



Riots And Evacuation In Ambala Division During Partition (1947)

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Abstract

Partition of Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan is a permanent blot on British rule in India. In February 1947, the British government announced its decision to transfer of power in India before June 1948. The announcement resulted in the deteriorated law-and-order situation in Punjab. Due to the continuous violence and destruction, the Khizar Hayat Khan ministry collapsed in March 1947. Despite the imposition of martial law, communal conflict raged in Lahore and Rawalpindi from March onwards. By mid-July over 700 non-Muslim homes had been burnt down. The present research paper traces out the devastation and bloodshed in Ambala division of united Punjab followed by British Prime Minister Attlee's announcement of transfer of power in Indian hands before June 1948.

Keywords: Communal, Partition, British, Riots, Evacuation, Camps.

Introduction

Muslim League's call to observe Direct Action On August 16, 1946, resulted in severe bloodshed at Calcutta and blowout to the Bengal countryside. It resulted into large number of deaths especially in Calcutta and Noakhali. From there, it stirred on to Bihar, then on to the United Province and finally to the province of Punjab. The united Punjab was divided into five administrative Divisions, known as Commissionaires, and 29 districts.ⁱ The Ambala division included Ambala, Hisar, Rohtak, Gurgaon, Karnal and Simla districts. The area of this division was 14,832 square miles and Ambala districts area was 1,851 square miles. This district had five tehsils; Ambala, Rugar, Kharar, Naraingarh and Jagadhari.ⁱⁱ Rohtak was a district in Ambala division, with an area of 2248, square miles. This district had four tehsils Rohtak, Sampla, Jhajar and Gohana.ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1947, Muslims and non-Muslims in Ambala division of East Punjab according to 1941 Census were as under:^{iv}

Sr. No.	Districts of Ambala Division	Muslims	Non- Muslims
1.	Hissar	28.2	71.8
2.	Rohtak	17.2	82.8
3.	Gurgaon	33.5	66.5
4.	Karnal	30.6	69.4
5.	Ambala	31.6	68.4
6.	Simla	18.2	81.8

Riots

Communal riots broke out in Rohtak in November 1946. It was reported that the Dawn was publishing and distributing communal articles written by pro Leaguers to instigate The Muslims against Hindus. Some of the Hindus were also circulating it amongst Hindus just to excite them to organize themselves for counteraction. It was alleged that the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh volunteers were creating panic and disaffection and they were instigating others to take the offensive. It causes six cases of stabbing in Rohtak.

Punjab Congress leader Gopi Chand Bhargava sent an attachment with a letter to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel written by a Muslim League ex- minister Habibur Rahman in which he talked about the verbal circular passed by Mr. Mohd. Ali Jinnah and the working committee of Muslim League.^v The circular stated that All Muslim in India shall die for Pakistan, people should be converted to Islam each Muslim is equal to five Hindus, all Muslim League should carry weapons in defiance of orders, all temples should be destroyed, Hindu shops should be burnt, Hindus and Congress leaders should be murdered, Muslims should never be allowed to work under Hindus, Hindu culture should be destroyed, no Muslim should buy from Hindu dealers etc. All Muslim Leaguers should obey these instructions and bring into action by September 15, 1946.^{vi} Sardar Patel argued to check its authenticity because similar documents were circulating all over India. Immediate orders were passed to arrest of Dawn's Rohtak correspondent.^{vii} It was advised by Lord Wavell that seditious literary articles in The Dawn should be banned.

The trouble in Rohtak had in fact been potentially very serious. When the riots started in Lahore, Rawalpindi and Amritsar in early days of March, 'Anti - Pakistan day' was observed in Rohtak. Hindu and Sikh population of the town declared Hartal to make their protest against the attempt to establish Muslim communal nation in the Punjab.^{viii}

