UOS Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities (UOSJSSH)
ISSN (P) 2224-2341, ISSN (E) 2310-0249
Volume: 10, (1) June, 2026, Pages (54-62)
Journal Homepage: https://uosjssh.su.edu.pk/

Migration, Memory, and Violence: Reassessing the Human Impact of the 1947 Partition

Muhammad Rizwan Majeed
PhD Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, Islamia University of Bahawalpur

Dr. Imran Ali
Assistant Professor, Department of Pakistan Studies, Islamia University of Bahawalpur
(Corresponding Author) Imran_ali@iub.edu.pk

Muhammad Imran Majeed
PhD Scholar, Department History, Islamia University of Bahawalpur

Abstract

The partition of British India in the year 1947 was one of the most important and hurtful events in the South Asian history that led to the birth of India and Pakistan. Among the principal points of partition that are analyzed in this article are the separation of state property between two new states that were created, mass migration and communal violence. The research methodology is qualitative in historical research and involves reference to secondary literature on the topic as well as primary data in the form of official papers, governmental reports, and contemporary records. This paper explores the role of the rush political move of dividing the subcontinent in the migration of one of the largest migrations in modern history where millions of Muslims fled to Pakistan and Sikhs and Hindus fled to India. The migratory process was characterized by a lot of communal violence which entailed murder, kidnappings and severe social unrest. The paper provides a comprehensive insight into the complex institutional and humanitarian effects of the partition by focusing on the administrative challenges in distributing the governmental systems of British India, military bases, and financial resources of the country.

Keywords: Division, Assets, Migration, Partition and Community Violence.

Introduction

One of the landmarks of the South Asian history as well as the British-Imperial history was the partitioning of the British Indian Empire that happened during the summer of the year 1947. According to the imperial perspective, the fall of its crown jewel made the British Empire lose a significant portion of its shine. To the eyes of the individual on the Indian subcontinent, millions of human beings had died during the riots that erupted after partitioning British India into India and Pakistan, two new independent states. Experts based in the United States, Britain, India, Pakistan and, to a smaller degree, Bangladesh are still arguing about various aspects of the Indian Partition today (Roy, 2014a).

The concept of partitioning in historiography has changed a lot in the history. The liberal imperialists like British historians argued soon after the independence that Britain was training India on how to govern itself one day. With the British rule, economic prosperity, security,

stability, and peace existed. The greed of the native politicians and inefficiencies in the administrative system led to anarchy, chaos, confusion and eventual separation of India (Judd, 2004).

Academics of both Pakistan and India produced the next generation of historical writing about Partition. The British split et impera plan and the subsequent emergence of All India Muslim League (AIML) along with its communal politics were condemned by Indian writers, who can be termed nationalists. The Indian National Congress (INC) is brought out as the heroic savior of Mother India rather than the British Raj (Mahajan, 2000; Panigrahi, 2004). The battle of the INC is depicted as a case of heroic failure. Nevertheless, Pakistani historians believed that there was a threat to the culture and lives of Muslims in the sub-continent to a combination of an unholy British imperial-Hindu.

Before Partition

Historians of Muslim politics in northern India have gathered a list of significant dates and events as far back as 1857 or earlier. These dates and incidences are marks of progress towards Pakistan, loss of chances of Hindu-Muslim settlement and the turning point or turning points when Pakistan became inevitable. The farther the date is set the more probable it is that the historian setting the date concurs that there was some basic issue or fault line in Hindu-Muslim relations across the subcontinent that had to be resolved otherwise the formation of two separate nation-states, one with majority Muslim population and the other with majority Hindu population was inevitable.

In addition to this, the Muslim league had just issued the demand of a separate Muslim nation just seven years ago, in the 1940s. It followed two years of Congress domination in the Indian provinces which had been accorded full autonomy in the Government of India Act of 1935. This experience gave rise to exaggerated fears that a Hindu Raj would endanger the economic interests of the Muslim community and their culture once the British had gone out of India. Things were however not as safe as the creation of a Muslim homeland, since the Muslim league had previously had little influence in those parts of India which were to make the core of a future Pakistan state.

This forced it to overcome the rest of the regional parties such as the Punjab Unionist Party and convince the Congress and the British that it was justified to have Pakistan (Talbot, 2009). The Second World War had a great influence on the development of the Muslim League (Inder Singh, 1987).

