
PARTITION OF INDIA AND MASS MIGRATION

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ABSTRACT

The prolonged struggle against British rule with all its colonial and imperial manifestation came to an end with independence. The exhilaration and excitement that came along was however, short lived. The brutality and violence that gripped Punjab in particular gave a new dimension to the freedom of India. There are many estimates of the loss of life and property but it can be said with some element of correctness that approximately 400,000 to 600,000 people were killed¹ and over 100,000 women were abducted.² At a broader level, almost 12 millions people were displaced having been compelled to leave their ancestral homes.³ Partition meant that about 4 million Muslims found themselves in the east Punjab, just as about 4 million Hindus and Sikhs in the west Punjab. Property worth about Rs. 500 crores,⁴ (about Rs. 768000 crores in present value) was estimated to have been destroyed in Punjab. In the words of O.H.K. Spate, the partition of the Punjab “enforced movements of the people on a scale absolutely unparalleled in the history of the world.”⁵ Harace Alexander says, “There must be many examples in the bloody history of mankind where the extent of violence has been as great or even greater but it is probably true that there has never been such a huge exchange of population.”⁶

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¹ According to G.D.Khosla, the total number of casualties was about 200,000 to 250000 non-Muslims and an equal number of Muslims. G.D. Khosla, *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of Events Leading Up to the Following The Partition of India* (London, 1950 reprint New Delhi, 1989). P. Moon, notes that during partition 180,000 people were killed in India & Pakistan, *Divide and Quit*, (London 1961). While Swarna Aiyar suggests that a total 5 lacs people died in communal violence, ‘August Anarchy: The Partition Massacres in Punjab,’ 1947 in D.A.Law & Howard Brasted (ed.) *Freedom, Trauma, Continuity: Northern India & Independence* (New Delhi), 1988, p.15

² Raghuvendra Tanwar, ‘The Unnatural Division of the Punjab,’ *The Tribune*, 20 July 1999.

³ It is generally believed that in 1947, about 6 million Hindus and Sikhs migrated to India from west Pakistan including the west Punjab, North west Frontier Province, Sind and Bahawalpur State etc. and about 6 million Muslims migrated from India including the east Punjab, the east Punjab States, Delhi, etc. to west Pakistan.

⁴ Swarna Aiyar, ‘August Anarchy’ in Law & Brasted (ed.) *Freedom, Trauma, Continuity* p.15.

⁵ O.H.K. Spate, *India and Pakistan*, (London, 1954), p. 110.

⁶ Horace Alexander, *New Citizens of India*, (Oxford University Press), p.7.

According to Stephen P. Landas, the convention of Neviely 1929 between Bulgaria and Greece and the convention of La-Usanna 1923, between Greece and Turkey both “caused the uprooting of two million people.”⁷ But in the case of the east Punjab and the west Punjab more that eight million people crossed the border.⁸ The exchange of population between Turkey and Greece hitherto known as the biggest of its kind was accomplished in a year or so, whereas in the east Punjab and the west Punjab the transfer of eight million people was completed in three months.⁹ In Bulgaria and Greece, the national minorities had the “right of leaving the country of origin and emigrating to the other country under conditions which would guarantee them full value of properties left behind,”¹⁰ whereas in the east Punjab and the west Punjab, the minorities were made to quit their hearths and homes in the most adverse circumstances, created by communal riots and they had to reach the country of their destination very often as paupers. According to Andrus, “The massive exchange of population that attended the partition of the subcontinent and the conditions under which it took place are unprecedented in history.”¹¹