Towards the end of March 1947, threats of trouble in district Gurgaon first arose when newspaper began to talk of tension in the Ambala Division. On 17th March the Governor of the Punjab visited Rohtak. This visit was taken as confirmation of the wildest rumours. A false report that a Hindu boy had been stabbed in the street by a Muslim, put the whole town of Rewari into a State of panic. This panic spreading to the villages

resulted in an unsuccessful attempt to stop a train two or three miles out of Rewari; some Muslim wayfarers were seized as temporary hostage in a Hindu Village and others were attacked and beaten close to another Hindu villages. On 23rd March riots broke out in Dehri and Hodal. A detachment of the Rajputana Rifles from Delhi quickly restored order. The incident was purely a one-sided affair with Hindu slaughtering Muslim and, from all accounts the trouble arose over a dispute between two Hindu menials. A Muslim had tried to settle the dispute and suddenly things had taken a communal turn. Ten Muslims were killed and about thirty injured. It is believed that there were no Hindu casualties. Muslim houses and shops were burnt. Only poorer Muslims and old men were attacked while richer Muslims who might have defended themselves, were left alone.^{ix}

In the northern Mewat, the trouble started about March 26. It was alleged that a buffalo from Nurpur, a Hindu Ahir Village was stolen by some Muslim. When the Hindus recovered buffalo, they were attacked by the Muslim, on their way back. On March 29, Hindus assembled in large number near Hasanpur. An attempt to hold a Panchayat on March 30, failed. Muslims burnt the Gujjar village of Koha Khandelwala. Next day, the Hindus retaliated by burning four villages. On the April 1st, the Muslims responded by burning Badgujar, Bisal, Akabarpur, Kharki and Baghanki. Up to the point all villagers had been evacuated before being burnt and casualties were extremely light.^x

On April 3, Jenkins informed Mountbatten that riots in Gurgaon had spread, the previous day Hindu Ahirs having attacked and burnt a Muslim village, killing 28 persons including women and children and wounding 15. He further stated that there had been a large fire in the town of Rewari which was not accidental.^{xi} Jenkins summarised on 30 April the total death toll in Gurgaon district being about 100.^{xii} Jenkins reported that he had learnt that some days back 36 bodies of Meos were found in a nullah near one of the Gurgaon villages and that these bodies had been brought from Alwar, where the state forces had fired on a crowd from an army vehicle. Till mid-June, one hundred and six villages involving a population of 212,000 have been burnt, looted or totally or partially destroyed in Gurgaon district.^{xiii} The Commissioner, Ambala Division, reported on June 10, that, strength of the troops... (was) inadequate to deal with armed bands roaming about the district.^{xiv}

When the Gurgaon districts affected with riots, the district Magistrate; Ambala had under the public safety ordinance passed an order prohibiting all public meetings demonstrations and processions in the whole district carrying of any thing capable of being used as a weapon excepting sheathed swords by Sikhs under this order permission for religious processions must also be obtained before they all taken out. ^{xv} Anti - Pakistan day was observed here with enthusiasm and the whole Hindu and Sikh population of the town declared hartal to make their protest against the attempt to establish Muslim communal raj in Punjab.^{xvi}

Under June 3rd plan, the country was to be partitioned into two sovereign states as a solution of the long standing communal tangle. This partition followed the division of the province into the Eastern and Western Punjab. The announcement of 3rd June plan resulted in the killing of several hundred thousand persons in

communal rioting at the time and the displacement of between eight to ten million persons from their ancestral homes.

Communal riot broke out in Abdullapur on 18th August, 1947. The origin of riot was the circulation of a rumour that the Muslims had slaughtered a cow in celebration of the id. One of the Hindu questioned a Muslim butcher on the point who attacked the former with a lathi. Both sides raised an alarm and collected crowd of sympathizers from amongst their co- religionists. Some of the saner elements, particularly the managers of the three mills in Abdullapur tried their best to pacify the crowds, but they were lured away outside the town by the false news that rioting had broken out in nearby village.^{xvii} While the sensible people were trying to investigate the truth of this story, some mischief mongers set fire to Muslim shops and houses including the newly constructed Jama Masjid at Abdullapur. This was followed by a wholesale attack on the minority of Muslims in Abdullapur many of whom were assaulted and stabbed. Some glass panes of the mosque were smashed and attempts were also set fire to it.^{xviii}

The victims of the attacks were Muslims and they suffered heavily. It was freely suggested that some more Muslims had been killed and thrown into the Western Yamuna canal. Deputy Commissioner of Ambala B.S. Grewal called a meeting of the leading men of all communities and rebuked the non-Muslims for their maltreatment of the Muslims and advised them to bury the hatchet and live as friends and brothers. Orders were also given for the prosecution of the persons arrested at or near the spot and suspected the complicity in the murders and assaults. A curfew was imposed and day and night patrolling of streets by the police and military ordered. Deputy Commissioner further pointed out that one regrettable feature of the entire episode was the very strong anti-Muslim feeling, both among officials and non-officials. There was almost a tendency to extol the misdeeds of miscreants and justify the ill luck that had befallen the Muslims.^{xix}

