



The Punjab Disturbances of 1946-47: Revisited

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ABSTRACT

In 1947, on the eve of Partition of India, a large scale killing, lootings of innocent citizens across the border took place which claimed lives of millions of people. According to an estimate almost more than two million people were killed, and almost another fifteen million, in addition, were forced to migrate from their homes. Much has been written about the communal violence in India, but in most of the literature, the British is blamed for igniting and encouraging disturbance for their imperial designs. In fact, despite British stern actions to address the law and order in India in the dying days of the Raj, the British Government failed to prevent the massacres, especially brutal and widespread in the Punjab, and in the rest of the country in general. The British was blamed for mishandling the communal matters which to some extent were true, but after the lapse of 67 years of partition of India, one can make an objective study of the Punjab disturbances that broke out in 1947. It is important, therefore, to analyze the dynamics of the communal violence in the Punjab and the factors that led to the tragic happening of communal violence. This paper attempts to understand how and why the disturbances in the Punjab took place and what efforts were made by the parties concerned to deal with it. The author intends to challenge this theory that these were the British who applied the Divide and Rule theory which resulted in the communal violence. This paper is significant to uncover the story on the basis of primary sources which will help fill an important gap in our existing historical literature.

KEYWORDS: Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, British, riots,

1 INTRODUCTION

Partition of India was such an appalling episode of sub-continental history which is both hard to ignore and difficult to forget easily. That tragic act resulted in the displacement of 12.5 million people in the former British India and an estimated loss of life of close to one million. The violent nature of the partition created an air of mutual antagonism between the newly emerged states of India and Pakistan. The nature and severity of violence in united Punjab was different from other areas because of the magnitude of bloody riots and extensive bloodshed. The greatest forced human migration in history with its gory tales of massacres, looting, arson, rape, abduction of women and children and other acts of savagery was essentially that facet of a Punjabi tragedy which has left deep and seemingly inerasable imprints on the future course of South Asian history. Historians have been trying their best to investigate various aspects of this history. But much more research needs to be done to shed a clearer light on the dynamics of that cataclysmic event. Therefore, it aims to examine the pre-partition time-period that preceded the later genocide, violence and riots.

The violence and the turmoil which occurred during the transfer of power of British India in August 1947 was the result of many factors. Though in some cases the violence against the other community was spontaneous, more often it was executed by well-trained and well-prepared militant organizations with clear objectives. The three main communities--Muslims, Hindus, and the Sikhs--all applied fear and violence as instruments of terror to win the war of succession in the Punjab. The main area of communal contention was Northern India in which certain parts of Punjab, some Princely States and Jammu were the main areas of attacks on the other community which was forced to flee to the other side of the newly-created border, Punjab especially, became a bloody battleground which left a permanent legacy of hatred between the successor states, India and Pakistan. There were clear indications that on the eve of the final transfer of power there could be widespread civil disturbances, but very few in India or in the United Kingdom had appraised its true dimensions. Thus, immediately after the June 3 announcement, which announced the termination of the British paramountcy in India, it began to turn ugly and very soon it became so wild and violent that some

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critics have called it 'genocide', while others have labeled it 'ethnic cleansing'. No wonder Mountbatten's period as the Viceroy of India came under criticism regarding his failure to 'nip the evil in the bud'. And it was alleged by critics that he failed to arrest the main leadership of the Sikhs who were not only instigating people for violence but also Shatching conspiracies against the Muslim leadership. Another belief is that the delay in the announcement of the Radcliffe Award caused uncertainty and thereby intensified the fighting. Each of these points may have a certain truth to it, but still they merit a deeper examination. Therefore, this paper will try to answer to all these questions so Mountbatten's true role in all those happenings can be properly analyzed. This study will, hopefully, help fill not only an important gap in our existing historical literature, but will also help revise the general perception about Mountbatten's role in the communal riots in the Punjab.

In recent years, many writers like Ian Talbot, Gyanendra Pandey, Paul Brass, Horowitz, Yasmin Khan and others have written about the violence and the human aspect of the partition. Their observations about the violence, on whether it was spontaneous or planned or was it 'genocide' and 'ethnic cleansing', have contributed greatly to the understanding of the history of violence before and after the partition of India. Other historians like Pippa Virdee and Ian Copland, have shed light on the communal history of the Princely States of the Punjab. This paper argues that no single party can be assigned sole responsibility for the outbreak of violence in the Punjab. In fact, individuals and groups bent on violence only moved into full gear after August 15, 1947, precisely because the final British restraints on their activities had been removed, but its true origins lay in the politico-communal estrangement which pre-existed among the Muslims, Sikhs and the Hindus.

