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‘We suffered the most’: Sikh refugee perspective on Partition

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The partitioning of British India in August 1947 into its principal successor state, Hindu-majority India, and newly formed Muslim-majority Pakistan, like many of the now infamous partitions of the twentieth century, did not take place without considerable humanitarian turmoil. Indeed, a communal genocide of provincial and district minority populations, together with a huge transfer of population to and fro the two dominions, preceded, accompanied and followed the official Partition. This paper focuses upon the ‘memory’ of this episode as held by one of its participant groups—the Sikh refugees—who migrated from the territory of prospective/realised West Pakistan into truncated India. This paper contends that the Sikh refugees have sought to convey, through their memory of this episode, that ‘their people’ were the foremost victims of Partition. This is both in terms of the associated violence and the long-term material consequences deriving from being driven out of their ‘homelands’.

Having been targeted for, first, objecting to the Muslim League’s Pakistan demand, and then, second, supporting the division of Punjab so as to salvage the eastern portion for India, the Sikhs, together with the Hindus, belonging to the Muslim-majority districts of west Punjab and the other territories of prospective/realised West Pakistan, succumbed to the wrath of Muslim mob attacks at the time of ‘Partition’.¹ Direct or indirect victims of physical violence, murder, rape, forcible conversion, loot and plunder of their assets, defilement of their holy sites; the Sikhs that had managed to reach the ‘safe-haven’ of truncated India, as with other refugee groups of Partition, held, what this paper terms to be, a ‘victimhood-rich’ memory of Partition (with the ‘victimhood-rich’ element to their memory being further accentuated by, in many cases, the detrimental long-term consequences deriving from the division).

¹ For the purposes of this paper, the timespan of ‘Partition’ relates to the period between late 1946 and early 1948.

Notwithstanding the ‘involuntary’ nature of traumatic neuroses (Freud 1955: 13), it appears that there has been a conscious attempt by many Sikh refugees to maintain and evoke a memory of Partition that is, in its shape, suggestive of ‘their people’ being the foremost victims of Partition. In terms of why any group would want to promote such an idea extends beyond the common impulse of wanting to ‘feel sorry for themselves’, but serves one or a combination of the following three objectives, with the first being a more practical objective and the latter two more egotistical. These are; (1) it strengthens their ability to extract concessions and support from their host society, be it from non-refugee ethnic kin or the government; (2) it justifies, for some, their destitute status for which a non-refugee of a similar status would likely be stigmatized; and (3) it demonstrates, for the large numbers of those that have ‘succeeded’ socio-economically since then, their sheer heroism by reaching such heights in spite of their destitute status at the time of Partition. This paper, therefore, identifies and summarises the validity of the common aspects emerging from the Sikh refugee memory of Partition which serve to support their claim of being the foremost victims.

Distinctively ‘Sikh’ Edge to the Memory of Partition Violence

Sikh refugees have sought to maintain and strengthen the ‘usability’ (Zamora 1998) of their ‘victimhood-rich’ partition memory by demonstrating (or at least insinuating) that they, as a subgroup, and part of a wider pan-ethnic collective, were the foremost victims of the Partition violence. In an interview with this author, Paramjit Singh Sarna, a Delhi-based refugee originally from Gujar Khan, Rawalpindi district, stated that, ‘[the Sikhs] lost ten times more people to the Muslims than the amount of Muslims [the Sikhs] killed’.² Similarly, Davinder Singh, a Jat refugee from a canal colonist family in Sheikhpura but now living in Ludhiana, stated that

[w]e suffered the most deaths during Partition by far, no doubt about it...but then again I suppose you could say that it is hardly surprising, if you look at Sikh history from the time of our Gurus till now, you can say it is almost our destiny to die a violent death.³

Sikh Refugees versus Hindu Refugees

There are a number of explanations that Sikh refugees have advanced for why they suffered more Partition violence compared to the Hindu refugees, who also fled from West Pakistan. One explanation maintains that the historical animosity that had existed between Sikhs and the Muslims meant that the latter had fewer reservations about engaging in violence against the former. This view is reflected in a statement by Vachan Kaur, an Amritsar-based refugee originally from Shahpur Kanjra, Lahore district:

² Interview with Paramjit Singh Sarna, Delhi, 21 August 2010.

³ Interview with Davinder Singh, Ludhiana, 2 September 2010.

There was a lot of hatred among Sikhs and Muslims. It was easier for the Hindus to come and go. There was hate for them also, but not like it was between Sikhs and Muslims (quoted in Verma 2004: 134).

While the antagonism that existed between the Sikhs and Muslims of Punjab during this period probably did exceed that between the Hindus and Muslims, one of the chief reasons for this—the perception that the ‘other group’ were unduly aggressive in nature—may actually have deterred some Muslim mobs from attacking the Sikhs as opposed to the Hindus, the latter of whom were apparently more ‘cowardly’ and thus thought to possess less aptitude for avenging any such assaults.

