

The battle for Lahore and Amritsar

and other Essays by Ishtiaq Ahmed

With time so short [before 15 August 1947], British and Indian leaders finally agreed to establish two separate commissions, one for Bengal and one for the Punjab. Each consisted of four members, two nominated by the Muslim League and two by Congress, a format which lent itself to deadlock. All members were judges; none had any geographical expertise.

A single chairman was to be appointed to head both Commissions. Indian leaders insisted that this post be filled by someone without previous experience in India. Muslim League and Congress leaders agreed to nominate Cyril Radcliffe, who had a reputation for judicial brilliance and impartiality. The Commission's instructions were deceptively simple. As announced on June 30th, 1947:

The Boundary Commission is instructed to demarcate the boundaries of the two parts of the Punjab [or of Bengal] on the basis of ascertaining the contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims. In doing so it will also take into account other factors.

The battle for Lahore and Amritsar

<http://www.apnaorg.com/articles/news-25/>

By Ishtiaq Ahmed

The News, August 25, 2007

Large-scale rioting in the undivided Punjab subsided from March 14, 1947, onwards, but enough blood had been spilled not to let the Punjab return to normality. Lahore, Amritsar, Multan and Rawalpindi witnessed harrowing scenes of inhumanity hitherto unknown to the Punjab. However, in Multan and Rawalpindi the non-Muslims were not only greatly outnumbered, but these towns were located deep in the overwhelmingly Muslim-majority western Punjab. Therefore the Hindus and Sikhs began to migrate, often times sending their womenfolk and children away to safer havens eastwards, and decided not to confront the Muslim majority in a militant manner.

The situation of Lahore and Amritsar was very different. These two cities were the biggest and second-biggest urban and commercial centres of the Punjab. They were located in central Punjab, where although Muslims were in a slight majority the three communities were evenly balanced in terms of population. Moreover, both districts belonged to the Lahore division and there was a regular daily movement of people and goods between them. Therefore what happened in one would have an immediate repercussion on the other.

According to the 1941 census, Lahore city had a total population of 671,659. It had crossed the 700,000 mark by 1947. It had an absolute majority of 64.5 per cent Muslims and the rest were Hindus and Sikhs as well as a small Christian community. In the district as a whole, Muslims were 60.6 per cent and Hindus and Sikhs together made up 39.4 per cent of the population. However, many of the new localities and most of the commercial and trading areas in the city were owned by Hindus and Sikhs, whose presence in the life of the city was very visible and prominent. They owned 80 per cent of the total wealth in it. Thus despite the statistics which showed a Muslim majority, many of the Hindus and Sikhs believed that they together were in a majority. A widely held belief among them was that Lahore will remain in India come what may.

Amritsar had a total population of 391,010. Although Muslims were the biggest single group they were not in a majority. In the city as a whole they constituted 47 per cent of the total population while Hindus and Sikhs together made up 53 per cent of the population. In Amritsar district as a whole too Hindus and Sikhs were in a majority of 54.5 per cent while Muslims were 45.5 per cent. Amritsar was the only city and district in the Lahore division that had a Hindu-Sikh majority (other districts besides Lahore were Gujranwala, Gurdaspur, Sialkot and Sheikhupura). Although Hindus and Sikhs were the richer communities of Amritsar the Muslims were also well represented in trade and small-scale manufacturing. Amritsar was the holiest Sikh city, but among the Muslims there was a very strong belief that Amritsar will become a part of Pakistan.

Given these demographic and geographical peculiarities the battle for these two cities raged almost until the end of June in Lahore and until the beginning of August in Amritsar. Usually recrudescence of violence would first occur in Amritsar and a day

or two later it would surface in Lahore. This is evident from the newspaper reports as well as government documents. I grew up in Lahore hearing from elders that the Muslim goondas of Amritsar sent a packet filled with henna and bangles to their Muslim counterparts with a view to taunt them for not attacking the Hindus and Sikhs despite being in a much bigger majority. When I started researching the Punjab partition one main concern was to find out if this actually happened or it was merely one of those rumours which go around so much that ultimately everyone starts believing in them. I finally found a statement issued by the district magistrate of Lahore in May 1947 that the Lahore goondas had received such a package from Amritsar. The details will be covered in my forthcoming book.