2. CAUSES OF THE RIOTS.

Since March 1947 the whole country had been in a politically unsettled state, including the Hindu-majority province of U.P., which was being run by a Congress Ministry. The previous August had seen a cycle of communal killings, which spread to East Bengal and North India following the Great Calcutta Killings. Initially, the Punjab had been unaffected, but in the wake of Khizar Tiwana's resignation on March 2 following a sustained Muslim League campaign against him, violence had broken out in the province as well. Giving an appraisal about the political condition of the Punjab, Jenkins (Governor of Punjab) told Mountbatten that the Province was heading towards a civil war owing to the military preparations of the various communities, particularly the Sikhs.

Nehru, also doing the same analysis, said that the situation was very dangerous and disturbing. He believed that it was principally due to a struggle between two fairly equally balanced parties to assume power over the whole province by June 1948. He ruled out any chance of a coalition government, since the parties mistrusted each other so profoundly. Therefore, he suggested an immediate partition of the Punjab with or without the partition of India. Not surprisingly, Hindu and Sikh members of the Central Assembly routed a memorandum through Nehru to the Viceroy requesting the partition of the Punjab the very next day. Similarly, the members of the Punjab Assembly's Panthic Party also demanded the 'Division of the Punjab'.

Shiromani Akal Dal, agreeing with the resolutions submitted by the Nationalist Hindus and Sikhs of the Punjab regarding the partition of that province, stated that in fact 'recent barbarities of the Pakistani Muslims on the Hindus and Sikhs of the Punjab have left no other solution of the communal tangle except the partition of the Punjab.' Akali Dal demanded that before the transfer of power to the Indian hands in June 1948, the Punjab should be divided into two provinces and a boundary commission should be set up for finalization of the new provincial boundaries. In a combined statement issued by the Hindu and Sikh leaders of the Punjab it was made clear that "In no circumstances are we willing to give the slightest assurance or support to the Muslim League in the formation of Ministry, as we are opposed to Pakistan in any shape or form."

Master Tara Singh, commenting on the Congress Working Committee's resolution regarding the partition of the Punjab, said, "The Sikhs will be glad if the Muslim League accept the principle and concede the Sikh demand of forming districts into a separate province in which the Sikhs and Hindus are given as much land as they possess at present. We cannot tolerate a division in which predominantly Sikh districts were partitioned." And he warned that "If the Muslims think they can break the spirit of the Sikhs and achieve Pakistan by indulging in such wanton communal violence as they have in the past few days done, then they are mistaken." Resultantly, it brought about communal riots, which, while starting from Lahore and Amritsar, soon engulfed the whole province. According to Ian Talbot, 'The announcement that the British would quit India by June 1948 had a disastrous effect on the situation in the Punjab.' No doubt, the artificial cobweb woven to ensure a semblance of communal harmony by Evan Jenkins could not resist the public pressure and

as a result Khizar Hayat Khan Tiwana resigned on March 2, 1947, thereby creating an opportunity for the Muslim League to form a Ministry, not possible otherwise.

The Congress and the Sikh leaders opposed the formation of the ministry and threatened to resist it by force. In fact, the historians mostly agree, that Khizar's resignation paved the way for widespread disturbances because following this Master Tara Singh started issuing irresponsible statements, and also because once the equilibrium between Muslims and the non-Muslims was broken, a return to a political status quo ante was going to be difficult. No wonder in a few days, communal riots started in Lahore and soon spread to the whole province. Once the wave of communal riots was unleashed, it turned into a vicious cycle of attacks of revenge and counter-revenge between Muslims and non-Muslims. Jenkins thought the only solution to the communal problem in the Punjab was the imposition of section 93, instead of allowing the Muslim League to form a ministry. He ruled out either the formation of the Muslim League ministry or holding fresh elections mainly because he thought that either would lead to a civil war. In fact, the British had indicated that they would quit India by June 1948 but to whom and how their power would be transferred was still unclear. This created a situation of uncertainty in India, particularly in the Punjab. The imposition of the section 93 had caused a stalemate. This political deadlock in the Punjab was not merely a religious conflict. Nor was it a question of minority versus majority. Essentially, it had become a struggle for power in the province of the Punjab because Muslims and non-Muslims were evenly balanced following the creation of the NWFP Province in 1901. Additionally, it had been a demand of the Congress and the Sikhs to divide Punjab into Muslim and non-Muslim areas since 1944. The three leading communities of Punjab, Muslims, Sikhs and the Hindus, each had militant organizations called the Muslim League National Guards, the Jathas, and the RSS, respectively, backed by political parties and these militant organizations devised and executed 'dramatic production of riot systems' especially in the month of August 1947, but were active throughout the period from March onward.

