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## Horrors of Partition

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# Series

## This is the first part a two-part article.

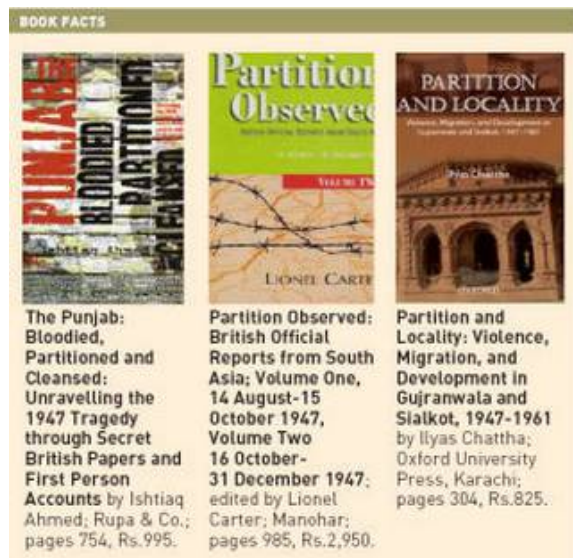
In addition to the loss of human lives and property, the near-fatal blows on cultures mark Partition's distinctively hideous features.

THE partition of the subcontinent of India deserves to rank as one of the 10 great tragedies in recorded human history. That is saying a lot. It is not only the loss of human lives and property but the near-fatal blows on cultures that mark its distinctively hideous features. Urdu and the composite Ganga-Jamuna tehzeeb (culture) suffered grievously. People were

uprooted, leaving an impoverished culture behind them. Of all the provinces, Punjab suffered the most. The massacre that preceded and

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Pakistan would mean a massacre, the Premier of Punjab Sir Sikandar Hyat Khan predicted to the distinguished civilian Penderel Moon as early as in October 1938 (Divide and Quit, page 20). That was well before the Muslim League adopted the Pakistan resolution on March 23, 1940, in Lahore, radically altering Sir Sikandar's draft just 24 hours before it was passed. He repudiated it because it dropped the organic link between the two parts of India, which he had provided. He told the Punjab Legislative Assembly, on March 11, 1941, We do not ask for freedom that there may be Muslim Raj here and Hindu Raj elsewhere. If that is what Pakistan means I will have nothing to do with it.



But that is precisely what Pakistan came to mean, regardless of Mohammad Ali Jinnah's initial tactical considerations. His two-nation theory implied two majoritarian states. It was to be a flawed secularism. His bogus theory of homelands of the two nations ensured a flawed, dented secularism. He protested to Mountbatten in 1947 when the Congress decided, rightly, to retain the name India, rather than accept the name he would have liked it to adopt

Hindustan; but this time within a communal connotation. His concept left little room for self-respecting minorities in Pakistan. The Sikhs, in particular, dreaded the prospect of being forced to live in an avowedly Muslim state.

Jinnah gave short shrift to them, to the Muslims in India and, not least, to the Muslims in East Punjab and West Bengal. The Pakistan resolution itself envisaged such territorial readjustments as may be necessary in the boundaries of the two zones it demanded. As early as on January 17, 1942, Jinnah confided to Prof. Reginald Coupland, adviser to Stafford Cripps, his

readiness to concede Ambala division to U.P. and for Bengal to cede its Hindu-majority western districts to Bihar, provided Pakistan acquired

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Must Meet Again, written by P.C. Joshi, its general secretary, one of the ablest pamphleteers, carried maps of Punjab and Bengal showing large compact zones of contiguous majority districts in the two provinces which had Muslim majorities (1944). So did maps published in B.R. Ambedkar's work *Pakistan or Partition of India* (1946).

Jinnah's Canutian edicts flew in the face of the realities. He was privately negotiating the terms of reference of the Radcliffe Boundary Commission on the partitioned Punjab and Bengal while publicly asserting that he would not yield on the partition of the two provinces. He misled his followers.