A second explanation for why the Sikh refugees supposedly suffered more violence than the Hindu ones was that it had been the Sikhs who had been most vocally opposed to the prospective Muslim League-led ministry in Punjab (and wider Pakistan scheme) and as such were obvious targets for the Muslims’ wrath. This is reflected in the two statements below:

[It] cannot be denied that the main target of [the March 1947] attack were the Sikhs. It is suggested that the reason for this was the Muslim League thought that the Sikhs were the principal obstacle in the formation of the League Ministry, and if they had joined hands with it or even if they had refrained from co-operation with the Hindus, it would have easily formed a Ministry on its own [emphasis added].⁴

The Sikhs had opposed the partition of India with even greater vigour than the Hindus, because they felt as a community they could only expect disaster in Pakistan; it was therefore, against the Sikhs that the spear point of the Muslim League attack was first aimed. In the March riots, the Sikhs of Rawalpindi faced annihilation and a large number of them left the district [emphasis added] (G. D. Kholsa quoted in Randhawa 1954: 13).

Admittedly, it is difficult to deny that the Sikhs, as demonstrated by the language (often quite provocative) used by senior Akalis,⁵ were the group most virulently opposed to the formation of the Muslim League ministry and the Pakistan demand.

A third explanation advanced is that the ‘Sikhs were obvious targets of the Muslims...because of their beards...otherwise Hindus and Muslims looked the same, so in that way possibly the Sikhs suffered the most’.⁶ Although those Keshdharis among the Sikhs were undoubtedly easier to identify from the Muslim mobs’ point of view as belonging to an ‘enemy religion’, it also meant that they were also able to gain the protection of their co-religionists a lot easier in high intensity situations. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable for refugees to conclude

⁴ ‘Statement of Justice Teja Singh’. Boundary Commission: Partition Proceedings vol. 2, Acc No. 1634 [Prof Kirpal Singh’s Manuscript Collection, Khalsa College, Amritsar], p. 101.

⁵ Giving an idea as to the heartfelt Sikh objections in this regard, Master Tara Singh suggested in early March 1947 that his community, with ‘unanimous determination...oppose the formation of the Muslim League Ministry in the Punjab which has for its object the achievement of Pakistan or the domination of the Punjab’, before going on to say, ‘let the *Khalsa Panth* now realise the gravity of the situation. I expect every Sikh to do his duty. *We shall live or die but not submit to Muslim domination*’ [emphasis added] (*The Tribune*, 4 March 1947).

⁶ Interview with Kuldip Nayar, Delhi, 29 August 2010.

that, aside from a few Sikh majority pockets within west Punjab, being a Keshdhari served to increase the chance of their becoming victims of mob attacks.

Pan-Sikh Collective versus Pan-Muslim Collective

Since it was clear that Muslims were by most accounts the principal aggressors in West Pakistan, there is often very little reason for Sikh refugees, with their 'victimhood-rich' narrative, to identify with or appropriate aspects (through a 'backwash effect')⁷ of the Partition memory of their non-refugee co-religionists in the east.⁸ However Sikh refugees have occasionally been, somewhat reluctantly, dragged into the wider cross-Wagah debate about which community suffered the most violence at a pan-collective level. Yet even on such occasions, the Sikh refugees have still maintained the claim that their pan-collective suffered more Partition-related violence than the Muslims. This is based on a number of claims.

One claim is that their demographic distribution, i.e. the fact that they were thinly spread across the subcontinent but relatively concentrated in the territories of Punjab, resulted in Sikhs suffering the most deaths out of any community. In support of this point, pro-Khalistani⁹ Dr Gurmit Singh Aulakh, a Jat refugee from a canal colonist family in Lyallpur (now Faisalabad) but now living in Washington D. C., remarks:

I think the Sikhs were the ones who suffered the most...loss of life...because more of us migrated...Hindus and Muslims were only a small fraction of the transfer of population [as per their pan-collective numbers across the subcontinent]...we [the Sikhs] were the majority of the transfer of population [proportionately]...we covered the most.¹⁰

Though it is undoubtedly the case that the bulk of the Sikh population were concentrated within Punjab and that this province probably witnessed the greatest upheaval out of any in united India (thus making the Sikhs proportionally the largest victims in this respect), it is also the case that the Sikhs were also proportionally more likely to participate in Partition-related crimes than any other. However, under such charges, the Sikh refugees could disassociate from their non-refugee ethnic kin, and thus maintain the purity of their 'victimhood-rich' memory.

A second claim is that Muslims believed the killing of kafirs (non-believers) to be a virtuous deed, whereas the Sikhs and Hindus were supposedly more 'moral' and, thus, reluctant participants in the violence. Granting there have been many Muslim extremists who have historically considered the killing and conversion of kafirs to be righteous, it is purely a matter of one's own subjective opinion as to whether Sikhs, or for that matter Hindus, were any more principled in their conduct during the Partition massacres.

⁷ 'Backwash-effect' relates to aspects of the non-refugee event-related experience, in this case Partition, which the refugees appropriate into their *own* memory of their exile.

⁸ Since by doing so would typically weaken, if not virtually eradicate, their ability to view their collective as victims of Partition.