It can be said that until about mid-June 1947 both sides – Muslims versus Hindus–Sikhs – confronted each other as equals. The RSS exploded bombs while the Muslims relied heavily on setting Hindu–Sikh localities ablaze with different substances called ‘solutions’ in the popular parlance.

From mid-June onwards the Muslims definitely achieved the upper hand in Lahore and the first stream of Hindus and Sikhs fleeing the city could be noted. It never ceased; on the contrary it increased by the day until on August 14 only between 10–15, 000 Hindus and Sikhs out of nearly 300,000 were in Lahore. On the other hand, in Amritsar the combat was a ding-dong situation for a long time with both sides holding fast in their belief that Amritsar will remain with them.

Consequently a very large number of Amritsar Muslims were still in that city when the Radcliffe Award was announced on August 17. Syed Ahmed Saeed Kirmani, who was in those days a prominent student leader, would travel many times to Amritsar from Lahore (during those days) carrying with him the message that Amritsar will come to Pakistan. Sardar Shaukat Hayat Khan would also travel often from Lahore to Amritsar to tell the Muslims that their resistance was paramount to the achievement of Pakistan and that their city will remain in Pakistan.

On the other hand, the Sikhs were preparing for revenge attacks in case their demand that Nankana Sahib and Lahore – both considered holy by them – were not awarded to India. Although the Sikhs and Muslims were engaged in negotiations until the very end to find a formula for keeping the Punjab undivided, extremist

factions of the Akalis led by Udham Singh Nagoke and another by Niranjan Singh Gill an ex-soldier of the Indian National Army of Subhash Chandra Bose were on the look out for assaults on Muslims. Equally the RSS had been re-grouping in Amritsar, having been ousted from Lahore by the end of June.

What comes out most strongly is that nobody wanted to leave their homes and neighbourhoods. When I interviewed Khawaja Iftikhar in Lahore in 2003 to talk about his book "Jabb Amritsar jal raha tha" (When Amritsar was burning), I was very surprised to hear him describe the relations between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in Amritsar as very warm and cordial before the trouble began. The situation in Lahore was even friendlier as comes out clearly from my collection of oral histories.

The author is a visiting senior research fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore on leave from the University of Stockholm. Email: isasia@nus.edu.sg

Negotiations on the Punjab – 1947

By Ishtiaq Ahmed

The News, September 1, 2007

The Punjab governors, Sir Bertrand Glancy (from April 7, 1940 to April 7, 1946) and Sir Evan Jenkins (April 8, 1946 to August 14, 1947) had been warning repeatedly that if India was partitioned, the partition of Punjab would become impossible to prevent. But attempts to keep it united continued almost to the very end. Sir Khizr Hayat Tiwana proposed that the Punjab could choose to remain undivided and seek direct dominion status within the British Commonwealth as an independent unit.

Mountbatten, otherwise notorious for a hurried and bloody partition of India, was supportive of a Punjabi solution that would result in an agreed international boundary. He threw his weight behind a meeting held in May 1947 between Jinnah and the Maharaja of Patiala for a settlement on the Punjab. That round of negotiations

failed. The Punjab Muslim League, the Punjab Congress and the Sikhs exchanged messages and even met a number of times to find a solution to the Punjab problem, but the Congress and the Muslim League top leaderships at the national level overruled an independent settlement among Punjabis.

The last serious attempt to achieve a Muslim–Sikh settlement that would keep the Punjab united took place in June–July 1947 when Major Short, a man very close to the Sikh leaders and Sir Penderel Moon (then a minister in the Bahawalpur State), an old Punjab hand, tried to facilitate a deal, but it too fizzled out because the Rawalpindi massacres had created deep suspicion among the Sikhs while the Muslim leaders did little to assuage their fears.

