

# The undivided history of Punjab's partition

The Punjab Bloodied, Partitioned and Cleansed

By Ishtiaq Ahmed

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AJAY BHARDWAJ

Ishtiaq Ahmed claims that his work is "the first holistic and comprehensive case study of the partition of Punjab" (p xlv); he has lived up to it admirably. A study of rigorous scholarship, with painstaking fieldwork on both sides of the divide, *The Punjab Bloodied, Partitioned and Cleansed* offers unbiased insights into a minefield called the Partition of Punjab. As the title itself suggests, the book delves deep into the most difficult aspect of Partition history which has come to define it — the scale and magnitude of the killings at that juncture.

The primary sources that Ahmed has accessed in his endeavour are equally interesting for a number of reasons. While the historian draws extensively from the classified fortnightly reports (FRs) of the Punjab governors and chief secretaries to the viceroys, he simultaneously pays heed to oral history or the personal narratives of individuals — "witness to or victim of traumatic events" — that he has recorded over a decade and a half. The coming together of the two strands creates an intricate web of high politics and everyday life, which contributes to a layered, richly detailed and immensely moving account of the partition of Punjab — leaving a permanent imprint on the mind of the reader.

In contextualising the contours of the conflict that was yet to shape up with full force, Ahmed does well to refresh our memory by making a brief reference to the controversy centred around the publication of the book *Rangela Rasul (The Pleasure Loving Messenger of God)* in 1927 and the Masjid/ Gurdwara Shahid Ganj dispute. Both events took place in Lahore, the provincial capital of Punjab. Earlier, in 1924, Hindus and Sikhs of Kohat in NWFP were forced to take refuge in Rawalpindi after being violently attacked.

However, these incidents were more in the nature of aberrations. In real terms Ahmed's narrative takes off in the second half of 1945 during the provincial election campaign in Punjab, when the Muslim League vociferously propagated its demand for a separate Pakistan. The span of the book ends at December 1947 by when religious cleansing was more or less complete in the two Punjabs. His premise: "The investigation is organised in a chronological order, on the assumption that actions and reactions over it amongst the contestants become a chain of intended and unintended consequences." (p li)

The area in which this cleansing took place was large. Pre-partition Punjab was spread over 29 districts coming under the five divisions of Rawalpindi, Multan, Lahore, Jullundur and Ambala, apart from its many princely states. The 1941 census put Punjab's population at 33,922,373. Violence broke out on 3-4 March, 1947 in Lahore soon after the resignation of Punjab Unionist Party led-government of Sir Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana. Gradually, as the scenario unfolded, the entire region exploded into brutal violence against its minorities — Hindus and Sikhs in western Punjab and Muslims in eastern Punjab.

The most remarkable aspect of the book is the manner in which Ahmed

has managed to contextualise, investigate and document almost each major episode of Partition violence. For, these were the decisive strikes which triggered the flight of minorities to safe havens on the other side: The contest at Mahan Singh gate and Chowk Farid, the train attack in Sharifpura, and massacre at Chowk Pragdas in Amritsar; the murder of Seth Kalyan Das, killings at Boar Gate and Basti Nau in Multan; the fire at Shahalmi in Lahore; Rawalpindi,

brings memories back into the realm of history in the world of academia. It lends voice to the otherwise forgotten tragedies of those voiceless Punjabis who paid the price by not only giving up all material possessions but ultimately giving up their lives at the altar of independence/Partition.

No wonder in popular Punjabi parlance Independence is always referred to by another name which reflects the experience of Punjab — *takseem, wand* or division.

**What is most ironic, in fact tragic is the fact that ordinary Punjabis — Muslim, Hindu and Sikh — had absolutely no idea of how rapidly their lives were going to be altered. Ahmed notes, "...the possibility that the Punjab could be partitioned was never submitted to vote. It did not figure in the election manifesto of any of the political parties. Therefore, no public ventilation of opinion and discussion took place on the most critical aspect of the partition of India — that the Punjab too, could be divided."**

Patiala, Ludhiana among others. The list is exhaustive.

Here is a book in which the Punjabis of Delhi, for instance, could easily trace an attack on Hindus and Sikhs in West Punjab, that, in one way or the other, was responsible for her/his family's flight to the other side. The same would hold true for many Punjabi Muslims in Pakistan who had roots in East Punjab. It would, therefore, not be an exaggeration to refer to this book as an encyclopedia of Partition violence in Punjab, with its look at day-to-day encounters of the violence spreading rapidly from village to village, district to district and division to division.