Deputy Commissioner recovered two hand grenades from Nishant Cinema, Ambala cantonment. The miscreants after placing these bombs, an alarm was raised which led to the evacuation of the cinema and the recovery and removal of the bombs to the police station. Deputy Commissioner examined the bombs and both the bombs were military hand grenades of the type originally found in the mosque at Ambala cantonment, and the kind that was earlier exploded on the night of the 15 August causing three deaths and injured 15 persons. He noticed "it seems that a gang is at work, as the modus operandi is the same in each case. The object seems to be to create more alarm and panic than actual physical damage."^{xx}

Chandi village were attacked by a mob, but troops dispersed it by fire, killing 10 and wounded 50. The Karnal-Kaithal road was declared dangerous for travel. Some cases of arson were also reported. Military action was taken to a mob which surrounded a village.^{xxi} Two Muslims were attacked in a village of Rohtak.^{xxii} The situation became worsened with the outbreak of Plague in Ambala. Sixty cases were reported and thirty deaths were registered here.^{xxiii} The situation in August 1947 further deteriorated with communal clashes. A 20 hour curfew was imposed in Ambala after major riots in the Sadar Bazar area on 30 August. Troop had also to open fire to control rioting mobs in Jagadhari in Dehradun. A curfew was imposed.^{xxiv}

A staff reporter of the Hindustan Times was in Bhiwani on August 30, 1947. He reported how a minor quarrel between a shopkeeper and a customer turned the whole region into a battlefield. This report said Muslim from neighboring villages fought a pitched battle for eight hours with the police, with bombs and heavy ammunition. Over 3,000 people were involved. Ultimately when things settled down, over 100 people of Hansi, Hisar and Rewari, the report said, were demanding that either arms be made easily available to them or those owned by the Muslims be confiscated.

According to an official communique a Muslim mob attacked village Dakala (Karnal) killing six Hindus. Muslim villagers round about Swani (Hisar) attacked Hindu villagers, killing 26 and wounding 1.^{xxv} The city of Panipat was placed under curfew in order to round up looters and recover stolen property.^{xxvi} At a cattle fair at Jaazgarh, a rumor that the neighboring village had been attacked by surrounding villages caused a panic, but when an armed police party and a Magistrate rushed to the spot, they found that rumour was false.^{xxvii}

In a meeting on September 17, 1947, Sir Chandu Lal Trivedi emphasized that he still wanted more troops – particularly in the Ambala sub area and in Hissar and Rohtak. He went on to say that over 90 percent of the soldiers were engaged in guarding Muslim refugee camps and Muslim refugee convoys. Only one or two sections of each battalion at present in the East Punjab area were available for maintenance of law and order.^{xxviii}

Towards the end of August, a camp for about six thousand Muslims was set up at Hansi, district Hissar which was attacked by Jats, Rajputs and Banias. It resulted in heavy loss of Muslim life. There were several attacks on trains between Jullundur, Ludhiana and Rajpura, carrying Muslim refugees from Ambala division and Delhi.^{xxix}

A British Officer, Major Ousty, was shot dead in a Muslim Mohalla in Rewari, as he led troops to maintain law and order. On the road between Kurukshetra and Jagadhari, over 50 Muslims were killed in a serious clash. In fact, the entire region around Ambala was extremely tense in the third and fourth weeks of September.^{xxx} A large number of illicit weapons were recovered at Karnal district.^{xxxii} There were also reports that 100 Muslims from Sewami, i.e., 8 miles South-West of Hissar attacked a village and killed 15 Hindus and Sikhs.^{xxxii} Major General Pert said that the Sikhs as a whole, were more arrogant than he had ever seen them.^{xxxiii}

On September 18, 1947, Major General Rees stated that there were many rumours circulating on both sides of the border. One in particular, alleged that the Pakistan authorities were holding up a large column of Sikh refugees because they believed that the east Punjab authorities were doing the same to the Muslim refugees.^{xxxiv}