Meanwhile, on June 3 the Partition Plan was announced. It stated that contiguous Muslim majority areas in the Punjab will be separated from non-Muslim ones, but also "other factors" will be considered when demarcating the international boundary. The statement also emphasised the special case of the Sikhs and the need to protect their interests. Using the 1941 census as the basis of population distribution, 17 districts constituting the whole of Rawalpindi and Multan divisions and except for Amritsar district the rest of Lahore division were notionally placed in western Punjab. The remaining 12 districts constituting the Jalandhar and Ambala divisions were placed in eastern Punjab.

In subsequent clarifications, the government stressed that such a division was only notional and the actual border between India and Pakistan would look different once the Punjab Boundary Commission had considered the arguments of the parties involved and the chairman announced the boundary award.

On July 17 a Punjab Boundary Force under Major-General Rees was announced. It was to monitor events in 12 central districts – Lahore, Sialkot, Gujranwala, Sheikhupura, Lyallpur, Montgomery, Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar, Ferozepur and Ludhiana – where most trouble was expected to take place. The PBF had no jurisdiction in the Sikh states and was woefully undermanned. It had at most 9 to 12 thousand men at its disposal [*sic*: the most detailed study suggests 23,000], all locals except for the highest officers who were British, to cover 37,500 sq. miles. The PBF was to take up its task from August 1.

The India Independence Act of July 18 laid down the mechanism for the partition of the Punjab. The Punjab Assembly (elected in

1946 but in suspension since March 5 when the governor's rule was imposed) was to meet, but as two separate entities: East and West Punjab assemblies. The notional division of Punjab was used for separating the two assemblies. They were to meet to vote on whether the Punjab should be partitioned or not. If either assembly voted by majority in favour of partition it would be implemented.

The Muslim members of the East Punjab Assembly voted in favour of keeping Punjab united while the Hindus and Sikhs voted for the Punjab to be partitioned. By an overwhelming majority it voted in favour of the partition of the province. In the West Punjab Assembly Muslim members, including Khizr and other member of his Unionist Party, voted to keep Punjab united while Hindus and Sikhs wanted it to be partitioned. The government considered the result a sufficient basis to accept that the Punjab will be partitioned since the East Punjab Assembly had voted in its favour.

A Punjab Boundary Commission comprising Muslim League nominees, Justice Din Muhammad and Justice Muhammad Munir, and Justice Mehr Chand Mahajan and Justice Teja Singh, nominees of the Congress and Sikhs, was set up. Sir Cyril Radcliffe was to be its chairperson. The commission met during July 21 and 31 and heard the arguments from not only the main parties but also minor ones such as Christians, Anglo-Indians, and the scheduled castes (so-called untouchables). Sir Cyril never attended any of the sessions held in the premises of the Lahore High Court. He remained in Delhi and received the transcripts of the proceedings everyday.

Meanwhile, violent activities were affecting more and more of the Punjab. From the middle of June, besides Lahore and Amritsar, Gujranwala, Sialkot and Jalandhar were reporting rioting. Non-Muslims were largely on the receiving end but in Gurgaon district in the Ambala division the Muslim minority was increasingly being attacked by the Hindu Jats. From the middle of July reports of Sikh jathas beginning to operate in Hoshiarpur, rural Amritsar, Ludhiana and Jalandhar were coming in.

The exodus of non-Muslims from the western districts had started already in March 1947 and by August 15, according to Major-General Fazal Muqeem, nearly 300,000 had crossed into the eastern districts. Other estimates put the figure at at least 500,000. On the other hand, although the Sikh *jathas* had begun to attack on a large scale in the Amritsar district from about August 9 the

first large-scale movement of Muslims from the eastern districts towards the western regions was reported as late as August 12. The whole of Punjab was now disturbed.

It must be said to the full credit of the Punjab Governor, Sir Evan Jenkins, that despite his Hindu, Muslim and Sikh officials becoming partisan, especially after having opted for either India or Pakistan as was allowed to them, he was able to prevent large-scale killings till he handed over charge to the East and West Pakistan governments on 15 August.