⁹ 'Khalistani' is a term associated with those Sikhs that support the concept of Khalistan, that is to say the secession of Sikh-majority Punjab from the rest of India.

¹⁰ Interview with Dr Gurmit Singh Aulakh [Phone Interview], 21 February 2011.

A third claim Sikh refugees advance for why they suffered the more Partition-related violence than the Muslims is that the disturbances in Punjab were part of a wider Muslim-led plan (inclusive of the Muslim League, their affiliated press and paramilitary organisations) to exterminate, or at least expel, non-Muslims from prospective/realised Pakistani territory. This view is reflected in the cross-section of Sikh refugee views from 1947 to the present that are offered below:

The relations between the two communities [Muslims and non-Muslims] got embittered due to the communal virus spread by the Muslim Leaguers.¹¹

The very name of the State which the Muslim League envisaged—and achieved—is, in the context in which it was adopted, a standing insult to the Hindus and other non-Muslims living in India. The name—Pakistan—means literally ‘the Land of the Pure’ or of Purity. This implies clearly that Hindus and all that belongs to them...[is] impure, defiled and unholy. In a communally-charged atmosphere to have broadcast such an offensive name and concept among the Muslims was to extend an open invitation to racial and communal arrogance (Talib [1950] 1991: 2-3).

Since the Muslim League had proclaimed that Pakistan was to be the homeland of the Muslims, it had to compensate its supporters with jobs, if necessary at the expense of the non-Muslims (Khushwant Singh 1965: 12).

Before [Partition] there was the news that although Pakistan had been created the Muslims there in India would live there [in India] and the Hindus and Sikhs on the Pakistan side could stay on in Pakistan. But Jinnah said it could not be allowed and that each man should come to within his own boundaries. It was after this that we started [migrating] [emphasis added] (Sikh refugee #16 quoted in Keller 1975: 45).

The killing was on all sides...but it was the Muslim League, and their conspiracy, that triggered it all...they called it Direct Action...and they started by going after Sikhs and Hindus wherever they could.¹²

Arguably, the Sikh refugee memory in this respect is partly a defensive reaction to the ‘competing history’ (Linenthal and Engelhardt 1996) from Pakistan that it was, in fact, a ‘Sikh

¹¹ ‘Memo: Akbar Virkan Village, Gujranwala District, Disturbances’, Fact Finding Branch, Ministry of Relief & Rehabilitation, Government of India, New Delhi, 3 May 1948, Acc No. 1415 [Prof Kirpal Singh’s Manuscript Collection, Khalsa College, Amritsar], p. 36.

¹² Interview with Tarlochan Singh, Delhi, 19 August 2010.

conspiracy'¹³ which triggered the violence across Punjab. In fact, the political leadership of both the Muslim League¹⁴ and the SAD¹⁵ not only repeatedly promoted the idea of transfer of population but also often instigated the violence used to achieve that goal. Of course this is not to say that the Hindus of Punjab did not play a role in expelling Muslims from east Punjab and the Sikh states (henceforth simply 'east Punjab') or other parts of India, but only that they as a community had, rationally speaking, the least to gain through any exchange of population both in socio-economic and political terms.

A fourth claim is that the Punjab police, largely fractured along communal lines during the partition violence,¹⁶ were dominated by Muslim officers. Amar Singh Bains, an Amritsar-based refugee originally from Pakpattan, Montgomery district, states that

the Punjab police force at the time was manned overwhelmingly by Mussulmans...and as you must be knowing, the force became utterly communalised at that time...They confiscated our weapons that were for the defence of our people under the pretext that we [Sikhs] may create trouble...This left us completely exposed to the raiders with whom many [police officers] joined in with the looting and plundering.¹⁷

While there were indeed more Muslim officers within the Punjab Police than any other community, it must be said that most of those serving east of the Radcliffe Line were actually non-Muslim. However, from a pan-Punjab perspective it is likely the non-Muslims suffered marginally more of a disadvantage in this respect.

A final claim, in common with a view shared by many Hindus across India, is that the British had a pro-Muslim bias (or at least a pro-Pakistan one),¹⁸ which led them to mildly

¹³ It was suggested by a series of publications produced by the Pakistani state in 1948 that the responsibility for the violence across Punjab lay with the Sikhs and their alleged 'conspiracy', namely '*the establishment of Sikh rule in the Punjab*' for which 'their preparations...were aimed directly and exclusively against the Muslims' [emphasis added] ('Note of the Sikh Plan', Acc No. 1517 [Prof Kirpal Singh's Manuscript Collection, Khalsa College, Amritsar], p. 1). Unsurprisingly many Sikh leaders have since, refugees and non-refugees alike, categorically refuted any such idea of a 'Sikh Conspiracy' ('Interview with Naranjan Singh Gill conducted by S. L. Manchanda', Delhi, 11 April 1972, Acc No. 168 [Oral History Collection, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi], p. 116).

¹⁴ This includes the likes of Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Sir Feroze Khan Noon to name but a few.