As long as there was the fear of a Japanese invasion of the subcontinent, the next constitutional improvement was put on hold in the name of respecting the political opinion of the Muslims. The vacuum created by the detention of nearly all the Congress leadership after the Quit India movement in 1942 was successfully filled by the Muslim league. The most important, however, was that the image of the Unionist government was ruined among the rural population due to its unpopular policy of recruiting army and agricultural policy on which they had to make in the vital Punjab area. The Punjabi farmers had maintained a distance with the Muslim league in the past. They started to consider the League as a better instrument of pursuing their interests compared to the discredited Unionist Party since 1944.

In addition, a large number of the landed supporters of the Unionist Party were also moved to opportunistically switch their support after Jinnah declined to admit any Punjabi Muslim representation on a broader Viceroy Executive Council other than that in the Muslim League during the Simla Conference in 1945 (Talbot, 2009). With religion becoming an important element of political identity, tensions were on the increase with the advancement of the Muslim league in war. The latter trend is known as communalism as it concerns the Indian subcontinent (Amin, 1990).

This was clearly noticeable in Punjab where the sizeable Sikh minority did not wish to be a constituent of a future Pakistani state. This was also as a result of the politicization of the Sikh identity that had begun in the late nineteenth century and which was founded on the selective re-creation of the historical community memories of oppression of the Mughals and the Afghans of the eighteenth century. Pakistan came to being, when the Muslim League secured big gains in the 1946 provincial elections not only in Punjab but also in other parts of Pakistan where majority of the population was Muslim.

Without this development, the validity of its claims of separatism would have been destroyed. This could not establish government in Punjab where an ungodly alliance of the Unionist, the congress and the largest Sikh Party (Akali Dal) was constituted winning majority of the Muslim seats. The mass violence in Bengal, the other key province where the majority of the population is composed of Muslims, began in August 1946, as opposed to Punjab.

No one doubts that this eruption was caused by the Call of Direct Action by Jinnah in reaction to the breakdown of the Cabinet Mission plans, combined with the British ruling that an interim All-India government should be formed without the participation of the Muslim League, but the question remains whether the Muslim League provincial government was at the helm of the eruption or not. The Calcutta bloodshed that claimed close to 4,000 lives was followed by a series of riots in Bengal and Bihar.

In keeping up with the waning circumstances, Lord Wavell, the Viceroy, was succeeded by Mountbatten. Attlee government delegated the latter the responsibility of ending the British Raj. By March 22, 1947, the time of arrival of Mountbatten in India, the violence had shifted to Punjab, now that it had started in Bengal. The province was brought under the administration of the Direct Governor after the Unionist coalition left the country at the beginning of the month, as well as, much violence in the Rawalpindi Division (Talbot, 2009).

Mountbatten had intended to revive the proposals of a federal India which had been put forward by the Cabinet Mission. All British authorities had a negative perspective of the economic future of a Pakistani state. The agreement of the Cabinet Mission proposals was first accepted by the Muslim League as they gave a lot of autonomy in regions where a majority of Muslims lived. In addition, ten years later, there was an opportunity to retreat and gain Pakistan through a backdoor. It took one month to convince that partition was the only alternative to secure rapid and smooth transfer of power because of the growing communal state of affairs and the long proddings with the Indian political leaders, which Mountbatten was faced with.

But he struggled to persuade Nehru who had devoted his professional life to the unity of India to this point of view. The second apprehension that Nehru also had was that by the formation of Pakistan, the process of Balkanization of the subcontinent would further accelerate. It was a master work of Mountbatten to have all the Indian leaders agrees on his 3 June Partition Plan.

This was not too pleasant to the leadership of the Muslim League that had earlier on aspired that Bengal and all of Punjab would have been incorporated in the new Muslim country. The partition experience hurt the long-term commitment of leaders such as Nehru and the Indian unity of Gandhi although some Congressmen in the leadership were happy to eliminate the Muslim problem, and even cynically believed Pakistan would not work (Talbot, 2009).

Migration under Blood

India became a formally independent country on August 15, and a separate country was formed in Pakistan on August 14. Millions of Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu inhabitants shifted the new boundaries in the divided regions. The presence of Gandhi inhibited many communal rebellions in Bengal and Bihar. Nevertheless, the mass exchange of population in Punjab led to the outrageous violence; the eastern region of Punjab became part of India but the western region was transferred to Pakistan. The migration of 14.5 million people and subsequent riots in the communities resulted in an estimated half a million fatalities, which included many of the Muslims in the east and many of the Hindus and sikhs in the west (Hansen & Talbot, 2002).