During partition, which witnessed perhaps the biggest migration in recorded history, a scene of trains in East Punjab.—  
THE HINDU ARCHIVES

As Ambedkar suggested, Jinnah would have been better off conceding that publicly. But, then, in that event he would have lost the support of the Muslim League landlords in East Punjab and the influentials in West Bengal. The question arises: Why did not the Congress and, for that matter the British, publicise these realities widely in 1945 ahead of the general elections for all the world to know?

#### Valuable contribution

These works by scholars of distinction are a valuable contribution to the history of Partition. Their industry is matched by integrity and a commitment to the truth. Ishtiaq Ahmed, born in Lahore, is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Stockholm University and Honorary Senior Fellow, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. He has not only consulted extensively the published material, especially material compiled from the archives by Lionel Carter, but painstakingly conducted interviews with Punjabis on both sides of the divide. None of the books based on interviews rivals his volume in range and depth. He is scrupulously objective.

The rival narratives are fairly set out: The late Harkishan Singh Surjeet, of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), witnessed the events and said in

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because I was there. I saw those dreadful acts with my own eyes. In that conspiracy, the Maharaja of Patiala was involved. The idea was that if the Muslims were driven out, the Sikhs could form their own state in eastern Punjab.' The attacks on Sikhs and Hindus in March 1947 in Rawalpindi are regarded as one of the major crimes that triggered off others.

The lunacy that convulsed Punjab is dissected calmly in each of its phases. Before 1947 the communities did mingle; but in the main they led parallel lives. The first to advocate partition of Punjab was Lala Lajpat Rai. In November–December 1924, he wrote in The Tribune: My suggestion is that the Punjab should be partitioned into two provinces, the Western Punjab with a large Muslim majority to be [a] Muslim-governed province; the Eastern Punjab with a large Hindu-Sikh majority to be [a] non-Muslim-governed province. He also suggested that Muslim provinces be established in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), Sindh and East Bengal.

By the end of 1945, partition had entered the realm of the probable. On December 27, 1945, the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, proposed a breakdown plan to London followed by a paper demarcating genuinely Muslim areas, on February 7, 1946. It was based on a partition of Punjab and Bengal.

The Governor of Punjab Bertrand Glancy wrote to Wavell on August 16, 1945: [T]here is a very serious danger of the elections being fought, so far as Muslims are concerned, on an entirely false issue. Crude Pakistan may quite illogical, undefinable [ sic] and ruinous to India and in particular to Muslims, but this does not detract from its potency as a political slogan. The uninformed Muslim will be told that the question he is called on to answer at the polls is Are you a true believer or an infidel and a traitor? Against this slogan the Unionists have no spectacular battle-cry if Pakistan becomes an imminent reality, we shall be heading straight for a bloodshed on a wide scale; non-Muslims, especially Sikhs, are not bluffing, they will

not submit peacefully to a government that is labelled Muhammadan Raj'. Hence it appears to me to be of vital importance to take action, before it is

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Muslims at A transit camp.-THE HINDU ARCHIVES

in Punjab there were two neighbouring divisions (Ambala and Jalandhar) out of our total of five, in which there was no single district with a Muslim majority. He would add to them the very important district of Amritsar. The citation of this practical illustration might be of great help. Action on these lines would at least provide the Unionist Party with a rallying cry against

Pakistan something on which the elector could definitely bite. No Punjabi, however, uninformed, would contemplate with equanimity so shattering a dismemberment of the province involving in effect the disappearance of the word Punjab' (emphasis added, throughout). This was sound advice.

Tense as the situation was, it was aggravated by the Unionist Ministry's ban on the Muslim National Guard, the League's civil disobedience movement, and Britain's announcement on February 20, 1947, that it would quit India by the end of June 1948. The Cabinet Mission's plan based on a united India had collapsed. In March 1947, the Congress demanded the partition of Punjab and Bengal. Sikhs and Hindus were determined to split Punjab. The League was determined to avert that. By then riots had spread. In 1946, 400 Hindus were killed in Noakhali and 5,000 Muslims in Bihar. As well as communal hate, political objectives fuelled frenzy in Punjab.