¹⁵ Once again senior leaders, this time belonging to the SAD, none less than Master Tara Singh advocated exchange of population as a permanent solution to the Sikhs' problem (*The Tribune*, 4 May 1947). Also, most objective readings regarding the Partition violence have shown that the SAD, and affiliated bodies such as the *Akal Fauj*, played a lead-role in massacring and expelling innocent Muslims across east Punjab. Indeed, according to Brass, Master Tara Singh himself admitted in conversation, that: 'We took the decision to turn the Muslims out' (Brass 2003: 77).

¹⁶ See 'Statement of Sobha Singh regarding Lyallpur Disturbances'. 28 March 1948, Acc No. 1405 [Prof Kirpal Singh's Manuscript Collection, Khalsa College, Amritsar], p. 110; see also 'Memo: Akalgarh Town, Gujranwala District, Disturbances', Fact Finding Branch, Ministry of Relief & Rehabilitation, Government of India, New Delhi, 12 April 1948, Acc No. 1415 [Prof Kirpal Singh's Manuscript Collection, Khalsa College, Amritsar], p. 3.

¹⁷ Interview with Amar Singh Bains, Amritsar, 16 September 2010.

¹⁸ According to a former MLA of British Punjab who fled Lahore after the Partition riots: 'The British were holding Pakistan up to some extent and, therefore, to hold it up, they had to be slightly anti-India, otherwise if they had been pro-India, Pakistan would not have come in' ('Interview with Surjit Singh Majithia conducted by S. L. Manchanda', Delhi, 14 June 1973, Acc No. 668 [Oral History Collection, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Museum &

endorse or turn a blind eye towards anti-Muslim outrages across West Pakistan. While conclusions about whether or not the British had a pro-Muslim/Pakistan bias is beyond the scope of this paper, it is clear that it was virtually impossible for the various communities of Punjab (and much less so across India) to be were awarded completely equal treatment by the Raj, nor can it be said that all British officials could have thought or acted alike.

Long-Term Consequences of Partition

The view that the Sikh refugees, and to a lesser degree the Sikhs as a pan-collective, suffered the most in terms of the nature and scale of partition violence appears to be consistent with the prevailing assessment within their memory that, in sum, 'the Sikhs were the worst losers of Partition'.¹⁹ Having discussed, in some detail, the violence associated with their departure, we now consider other reasons, economic, political and cultural, Sikh refugees perceive their community as suffering the most from Partition.

Economic Consequences of Partition

The Sikh refugee memory tends to assume that their people suffered the largest fiscal 'step-down' with respect to their pre- and post-partition livelihoods.²⁰ A statement by Tarlochan Singh, a Delhi-based refugee, originally from Dhudial, Jhelum district, provides an example of this:

There's absolutely no comparison [between life in west Punjab and east Punjab]. You see over there we were rich, we were the landholders, we had better agricultural facilities and techniques...we had large bungalows...and then to come to the east, where the people were backward, and very poor...and we joined them in their poverty...I was working on the streets, doing all sorts of child labour...from the age of thirteen, I was working hard.²¹

Similarly, Kuldip Nayar, another Delhi-based refugee, originally from Sialkot, suggests that out of the transfer of population,

the Muslims fared better...you see when they left India they had only land...so you can say there's was a step-up...[Yet in Indian Punjab] there were many homes that were vacated...these were

Library, New Delhi], p. 89). Perhaps one credible way of assessing whether or not the British held a pro-Muslim bias would be to record the proportion of Muslims/non-Muslims who, in accordance with their respective populations across India, were knighted or honoured by the crown.

¹⁹ All refugees interviewed by this study, as well as all post-event offspring, articulated words to this effect. Such a view has also been expressed in works written by both refugee and non-refugee Sikhs (See Gill 1975: 63; Khushwant Singh 1984; Nayar and Khushwant Singh 1984: 21; Dhillon 1994: 249).

²⁰ In his study on the Sikh refugees, which comprised 73 interviews with members of this sub-group, Stephen Keller remarked that, 'not one of the refugees, in designating the changes that had occurred in his life on this side of the border (as contrasted with his life in west Punjab), remarked that he was materially better off than he had been on the other side of the border' (Keller 1975: 85).

²¹ Interview with Tarlochan Singh, Delhi, 19 August 2010.

Muslim evacuee homes, though they were smaller than we had been used to, these were filled by Hindu and Sikh refugees [emphasis added].²²

In addition, these views, there are a number of other popularly-held views as to why Sikh refugees suffered the most in this respect. One relates to 'non-Muslim' dominance of commercial centres across West Pakistan.²³ So, for instance, Sarna suggests that one of the chief reasons for Muslim support for the Pakistan demand was that

[b]efore partition, Hindus, and Sikhs too, used to own all the businesses...even though Muslims were the majority; they only owned ten per cent of the businesses...so that's why they [the Muslims] were resentful.²⁴

Although there is much truth in the view that non-Muslims were dominant in trading centres across West Pakistan, it was mainly the Hindus who were so. This perhaps why Sikh refugees, in a bid to extract sufficient 'usability' from this aspect of their partition memory, tend to speak of a joint 'Hindu and Sikh contribution'.²⁵ Such apparent shifts in group identification are possible because 'every individual belongs to numerous...groups and therefore entertains numerous self-images and memories' from which to draw upon (Assmann 1995: 127).