No one could have ever imagined the magnitude of the destruction and the number of lives that were going to be lost in the future that was going to befall them. A number of public disruptions, including riots, mass deaths, migration, and refugee crises, were also triggered as a result of this event (Bharadwaj et al., 2008). Individuals, particularly civilians, were driven to escape to an area where they believed safety, which was a task that had the potential to be fatal. In the chaos that Gandhi described, a sense of safety was a luxury. The massacres and kidnappings that occurred to these large groups of individuals as they were making their way to the place that would eventually become their home were the impetus for the violent conflict that broke out inside the community.

Revolters halted a train that was already in motion. Both a sword and a pistol were used to kill them once they were snatched from the mob. While on the trip, passengers were provided with halwa, bananas, and milk. "The announcement of this train was not made in a timely manner," the first organizer noted. Brothers and sisters, because of this, we have been unable to provide you with exorbitant entertainment (Manto, n.d.). The verse reflects the animosity that existed during the time of the Partition, which led to horrendous violence. Religion was necessary for the survival of humans. This barbarism could not be explained by any rule or regulation. In doing so, they contributed to the passage of legislation that institutionalized violence.

When they finally made it across the border into what they believed to be a more secure nation, they were compelled to live in refugee camps where they had no idea what their future held. In an interview with Malhotra (2017), a person who survived the Partition of India stated, "Beta, bohot saal tak camp mein rahe (We lived in camps for many years) .... Large tents housed two families, while a textile curtain separated them." You dined, slept, and lived at that location. Similar to a half tent, our barrier serves the purpose of isolating us from another household.

Anxiety caused by Partition was exacerbated by factors such as overcrowding in refugee camps, unsanitary surroundings, a lack of food and water, and the loss of family members.

Migration and Women Abduction

In order to have a complete understanding of the Partition, a gendered viewpoint is required. When the partition occurred, women suffered the most (Gunne, S., & Brigley, 2010). Numerous stories recount the sexual exploitation, rape, kidnapping, and murder of women on both sides of the border. These atrocities include forced conversion. When women learnt about the terrible conditions that others were living in, a number of them attempted suicide at frighteningly high rates in an effort to restore their reputation (and the honor of their community) (Dey, 2015).

As evidenced by the practice of honor killings and attitudes regarding sexually inappropriate relationships, both Muslim and Hindu cultures hold the belief that a man's honor is inextricably linked to the bodies of women. As a result, the community was penalized for the abuse of a lady. There was a major exchange of aggressiveness between female bodies (Menon, 2013). It was discovered by Dey (2016) that members of opposing groups also assaulted women in order to protect their honor.

After their kidnapping or disappearance, the women who had blended into the culture of the other side were put in a more difficult situation as a result of the Recovery Operations that took place in September 1947. After being relocated, their decisions were disregarded when they went back to their previous residence. As a result of the stigma associated with coexisting with the other community, they were forced to begin again. However, they frequently faced the possibility of being rejected by their families (Butalia, 2000).

Within the context of a violent patriarchal and political system, we should not consider women to be weak. In spite of the challenging circumstances, women retain agency. The importance of understanding women's agency in the context in which it exists is emphasized by Roy (2014). There is an investigation on strategic essentialism (Spivak, 2023). Temporary solutions to the problem of discrimination based on gender in patriarchal civilizations could be provided by this. However, according to Butalia (1993), agency must incorporate the moral order that is intended for women's job as well as the mediation of family, community, social class, and religious beliefs. After that, she provided further Partition women's agency examples.

Their agency was influenced by patriarchal society in numerous instances, including mass suicide, women rescuing those who had been kidnapped while also sustaining the patriarchal narrative of ownership, refugees refusing rescue and returning to their homeland, and refugees protesting against a state that is structurally violent.

When it comes to their own lives, people are considered to be actors; yet, double trauma is particularly important for women because mothers and grandmothers have the ability to pass on this suffering to subsequent generations. In a study conducted by Danieli et al. (2015), it was discovered that women had the strongest connection between the reparative adaptations of their children and the post-traumatic adaptations of their parents. It was found by Yehuda (2018) that children of Holocaust survivors have reduced levels of the stress hormone cortisol. They are

more likely to suffer from anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Other researchers, such as McCloskey and Bailey (2000) and Testa et al. (2011), discovered that individuals who had survived sexual abuse were more likely to have been abused as children. Women frequently serve as symbols of the supremacy of one religion over another. Butalia (2000) believes that 75 thousand women had been kidnapped and sexually assaulted while they were in the process of migrating. In order to comprehend this "unjust violence," it is necessary to comprehend the roles that women play and the manner in which males treat them across the divide.

