

## The Arduous Last Journey: Refugees' Migration from Rawalpindi in 1947 and the Attendant Hardships

### ABSTRACT

*Falling in the domain of the "new history" of Partition, the article deals with the social history of partition of the Punjab by highlighting what was the deep personal meaning of Punjab's territorial division for the Sikhs and Hindus of Rawalpindi. The study's spatial scope encompasses the administration of six districts in the Rawalpindi division, namely Rawalpindi, Attock, Jhelum, Mianwali, Shahpur, and Gujrat, where the non-Muslims were a minority. This made them vulnerable targets of violent attacks from the Muslims in 1947. The Sikhs and Hindus faced challenges in ensuring safety and security amid the chaos and uncertainty of the situation. Although they escaped the gravity of partition related violence unleashed in areas where the Punjab Boundary Force was deployed, they were not entirely safe from imminent threats of violent attacks as they set out on their journey. The study demonstrates that the movement of the non-Muslim refugees from Rawalpindi was not as smooth as it is popularly believed; rather, it was shaped by anxiety, terror, and adversities. Apart from the dangers of being subject to violent attacks instilling constant distress among them, the physical hardships left them with no choice but to neglect them, which in a normal situation they would not have. The attendant dangers and miseries of their last journey left deep imprints on their minds and lives as they started living in their new geographical environment after 1947.*

**Keywords:** Partition, Punjab, Rawalpindi, Refugees, Violence, Migration, Sikhs, and Hindus

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## **Introduction**

Without discussing the experience of migration of the Sikhs and Hindus that forced them to abandon their properties and move to new locations within a few months, the description of violence in the Rawalpindi division would remain incomplete. Their uprootedness started in the aftermath of March violence, in which, apart from brutal killings of non-Muslims, their homes had been physically destroyed due to arsonist activities from the Muslims. Jenkins in his correspondence to Mountbatten on 31 March 1947 wrote, from the Rawalpindi, Attock, and Jhelum districts, where atrocities reached unprecedented levels in villages, there were around 40,000 refugees accommodated in the temporary shelters (Carter, 2007, p. 102). Once the law-and-order situation was brought under control with administrative vigilance, the repercussions of March violence started to surface. The atrocities committed upon Sikhs and Hindus caused among their co-religionists who were unhurt the feelings of distrust about the future course of events. Those with insufficient resources, especially middle-class townsmen and farming communities such as peasant proprietors, were unable to relocate as a precautionary measure due to their financial circumstances. On 2 April, 1947, Charanji Lal Kapur, a Punjabi Khatri of Jhelum city, wrote to Acharya J. B. Kriplani, President All India Congress Committee, about the distress faced by the non-Muslim residents of the city. He wrote that the recent communal attacks and the Congress resolution demanding division of Punjab made the wealthy and influential people to move out of the town, which caused panic in the area (Kaur, 2007, p. 67). Struck with grief and hopelessness, he added:

Middle class or the poor masses are unable to decide their future line which has further darkened by the attitude of local leaders. They have got only two courses to adopt i.e. either they should remain there where they are and enrisk (*sic*) their lives in the hands of the Pitiless Majority or they should arrange for their shifting which is very difficult on account of their financial circumstances. Will you therefore, the author/supporter of the division resolution very kindly guide them in this hour of distress and oblige. (Kaur, 2007, p. 67).

The 'human convulsion' that began in a tide of forced migration after March culminated as the partition of the Punjab became a certainty in August 1947. In a period of relative calm between March and August, there were a few signs of anticipatory migration from the affluent urban non-Muslims who moved steadily from isolated pockets to safer localities where they found their lives and assets secured. However, the Sikhs and Hindus who had

escaped March violence, especially in Mianwali, Shahpur, and Gujrat districts, decided to continue living in their homes until the province was partitioned and the severity of violence forced them to flee from their hometowns. The deteriorating communal situation of the Punjab, leading to increased communal temperature in the Rawalpindi division, gave a vital push to the non-Muslim minorities to move away to East Punjab where their community was in majority. They decided to leave their homes and properties behind when they had no other choice but to migrate for safety and survival as an alternative to death. Philip Ziegler rightly points out that numbers cannot capture the extent of human suffering 'since the partition of the Punjab caused untold misery to several million people who were made refugees.' (Ziegler, 1985, p. 437).