Another popularly-held view that contributing towards the conviction that Sikh refugees suffered the most economically is that, while Sikhs were responsible for transforming the largely barren wastelands of central Punjab into the most fertile and productive agricultural land in the country, i.e. the 'canal colonies', all nine of these colonies ended up in Pakistan (Krishan 2004: 80). Admittedly, the view that the Sikhs were responsible for the success of the canal colonies is one that was articulated both in the period shortly before the partition of Punjab/India as well as in the subsequent decades.

Before partition, this view was expressed in the following statements:

It is significant that only those districts and regions of the Punjab, which are mainly cultivated by the Sikh farmers, are the surplus food districts...By sheer dint of their hard work, the Sikhs have not only made barren and waste lands fertile but also have created an insatiable desire amongst the Punjabis for canal-irrigated land which has incidentally raised the price of land (Harnam Singh 1945: 64-65).

Sikhs are the best farmers in India and are in fact the only successful colonisers of new lands. By their hard work they have made the deserts of Montgomery and Lyallpore blossom into a peasant's paradise (Gyani Kartar Singh 1947: 2).

²² Interview with Kuldip Nayar, Delhi, 29 August 2010.

²³ Such a view was subscribed to, and expounded, by prospective refugees among the Sikhs in the months prior to Partition, in the hope the British adjudicators would extend east Punjab territory over majority Muslim districts ('Copy of Resolution of Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, Saugor'. 10 July 1947, FN 2-B/47 [RPP], p. 9).

²⁴ Interview with Paramjit Singh Sarna, Delhi, 21 August 2010.

²⁵ It is accurate to say, that Sikh refugees have tended to refer to this aspect of their economic loss, which inevitably highlights Hindu Partition suffering as a consequence, mainly during periods when Hindu-Sikh relations have remained cordial.

After partition:

The two and half millions that were expelled from Pakistan had been the richest peasantry of India owning large estates in the canal colonies (Khushwant Singh 1984: 6).

We Sikhs had built up those canal colonies through our own hard toil and painstaking efforts...My grandfather was one of the early ones to go over [from east Punjab] and take a gamble on transforming these jungles into productive lands...and then to have been driven from our homes, our livelihoods...by the communal poison unleashed upon us by those politicians and other self-seeking persons, sitting in the comfort of their homes in places far away...well you can guess how painful it was for us.²⁶

However, this view might be challenged by pointing out that Sikhs only became agriculturalists in these areas in the first place because they were 'awarded' those plots by the British. In fact, a Delhi-based refugee originally from Haripur, NWFP, conceded that 'the British made us [Sikhs] the landowners in the years after they annexed the Punjab'.²⁷ However, given post-Partition trends, there is no evidence to suggest that Muslim or Hindu farmers, even had they been awarded such land grants, would have wielded equal pastoral aptitude to that shown by the Sikhs.

A third reason advanced for why Sikhs were relatively more disadvantaged economically by Partition is that, because a larger proportion of their pan-collective suffered dislocation relative to the other groups, and since they were moving from a relatively sparsely-populated area to a dense one, the Sikhs suffered more graded land-cuts and/or landlessness in post-Partition India than any other group.²⁸ Based on 1941 Census of India information (albeit not entirely reliable data), Sikhs as a pan-collective did indeed suffer proportionally the more dislocation, both at the level of Punjab and all-India. However, if we focus absolute numbers, rather than proportion of the population, it is clear that there were actually far more Hindu and Muslim refugees than there were Sikhs. This is a rare instance in which it has made sense for the Sikh refugees to elide their partition memory with the wider pan-Sikh one, so as to constitute the biggest victims.

Political Consequences of Partition

²⁶ Interview with Amar Singh Bains, Amritsar, 16 September 2010.

²⁷ Interview with Dr Mohinder Singh, Delhi, 21 August 2010.

²⁸ All refugees interviewed by this study articulated words to this effect. Of course, such grievance is not without foundation, since, 'As against an area of 67 lakh acres of land abandoned by the Hindu-Sikh landowners in West Pakistan, only 47 lakh acres were available in East Punjab. The gap in area was not bad enough but the position was actually much worse when we consider the factors like fertility of soil and means of irrigation. The Hindu-Sikh land-owners left 43 lakh acres of irrigated land as against 13 lakh acres of irrigated land left by the Muslims. Out of the irrigated area left in West Pakistan by the Hindu-Sikh refugees, 22 lakh acres were perennially irrigated as against only 4 lakh acres of such land left by the Muslims in East Punjab' (Randhawa quoted in Keller 1975: viii).

In addition to the economic consequences of partition, the Sikh refugees tend to hold that they, and their wider pan-ethnic community, bore the heaviest political costs from the Partition. It should be noted that these political consequences probably are among the most malleable aspect of the Sikh refugee memory. Consequently, the discussion here will restrict itself to only analysing those aspects which have remained largely unchanged since 1947. These include the following two commonly expressed, but somewhat contradictory, views.