In the figures on casualties up to 2 August 1947, the governor reported 3,753 Hindus and Sikhs killed and 879 Muslims. Most of the non-Muslim deaths occurred in Rawalpindi district while most Muslims lost their lives in Gurgaon. From 2 August onwards, the scale of killing increased dramatically. In the final essay on the Punjab partition we will try to explain what happened after British colonial rule ended in Punjab after 98 years.

The author is a visiting senior research fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore on leave from the University of Stockholm. Email: isasia@nus.edu.sg

<http://www.apnaorg.com/articles/news-26/>

The Punjab holocaust of 1947

By Ishtiaq Ahmed

The News, September 08, 2007

Intelligence about private armies and sale and movement of arms and ammunition had been collected by the Punjab administration for a long time, and the fact that a very large population in Punjab had served in the army should have left no doubt that a bloodbath would occur if proper arrangements were not made to prevent it. The Sikhs could always use their *kirpans* as daggers. They were also better organised for the final showdown.

Governor Jenkins requested at least four divisions of troops under British command to supervise the partition, but the British government replied curtly that no such divisions existed. Mountbatten remained supremely confident that Jinnah, Nehru, Patel, Tara Singh, Giani Kartar Singh and others would exercise

their influence in seeing to it that the partition of Punjab could be carried out peacefully without causing any displacement of people!

My extensive interviews with Muslim survivors from East Punjab show that almost nobody in the rural areas had any idea that the Punjab would be partitioned; much less that they would have to abandon hearth and home. Hindus and Sikhs in the villages and small towns of western Punjab were equally unaware of what lay in store for them, although half a million had moved eastwards beginning from March 1947.

Conspiracy theories have surrounded the Radcliffe Award of August 17, but a serious analysis would reveal that it largely followed the "contiguous population" principle and "other factors" were only recognised partially. Thus despite Sikh and Hindu arguments about owning 75 per cent or more property in Lahore and other districts of Lahore division they were given to Pakistan including Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak; so were the canal colonies of Lyallpur and Montgomery where the Sikhs owned nearly 75 per cent of rich agricultural land.

In any event, the Sikh holy city of Amritsar remained in India because Amritsar district had a non-Muslim majority. But three tehsils of the Gurdaspur district on the eastern bank of the Ravi – Gurdaspur, Batala and Pathankot (non-Muslim majority) – were given to India, although the district as a whole had a very narrow Muslim majority of 51.1 per cent.

Thus the non-Muslim majority Ferozepur district in the southwest and Gurdaspur district (minus Shakargarh which was on the western bank of the Ravi and given to Pakistan) in the northeast and the Wagah-Attari region in the middle were connected to form an international border more or less equidistant between Lahore and Amritsar. From Lahore the border followed the Ravi upwards into Kashmir.

For serious scholars of the Radcliffe Award it would be interesting to note that it corresponded exactly to the Breakdown Plan which Viceroy Wavell had sent as a top secret document to London on 7 February 1946. Wavell believed that the British should pull out quickly in case of an uprising. He had proposed a border in a partitioned Punjab which was identical to the Radcliffe Award.

From 18 August onwards hell literally broke loose, especially in East Punjab where troops from the Sikh states such as Patiala,

Nabha and Faridkot were involved in the attacks. The successor governments of East and West Punjab proved thoroughly incompetent in protecting the lives of the minorities. There is abundant evidence that the administrations turned partisan on both sides. Suddenly the greatest involuntary migration in history began to take place.

The Punjab Boundary Force was disbanded on September 1 as it proved to be completely ineffective and in some cases partisan. The Indian and Pakistani military then agreed to form mixed units to supervise transfer of populations. This formula worked much better and hundreds of thousands of lives were saved, but even their best efforts proved to be grossly inadequate.

From East Punjab some six million Muslims tried to cross the border into Pakistan while some four million Hindus and Sikhs moved in the opposite direction from West Punjab. According to Sir Penderel Moon 60,000 Hindus and Sikhs were killed in West Punjab and twice as many, 120,000, Muslims in East Punjab. This estimate is too low. Justice G D Kholsa claimed that at least 500,000 died, of which 200,000 to 250,000 were Hindus and Sikhs. He admitted that more Muslims were killed in East Punjab than Hindus and Sikhs in West Punjab. Lt-General (r) Aftab Ahmad Khan who served in the Punjab Boundary Force and then in the Pakistani force that along with Indian units escorted refugee convoys across the border, claimed in a letter to me that at least 500,000 Muslims lost their lives.