Ishtiaq Ahmed documents the happenings, political and murderous, in a disciplined chronological order based on the records and interviews. The leaders had lost control over their followers.

Swaran Singh, leader of the Panthic Party in the Assembly, told Governor Evan Jenkins on February 27, 1947: The Sikhs have been profoundly moved by the obvious desire of the Muslims to seize the Punjab for themselves and would not permit them to do so. The agitation has shown Pakistan in all its nakedness and was a fair example of the kind of treatment that the



minorities, including the Sikhs, might expect from Muslim extremists. He [Swaran Singh] admitted that civil war would lead to widespread misery,

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partitioning the Punjab, but felt that a partition with all its disadvantages might prove to be the only remedy.

The author records that in his fortnightly report of March 4, 1947, covering the second half of February, Chief Secretary Akhtar Hussain wrote that the agitation had affected all districts, creating serious situations in some places: The campaign is of deliberate disobedience and defiance of law conducted with a definite undemocratic political motive. In his report of March 24 (covering the first half of March), he remarked: Although many were shocked by the vulgarity of the League's tactics and behaviour, the agitation undoubtedly attracted the sympathy of most Muslims.

He noted: Of all reactions, however, the most marked, and the most dangerous, were those of Sikhs. Their resentment was bitter and their feelings inflamed by their understanding of the League's objective and by incidents involving Sikhs and furnished what they accepted as proof of Muslim mass animosity directed against the Sikh community. Akhtar Hussain blamed the Muslims of Amritsar particularly for their brazenly aggressive attitude towards Sikhs. Muslims in their stupidity disgraced Sikhs, singled out Sikh policemen for their attacks and brutally murdered a Sikh constable. The effect of this was grave in the extreme and, as has already been stated, communal strife between Sikhs and Muslims was almost inevitable if the League movement of defiance had continued.

Sikhs were led by a man devoid of sense, who was to make a mess of things even after independence. On March 3, 1947, Master Tara Singh came out on the steps of the Assembly, accompanied by other Sikh leaders, to meet the crowd. He unsheathed his kirpan and waved it in the air. The incident instantly acquired notoriety and unleashed wild passions.

#### **Massacre in Rawalpindi**

March 1947 was a defining month. The author reconstructs the outbreak of violence in Rawalpindi on the basis of interviews. The initial clash was provoked by Hindu and Sikh protesters on March 5, a fact that Justice G.D.

Khosla's disgracefully partisan report does not mention. The author writes: The attacks

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At a camp in East Punjab, evacuees from West Punjab. –THE HINDU ARCHIVES

the Sikhs were heavily armed, and instead headed towards the nearby villages. Between December 11–14, 2004, Ahmad Salim and I visited some of the villages in the Rawalpindi district that were attacked in 1947. We avoided visiting Thoa Khalsa, whose story has been made unforgettable

by Urvashi Butalia in her classic work *The Other Side of Silence* (2000). Thoa Khalsa is located close to Kahuta, where the principal Pakistani nuclear enrichment plant is located. In *Freedom at Midnight*, Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre depicted the agony of Kahuta a rather large village of 2,000 Hindus and Sikhs and 1,500 Muslims in the following words:

A Muslim horde had descended on Kahuta like a wolf pack, setting fire to the houses in its Sikh and Hindu quarters with buckets of gasoline. In minutes the area was engulfed in fire and entire families, screaming pitifully for help, were consumed by the flames. Those who escaped were caught, tied together, soaked with gasoline and burned alive like torches.'