As the Sikh and Hindu residents of the Rawalpindi division set out on their last journeys amid precarious situation and intensified violence, their journey was not absent of the attendant disasters, dangers, and privations all along. Their last journey due to fear and terror and the potential threat of communal attacks was extremely difficult for those Sikhs and Hindus who were already aggrieved at their uprootedness. *Punjab Police Abstract of Intelligence*, week ending 23 August 1947, Vol. LXIX, p. 425, reported that the situation became tense, particularly in Rawalpindi, Jhelum, Sargodha, Gujrat, and Mianwali, as the Muslim refugees in a miserable state started pouring in from the East Punjab. Alarmed by the situation of Muslim refugees, the Hindu and Sikh communities in the Rawalpindi division were fearful of reprisals against them. The governments of Pakistan and India refused to acknowledge that a large-scale population transfer was required until September 1947 and realised its necessity only after the uncontrolled violence and instability that gripped the Punjab region (Virdee, 2018, p. 64). The two governments in the sixth meeting of the Joint Defence Council held at Government House, Lahore, on 29 August 1947 resolved "to take all possible steps towards the well-being and safety of refugees" (Singh, 1991, p. 505), but they were vulnerable to targets, particularly of specialised attacks during evacuation and migration.

In Gujrat, Mahinder Nath Khanna and his family were attacked by a violent mob near the railway station when they were heading for it to leave the town in August. He was hapless to save his father and mother from the mob, who pleaded for their lives but were killed atrociously. He ran towards the railway station for life and luckily boarded the train but several refugees, especially elders and children, including his siblings, could not succeed. From there, he safely reached Lahore and then to Amritsar. For Mr. Khanna, stepping on Indian soil meant deliverance but the personal grief at the loss

of his family and the miserable abandonment of his home excited in him the desire for revenge. He admitted in an interview held at Amritsar on 3 January 2005 that he and many other victims of violence from Gujrat took part in attacks on the Muslims in Amritsar and killed them in reprisal. "I must admit that I and many others from the Gujrat group did take part in attacks on Muslims. How many did we kill? I think I stopped counting after I struck the first victim with an axe." (Ahmed, 2012, p. 369) The torturous last journey of Mr. Khanna inflamed communal passion in him that killing did not bring any regret and disgust; rather, it satiated the thirst for revenge. It was presumed to be an act committed in validation for vicious bloodletting of his loved ones. Nevertheless, the trauma of what he had gone through enveloped his life afterwards. He noted, "I never married because I could never overcome my grief and sorrow. My life was shattered in August 1947." (Ahmed, 2012, p. 369).

The experience of forced migration was also traumatic for those Sikhs and Hindus who fortunately escaped direct attacks. It was the continuous danger of impending tragedies during their last journey that made them suffer with fright and uncertainty. The last journey was filled with terror for Raj Rani Gosain from the Shahpur district, who was able to leave Bhera town safely when her relatives began to pour in her house from violence-stricken places in Miani and Malakwal from July onwards. Before the violence could erupt in Bhera, an influential man of Bhera, Diwan Sahib, made arrangements to evacuate non-Muslims from Bhera to Mandi Bahauddin under military escort, from where they were to set their journey to Amritsar. Even though Gosian undertook her journey under military protection, she clearly remembered the feeling of terror and insecurity she could not resist during the entire journey. She recollected in an interview held at Noida on 2 December 2005:

We got to Bhera station and boarded the train. The train pulled out but stopped a little later. It was brought back to Bhera station. Everyone was tense. The Maratha troops trained their machineguns in different directions, but fortunately a little later the train started again. We reached Mandi Bahauddin. We all walked to a fort-like structure through a huge gate. We had brought a lot of home-made snacks to eat. Next day there were rumours that eatables and water outside the compound had been poisoned by local Muslim goons. None of us ate anything from outside. Families shared the home-made food. Water was arranged inside the compound. The trucks arrived on the third day. We moved out single file. We were allowed to take only what we could carry. Most people left some of their luggage behind. The local policemen charged Rs 100 per person as a bribe. They negotiated other ways to make money also. The trucks were escorted by the Maratha

battalion again, who took us to keep our heads low during the journey. We reached Attari without any incident. A little later, the trucks stopped and formed a circle in an open field. Everyone stayed in the middle. We were told to lie down if an attack took place. The soldiers stood guard the whole night. Next day, the train arrived. Those days all trains were running for free. We all reached Amritsar safely and went to Golden Temple [where there were many refugees already]. (Ahmed, 2012, p. 378).