I have done interviews on both sides of Punjab. There is no doubt that many more Muslims lost their lives. Between 700,000 and 800,000 Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs perished altogether. That year the monsoons were also in a bloody mood. A large number of deaths were the result of cholera, dysentery, malaria and typhoid which plagued the refugee camps and the caravans on the move.

Good people from all communities helped their neighbours and friends and even complete strangers. The Khaksars did a great job in protecting Hindus and Sikhs in Rawalpindi while in Amritsar the communists will never be forgotten for saving thousands of lives.

The Sikh hordes did not touch Muslims who crossed into Malerkotla State, but those just a few feet away from its borders were cut down without any mercy. Thanks to Guru Gobind Singh's instructions, the Muslims of Malerkotla were not to be harmed come what may in the future because the Nawab had not complied

with the demands of the Mughals to arrest the Guru's minor sons who were passing through his State. Malerkotla is the only Muslim-majority town in East Punjab and elects one member of the East Punjab Assembly.

The killing units on both sides were formed by nexuses of local political bosses, police, corrupt magistrates, badmashes (criminals), fanatical religious figures and drug addicts from all the communities. The gangs excelled each other in inflicting cruelty on hapless men, women and children. Revenge, "communal honour", loot and lust were the main factors that impelled them to commit crimes against humanity. There was nothing remotely noble about their conduct. In this regard the shameful role of communal newspaper needs to be particularly condemned. They played a most vicious role in creating the mindset that demonised and dehumanised rival communities.

As far as the main leadership is concerned, we should note that a Gandhi–Jinnah peace appeal was issued as early as mid April 1947, but it did little to change the situation on the ground. Jawaharlal Nehru intervened personally to save the lives of thousands of Muslims in Batala and Jalandhar while the goondas of Sardar Patel funded bomb factories in Amritsar and elsewhere. Prime Minister Nehru and Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan together toured the two Punjabs in the last days of August trying to calm down the situation, but things had gone out of control.

Although Delhi was not administratively a part of Punjab its Muslims had to bear the fallout of the Punjab bloodbath. The late Dr Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi has written what happened to thousands of desperate Muslims who pleaded to Gandhiji to save them. He promised to do his best. Dr Qureshi notes that most of them survived and concludes that Gandhiji kept his word.

The writer is professor of political science at the University of Stockholm, Sweden. Email: Ishtiaq.Ahmed@statsvet.su.se

<http://www.apnaorg.com/articles/news-27/>

Restoring Punjabi identity

By Ishtiaq Ahmed

The News, October 06, 2007

The BBC announced on October 1 that a truck carrying goods from East Punjab crossed the Wagah–Attari border between India and Pakistan and entered West Punjab for the first time in 60 years. This was once an ancient trade route, dating back to 600 years. It linked India to Afghanistan and Central Asia, but when partition took place that route was closed. Consequently, for a long time there was no trade between the two Punjabs or when the trade was agreed a few years ago trucks would unload their goods at the border on both sides and then labourers would carry them to the other side. Mind you, the trade consisted of vegetables going from East Punjab to West Punjab and fruits coming from West Punjab to the other side.

Commonsense would tell us that vegetables and fruits quickly perish and therefore they need quick and prompt transportation to the market. Therefore the strange practice of unloading trucks at the border rather than letting them unload their products at the markets was an absurdity and nothing more. I am not sure which side deserved to be blamed more for such foolish behaviour, but we can hope that good business sense will prevail now and trade will expand quickly. Analysts believe that trade between the two countries could reach \$6 billion a year if both sides ease restrictions. In my recent series of articles on partition of the Punjab, I let the facts speak for themselves, because I believe that truth and truth alone should be the basis of solid and lasting human relations. Punjabis deserve to know what happened in the past so that they can make rational and hopefully enlightened decisions on the present and the future.