In fact, the genesis of violence lay in the partition of the Indian which caused the partition of the Punjab, a big task even for the British government to manage in those disturbs times. For them, "Every argument for dividing India is an argument for dividing the Punjab, and every argument for keeping the Punjab united is an argument for retaining the unity of India." In the June 3 Plan, Lord Mountbatten had given the power to East Punjab to join either the legislature of Pakistan or India as per the demand of the Sikh community. The Sikhs began to prepare themselves to take their homeland by force." Although the Sikhs' had started aggressively in March/April 1947, and with the signatures of 18 important Sikh leaders a war fund of Rs. 50 lakhs was announced. Giani Kartar Singh, Master Tara Singh and Baldev Singh were fully involved in these preparations, particularly with the support of the Maharaja of Patiala. Sikhs were not ready to accept the sole dominance of any other group in the Punjab. In view of these aggressive preparations the Governor of the Punjab asked Sardar Soran Singh, the former Minister of Punjab to eliminate this aggressive propaganda. Primarily Sikhs were only preparing for the violence in the province. Initially they had no intentions to make attacks on Muslims. There preparations were only to face the Muslims after the elimination of the British rule.

The Punjab Governor believed that the Sikhs would not prefer to launch any aggressive activity before July 1948. But "... The Governor of Punjab gave clear and persistent warnings to Mountbatten that the Sikhs meant to make trouble if the Governments of Pakistan and India were set up before the lines of demarcation were laid down by the Award of the Boundary Commission and if that Award were not to their liking...". So Lord Mountbatten asked Baldev Singh, the Defense Minister of India, that if Sikhs showed any brutality, he would crush them using the army and air force. As per the Radcliffe Boundary Award (August 17, 1947), West Punjab was awarded about 62,000 square miles with an estimated Muslim population of 15,800,000, while East Punjab comprised of 37000 square miles with a population of 12,600,000, the number of Muslims in East Punjab it was about 4,375,000. The Award deprived Pakistan of many those areas as per which the agreed upon formula of Punjab's partition should have been awarded to her.

The inclusion of the Sheikhpura district with its Sikh holy shrines, along with the transfer of Multan, Montgomery and Lyallpur districts, where many Sikhs were either large landowner and/or resided in large numbers, part of West Punjab which incited them and they opted to resist by force. Gradually the law and order situation were becoming worse in the Punjab. "It is well known that in Punjab the Sikhs, assisted by the Hindus, are preparing for a communal war. The *Maharaja of Patiala* is supplying arms, ammunition and explosives and has also sent some of his troops in mufti to Amritsar. The *Maharaja of Faridkot* has also joined in. Liaqat Ali Khan suggested to the Viceroy to permit the Muslims to be able to own and carry weapons with them for security purposes like the Sikhs, who were given such permission in 1924 but the Viceroy felt that such a permit could cause more violence.

2.1 Outbreak of violence: Punjab had caught up with epidemic of religious violence which had rippled out from Calcutta (August 1946—The Great Killings) to Noakhali (E. Bengal) and Bihar. These episodes

polarized opinion in the Punjab. During this period, the Hindu-Sikh unity against the common enemy, the Muslims, was the hallmark of the communal violence. As Paul Brass and Ian Talbot have already observed that the 1947 Punjab violence was ‘politically motivated’, unlike the ‘traditional’ communal religious violence. It had a purpose to carve out control over territory and to displace the concerned minority population whose identity was reduced to that of an ‘essentialised’ religious labeling. Some violence was of course ‘spontaneous’ and motivated by the desire for loot or revenge. But alongside this was the highly organized and politicized violence which had some of the very same characteristics which Brass attributed to post-independence communal conflict in North India.

According to Jenkins the communal violence in the Punjab passed through three stages. The first phase lasted from March 4 to 20. This phase started mainly from Lahore and spread to Amritsar, Rawalpindi, Gurgaon, Multan and Jullundur; it was a phase of normal intensity of communal disturbances except in Multan where 130 non-Muslims were killed in three hours. The second phase lasted from March 21 till May 9, and comprised of minor incidents in many cities, as the communities were preparing for the final battle. The third and final phase, during Mountbatten’s viceroyalty, lasted from May 9 to August 15. In this phase, communities caused maximum scale of damage to one another and to property while ‘exposing a minimum’ expanse of surface to police and army.’ Though the Muslim League’s Civil Disobedience Movement against the Khizar Hayat Khana Tiwana’s government had dented the communal relations, but organized rioting only occurred after the resignation of Khizar Tiwana. British Intelligence reports focus on the activities of the RSS and the Muslim League’s National Guards, but there were numerous other organizations as well. However, Master Tara Singh’s open pronouncements to resort to a religious war against the Muslims, and indulging in strong war preparations not only heightened the already very tense and suspicious nature of communal relations in the Punjab but also produced a mushrooming of private armies.