One view is that, irrespective of whether or not they agreed with the decision to partition Punjab and/or India, the Radcliffe Line which cut across Punjab was unjust and, specifically, did not extend far west enough.²⁹ Sikh refugees have sensible grounds for this claim; (1) the 1941 census figures used to ascertain majority Muslim and non-Muslim areas across Punjab were, despite being highly suspect,³⁰ taken as authoritative by the Boundary Commission;³¹ (2) in the months prior to the partition of Punjab/India being officially agreed upon in June 1947, the non-Muslim population between the Chenab and Ravi (territories that ended up in Pakistan) had materially increased owing to refugee movements from the March 1947 disturbances, and thus the 1941 census figures were even less representative of the 'facts on the ground' (The Division of the Punjab 1947: 3); (3) the non-Muslims of Punjab were effectively awarded less than 38 per cent of the territory of British Punjab despite constituting approximately 43 per cent of its population, and less than 43 per cent of the entire Punjab inclusive of the princely states despite constituting over 47 per cent of its total population;³² and (4) the 'other factors'³³ which Cyril Radcliffe was supposed to take into consideration, did not appear to have made a significant difference to the ultimate boundary line.³⁴

²⁹ While all Sikh refugees could credibly express regret at the outcome of the Radcliffe Line, clearly those living in districts adjoining to the new Indian border (as opposed to those from places such as Attock and further afield) held greater grounds to do so. This was because those areas actually held a more 'realistic' chance of being awarded to India given that they inhabited a more substantial non-Muslim population, more of their religious sites and landed property etc. A boundary line extending further west then had transpired, perhaps closer to the Chenab for example, would have benefitted those Sikhs living in outlying western districts only from the point of view that they would have had less 'enemy territory' to cross before reaching India.

³⁰ Concerns that the 1941 census Punjab population figures had been duped in favour of the Muslim count were expressed by a number of Sikhs in the lead up to Partition (see Harnam Singh 1947: 65; see also 'Copy of Resolution of Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, Saugor', 10 July 1947, FN 2-B/47 [RPP], p. 5, 14). Even Oskar Spate, openly in favour of the Muslim case in Punjab, admitted that sections of the 1941 census were 'grossly inaccurate' (1947: 201, 208).

³¹ See *The Tribune*, 5 June 1947.

³² These are based on the 1941 census figures which, as mentioned, were almost certainly not an accurate depiction of the numerical strength of the respective communities across Punjab. As such the 'disjuncture' between land awarded and population, was likely far wider in reality than these figures suggest.

³³ According to its terms of reference: 'The Boundary Commission is instructed to demarcate the boundaries of the two parts of the Punjab 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*' ('Statement of Justice Teja Singh'. Boundary Commission: Partition Proceedings vol. 2, Acc No. 1634 [Prof Kirpal Singh's Manuscript Collection, Khalsa College, Amritsar], p. 81). Naturally, Hindus and Sikhs believed that the division of Punjab along communal lines alone would be prejudicial to their interests and hence lobbied to include 'other factors' which they may have assumed would incorporate items such as land ownership, historical sites, geographical boundaries etc.

³⁴ The Pakistani state line in this respect has tended to hold that India was unfairly awarded with Gurdaspur district despite its 51 per cent Muslim majority (as per the 1941 census). It must be said that India did not gain/retain the full district, only the majority (with most of its Shakargarh *tehsil* going to Pakistan), furthermore the district-

However, it is clear that there are important points which the Sikh refugees have, in order to maintain an untarnished 'victimhood-rich' narrative, conveniently ignored or at least downplayed. This adds sustenance to Pierre Nora's claim that memory 'only accommodates those facts that suit it' (Nora 1989: 8). For the Sikh refugees, the facts that do not suit their 'victimhood-narrative' include; (1) not all non-Muslims were necessarily in favour of union with India over Pakistan (though they were evidently treated as such by Radcliffe);³⁵ (2) the non-Muslim population (particularly the Sikhs) were more thinly spread across Punjab compared to the Muslim one, hence making it difficult to draw a border which would be more reflective of their pan-Punjab population; (3) that the Sikh leadership (and admittedly the INC too), while they managed to include 'other factors' in the official criteria for the division, failed to specify its prescribed weight. Moreover, they even agreed with a Muslim League memorandum that stated, the boundary

should be a workable and practicable boundary from the point of view of administration and...should not be a crazy line running backwards and forwards over the areas of several districts and in and out of every village in those districts so as to result not in the separation of the two parts of Province which might each be constituted into a Province.³⁶

By agreeing with this memorandum, the Sikh (and Hindu) leadership effectively 'shot themselves in the foot' when trying to make the case for potential corridors linking important non-Muslim cultural sites, such as Nankana Sahib, with truncated Indian territory; and (4) the Sikh leadership's continual indecisiveness and confusion as to their political demands in the lead up to Partition—whether they wanted i) an autonomous/independent Azad Punjab in which they would constitute a minority but hold a legislative 'balance of power' between the three main communities, ii) an independent Khalistan, iii) to join Pakistan, or iv) push for a divided Punjab in order to join partitioned India (and if the latter specifying their preference for where the boundary should rest)³⁷—arguably weakened their bargaining position vis-à-vis the British.