Even after 60 years the testimonies are extremely vivid, be it those of victims, their oppressors or just eyewitness and by-standers. Wherever possible, Ahmed has taken pains to use multiple sources to cross-check the details of an incident. The accounts can't but put the reader in an introspective mode.

Punjabis are connected to Partition through millions of memories that are being continuously processed and reprocessed within families. By transforming them into text this book

However, the *takseem/wand*/ Partition narrative until recently has largely been cast in a victim mould, where refugee Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs all fell prey to brutalities committed by the 'other' side. This myth has suited the nationalist discourse of nation-states formed on both sides of the divide. The perpetrator was always the other — the other community and, by implication, the other nation: Muslims and Pakistan for Hindus/Sikhs in India; and, Hindus/Sikhs and India for Muslims in Pakistan. No wonder, the churning of hatred has been on auto-mode for 60 years.

By writing an undivided history of Punjab's partition, Ahmed has made a strong case for breaking out of the binaries in which it has been cast. He leaves no scope for a blame game. Instead, he proves that Punjabis — Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus — were both victims as well as perpetrators of the crimes committed against each other. In a way it is a small beginning to retrieve Punjabi history from the clutches of *mazhab, millat, quam* and *mulk*.

This brings us to the issue of high politics — the dreams and schemes of colonialists, nationalists, and communalists. As early as 1944, the Punjab Governor, Sir Bertrand Glancy, in a FR dated 26 October, had warned of the disastrous consequences of extending the idea of Pakistan into Punjab: "I can think of no more alarming menace to peace, so far as Punjab is concerned, than the pursuit of Pakistan doctrine. Any serious attempt to carry out into effect this idea in the Punjab with its bare Muslim majority and its highly virile elements of non-Muslims means that we shall be heading directly towards communal disturbances of the first magnitude" (p 82). Ahmed has meticulously followed this thread by repeatedly quoting from the FRs in the book. But as the destiny of Punjab became increasingly entangled with that of India, the worst fears of communal disturbances of the first

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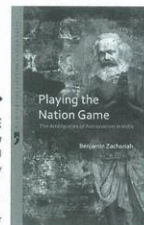


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magnitude came true.

Meanwhile, the real actors were getting ready to pay any price to protect their irreconcilable interests. Full-scale preparations were on for a bloody conflict along religious lines. "In the 29 June (1946) FR, the governor wrote, "The Sikhs are busy raising their new private army, recruits to which are required to sign the standard pledge in their own blood.'" (p 117)

The FRs take note of other developments as well. "Chief Secretary Bhanot noted in his FR dated 31 July that one of the most ominous characteristics of the current situation was the marked increase in the activities of the RSS and of the Muslim League National Guards. The membership of RSS had doubled since November and was estimated to be 28,000. The strength of Muslim League National Guards had increased from 3000 at the end of 1945 to over 10,000. The League announced its intention to increase the number of Guards to half a million in the remaining months of the year." (p 117)

What is most ironic, in fact tragic is the fact that ordinary Punjabis – Muslim, Hindu and Sikh – had absolutely no idea of how rapidly their lives were going to be altered for all time to come. Ahmed notes, "At that time, roughly only 11 per cent of Punjabi population was enfranchised. Perhaps more important to note is that the possibility that the Punjab could be partitioned was never submitted to vote. It therefore did not figure in the election manifesto of any of the political parties. Therefore, no public ventilation of opinion and discussion took place on the most critical aspect of the partition of India — that the Punjab too, could be divided." (p 103). Such was the magnitude of disconnect between high politics and the people at a time when the nation was about to get its independence.

It is thus not surprising that "Sir Evan Jenkins noted that the announcement of the 3 June Partition Plan did not rouse much enthusiasm among the Punjabis. However, it made the task easier for the criminal elements and their political patrons and sympathisers in the administration to escalate violence." (p 667)

A Reuters report of the time very poignantly described the contrasting situation when members of the Punjab Assembly met separately to vote on the partition of the province. "With large sections of Lahore and scores of villages throughout the province fire-blackened ruins, the 168 members of the Punjab Legislative Assembly laughed and joked as they shook hands in the lobbies of the Assembly building on their way to record their votes to decide whether the Punjab should be partitioned." (p 279)

In hindsight we know that Punjabis, irrespective of their religious identities, didn't want to leave their *vatan*, their home, and their lands. They resisted it till the very end and finally paid a very heavy price for their attachment. Had they been given a chance to decide the fate of Punjab through a general referendum in 1947, who knows they may have opted to stay together, and independent. That might have given birth to a radically different South Asia. ■