There were challenges of ensuring the safe evacuation of refugees, managing military escorts for transporting them to transit camps and train stations for cross-border migration. All of this was compounded by the political situation with the growing scale of violence in the province. All of September, there were daily pitched battles between soldiers guarding convoys and the raiding parties (Tanwar, 2006, p.421). It was the midst of terror of looming communal attacks that the flight of refugees was generated.

Besides the gruesome violence, the departing Sikhs and Hindus of the Rawalpindi division had to endure human greed and unkind nature for their safety and survival on the course of their journey. Taking advantage of refugees' misfortune, unkind elements were out in circumstances when the hapless victims of violence were in dire need of sympathy and compassion. The *Civil and Military Gazette* issued from Lahore reported on October 19, 1947, that Avtar Narain Gujral of the Congress complained to Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan of the Muslim League that while the Jhelum District Commissioner and Superintendent Police were working together to help the minorities regain their confidence so they could return to their ancestral homes, petty officials were trying to undermine the effort (Singh, 1960, 257). The Punjab: AICC Papers, File No. G 26, 1948 state that in June 1948, a woman who identified herself as the 'wife of Mehta Raja Ram' wrote to the Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation that:

*Sir,*

My husband Mehta Raja Ram was a Political Worker [with the Provincial Congress Committee] in the Pind Dadan Khan Tehsil Chakwal [Jhelum district]. His views were in distinct conflict with those of Muslim League, which stood for creating a poisonous atmosphere against the Hindus in general and Congress in particular.

The activities of my husband drew upon him the wrath of the League-minded officials of the District and he had to abscond from the place all along, or else he would . . . have been exterminated without any trace left behind.

After he had successfully reached this side of the border he made repeated attempts to get us evacuated and ultimately 'Free Air Passage' was granted to the Petitioner and her children. This would be apparent from the Register and the other documents showing allotment of air passages relating to the evacuation of Evacuees from Chakwal on 5 November 1947.

After, however, the undersigned had boarded the plane, the undersigned was told by the Conductor-in-charge that she must pay Rs 264 as fare or get out. To ask a person to [get] out in the circumstances then existing, was tantamount to pushing him or her on the knife of the assassin, more especially as the aerodrome is 5 miles away from the town with hardly any reliable means of conveyance.

The undersigned was penniless and this sudden and unexpected demand would have resulted in the massacre of herself and her children, but for the fact that one Pir Santokh Raj Jogi, then present, took pity on her and lent her the amount.

The undersigned and her husband have brought absolutely nothing from Pakistan and have no property. In spite of their best efforts, they have not been able to pay off their debt. They have a large family to support. It is inconceivable as to why the undersigned should have been coerced into paying when free passage had been sanctioned.

It is humbly requested that a sum of Rs 264 be paid to the undersigned as passage be refunded to her and the previous intimation [an earlier application for a refund of this amount had been refused] turning down her request be reviewed and cancelled (Butalia, 2001, p. 220-21).

The letter points to multiple hardships that define the plight of refugees. In a charged communal environment, the members of the opposite religious community were more vulnerable to attacks because of their political inclinations. The upheaval that accompanied the partition of the Punjab made safe departure for refugees a challenging task, and there was uncertainty until they crossed the border. Due to weak control by the authorities, the unexpected demands at the time of evacuation increased the anxiety of refugees, who were already terrified by the mayhem surrounding them. The only thing that could alleviate the suffering and despair of refugees in such dreadful circumstances were small acts of compassion. In the letter, Mrs. Mehta expressed her grievances and pleaded with the state to become involved in resolving their situation, emphasizing that the government should not disregard people who worked for the Congress Party.