THE CAUSES OF THE MASS MIGRATION

What were the basic causes of the mass migration? It is a controversial question. Some are of the view that the Sikhs and the Hindus organized their mass exodus in order to cripple Pakistan economically as they held important positions in the economic structure of the west Punjab.¹² But, this is a misleading statement. L.F. Pushbrook William writes, “In Lahore and Layallpur, they say, there was an exodus which looked concerted not only of men of substance in the business and professional life but also of clerks, minor officials in every department of government, nurses, orderlies, school masters and medical staff. All over India, Hindus and Muslims, including the Defence Services, had indicated their option. The public servants in the Punjab behaved similarly. Rich farmers left in the hope of returning to claim their land after six month in any case, they could not have taken the lands with them. They had to leave after what had happened to Non-Muslims in some Muslim majority districts in Punjab. Mudie’s letter quoted below proves that Sikhs of Lyallpur were loathe to go, but the

⁷ Stephen P. Landas, *The Exchange of Minorities*, (New York 1932), p.3.

⁸ Government of India, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, *Millions on the Move – The Aftermath of Partition* (Delhi 1948), p.10 (hereafter given as *Millions on the Move*).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Stephens, *The Exchange of Minorities*, p.3.

¹¹ J. Russel Andrus and Aziz F., *Mohammad, Economy of Pakistan*, (London, 1958, p.463).

¹² Kirpal Singh, *The Partition of Punjab*, (Patiala, 1973), p.118.

west Punjab Government was determined to drive them out. Sir Francis Mudie, Governor of the west Punjab in 1947, had noted that Giani Kartar Singh met him at Lyallpur and requested him to give necessary facilities to the Sikhs for going to India, as they had decided to leave Pakistan. Giani Kartar has also noted that he had confirmed information that Jinnah had instructed the Governor of the west Punjab to expel all the Sikhs from Pakistan. Subsequently, this was confirmed by a letter of Muddie addressed to Jinnah and intercepted by the east Punjab police. Muddie had said, "I am telling everyone that I do not care how the Sikhs get across the border, the great thing is to get rid of them as soon as possible. There is still little sign of 5 lakh Sikhs in Lyallpur moving, but in the end they too will have to go."¹³ Alan Campbell Johnson who was in the centre of it all had also noted that only the compulsion of mass killing and the fear of reprisals could have brought about mass migration.¹⁴

Some of the general causes that led to the mass migration can briefly be seen as:

Police

The police on both sides was greatly responsible for the expulsion of the minorities both in the west Punjab and the east Punjab. At places, police officials in the west Punjab did every thing to turn out Hindus and the Sikhs. The district Liaison officer, Gujranwala, reported that the police officer of Nawshera Virkan (Distt. Gujranwala) "proclaimed with a beat of drum that the Kafirs should accept Islam or be massacred. He collected Muslims at a bridge on the canal and told them that they should kill and loot the non Muslims." The worst instance of such conduct was that of a police officer at Komoke (Distt. Gujranwala) where non-Muslims girls were distributed among police officers, their friends and relatives after the massacre of passengers of a refugee train there.¹⁵

A person named Mangha Ram has recorded:

I was working as a shopkeeper at Bakhshan Khan P.S. Chritian in Bahawalpur state. I was at Bahawalnagar on 26 August 1947. On that day the Muslim military and Muslim Police had started murdering and looting there. On the 24th August we were coming to our native place Jullundur from Bakhshan Khan. On the way at Chak Abdullah Railway station, the train was stopped. The military and the police

¹³ Khosla, *Stern Reckoning*, p.315

¹⁴ *Asiatic Review*, July 1952, p.167

¹⁵ Kripal Singh, *The Partition of Punjab*, p.123

who were all Muslims began looting and murdering in the train. They announced that no train would go further. All the passengers were detained. We were all taken to Dharamsala at Bahawalnagar. On the 26th of August the Musslamans, military and the police who were all Muslims announced to shoot us. They began to loot and murder us. One Muslim military man had fired at my wife. The shot hit the left feet of my wife but luckily she was saved. One European named, Mohn Sahib, brought all of us on the 31st August by train to Hindumal Kot Railway station. The Muslim Military and Muslim Police help each other there. They said that Hindus and Sikhs had nothing to do there and they should go to their Hindustan, otherwise they would be murdered.¹⁶