Around 3,000 people were killed. In a special report to Mountbatten dated April 16, Jenkins wrote: The communal proportions have not been accurately reported, but I should say that among the dead are six non-Muslims for every Muslim. Mr Liaquat Ali Khan can hardly realise the terrible nature of the rural massacre. One of my troubles has been the extreme complacency of the League leaders in the Punjab, who say in effect that boys are boys'. I have no doubt that the non-Muslims were provocative in the cities, but the Muslims had been equally provocative during their agitation and had in particular murdered a Sikh constable in Amritsar. The author notes that at the outbreak of rioting in Rawalpindi the Sikhs enjoyed the upper hand for a couple of days until the tide turned on March 6. That evening, Muslim raiders headed towards predominantly Sikh villages surrounded by a sea of Muslim villages and hamlets. Such villages were

attacked by large mobs, sometimes running into several thousands, which easily overwhelmed the resistance that was offered. The pogroms and

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women only makes that episode more tragic; it is the code of honour of those times that dictated such behaviour, which outsiders might describe as bizarre'.

The complacent assumption that the partition of Punjab would not entail massacres and migrations was totally unrealistic. By the second week of May, violent attacks increased. Intelligence agencies reported it and the Punjab Governor passed on that information to Mountbatten. Predictably administrative measures proved grossly inadequate.

#### Role of Sikh rulers

The author records: There is no reason to doubt that the Sikh leadership involving the Akalis as well as some rulers of princely states had made up their mind to empty East Punjab of all Muslims. It was put into operation immediately after August 17, when the Radcliffe Award became known to the general public. Next day, which coincided with the Islamic festival of Eid, proved to be the day when all hell broke loose on the nearly six million Muslim minority. Most of the Muslims were unarmed peasants, who had no clue that they would be forced to leave their ancestral abodes. The attacks on them, no doubt, had been planned much earlier, but remained in abeyance till such time that the conditions were ripe. The attacks took place much in the same way that Sikh villages were raided in March 1947; only the scale was many times bigger. No doubt Hindus were involved in financing the attacks, but it was mostly Sikhs who took part in them.

In the Hindi-speaking eastern districts, Hindu Jats also took part in the attacks on Muslims. The lawless Hobbesian state of nature materialised in the fullest sense in the Sikh princely states, where preparations to expel Muslims had been under way for a long time. The PBF [Punjab Boundary Force] had no jurisdiction in the princely states and that made it easier to attack Muslims.





The partition of Punjab was inevitable if India was to be partitioned, and massacres were inevitable

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Master Tara Singh, the most prominent leader of Sikhs. On March 3, 1947, he came out on the steps of the Assembly, accompanied by other Sikh leaders, to meet the crowd. He unsheathed his kirpan and waved it in the air. The incident instantly acquired notoriety and unleashed wild passions. – THE HINDU ARCHIVES

have a contingency plan if the Punjab was divided and it was based on the use of force and terror to make the Muslims run for their lives from East Punjab. Therefore, the Sikhs in particular had a special interest in expelling Muslims if not Hindus at that time in order to concentrate their co-religionists in those parts of the Punjab they wanted to become a Sikhistan or Khalistan. Such an objective necessitated the use of brutal force and the Sikhs had made preparations accordingly. The weapons they used in some cases included even machine guns and other automatic weapons. The transition from colonial to Indian rule provided the opportunity to quickly realise ethnic cleansing in a matter of a few months.

### Jinnah's failure

Jinnah very well knew that the partition of Punjab was a logical consequence of the partition of India. Had he accepted that publicly, the Leaguers of East Punjab, some of whom were landowners, would have deserted him. The author records his parleys with the Sikh leaders, especially the Maharaja of Patiala, in May 1947; but the offers were based on a united Punjab as part of Pakistan, a Muslim State. The Sikhs demanded its partition.

Had Jinnah conceded that even at that late hour and forged a pact with the Congress, the massacres might have been averted. In his hour of triumph, Jinnah lamentably failed in statesmanship.