The Government of Punjab by its telegram dated October 23, 1947, conveyed their anxiety to Government of India at the increasing number of reports of Muslim passengers being thrown out of trains on Bina-Katni and Jhansi-Itarsi railway lines.^{xxxv} A few stabbing cases took place in a Muslim convoy at Ambala on October 28, following the looting of refugees.^{xxxvi}

The East Punjab consisted of thirteen Districts and with a population of under ten million. The new Government formed in the East Punjab. It consisted of Dr. Gopi Chand Bhargava as Chief Minister. The Punjab Legislative Assembly met for the first time on the 1st of November 1947. The flag-hoisting ceremony was followed by the swearing in of the Speaker and the Ministers. Sri Ram Sharma drew the attention of the House to the plight of refugees in Rohtak and Hissar. Punjab Chief Minister Gopi Chand Bhargava said in defence that he was helpless to do something because the Government of India did not accept his suggestions. It is noted here that the Punjab Cabinet worked as a puppet in the hands of Central government. Jathedar Udham Singh Nagoke told the House that some officers had not hesitated to kill Hindus and Sikhs for personal loot.^{xxxvii}

Governor of Punjab Sir Chandu Lal Trivedi said that he was not so happy about the general situation in the Ambala district consisting mainly of attacks by armed bands of Sikhs on Muslim refugee columns and camps these had increased over the last few days when his ministers had been in Delhi, he had sent them a message asking that one of them should visit Ambala and try to induce the Sikhs to stop these attacks the problem was one of the early evacuation of Muslims, of whom one million remained in the Ambala division – which, of course, included the districts of Ambala, Hissar, Rohtak, Karnal and Gurgaon. The Muslims were getting very restive. They were in the main concentrated in various towns; there was raiding and counter-raiding going on and a general insecurity in the areas around these concentrations.^{xxxviii}

Till September 1947, attacks on Muslims in villages and towns were on a very much reduced scale. This was largely due to the fact that there were no Muslim left to be attacked. Attacks on refugee camps and marching caravans were fewer. Train attacks also occurred in Ambala.^{xxxix} G.D. Khosla has recorded that 3,299 Muslims and 328 non-Muslims lost their lives in the district of Rohtak alone between August 15, 1947 and October 15, 1947. The figures calculated by him for other districts of East Punjab for the same period were: Hissar- 1, 081, Muslims – 384 non – Muslims, Gurgaon 332 Muslims and 568 non - Muslims, Karnal 515 Muslims and 273 non – Muslim, Ambala 1,000 Muslims and 200 non – Muslims.^{xl}

Evacuation

The land of the Punjab was in chaos due to exchange of the population. The British organised a Military Evacuation Organisation under General Rees. This Organisation was to oversee the mass movement of people across the newly created by international border along the rivers Satluj and Ravi. The MEO endeavoured to perform their duties in the right earnest, but it was the marching caravans who formed their own defence as best as they could. Routes were arranged by representatives of both dominions for Foot convoys:

- Via Sirsa and Sulaiman ke – for Muslim foot convoys from Hissar, Rohtak and Gurgaon districts.
- Via Ludhiana – Ferozepore- Kasur – for Muslim foot convoys from Ambala, Karnal Districts.^{xli}

The Movement of the Muslim foot convoys on the various routes could be finished in 35 days under Joint Evacuation Movement plan provided that it begins on all routes simultaneously :-

- Sirsa- Sulaimanke Road- 30 days from 21 Oct-19 Nov.
- Ludhiana- Ferozepore- Kasur – 33 days. ^{xlii}

Sir Chandu Lal Trivedi said that a scheme had been worked out by East Punjab Area for the protection of the Ambala-Amritsar line. Sir Robert Lockhart stated that it had been decided that the Military escorts with Muslim refugee trains should in future be stronger; that these trains should contain flat mounting machine-guns; and that mobile road escorts should accompany them. ^{xliii}

A Muslim refugee special which left Ambala on September 24 at about 2 P.M. met with a serious accident at Shambu Railway Station, due to deep –seated conspiracy or gross negligence. Engine and three bogies were derailed, resulting in 129 deaths and injuries to about 200 persons of whom nine died in hospital. Train resumed journey at 2.30 A.M. ^{xliv}

