vols. V, VI, pp. 457, 623-624.

murdering, crushing, looting, and burning. The only effective way of applying this force is by operational use of aircraft.' However, neither the Hindus nor Muslims could point fingers at others, for all were equally to blame. Neither could the government of East or West Punjab blame others for lapses for all had failed to fulfill their first duty of giving protection of life and property to their citizens of minority community.⁵⁴

Role of the Police

Following the deaths and murders in 1947 in East and West Punjab, the planners in Delhi must have been aware that the communal conflict would follow independence. Police intelligence must have known the preparation in the gurdwaras and elsewhere. Top priority should have been given to the security consisting of troops, police, and magistrates. The only way to restore peace was to quickly arrest those who had been organizing murder, a task for the Punjab police and not the army. However, the planners did not do their job well for the Punjab and the police disintegrated on the first day of independence.⁵⁵ On 13 August, Muslim police constables in Amritsar who opted to go to Pakistan were disarmed and their vacancies were filled by the Sikh members especially RSS and INA volunteers who had been trained in guerrilla tactics by Mohan Singh, a prominent Sikh leader of INA. The systematic elimination of the Muslims from Amritsar district began about this time.⁵⁶ Sixty percent of the Punjab police at the time were made up of Muslims who were disarmed by the order of the non-Muslim officials before 15 August after which they refused to serve there. The non-Muslim police in the West also wished to go to the East. Thus, the non-Muslim police were exterminated from Lahore, and the Muslim police from Amritsar. On 15 August, in the Jullundur division the government was minus 7,000 due to the loss of the Muslim police. The efficient intelligence system rapidly disintegrated.⁵⁷ Most British civil and police officers also retired on 15 August. For centuries, peace and security in the Punjab depended on the British Army. The sudden withdrawal of nearly all the British officials left a security vacuum filled by men more in sympathy with the communal war than its suppression. The machinery of government after 15 August in East and West Punjab 'almost ceased to function.'⁵⁸ In the absence of effective civil authority, the police were completely useless and unreliable during communal riots. The incidents of massacre took place and the police stood by and watched. In some cases, they joined the raiders in looting and shooting. The police were no longer impartial people whose task was to protect law and order. Nor were the armed forces any longer neutral forces. Partition shattered the myth of neutrality

⁵⁴ Zaidi, ed., Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah Papers, Vol. V, p. 463.

⁵⁵ R.C.B. Bristow, *Memories of the British Raj, A Soldier in India* (London: Johnsons, 1974), p. 149.

⁵⁶ Punjab Police Secret Abstract of Intelligence for the Year 1947, Vol. LXIX, p. 413; Islam, *East Punjab's Blood Bath*, p. 16; Hamid, *Disastrous Twilight*, p. 224.

⁵⁷ Hodson, *The Great Divide*, p. 406; Burke and Quraishi, *The British Raj in India*, p. 613.

⁵⁸ Bristow, *Memories of the British Raj*, p. 198.

and objectivity of the police and army. Muslims as well as Hindus would feel safe only if accompanied by police of their mind. However, this was possible in only a limited sense, as they also had to mark out their territorial jurisdiction.⁵⁹ Jenkins once complained to Auchinleck that his police force had turned into a communal instrument and could no longer be trusted.⁶⁰ They were aware of planned attacks and would thus deploy themselves in places where there was no trouble or arrive after the damage was done.⁶¹ No attempts were made to mix the police force, while the army's task was to support the administration and police only but these were no longer effective.⁶²

Exchange of Population

The preservation and cohesion of the Sikhs was the uppermost in the minds of the influential Akali Sikh leaders. They accepted the plan for the partition of the Punjab with the hope that all their rich lands and half of their population of West Punjab would be included in the Indian side of the border.⁶³ People in Punjab were encouraged by official statements made by the leaders of the Congress and the League and even by Master Tara Singh to stay where they were and should not leave their homes in addition to the joint statement of 22 July explicitly guaranteeing protection to all citizens against any violence in either country.⁶⁴ Despite these assurances, some leaders like Giani Kartar Singh held the view that 'there must be an exchange of population on a large scale.' While Jathedar Mohan Singh opined that 'the only solution was a very substantial exchange of population. If this did not occur the Sikhs would facilitate it by a massacre of Muslims in East Punjab.' The Radcliffe Award failed to satisfy the Sikhs' plan of concentration. To give practical shape to their plan, they started driving out the Muslims from East Punjab with terror and force to concentrate the Sikhs of West Punjab there.⁶⁵

The influx of refugees in West Punjab with terrible tales of woes flared up communal fury against the Sikhs in West Punjab. The heavy casualties inflicted on Hindus and Sikhs on August 25th and 26th forced them to move from Montgomery to the adjacent Ferozpur in well-guarded convoys; nourished a fierce hate for those who had compelled them to abandon their carefully nurtured fields.⁶⁶ With time, the West Punjab government found it hard to stop the Muslims from retaliatory attacks against the Sikhs and Hindus. On 5 September, Francis Mudie the Governor of West Punjab

⁵⁹ Zaidi, ed., Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah Papers, Vol. V, p. 323; Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence, Voices from the Partition of India* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 59-60.