The raging communal violence made it imperative for the Sikhs and Hindus to flee from violent situation and leave the area that could put their lives in danger. The Muslims from East Punjab also faced the same situation

and migrated to the western side of the province for their protection. To speed up evacuation on both sides, railway trains, a fleet of transport planes, civilian aircrafts, and motor trucks were mobilised (Rai, 1965, p. 79). Of all available means, military trucks, trains, and airplanes, the last was the safest of all but also the most expensive and, therefore, out of reach of ordinary people. Between 7 August and 26 November, 673 refugee trains were run carrying over 2,799,368 refugees inside India and across the border (Government of India, 1948, p. 53). Even though the train journey was fraught with danger, it was much in demand as a quick means to get away from 'risk zones'. The train, as a means of transport in this regard, became symbolic of the iconic last journey of a great number of refugees. There were targeted attacks on trains, and frequently the trains arrived at their destinations carrying corpses devoid of any identity, prompting further killings in retaliation to send back an equal number of dead bodies on their return journeys. A personal account by Prakash Tandon, of a Punjabi Hindu from Gujrat, states:

One day, train crammed with two thousand refugees came from the more predominantly Muslim areas of Jhelum and beyond. At Gujrat station, the train was stopped, and Muslims from the neighbourhood, excited by the news of violence in East Punjab, began to attack and loot. There was indescribable carnage. Several hours later the train moved, filled with a bloody mess of corpses, without a soul alive. At Amritsar, when the train with its load of dead arrived, they took revenge on a trainload of Muslim refugees (Tandon, 2000, p. 131).

Even if this account may exaggerate the number of dead, there is no disputing that the refugees' train travels were plagued by horrific violent attacks, which inspired additional retaliatory killings.

The train journey was quicker and more affordable, which made it a popular means of transporting the refugees, but getting a place on the train was not easy (Kaur, 2006, p. 2224-2226). Usually, the railway workers would be the first to find space for their family and themselves, as they were aware of the schedules, which were frequently withheld from the public as a safety measure until about 30 minutes before departure. In order to obtain this information, many people would resort to bribing railway workers. The refugees were transported to the train station in batches following some sort of priority list maintained at the transit camps. Many migrants attempted to use their personal connections or bribe the officer in charge to have their names given high priority. The special trains for refugees were overcrowded, and the refugees had to find their way in once they managed to reach the stations. In an interview held in Delhi on 20 October 2001, Mrs. H. Kaur

who was 10 years of age at the time of partition recollected this scene when her family was travelling from Sargodha to Amritsar in August 1947:

At the railway platform, there was a mad rush towards the train. My father was making sure that I and my siblings did not get lost in the crowd. The women of my family would normally never go out unaccompanied and without a head cover, dupatta. A sort of purdah was maintained in our house as far as outsiders were concerned. But now my mother was standing in the crowd trying to keep her head covered and observe all the customary niceties. It almost seemed impossible to get into the train till a complete stranger offered to help us. As the door was jam-packed, we had to be thrown in through the window. And then it was my mother's turn. The stranger and my father picked up my mother and pushed her in through the window. Nobody seemed to care at that time. It was important to save our lives. This incident, later though, made a big impact on my mother. She would often talk about it and the bad times when strangers could touch other people's women (Kaur, 2007, p. 78).

The immediate concern of the refugees was to escape the situations that posed danger and risk to their protection and survival. In doing so, they had to endure hardships during their journey and overlook all the discomforts, which in a normal situation they would have never done. In the above account of a Sikh woman, gender barriers were challenged during her family's last journey, indicating the woman's vulnerable condition in such occurrences. Even though the family had fled uninjured, and the stranger was only attempting to assist, the memory of intrusion persisted. The remembrance of intrusion remained in the memory of her mother even though the family had escaped completely unharmed, and the stranger was merely trying to help.

The Sikhs and Hindus, as minority populations, became refugees in their own areas and were forced to flee the site of violence. The tragic experiences of violence, uprootedness, separation of families, and refugeehood during the unfolding of partition marked the people's memory of the event (Tong & Qudaisya, 2000, p. 7). Their journey as refugees developed in them feelings of loss, grief, and guilt because they had survived but were unable to save their loved ones who had been left behind. Rajesh Babbar recalled the experience of his grandmother's arduous journey from Sargodha (Shahpur district) when flames of violence reached her locality. He narrated in an interview recorded in 2002:

My father lived in Sargodha district of Pakistan and was the only son in the family he had seven sisters before him and was much pampered by his parents. My grandfather was a trader and a stockist of sugar and blankets. At



the time of the Partition, my father was 13 years old and four of his older sisters had been married off. When the violence started in their locality, my grandmother ran away with him as she wanted to save her only son. My grandfather was killed while trying to save his three unmarried daughters. He did not succeed. They were raped and then murdered. My grandmother and my father joined a refugee caravan and reached Delhi.

