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The Punjab Partition: A human tragedy of migration, mass violence, and the struggle for Rehabilitation

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Abstract: The Partition of British India in 1947 remains one of the twentieth century's most defining geopolitical and humanitarian cataclysms. While traditional historiography often focuses on the high politics of the transfer of power, this paper shifts the analytical lens to the Punjab province, where the bifurcation precipitated a unique and unprecedented demographic rupture. This paper interrogates the Partition not merely as a constitutional event, but as a prolonged human tragedy characterized by genocidal violence, mass migration, and a complex, often exclusionary, process of state-led rehabilitation. By synthesizing secondary historical literature with analysis of oral histories and literary representations, the paper argues that the "Long Partition" was a process rather than a discrete event, one that fundamentally reshaped notions of citizenship and belonging. It examines the bureaucratic mechanisms of rehabilitation, revealing how the state's drive for order often marginalized vulnerable groups, particularly Dalits and women. Furthermore, the paper explores the lingering trauma embedded in social memory, contrasting official state narratives of successful resettlement with the affective histories found in literature and survivor testimonies. Ultimately, this study concludes that while the physical rehabilitation of Punjab was a logistical triumph of the post-colonial state, the psychological and social fissures remain unhealed, continuing to influence the region's socio-political landscape.

Introduction

The events of August 1947 did not merely signify the end of British imperial rule in India; they marked the beginning of a violent reconfiguration of South Asian society, nowhere more visceral than in the province of Punjab. For decades, historical inquiry into 1947 was dominated by the "high politics" of the negotiations between the British Raj, the Indian National Congress, and the Muslim League. However, the sheer scale of the human displacement—estimated at over 14 million people across the subcontinent, with the most concentrated violence occurring in Punjab—necessitates a shift away from the Viceregal dominance of historical narratives



toward a social history of the marginalized. The Punjab Partition was distinct in its totality; unlike Bengal, where migration continued in trickles for decades, Punjab witnessed an almost complete demographic exchange amidst carnage that scholars have increasingly categorized as genocidal in nature (Talbot 2006).

This topic is historically significant not only for its statistical magnitude but for how it defined the post-colonial state's relationship with its citizens. The crisis transformed the new dominions of India and Pakistan into "refugee states," forcing them to expand their bureaucratic capacities overnight to manage relief, rehabilitation, and the allocation of "evacuee property." This paper engages with the "New History" of Partition, a historiographical school led by scholars such as Urvashi Butalia, Gyanendra Pandey, and Vazira Zamindar, who prioritize oral history, memory, and the subaltern experience over official archives. These scholars argue that the violence was not merely a temporary breakdown of law and order but a foundational violence that helped constitute the national identities of the opposing states.

The central thesis of this paper posits that the rehabilitation process in Punjab, while ostensibly a humanitarian project, functioned as a mechanism of social engineering that reinforced preexisting class and caste hierarchies. By prioritizing the settlement of landowning classes to preserve agricultural productivity, the state inadvertently deepened the trauma of marginalized communities, specifically Dalits, whose experiences of displacement were compounded by structural invisibility. Through an examination of the mechanics of migration, the politics of rehabilitation, and the enduring shadow of trauma as reflected in literature, this paper intends to illustrate how the Partition of 1947 persists as a "Long Partition"—an ongoing struggle over memory, identity, and the meaning of home.

From violence to rehabilitation: memory, marginality, and the long partition

The cataclysm that engulfed Punjab in 1947 was less a spontaneous eruption of communal frenzy and more a systematic dismantling of a pluralistic society, driven by the collapse of institutional authority and the militarization of local militias. The violence that precipitated the mass migration was performative and designed to cleanse territory, creating a psychological imperative for flight. When the Radcliffe Line was finally announced, it severed the organic unity of the region's canal colonies and agrarian networks, triggering a chaotic exodus. Historians have noted that the migration in Punjab was absolute; within months, East Punjab was emptied of Muslims, and West Punjab of Hindus and Sikhs. This total exchange necessitated a massive state intervention, transforming the refugee into the central figure of the post-colonial political landscape. The Indian state's response was driven by a "bureaucratic rationality" that sought to convert the chaotic mass of humanity into intelligible, productive citizens. The Department of Rehabilitation became a super-ministry, wielding immense power over the allocation of abandoned Muslim properties to incoming Hindu and Sikh refugees. This process, often lauded in official histories as a triumph of administrative resilience, was deeply fraught with ethical contradictions and practical inequities (Kaur 2007).