Similarly a displaced person Wazir Singh narrated his experience:

From 24th August to 26th August 1947, the military and police who were all Muslims surrounded us. They started looting. The Military and Police who were Mussalmans said to us, 'Hindus and Sikhs have no business here nor you own any land, residential houses or any other property. You go to your Hindustan. You have nothing to do in our Pakistan.' The Muslim military and police ransacked us and forcibly carried away money in cash and all our jewellery. One military Havildar who was a Mussalman visited me and said, 'Pay us something if you want to save your life.' For our security I paid Rs. 300 to the said military Havildar. Only 8 of us escaped at night. When we reached the bridge over the Sadki Canal, the Military and other Mussalmans besieged us again. One of our men was killed there and we do not know the whereabouts of two of us we walked on foot and reached village Mazaranwala in Bikaner State. In this way we saved our lives."¹⁷

TRANSFER OF CIVIL AND PUBLIC OFFICERS

One of the most important factors which paved the way for the law of nemesis to work in the east Punjab and the west Punjab was the exchange of Deputy Commissioners, the magistracy and other high officials belonging of the minority community in the opting process provided by the Punjab Partition Committee. Their departure from amidst the minorities to whom they

¹⁶ Recorded Statement of Mengha Ram s/o Atma Ram, resident of Jullundur. Recorded by S.P. Barnala dated 28.9.1947. (Punjab State Archives, Patiala) File no. 2401/30, p.91

¹⁷ Recorded Statement of Wazir Singh s/o Kaka Singh, Harnwalla (Bahawalpur), Ibid. p.81.

belonged undermined their sense of security in the tense atmosphere of communal rioting.¹⁸ The very presence of a strong officer belonging to a minority had a sufficient deterrent effect on the majority community. The District Liaison Officer of Gujranwala wrote that: "It is a fact admitted even by the Muslims that the non-Muslim Deputy Commissioner of Gujranwala controlled the situation with a strong hand even though trouble had been brewing for a long time and tension grew from day today. His departure was a signal to the Muslim officers of the district who openly became hostile to non-Muslims."¹⁹ One of the most conspicuous exceptions was that of a Muslim Deputy Commissioner of Shahpur. According to the District Liaison Officer, Shahpur, "It was due to his presence the district had been much quieter than many districts."²⁰ The officers, who had been recently transferred as a result of the partition, were themselves affected by communal rioting. After taking charge of their new posts, they incited retaliation.

Dominion Governments

A decision in favour of the exchange of minorities by the Dominion Governments would have uprooted the entire Muslim population in India and non-Muslim population in Pakistan. It would have created a gigantic problem for both newly born states. Neither all Muslim were willing to leave India nor were all the non-Muslim from Pakistan. This would have raised the further question of evaluating their immovable properties. It was on this account the two Governments did not favour the idea of the exchange of population. On the other hand, the ever-deteriorating situation in the east Punjab and the west Punjab demanded firm action and a clear-cut out policy. When the problem of the Hindu and Sikhs refugees in Pakistan was discussed in the Partition Council's meeting held on the 5th August, Liaqat Ali Khan (Prime Minister) said: "This item may be taken up at the next meeting of the council, as he had not had sufficient time to study the papers" and at the same he said, "refugees from the states should also be considered. There had recently been serious trouble in the Alwar State and 200 refugees, men, women and children from that place had arrived in Delhi yesterday."²¹

Sardar Patel, asserted in a note: "The Indian Railways in the circumstances consider it most inadvisable to run special trains from India to Karachi unless arrangements are made at the

¹⁸ *East Punjab Liaison Agency Records*, File no. LIX/2, Report of D.L.O. Gujranwala (Punjab State Archives, Patiala) hereafter E.P.L.A.R.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* File no. LIX/2 Report of D.L.O., Gujranwala