⁶⁰ Mosley, *The Last Days of the British Raj*, p. 233.

⁶¹ Zaidi, ed., Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah Papers, Vol. V, pp. 323-324.

⁶² Bristow, *Memories of the British Raj*, p. 197.

⁶³ Moon, *Divide and Quit*, pp. 280-281, 79.

⁶⁴ Hugh Tinker, *Viceroy Curzon to Mountbatten* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 245-246; Moon, *Divide and Quit*, p. 93-94.

⁶⁵ Zaidi, ed., Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah Papers, Vol. IV, p. 391; Burke and Quraishi, *The British Raj in India*, p. 615.

⁶⁶ Hugh Tinker, *India and Pakistan, A Political Analysis* (New York: Fredrick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1962), pp. 41-42.

wrote to Jinnah, “there is little sign of three lakh Sikhs in Lyallpur moving but, in the end, they too will have to go.” He further wrote ‘I am telling everyone that I don’t care how the Sikhs get across the border; the great thing is to get rid of them as soon as possible.’⁶⁷ Communal frenzy started taking its toll in East Punjab and Jullundur, Hoshiarpur, Ferozepur, Ambala Ludhiana and Gurdaspur became plague spots and Muslims started fleeing for their lives leaving property, livestock, and crops behind them. Every district, every town and every village became the hotbed of inhuman brutalities and massacres of Muslims. The Akalis and fanatic Sikhs also attacked the train headed for Pakistan near Amritsar the last station before the Pakistan border with their sword blades. The train loaded with dead and dying levied upon the Hindus and Sikh minority the vengeance in West Punjab. They in turn panicked and fled. Thus, the policy of concentration ensured the survival of the Sikhs but at the cost of much blood.⁶⁸ The exchange of population did not save the threatened minorities from murder, rape, and loot. It could have been only stopped, had the security forces been employed resolutely by the two governments. However, they preferred to devote their energies to verbal and propaganda war against each other. Without clear direction from the new governments, the troops could not take strong action against their people. Reliable sources about migration are not available, however, according to an estimate, more than ten million Punjabi men, women, and children fled their ancestral homes. Between August 1947 and March 1948, four and a half million Hindus and Sikhs migrated from West Pakistan to India and about six million Muslims moved in the reverse direction. A greater part of migration took place within the short span of three months that is between the middle of August and the middle of November.⁶⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, the post-partition communal riots in East and West Punjab stand as stark reminders of the devastating consequences of religious and political divisions. These tragic events, fueled by historical grievances, socio-political tensions, and the chaotic aftermath of partition, left deep scars on the collective psyche of the region. The loss of lives, mass displacement, and communal polarization continue to reverberate through the generations, shaping the socio-political landscape of Punjab and beyond.

As we reflect on the legacy of these riots, it becomes clear that the path to reconciliation and healing is fraught with challenges. Efforts to address the root causes of communal violence, promote interfaith dialogue, and foster a culture of

⁶⁷ K.L. Gauba, *Inside Pakistan* (Delhi: Rajkamal Publications, 1948), pp. 302-303; Mosley, *The Last Days of the British Raj*, p. 244.

⁶⁸ Islam, *East Punjab’s Blood Bath*, pp. 16-17; Tinker, *India and Pakistan*, p. 42.

⁶⁹ Ishtiaq Ahmed, “The 1947 Partition of Punjab: Arguments Put Forth Before the Punjab Boundary Commission by the Parties Involved” in Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh, eds., *Region and Partition, Bengal, Punjab and Partition of the Subcontinent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 163.

tolerance and understanding must be prioritized. Governments, civil society organizations, and religious leaders have a critical role to play in promoting peace and stability in the region.

Moving forward, lessons must be learned from the past to prevent such a pathetic history from repeating itself. By acknowledging the shared humanity that transcends religious and cultural divides, we can strive towards a future where the people of East and West Punjab live in harmony, mutual respect, and cooperation. Only through collective action and unwavering commitment to peace can we honor the memory of those who perished in the fires of communal hatred and build a better, more inclusive society for generations to come.