Contrast his attitude with the stand adopted by Sir Edward Carson, the architect of Ireland's partition, in the House of Commons on May 18, 1920. He himself excluded from Ulster (Northern Ireland) three overwhelmingly

Catholic counties and was content with the six that had a Protestant majority. Enlarging territories on false premises was a system of land

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LOSS OF THE MINORITIES accentuated the muslim character of Pakistan and undermined Jinnah's commitment to secularism. His dream was shattered. The imposition of the permit system in March 1948 and the erection of barriers wrecked the rest of his plans. They were based on two fatal flaws; one in concept the two-nation theory and the other in its execution an abrasive offensive rhetoric. Both rendered impossible a friendly accord, which alone could have mitigated the cost of Partition. Ishtiaq Ahmed, a Punjabi himself, describes eloquently but realistically the emotional wrench which is still felt by Punjabis.

#### Insights into partition violence

Illyas Chattha, now based at the Centre for Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies, University of Southampton, offers a unique, locality-based perspective on the process of collective violence and mass migration. He has consulted all that there was to read and conducted fieldwork intensively, retrieving neglected first information reports (FIRs) in police stations.

Partition violence has only recently been considered in terms of general theories. Why was this violence not featured in broader accounts of genocide or ethnic cleansing? This academic neglect was not only because of the Eurocentric character of the post-Second World War debate on mass violence overshadowing India's Partition violence, but also because the state's nation-making accounts downplayed the darker side in order to bolster the achievement of freedom. For a long time, standard accounts of the 1947 communal violence observed this violence as summer madness, slaughter', mass killings', massacres', and the like. The author has delved into the archives for original research and not confined himself to published compilations of archival material.

The scholar's industry is matched by his objectivity. The strongly communalised local press exacerbated tensions. The newspapers Ajit and Rajut instigated the Sikh community to be ready for sacrifices to maintain unity and the existence of the Panth. The Muslim newspapers Azad and

Inquilab wrote against the division of Punjab with the heading 'Fragmentation of the Punjab'. They reported with an expression of grim

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paramilitary organisations had mushroomed and penetrated every corner of the Punjab.

By June 1947, it was estimated that the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh] had opened seventeen new branches and its membership had risen to 59,200. The Muslim League National Guards (MLNG) had accumulated 43,200 members, not to mention the members of a variety of miscellaneous bodies such as the Ahrar razakars, Khaksar militia, Shahidi jathas, Volunteer jaishes, Hindu Scouts Volunteer Corps (HSVC), and Akal Shiana. Preparations for violence were made to pre-empt the boundary award. With the appointment of Radcliffe to map the boundary lines a sudden flare-up' was noted.

Chattha notes the class dimension of the carnage and rejects much conventional wisdom. Partition violence had clear class and gender dimensions. Politically astute members of the upper-middle class Hindus and Sikhs had started to migrate months and weeks before the actual Partition took place. They had begun to sell their properties and shift assets to safer zones'. Poor people who lacked not only the resources, but also were unaware of the rapidly evolving political scenario, were driven out from mid-August onwards. Urvashi Butalia deserves high praise for her work on the crimes committed against women.

Since Sialkot shares a border with Jammu violence in Jammu had many parallels with that in Sialkot. What gives the Jammu massacres a special character is that they were mainly ordered by the Maharaja of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, and involved political motives to ethnically cleanse the Muslim population. This was intended to ensure a non-Muslim majority in the Jammu region. Violence was undertaken in the main by the State troopers. They received support from disgruntled Hindu and Sikh refugees from West Punjab. The danger for Muslims multiplied every hour', as hordes of Hindu and Sikh refugees started pouring into Jammu from

areas that were going to become Pakistan. In many ways, Kashmiri Muslims were to pay a heavy price in September–October 1947 for the earlier

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A large flock began to arrive after the March 1947 Rawalpindi massacres of Hindus and Sikhs. By late 1947, over 160,000 Hindus and Sikhs had migrated from the western districts of Punjab. In Jammu city alone, by mid-September, they numbered over 65,000. They carried with them harrowing stories of Muslim atrocities, which were retold in the press and given official sanction by the state media. Their arrival brought the communal tension to the breaking point' and further intensified the killings of Muslims and their exodus.