²⁰ *Ibid.* File No. LIX/7, Report of D.L.O., Shahpur

²¹ Partition Branch, *Partition Proceedings*, vol.IV, p.392

other end to run an equal number of trains for transporting men wishing to come over to India.”²²

Both the Indian and Pakistan Governments could not agree on a comprehensive plan to meet the ever deteriorating situation in the east Punjab and the west Punjab. The riots, arson, murders, loots and abduction of women were spreading and, setting a chain of retaliation and counter-relation, uprooting the minority community. It was under such conditions that the representatives of India and Pakistan agreed on the 17th August, 1947: ‘The Governments of the east Punjab and the west Punjab will give maximum assistance towards evacuation of refugees from one province to another and will make necessary arrangements for refugees prior to evacuation. The Central Governments will give whatever assistance needed for maintaining service and communication.’²³

Mutual Differences

The leaders of Pakistan who had recently taken the reins of Government in their hands were afraid of the Indian leaders visiting Pakistan in order to help and alleviate the sufferings of Hindus and Sikhs stranded in Pakistan. Sir Francis Muddie, (Governor of west Punjab) wrote to the Governor General of Pakistan (5th September): “We had from our point of view a successful meeting with Nehru, Patel and company on Wednesday (3rd Sep.). The main fight was over certain proposals of the east Punjab by which their troops of officials would be allowed to enter west Punjab on various pretexts. Finally, I had it conveyed to Nehru that the conference would break down unless they gave way which they did. I hope that we have now seen the end of visits to this province of Nehru and his fellow politicians.”²⁴

It may be pointed out that only the previous day (2nd September) the Sikhs and the Hindus of Lyallpur had requested Jawahar Lal Nehru to pay them a visit every now and then. Nehru with the consent of Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan had agreed to this request. But as it were the very next day, this possibility was ruled out. It had a very adverse effect on the minorities in the west Punjab.

Displaced families

The exodus from the west Punjab was greatly responsible for the trouble in the east Punjab.²⁵ Wherever such families went, they carried with them their tales of woe and sufferings, unintentionally perhaps creating tension and panic. The Muslim leaders seldom, if ever,

²² Ibid., p.478

²³ Government of India, *Concerning Evacuee Property*, p.8

²⁴ Khosla, *Stern Reckoning*, p.315

²⁵ Govt. of India, Publication Division, *After Partition*, (New Delhi 1948) p.40.

expressed any regret or condemned these attacks on the non-Muslims. There had been many instances where the Muslim ruffians had killed individual Sikhs and Hindus. According to Master Tara Singh, it was in this atmosphere of frustration that the Sikhs and Hindus in the east Punjab resorted to retaliation.²⁶ Following the disturbances, at Amritsar, and Hoshiarpur rioting, arson and murder broke out in other districts. As the refugees progressed eastwards, communal troubles also spread, causing the migration of the Muslims, communal troubles also spread causing the migration of the Muslims from the east Punjab. What had happened in the west Punjab was re-enacted in the east Punjab in August and September on a large scale with more ferocity.²⁷

Over large areas in the east Punjab, the Sikh mobs attacked almost every Muslim village, killed a large number of Muslims and harried the columns of Muslim refugees. This was further followed by counter retaliation with attacks on minorities in the west Punjab. A British Lieutenant Colonel in the Pakistan army stated on the 13th of September, 1947 that some 250 armed Pathans from the frontier have drifted into Lahore and the surrounding villages.²⁸ The same brutalities of death and fire were again perpetrated on the Hindus and Sikhs who were still in Lahore and its surrounding areas. The Muslims in the west Punjab saw that by attacking the Sikhs and Hindus who owned property and land, they could acquire their properties. Exactly the same thing happened in the east Punjab where the Sikhs and the Hindus attacked the Muslims to drive them out in order to acquire their lands.