There is second commonly-held view as to why their people bore the heaviest political costs from Partition. This is the view that the Sikhs were the only community, recognised as such by the British imperial overlords, not to secure anything tangible as a result of the

level was never taken as the basic unit of division and even if it had been, then surely the Indian side had even more of a gripe to pick with the Boundary Award given that the Chittagong Hill Tracts, with its 97 per cent non-Muslim majority, was awarded to East Pakistan (*After Partition* 1948: 31).

³⁵ For instance, many Christian Punjabis preferred to remain in, or migrate to, Pakistan.

³⁶ Quoted in 'Statement of Mehr Chand Mahajan', Boundary Commission: Partition Proceedings vol. 2, Acc No. 1634 [Prof Kirpal Singh's Manuscript Collection, Khalsa College, Amritsar], p. 12.

³⁷ It is clear that the Sikhs were internally torn between calling for the Boundary Line to be drawn along the Jhelum, Chenab or the Ravi (See 'Letter to Sir Stafford Cripps from Master Tara Singh', 30 May 1942, Acc No. 2018 [Prof Kirpal Singh's Manuscript Collection, Khalsa College, Amritsar]; see *Hindustan Times*, 11 June 1946; see *The Tribune*, 9 January 1947 and 3 May 1947; see also Gyani Kartar Singh 1947: 3, 9). Arguably, none displayed more confusion in this respect than Master Tara Singh himself.

division.³⁸ The Sikhs were given neither a political entity nor constitutional guarantees regarding the security of their communal autonomy. The deep-felt sense of injustice in this regard is aptly conveyed by Master Tara Singh's now infamous statement of 1961: 'The Hindus got Hindustan, the Muslims got Pakistan, what did the Sikhs get?' This statement is constantly paraphrased by Sikhs (especially those with a communal and/or Khalistani political leaning). Consider the following statements by Sikh interviewees:

[After Partition] circumstances for the Hindus had changed that they became masters. Things had changed for the Muslims that they got Pakistan, but the Sikhs did not get anything at all [emphasis added].³⁹

It [Partition] was a betrayal of the Sikhs...we, having been rulers of Punjab prior to the British taking it in trust, were left to beg like dogs for scraps from the likes of the Congress when they [the British] left...and to compound it all, the Hindus they got their Hindustan, the Muslims, they got their Pakistan and, let me say some of the most fertile lands which we had created single handed...and the Sikhs, well...what did we get?...After independence we had to fight for years just to obtain a linguistic state even...Yet, in spite of this we continued to make unparalleled contribution to India in all wars, in Kashmir [1947-1948], 1962, 1965, then Bangladesh [war in 1971]...only to get our long awaited recognition from the Brahmin rulers in the form of the rape of our most precious site...Harmandir Sahib...our Vatican [emphasis added].⁴⁰

I think proportionately we were massively hit more than the other communities...but I think there's something...even more unjust about [Partition] if you're looking at it from the perspective of the losses of the groups involved, and that is that the Hindus got Hindustan, the Muslims got Pakistan, and the Sikhs got nothing [emphasis added].⁴¹

This point of view has credible basis since the INC and the AIML, recognised as having the mandate of the franchised Hindus and Muslims, were awarded with Hindustan/truncated India and Pakistan respectively. However, it still merits scrutiny. It might be argued, for instance, that; (1) the Hindus did not actually get 'Hindustan'⁴² at all, but in fact India remained a 'secular',

³⁸ Demonstrating this point, an Amritsar-based refugee originally from Malkpur, Lyallpur district, remarked that, 'Sikhs did not get anything except suffering out of all this migration. If the Sikhs had got something, we could have lived as far as Nankana Sahib' ('Interview with Kuljeet Kaur conducted by Prof Ian Talbot', Amritsar, 19 February 2003, quoted in Talbot and Tatla 2006: 140). Though constituting a core component of the Sikh refugee memory, such associated grievances are found within the non-refugee Sikhs' memory of partition—and for good reason, given that the inability of the SAD to secure anything 'tangible' as a result of partition impacted the non-refugees as much as it did refugees. It is probably only those refugees that had held political or administrative posts within west Punjab/West Pakistan who could credibly claim to have suffered *more* in this respect than their non-refugee co-religionists in the east.

³⁹ 'Interview with Hukum Singh conducted by S. L. Manchanda', New Delhi, 4 April 1976. Acc No.344 [Oral History Collection, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi], p. 72.

⁴⁰ Interview with Avtar Singh Kohli, Amritsar, 19 September 2010.

⁴¹ Interview with Ranjit Singh Srai [Phone Interview], 29 May 2011.

