

The Punjab partition: when protectors become perpetrators



*Whilst the legacy of partition remains etched across the Punjab and beyond, few have attended to the role of the servicemen as perpetrators of the violence as well as protectors, writes **Saud Sultan**.*

The 1947 partition of the Subcontinent divided Punjab into two parts – the West Punjab, belonging to Pakistan and the East Punjab, which became part of India. It was associated with massive violence within the six month time frame, large exchanges of population (approximately ten million), and significant involvement of the government in evacuating and protecting the refugees.

The enforced movement of the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim populations of Punjab has been described as ‘on a scale absolutely unparalleled in the history of the world’. ([Singh and Sharma, p.114](#)). Around five-and-a-half million Muslims migrated to West Punjab, and around four-and-a-half million Hindus and Sikhs moved to east Punjab. ([Ilyas Chattha, p.80](#)) Violence is regarded as the main cause of the mass migrations that occurred in Punjab (see [Talbot and Singh, p.66-67](#)) and it became notorious in history as the ‘bloody battlefield of the Partition whereby far the greatest number of massacres of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims occurred’ ([Yasmin, p.07](#)).

Moreover, Chattha argued that there was an organised violence in Punjab, and ‘its aim was what would be now be termed the ethnic cleansing of the unwanted population’. ([Ilyas Chattha, p.155](#)). For example, during a single week in March 1947, four thousand Muslim homes and shops were destroyed in [Amritsar](#). Violence was such that:

“On both sides of the 35-mile-long road between Amritsar and Lahore, there were heaps of corpses. It appeared as if the entire territory had been converted into an extensive graveyard.” ([Ian Talbot, p.161](#)).

The role of servicemen

One of the main reasons for the violence was the communal tension in Punjab, especially due to the Sikhistan issue as Sikhs demanded an independent Sikh state. The Sikhistan issue is well known and adequately covered by academic literature (See [Talbot and Singh, p.206](#) and [Amrik Singh, pp.159-177](#)) However, it is rarely discussed that what role did the servicemen, such as policemen, army and civil service officers, played in causing the violence in Punjab at partition. The servicemen are considered the protectors of a country as it is their duty to maintain law and order, and protect the country and its people from attacks. However, servicemen in Punjab perpetuated violence, instead of controlling it. This article will look at how and why they instigated the violence in Punjab.

The sheer scale of violence in Punjab caused India and Pakistan to agree on an exchange of population in the Punjab under the control of Military Evacuation Organisations (MEOs). Headquarters of MEOs were set up on both sides of the new international boundary. To facilitate the evacuation of refugees, the West Punjab Government and the East Punjab Government reached an agreement according to which no train or motor vehicle was to cross the border without refugees from the other side. Additionally, foot convoys of refugees, especially the peasants of the Punjab, was another method of evacuation. These evacuations meant that minorities had no choice but to leave their ancestral homes. While this was helpful for refugees who were under the severe threat of being attacked, it also meant the migration of minorities who did not face any such serious threats. ([Talbot and Singh, p.102](#))



Guns and ammunition captured by the military and police in Paharganj during partition. Photo credit: Govt of India, [Wikimedia Commons](#), Public Domain.

Punjab had been a major military recruitment area of British India. At the start of the Second World War, 48 percent of the Indian army consisted of men from Punjab. After the end of the Second World War, the large number of demobilized soldiers of Punjab, who primarily belonged to the Muslim and Sikh communities, perpetrated violence on each other. These ex-servicemen did not only possess weapons, but they were professionally trained in the use of arms and their recent experience in the war meant that the brutalities carried out by them were lethal. For instance, the attacks on refugee trains were 'characterized by the use of military tactics, the methodical and systematic manner, a high degree of planning and organisation, and military precision.' ([Talbot and Singh, p.208](#))

The government officials were given the right to choose which dominion they wanted to join. The transferring of civil and public officers, such as Deputy Commissioners and other high officials who belonged to the respective minority community had an adverse effect on that community as they provided a sense of security in an atmosphere of communal tensions. With their departure, the officers of the majority community became hostile to the minority communities in some areas.

Singh argues that law and order was difficult to maintain on both sides of the Punjab because of the 'infected' police. For instance, in East Punjab new policemen had to be recruited as out of around 20,000 policemen of the United Punjab, only 7000 policemen were left with East Punjab. ([Singh and Sharma, p.123](#)) Most of the new recruiters in the East Punjab Police were refugees from West Punjab, who had seen communal rioting and were affected themselves by it. They were infected with communal virus and therefore when problems began in East Punjab, instead of trying to control the situation, these policemen supported the wrong doers. For example, a number of men in railway police Ambala were arrested on the charges of looting and murder. (reference from kirpal) Similarly, according to Talbot, the police of both East Punjab and the West Punjab raped, killed and looted on various occasions. ([Ian Talbot, p.158](#))

Conclusion

The partition of Punjab was a tragedy that is remembered to date as it affected the lives of millions of people. The partition showed that when a country faces a major catastrophe, servicemen like police, army and civil service officers play a crucial role in maintaining law and order and protecting people in a country. However, if these servicemen themselves perpetuate violence then the consequences can be dire. As we witness [a significant rise in hate crimes across India](#), it is imperative that the policemen and army in the country are not adversely affected by any forms of communalism, and carry out their role aptly and effectively.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author



Saud Sultan graduated from the University of Cambridge with an MPhil in Modern South Asian Studies. His research interests include the Kashmir issue, the 1947 partition and India-Pakistan relations.