Division of Assets

To create India and Pakistan as a sovereign nation-state, government employees, assets, civil department records, military records, civil settlements, the unique jurisdiction of federal and high courts, the domicile policy, and, naturally, boundary demarcation was all partitioned. The Indian leaders had no idea of the extent of the task strangely until they encountered the message. It would be presuming that this shock was so harsh that it shocked everyone who was in attendance, which would have been rather tragic, as Lord Mountbatten says (Sengupta, 2014a). These physical consequences of partitions have not been given much scholarly attention with the exception of the border-making process (Kudaisya and Yong, 2004).

A Partition Committee was set up on June 12 to perform the task of partitioning British India and was led by Lord Mountbatten. The League was represented in the committee by Liaquat Ali Khan, Abdur Rab Nishtar, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Rajendra Prasad, the leaders of the Congress. Ten professional committees consisting of senior bureaucrats were set up to take care of the endless specifics of the transfer process. These committees had an equal number of Muslim and non-Muslim executives and they represented the interests of the two future governments. The steering committee that acted as a point of contact between the expert groups and the Partition Committee was comprised of two highly senior bureaucrats H.M. Patel and Muhammad Ali.

According to the logic of separation, the officers were mainly Muslims who were chosen to serve the interests of Pakistan and non-Muslim public servants were chosen to represent India. These officers reckoned that India and Pakistan were the only custodians of the Hindu and Muslim concerns respectively and they also subscribed to the politics of the day to a large extent. As partition was coming closer, Nishtar was replaced by Muhammad Ali Jinnah in the Partition Council that substituted the Partition Committee (Mansergh, 1987). Generally, in case one of the two normal members of Pakistan and India was not able to attend the council meetings, Nishtar and C. Rajagopalachari were to participate. An arbitral tribunal was also put in place in case two parties did not agree with each other.

The same processes were put in place at the provincial level. The Separation Council presided over the election of departmental committees in equal seats at each side. These committees had the responsibility of bringing together all the known assets and liabilities of the departments and suggest the most reasonable way of distributing the same (West Bengal, 1948). There was a central committee that divided the Separation Council and the different departmental committees (West Bengal, 1948). It tried to take into account the suggestions of the departmental

committees and then submitted them to the Separation Council to which it added its own suggestions and modifications. This system divided assets leading to the formation of a complicated bureaucracy system that generated additional problems.

It was the start of the process of partition, which was the allocation of assets and liabilities, in an atmosphere of increased religious nationalism and antagonistic communal sentiment. As might be conceived there was a tremendous amount of popular anxiety of what then should be the basis of this separation, what property should be divided and what was too valuable to divest, how fair the whole business would be, etc. All these fall under to continuous arguments and controversial relationships. The media reflected the concern of the masses.

The Pakistan Times was critical of the partition process in Punjab whereby the commissioner in charge of partitioning and his aide were both non-Muslims (Sengupta, 2014b). Later in the same day, the Morning News told that curious and fantastically absurd events were occurring in Bengal, and that the representation of Muslims was apparently zero in the committee which decided to divide the assets and liabilities of the Bengal government (Sengupta, 2014b). Nonetheless, when he added, Muslim members of the Expert Committees are attempting to acquire as much as possible, the reporter of the Hindustan Times in Bengal area accused the opposite (Sengupta, 2014b).

The members of the Expert Committees had less than seventy days in which to partition the state of British India. The total assets and liabilities of all the departments were to be shared within this ridiculously limited period. Moreover, government employees were to be shared along with files and records of departments keeping in consideration any future requirements of both countries.

Conclusion

The partition of British India in 1947 is one of the most challenging and complex phenomena of the 20th century that led to the establishment of the independent states of India and Pakistan. The process caused the largest-scale population migration in history since it resulted in the relocation of an estimated 1015 million people across newly drawn boundaries. Hindus and Sikhs ran to India and millions of the Muslims to Pakistan. This movement was accompanied by extreme communal violence, such as in the form of massacre, acts of rape and kidnapping, and had generation's long psychological and social damage. The administrative systems were not ready to manage such high population influx as the division was sudden, and the result was the disorganized refugee camps and dire food, shelter, and healthcare shortages.
On top of the human plight, there was the tension of the resource gap, which included the financial institutions, military equipment, and the governmental systems. A permanent political conflict between the two nations was caused due to the property, compensation and state requirements. Besides altering the political and demographic environment in South Asia, partition had devastating social trauma resembling discontent with the local economies, family relations, and cultural continuity. The consequences of political decision-making in a rush without adequate planning of its effect on the populations are revealed in the moral and humanitarian failures that took place during this period.