On September 18, 1947 the situation reported to be deteriorating in Dujana, Ambala and Simla areas. Refugee escorts beat off attacking mobs at Kaithal. K.C. Neogy reported that a column of 70, 000 Muslim refugees left Rohtak on October 29, 1947. ^{xlv} At many places, the Muslim were attacked by armed Sikhs. Secretary to Governor East Punjab wrote to Maharaja Patiala that the bands of Sikhs coming in Simla from Patiala State are creating panic. He stated that on September 21, a Pakistan special train was attacked by a Sikh armed band near Sirhind. ^{xlvi}

Mr. Kriplani spent two hours in a refugee camp in Karnal. This had included a visit of over an hour to the Muslim camp there. He reported that there were still 14,410 refugees in this camp; 5,500 had already been evacuated by train. The condition in this camp were good and sanitary arrangements were excellent. Food supplies had been insufficient, which was largely due to the fact that the Pakistan Liaison officer only visited the camp once a week, which was not often enough. Plans had been made on the assumption that many of the refugees would have their own food; but they had finished this sometime previously. There was no shelter and no tents in the camp and the nights were very cold. All the bullock-carts which the refugees had brought, had been broken up and used as fuel. All the Muslims in this camp were very anxious to go to Pakistan. ^{xlvii}

Due to delay in evacuation, many Muslim families, who were staying in camps in East Punjab started to go back to their areas. It was reported that over five thousand Muslim refugees from Rohtak and Karnal moved into Muzaffarnagar. ^{xlviii} Perhaps delay in evacuation and the attachment with motherland insisted them to do so. Many people were forcibly migrated to alien lands. When they got opportunity to evade evacuation, they instantly grabbed it. Authorities were terrified of further communal mis-happening and termed it as against law and order. Sardar Patel felt anxiety over it and ordered to take effective action to send them back and to keep out further influx. ^{xlix} His intention was to keep the situation peaceful and under control.

Conclusion

The partition of Punjab in August 1947 triggered a large scale demographic upheaval which led to the displacement of millions of people from their living places. Along with other central districts of united Punjab, Ambala division also experienced riots and devastation during those critical months of partition in 1947. Gurgaon, Rohtak, Simla and many other areas of this division experienced communal bloodbath. The authorities had to impose special regulations to curb the violence. At Gurgaon, the roads of many villages and towns were littered here and there with dead bodies. Several houses were burnt down. Nature also turned destructive and showed its worst side. The monsoon of 1947 were unparalleled in its fierceness and in its long duration. The rains came on with fury and played havoc with the marching caravans and flooded the roads and bridges.

References:

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- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p.330.
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- ^v Durga Das (ed.), *Sardar Patel's Correspondence 1945-1950, Vol. III*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmadabad, 1972, p. 87.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.* pp. 87-88.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.
- ^{viii} *The Tribune*, March 18, 1947.
- ^{ix} Francis Tucker, *While Memory Serves*, Cassell and Company, London, 1950, pp. 315-16.
- ^x *Ibid.*, pp. 316-317.
- ^{xi} Latif Ahmad Sherwani, *The Partition of India and Mountbatten*, Atlantic Publishers, New Delhi, 1989, p. 181.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xiii} Francis Tucker, *While Memory Serves*, p. 323.
- ^{xiv} *TOP*, Vol. IX, p.260.
- ^{xv} *The Tribune*, March 18, 1947.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xvii} Kirpal Singh (ed.), *Select Documents on Partition of Punjab 1947 India and Pakistan Punjab, Haryana and Himachal – India and Punjab – Pakistan*, National Book Shop, Delhi, 1991, pp. 498-499.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*
- ^{xx} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxi} *The Statesman*, September 17, 1947.
- ^{xxii} *The Civil and Military Gazette*, October 31, 1947.

- xxiii *Ibid.*
- xxiv *Hindustan Times*, August 31, 1947.
- xxv *The Tribune*, 22 October, 1947.
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- xxxi *Ibid.*, September 26, 1947.
- xxxii *The Tribune*, October 3, 1947.
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- xlii *Ibid.*, p. 551.
- xliii Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *Mountbatten and Independent India 16 August 1947 – 18 June 1948*, p. 115.
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- xlvii *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- xlviii Durga Das (ed.), *Sardar Patel's Correspondence 1945-1950, Vol. IV*, p. 267.
- xlix *Ibid.*