⁴² While we can appreciate the multiple connotations associated with this term, it should be noted that in mid-twentieth century Indian politics it became increasingly synonymous with the idea of a Hindu-dominated successor state to British India.

some would say 'pseudo-secular'⁴³ state; (2) that the Sikh leadership was offered independence and even union with Pakistan (which 'officially' included a proposed autonomous Sikh unit), but themselves opted for union with India instead; (3) the fact that Punjab was partitioned at all was arguably more out of British consideration for Sikh sentiments than the numerically larger Hindu Punjabi populace; and (4) that the demographic upheaval across Punjab, created in large part due the Sikh (and Muslim) leadership's wishes and actions, actually resulted in the concentration of the Sikh population along the border districts of Punjab, which, while not resulting in a Sikh majority Khalistan as some may had hoped for, made the subsequent Punjabi suba movement vis-à-vis the Indian state a feasible one.

Cultural Consequences of Partition

Unlike economic, and to a lesser degree political, the cultural losses associated with Partition are, for obvious reasons, quite difficult to objectively assess. Nevertheless the common perception among Sikh refugees, as expressed in their memory of their exile, is that they and their community suffered the most in this respect.⁴⁴ There are two factor commonly cited in this regard.

The first factor in support of this is that Lahore, with its deep Sikh historical association, ended up in Pakistan.⁴⁵ Although Lahore did indeed serve as the capital of Maharajah Ranjit Singh's empire, it is also a city that had links with the Hindus and Muslims too. Consequently, it is purely a matter of opinion as to which community had the deepest association with it.

The second factor, and one far more important than the first, is that, given the approximately 150 important Sikh gurdwaras and religious sites⁴⁶ (including Nankana Sahib) which ended up falling under Pakistani jurisdiction on the eve of partition, the proportion of significant holy land that the Sikhs lost surpassed that of the Hindus or Muslims.⁴⁷ It is difficult to argue with the view that the Sikhs as a community lost proportionally was greater than that of the Hindus or Muslims. Though the extent of the Sikhs' geographical remit was, historically speaking, subcontinent wide (and perhaps even beyond if one takes into account Guru Nanak's travels to Baghdad), the overwhelming concentration of 'historic events and memories' occurred in and around the Punjab plains. Anthony Smith observes:

⁴³ Many Hindus, typically those considered as falling within the 'Hindu-right' category, tend to hold this view.

⁴⁴ Grievances pertaining to the cultural losses resulting from Partition are not exclusive to the Sikh refugees. With the exception of those Sikh refugees who manned gurdwaras or lived in the direct vicinity of such sites/towns across West Pakistan, non-refugee Sikhs have near equal grounds for identifying with such losses within their own Partition memory.

⁴⁵ 'Interview with Sardar Mangal Singh conducted by Dr Hari Dev Sharma', Chandigarh, 21 June 1973, Acc No. 408 [Oral History Collection, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi], p. 159.

⁴⁶ The view that Punjab, owing to the existence of these shrines, stood as their holy land was expressed by politically active Sikhs prior to Partition (See Gyani Kartar Singh 1947: 1; see also Harnam Singh 1945: 64).

⁴⁷ See Vachan Kaur quoted in Verma 2004: 134; Interview with Tarlochan Singh, Delhi, 19 August 2010; Interview with Dr Mohinder Singh, Delhi, 21 August 2010; Interview with Paramjit Singh Sarna, Delhi, 21 August 2010; Interview with Kuldip Nayar, Delhi, 29 August 2010.

The holy deeds of 'our ancestors' may also confer a sacred quality on an ethnoscape. These legendary or historical figures are venerated by the people for the benefits, material and spiritual, that they bestow on the community, and for the divine blessings they bring on the people. So the places where holy men and heroes walked and taught, fought and judged, prayed and died, are felt to be holy themselves; their tombs and monuments became places of veneration and pilgrimage, testifying to the glorious and sacred past of the ethnic community.⁴⁸

It was thus, 'not the loss of territory tout court which provoke[d] the special pain, but the loss of territory [that was] situated within [their] imagined homeland', namely Punjab.⁴⁹ Though the Indus Valley was the cradle of Vedic philosophy and science, the cultural heartland of the Hindus had long shifted to the Gangetic belt (though clearly the division of Bharat Mata was undoubtedly extremely difficult painful for culturally conscious Hindus). As for the Muslims, the Pakistanis among them effectively 'lost' numerous Indo-Islamic cultural sites. However, because most Muslims remained behind in India, these sites did not suffer the dereliction to the same extent that non-Muslims sites in Pakistan did.

Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated, the memory of Partition held by the Sikh refugees does indeed convey the view that 'their' people were the foremost victims of this episode. Though it is extraordinarily difficult for any scholar to quantify suffering on a 'collective level', especially so on a subject as sensitive as that of Partition, clearly there are many aspects to the Sikh refugee 'victimhood-rich' memory with which it is difficult to refute. This is not to say that Sikh refugees were the foremost victims of Partition, but only that they have credible grounds to consider themselves as such.

As far as the 'usability' of this memory is concerned, clearly it has served a practical and egotistical purpose for Sikh refugees within India, and no doubt it will also serve, as it has arguably already done so, a purpose for their non-refugee ethnic kin and also the refugee post-event offspring who appropriate the memories held by the former. 🙏

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