To sum up, the division of 1947, though not only a geopolitical occurrence, was mainly a tragic

event in human history, with forced migration, inter-communal conflict, and contested allocation of resources. Its legacy continues to affect India-Pakistan relations, regional security, and collective memory highlighting why historical reckoning, reconciliation, and recognition of the colossal human price of the creation of the two nation-states were needed.

References

Amin, S. (1990). Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India. By Sandria B. Freitag. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. xvii, 328 pp. $32.00. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *49*(3), 674-675.

Bharadwaj, P., Khwaja, A., & Mian, A. (2008). The big march: migratory flows after the partition of India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39-49.

Butalia, U. (1993). Community, state and gender: On women's agency during partition. *Economic and political weekly*, *28*(17), WS12-WS24.

Butalia, U. (2000). *The other side of silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Duke University Press Books.

Butalia, U. (2017). *The other side of silence: Voices from the partition of India*. Penguin UK.

Danieli, Y., Norris, F. H., Lindert, J., Paisner, V., Engdahl, B., & Richter, J. (2015). The Danieli Inventory of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma, Part I: Survivors' posttrauma adaptational styles in their children's eyes. *Journal of psychiatric research*, *68*, 167-175.

Dey, A. (2016). Violence against women during the Partition of India: Interpreting women and their bodies in the context of ethnic genocide. *The Journal of English Studies, 66*, 103–118.

Gulzar. Two: A Novel. New Delhi: Harper Collins India, 2017. Print

Gunne, S., & Brigley, Z. (Eds.). (2010). *Feminism, literature and rape narratives: Violence and violation* (Vol. 27). Routledge.

Hansen, A. B., & Talbot, I. (2002). Partition and genocide manifestation of violence in Punjab, 1937-1947. *(No Title)*.

Inder Singh, A. (1987). *The Origins of the Partition of India*, *1936.C1947*, Delhi.

Judd, D. (2004). *The lion and the tiger: the rise and fall of the British Raj, 1600-1947*. Oxford University Press.

Khan, Y. (2017). *The great partition: The making of India and Pakistan*. Yale University Press.

Kudaisya, G., & Yong, T. T. (2004). *The aftermath of partition in South Asia*. Routledge.

Mahajan, S. (2000). Independence and partition: the erosion of colonial power in India. New Delhi.

Malhotra, A. (2017). Remnants of a separation: A history of the Partition through material memory. *(*HarperCollins India*)*.

Mansergh, N. (1987). *Transfer of Power*, 11, p. 40, London.

McCloskey, L. A., & Bailey, J. A. (2000). The intergenerational transmission of risk for child sexual abuse. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, *15*(10), 1019-1035.

Menon, J. (2013). *The performance of nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the memory of partition*. Cambridge University Press.

Menon, R., & Bhasin, K. (1998). *Borders & boundaries: women in India's partition*. Rutgers University Press.

Panigrahi, D. (2004). *India's partition: the story of imperialism in retreat*. Routledge.

Roy, A. (2014). Popular culture & the representation of women's 'agency'during Indian Partition. *E-International Relations. https://www. e-ir. info/2014/11/05/popular-culture-the-representation-of-womens-agency-during-indian-partition*.

Roy, K. (2014). Partition of British India: Causes and Consequences Revisited. *India Review*, *13*(1), 78-86.

Sengupta, A. (2014a). Breaking up: Dividing assets between India and Pakistan in times of Partition. *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, *51*(4), 529-548 cited the Viceroy's Personal Report No. 8, L/PJ/6/123: ff. 114–21.

Sengupta, A. (2014b). Breaking up: Dividing assets between India and Pakistan in times of Partition. *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, *51*(4), 529-548 cited the "News dated 15 June 1947. F. No. 15(106A) F1/47, Finance Department, Branch-Finance, National Archives of India (NAI), New Delhi".

Spivak, G. C. (2023). Can the subaltern speak?. In *Imperialism* (pp. 171-219). Routledge.

Talbot, I. (2009). Partition of India: the human dimension: introduction. *Cultural and Social History*, *6*(4), 403-410.

Testa, M., Hoffman, J. H., & Livingston, J. A. (2011). Intergenerational transmission of sexual victimization vulnerability as mediated via parenting. *Child abuse & neglect*, *35*(5), 363-371.

West Bengal, (1948). West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings (WBLA), 1948, Volume 2, No. 1, p. 20, cited by Sengupta, A. (2014). Breaking up: Dividing assets between India and Pakistan in times of Partition. *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, *51*(4), 529-548.

Yehuda, R., & Lehrner, A. (2018). Intergenerational transmission of trauma effects: putative role of epigenetic mechanisms. *World psychiatry*, *17*(3), 243-257.