The trauma of what she had gone through remained with her forever. She became so wary of the unknown that even in need of help she did not approach the government. Rajesh added:

She had managed to bring half a kilo of gold along. She rented a room in Paharganj [Delhi] and they lived off the gold for a while. She was very afraid. She never went to any government agency for compensation or help. She was uneducated and terrified of the events that had taken place. She just wanted to live a low-profile life. My father started going to a school and started working part-time after Class 10. He was married off to my mother, who also came from a refugee family.

The tragic journey in which he was forced to leave his hometown in a miserable condition, causing the breakup of his family, had a profound influence on Rajesh's father. His personal suffering compelled him to safeguard his children from any possible dangers. Rajesh remembered:

My father would never talk about his past life. He had some fears and would not allow us to go too far off. Fate has been good to him. We are seven brothers and one sister, but my father would never tell anyone how many of us there are. He fears 'evil spirits'. I came to know all of this from my mother and grandmother. She never met her four married daughters. Nobody knows what happened to them. My father has emotional attachment to his place. He says if he is taken there, he will recognize everything . . . (Kaur, 2007, p. 210-11).

The real tragedy of the Punjab's partition fell upon thousands of ordinary people who were unaware of high politics and were brought unprepared into its folds. They had to endure the pain of the process of migration from their hometowns and live with the sense of being displaced, unsettled, and unattached afterwards. Darshana Rani, who had to migrate from Rawalpindi, remembered in an interview held in Bhogal, Delhi on 4 October 2001:

*Hindustan aa to gaye par watan to uthe hi hai* (we came to India but our home remains there) . . . *Batwara Kyon Huwa. main nahin jaanti-* (why Partition happened, I do not know) we lived cordially with Muslims, except that we did not eat with the, but there is something different about the place where you spent your childhood, land which which was yours, one which belonged to your ancestors, whose *sugandh* (fragrance) I can smell even

today. I remember playing *geeta* or *stapu* in the corridors of my big house in Rawalpindi- we had six rooms!

Nostalgia enveloped her as she desired:

How much I want to go and see how is it today? Who lives in my house? Is everything like the way it was? I want to go there and cry endlessly... meet my friends Shahana Bibi and Fatima Bano. I wonder if there are alive?

Out here we have no land which is ours, no sense of belonging. Half of my life, I lived being called a 'refugee'- what does that mean? I live in Bhogal, in a small cramped place- I had a big house here. Why should this have happened? I paid for this house, bought it, but still do not feel settled- *sab kuch lut gaya wahin pe* (we lost everything there) *kis liye* (why) what was our fault (Bhardwaj, 2004, p. 84-85).

It is an unfortunate aspect of Punjab's partition that little thought was given to any kind of organized population exchange during political developments leading to this event. The British administration was entirely focused on leaving India to avoid being engaged in any form of civil strife, whereas the Congress and the Muslim League leadership had not anticipated the mass migration. In the discussions with the British power on the territorial division of India, the division of people was not given rightful consideration by the two parties. For the secular-oriented Indian National Congress, this meant admitting that India was made up of 'two nations' with irreconcilable differences; on the other hand, Jinnah of the All India Muslim League had envisioned Pakistan as a place where minorities would be protected (Virdee, 2018, p. 46-47). For this reason, the ability of the nascent states of Pakistan and India to cope with violence and disruption caused in the aftermath of partition was lacking. It was the refugees who became the ultimate victims of the Punjab's partition. The sheer brutality of violence and the suddenness with which forcible displacement took place caused irreplaceable damage to them. Their life path, which would have otherwise followed the usual course, took a different turn. The agonizing experience as refugees shaped their memory of the events. It was *batwara* (partition) and not *azadi* (independence) that counted for them (Pandey, 2001, p. 124). Regrettably, the pain persisted as the refugees of terror-filled journeys battled to get past the trauma in India while the state embarked on the journey of building the nation as an independent country.

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