Migration (Transfer of Population)

The Hindustan-Pakistan plan was announced on June 3, 1947 whereby a new entity called Pakistan was proposed to be created, of which west Pakistan was to comprise the Muslim-majority provinces of Sind, the North-west Frontier province, and 16 districts of Punjab, the remaining 13 districts of undivided Punjab were to be part of India.²⁹ As a consequence of the decision of the partition of Punjab, riots flared up with greater intensity in many parts of the province. The communal virus had inflicted almost every section of society in the province including administration and the police.³⁰

²⁶ P.N. Chopra, *The Collected Works of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel*, vol. XII, (Delhi, 1995), Master Tara Singh's letter to Sardar Patel, dated the 14th August, 1947

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Francis Toker, *While Memory Serves*, (London, 1950), p.431

²⁹ Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders & Boundaries*, (Delhi 1996) p.33.

³⁰ Manmath Nath Das, *Partition and Independence of India: Inside Story of Mountbatten Days*, (Delhi 1982), p.163.

The violence meanwhile spread even to remote rural areas of the Punjab. In the predominantly Muslim regions of Rawalpindi and Multan, the minority communities, particularly the Sikhs, faced daily risk to their lives, property, houses and lands. Hundreds were killed, and thousands more fled to the towns to escape slaughter.³¹ The rural people in their simplicity, and unaware of political forces that lay behind their destruction, thought the violence to be temporary.³² In most cases one brush with death was sufficient to change such opinions but for many there was a failure to perceive the threat, a form of denial of the danger by ignoring it. Even so the threshold was amazingly high in some cases: “We were in settlement 485, Tehsil Samundri. That was a Muslim village. A canal passed about a furlong from the village. Every day we could see human bodies and bloody water in that canal but we kept on working. About a month earlier we had heard word about the formation of Pakistan but that hadn’t really affected us. The canal sight made us a little uneasy but that was all. The Muslims didn’t speak to us.”³³

When the partition plan was announced, the situation in the Punjab began to rapidly deteriorate. Although the exact boundary line between the two countries was still to be determined by the Boundary Commission, the exchange of population started taking place much before 15 August. The Boundary Commission announced its awards on August 16 within a week, about one million Hindus and Sikhs had crossed over from west to east Punjab, and in the week following, another two and a half million had collected in refugee camps in different districts in west Pakistan.³⁴ Approximately 37.5 lakhs of refugees crossed the border upto November 1947.³⁵ All available means of transport – animal drawn carts, motor cars, trains, and aeroplanes were mobilised for evacuation.

The idea of leaving property and homes was naturally haunting. The traumatic period to uncertainty of whether to go or not was relatively short and the ultimate decision was often made abruptly.

³¹ For a horrifying example see the statement of Mst. Rakhi widow of Chanan Das Arora, resident of Sangla Hill, aged 35 years. Recorded by Superintendent of Police, District Barnala, dated 25.9.1947, File no. 2401/30, p.75. (Punjab State Archives, Patiala)

³² Das, *Partition and Independence of India*, p.163

³³ Stephen L. Keller, *Uprooting and Social Change: The Role of Refugees in Development*, (Delhi 1975), p.43.

³⁴ M.S. Randhawa, *Out of the Ashes: An Account of the Rehabilitation of Refugees from west Pakistan in Rural Areas of east Punjab*, (Chandigarh 1954), p.25. (M.S.Randhawa was Director General of Rehabilitation in east Punjab in 1949).

³⁵ *Census of India, 1941, Punjab*, vol.VI (Shimla 1941)

M.S. Randhawa, recalls that: ‘the fatal decision was not long delayed, as the ring of death and destruction closed in from all sides. The hand that was sowing the seed in the fields in the morning was hurriedly packing in the afternoon. The non-Muslim population, everywhere else, had faced difficulties before, but this was an unprecedented experiment. There was no body that they could turn to for help, now here that they could go for justice. Thus the only choice before them was to say good-bye to the land of their birth.’³⁶

³⁶ M.S. Randhawa, *Out of the Ashes*, p.9