It is interesting to note that western Europe, which is today the most-advanced region of the world in terms of socio-economic and political cooperation, was not very long ago just the opposite. The bloodiest conflicts of history – the first and second world wars – originated in western Europe as nationalist ideologies and ambitions of the different nations clashed with one another. Thirty-five million human beings died in the First World War and 75 million (of which 25 million died in the war begun in Asia by Japan) in the Second World War. If the Europeans can forget and forgive the excesses committed in those two wars, there is absolutely no

reason why we can't do the same. What is needed is political will. In addition is needed a futuristic vision of regional peace and progress that transcends narrowly-defined national interests, which if you analyse closely are mainly the interests of ruling elites.

I am convinced that normalisation of relations between India and Pakistan is inevitable though there are important decisions to be made by both sides to solve the Kashmir issue in a manner that there are only winners and no losers. This can be possible only if all parties involved realise that there is no military solution to that problem. For the Punjabis in particular a new vision is needed to heal the wounds of 1947. We have to insist that in our schools and colleges the message of peace and harmony bequeathed to us by our elders is taught in a fair and dispassionate manner. I can tell you that Punjabi wisdom about peace, mutual respect and harmony is very rich and all we have to do is to own it without prejudice of religion and sect. Then we have the message of love of Guru Nanak and Sufi saints to share.

In fact simply one course in partition literature containing the best works of Krishan Chander, Saadat Hasan Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Balwant Singh, Ashfaq Ahmed, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi and other great fiction writers can suffice to shatter all the ugly walls of prejudice created by politics. Hindu Punjabis were at the forefront in charitable causes. Before partition all charitable hospitals in the Punjab were gifts of Hindu philanthropists. In Lahore alone we have the Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, Gulab Devi Hospital, Janki Devi Hospital, and the lesser known Dr Khera Hospital in Gowalmandi.

We should not forget the tiniest Punjabi community of all: the Christians. I wonder if we ever really take into account how important and useful have been the contributions of Christian missionaries in establishing hospitals, schools and colleges in the Punjab. We can always damn Hinduism for its caste system, which indeed was and is an evil, just as non-Muslims allege that Muslims draw arbitrary lines between believers and non-believers. The Sikh is stereotyped as a simpleton but also a brute when seeking revenge. But the truth is that good and decent human beings constitute the majority of all communities and it is in them that we should place our trust.

The Punjab is truly pluralist and it must remain that way even if we are now divided between two nations. Our common bond is Punjabi culture and language, but it has not been properly

recognised and developed. Unfortunately Punjabiyaat was a victim of communalism. In the early 20th century communal revivals resulted in the Punjabi language being communalised too. Thus Punjabi Muslims returned Urdu as their mother tongue in the censuses, Hindus Hindi and only the valiant Sikhs acknowledged Punjabi as their mother tongue. Now, all lovers of the Punjab and Punjabi have to make amends for that communal type of thinking from the past. Anyone who loves the Punjab and owns the Punjabi language as her mother tongue should be considered a Punjabi. My approach is inclusive: it does not refer to ethnicity, religion or sect.

The Punjabis of today are truly a global community. They constitute altogether between 100 and 120 million people. The Punjabi diaspora comprises some 10 million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs settled in Europe, the Middle East, the Americas and in many other parts of the world. There are Punjabi poets, fiction writers, journalists, filmmakers, songwriters and music directors all over the world and indeed in the subcontinent. Punjabis have many websites devoted to Punjabi culture. The general trend is to write in Gurmukhi and Shahmukhi alongside English.

Personally I think a great leap forward can be made if Punjabi literature was available in the Roman or Latin script. For instant communication there is no better medium than the Latin script. It is easy to learn and is familiar to Punjabis all over the world. I believe the restoration of the Punjabi identity can be speeded up if we can start writing in the Latin script.

The author is a visiting senior research fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore on leave from the University of Stockholm, Sweden. Email: isasia@nus.edu.sg

<http://www.apnaorg.com/articles/news-28/>