These organizations were receiving arms and ammunitions from the rulers of the Princely States and from the Frontier (presently ‘KPK’). Moreover, funds were raised by the political parties to support these organizations. These organizations were fully backed by the political parties and when the RSS and the National Guards were banned by the Punjab government on January 24, 1947, agitation started against the Government and it was forced to lift its ban under great pressure. Thereafter, it appears that the British avoided direct confrontation with the political parties and their affiliated organizations. Therefore, they avoided detaining the top leadership of these organizations as well. Although the whole of Punjab was ablaze with religious frenzy, the main trouble-spots were the cities of Lahore and Amritsar, along with the Gurgaon District in the UP, which remained the most disturbed areas till August 15. The police and army continued to curtail the activities of the rioters.’

The rioters had developed the methodology of carrying out “cloak and dagger” attacks, which made the work of the police and the army difficult. However, the imposition of the martial law in Lahore, as suggested by Nehru, was deemed counterproductive. Trouble flared up again in Lahore and Amritsar, and in the Gurgaon district. Arson and stabbing were widespread in the two former areas. The British defended their position by saying that since it was carried out by “cloak and dagger” methods, it was, therefore, very difficult to put down. There is a long list of occurrences of the communal violence in the Punjab from March 29 to August 15 1947, but it suffices to suggest that studies have already been carried out on these events by Ian Talbot *et al.* It further suffices to state that these communal outbreaks all over Punjab was leading up to independence, both were set the pattern and paved the way for the greater bloodbath which followed independence.

The violence had complex motivations, including frenzy and lust for revenge, looting and political motives for asserting a community’s domination. With respect to the latter case, the outbreaks were not just spontaneous, but were in fact well-organized occurrences in which the RSS, Muslim League National Guards and the Sikh Jathas played a big role. These organizations were trained and well-prepared to take part in what Jenkins termed ‘the war of succession in the Punjab.’ They had accumulated arms, given training to the people and instigated their communities to get ready for the coming showdown.

Not only the British officials believed that these attacks were planned, but Nehru also had the same opinion. Nehru expressed his horror and disgust at the riots in the Punjab, Bengal and elsewhere, and said that these were riots were not isolated acts, but was planned attacks instead and held the administration responsible for not stopping them. As a matter of fact the province of the Punjab was passing through a critical situation and thereby posed a challenge for the administration which was diametrically different from the 1942 Congress uprising. At that time the authorities were faced with concentrated attacks on Government employees and government property, but in 1947 the challenge was to deal with the widespread fighting between the three main religious communities. What then was the British response, Lord Mountbatten’s in particular, to the deteriorating situation in the Punjab?

3. CONCLUSION

The Punjab was going headlong towards civil war, owing to the lofty demands and the mindset of the communities to achieve their respective, narrow goals. There were para-military organizations, jathas, and groups which were making preparations and at times committing violence. The Governor and his administration, civil administration and police were alerted to nip violence in the bud, but some of the foreign employees of the Punjab government were losing heart and had already decided to leave India as early as possible because of the growing turmoil. In fact, the communal violence had already started in the Punjab and continued to grow as the date for the partition came closer. He could only check terrorist activities of the organized groups with the help of the police and the army. But not only the politicians had been divided on the communal lines, but signs of division were visible in the Punjab police as well, and the army also displayed signs of division on communal lines during the last days of the British rule in India. Mountbatten was, however, successful in checking the organized activities of paramilitary organizations, but could not succeed in disbanding them in advance of the British departure. In its wake, with local government structures in disarray and partisan in character, they were able to step up their efforts in pursuit of political goals. This forms the background to the intense violence and the mass migrations, it gave rise to, of the immediate post-partition period.

The leaders and political parties remained complacent at the beginning about the growing communal bloodshed which resulted in the religious frenzy among the communities. Therefore, arresting the Sikh leadership or announcement of the Radcliffe Award before August 15, would not have served the purpose as the stage for the war of succession and the communal disturbances had already been set by the irresponsible statements, fantastic demands, complacent attitude of the Indian leaders, coupled with the extremely divisive and hostile communal mood of the people, police and even the army. Contrary to the view of his critics, despite limited resources, Mountbatten was able to curtail communal bloodshed in the Punjab to manageable proportions in the March to 15 August 1947 period, and therefore, was happy with Jenkins and his faithful band of officials. Following the transfer of power a new set of circumstances prevailed, which enabled the plans of, for example, the Sikh rulers and the Akalis to 'ethnically cleanse' Muslims from East Punjab to come to fruition. Similarly, the Muslim League National Guards and criminal groups were given free rein to loot, pillage and drive out Hindus and Sikhs from West Punjab, although some of these activities were mitigated by the Punjab Boundary Force which Mountbatten had established. In a nutshell, though the British government may have been complacent to curb the riots in the beginning, but the disturbances in the Punjab turned into 'ethnic cleansing', 'holocaust' or genocide, because of the inherent undercurrents of aggressive communal feelings and thus it was almost impossible for the State machinery to curb them altogether.

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