The state's primary objective in rehabilitation was economic stabilization rather than holistic social justice. The policy of "land for land"—allotting evacuee land in East Punjab to those who had left behind land in West Punjab—was designed to recreate the agrarian status quo. While



this prevented a total collapse of agricultural production, it essentially transplanted the feudal hierarchies of West Punjab into the East. The "standard acre" became the currency of rehabilitation, a cold metric that reduced the complex emotional loss of a microscopic "home" to a macroscopic claim of territory. This bureaucratic approach to rehabilitation often collided with the refugee's lived reality. For the displaced, the loss was not just material but ontological; they had lost the spatial anchors of their identity. The state could replace a house with a house, but it could not replace the Watan (homeland) or the syncretic social fabric that had been torn apart. The "long shadow of memory" thus persists in the gap between the state's dossier of claims and the individual's narrative of loss. Even as refugees were "settled" in the official records, oral histories reveal a lingering sense of impermanence and a nostalgia for the undivided past, suggesting that rehabilitation was a physical success but often a psychological failure.

This disconnect between state policy and human experience is most starkly visible when examining voices from the margins, particularly the experiences of Dalits (formerly "Untouchables"). The dominant narrative of Partition is overwhelmingly upper-caste and middle-class, focusing on the loss of property, honour, and status. However, for the Dalit communities of Punjab, Partition was a "double trauma." Many were initially prevented from migrating by both Pakistani authorities and local mobs because their labour as sweepers and scavengers was deemed essential for the sanitation of the new state. When they did manage to cross the border, the rehabilitation policies offered them little. Since the compensation laws were based on verified claims of lost property, the landless Dalits, who historically had no documented ownership rights, were rendered invisible in the compensation schemes. They arrived in a "free" India only to find that their social marginality was reproduced in the refugee camps and resettlement colonies. Literature and recent subaltern studies have begun to excavate these silenced histories, showing how the "partition of the Dalits" was distinct from the partition of the elites. They were refugees without the "right" to be refugees, excluded from the state's grand narrative of sacrifice and recovery (Bandyopadhyay 2022).

The insufficiency of the archive to capture these traumas has led historians to turn toward literature as a vital repository of historical truth. Writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Amrita Pritam, and Khushwant Singh articulated the absurdity and horror of Partition in ways that official reports could not. Manto's *Toba Tek Singh*, for instance, serves as a searing critique of the lunacy of the two-nation theory, questioning the very definition of sanity in a world gone mad. Literature provided a space for the "voices from the margins" to emerge, capturing the gendered violence—the abductions, rapes, and "honor killings"—that families and the state conspired to silence to preserve "national honor." The recovery of abducted women, orchestrated by the governments of India and Pakistan, often inflicted a second violence upon women who had settled into new lives, forcing them to return to families who might reject them or to a nation they no longer recognized. These literary and oral accounts reveal that the "struggle for rehabilitation" was not just about economic survival but about processing a profound psychic wound. The trauma was intergenerational, passed down through silence and fragmented anecdotes, creating a "post-memory" generation that inherits the grief of displacement without having witnessed the event (Butalia 1998).



The legacy of this "Long Partition" extends well beyond the immediate years of resettlement. The demographic engineering of 1947 fundamentally altered the political culture of Punjab. The concentration of Sikhs in East Punjab, a direct result of the migration, laid the demographic foundation for the later demand for a linguistic state (Punjabi Suba) and the subsequent militancy of the 1980s. The rehabilitation colonies of Delhi and other North Indian cities reshaped urban sociology, creating a hardened, resilient refugee culture that came to dominate the political and economic life of the capital. Furthermore, the border created in 1947 remains a militarized scar, transforming the lush agricultural plains of Punjab into a security zone. The "enduring legacy" is thus visible not only in the geopolitical tension between India and Pakistan but in the internal social structures of the region. The violence of 1947 normalized a certain brutality in public life and entrenched a "refugee mentality" characterized by an aggressive pursuit of security and material stability. By viewing Partition as a continuing process rather than a closed chapter, we understand that the struggle for rehabilitation is, in many ways, still ongoing. The psychological borders erected in 1947 remain as formidable as the physical fences, defining who belongs and who remains an outsider in the narrative of the nation-state.

Conclusion

The Partition of Punjab was not simply a political or administrative decision but a deep humanitarian crisis whose consequences extended far beyond 1947. It led to large-scale violence, displacement, and the breakdown of long-established social and cultural ties. While the postcolonial state created an extensive bureaucratic system that succeeded in the physical rehabilitation of millions, it often failed to address the psychological trauma and social dislocation suffered by ordinary people. Administrative mechanisms such as "claim" files and "evacuee property" reshaped ideas of citizenship and belonging, privileging property-owning groups while marginalizing landless communities, especially Dalits.

This study brings out the sharp contrast between the official narrative of "successful rehabilitation" and the lived realities of loss and suffering. Although towns and villages were rebuilt, Punjab's composite and syncretic culture was irreversibly damaged, giving way to rigid religious identities. Literature, oral histories, and personal memories challenge state-centered accounts by foregrounding silence, pain, and unresolved grief. The concept of the "Long Partition" is therefore crucial, as it shows that while borders were drawn quickly, their social and emotional consequences continue to shape identities and relationships in South Asia.

In light of these findings, future research must move beyond a nation-state-centric perspective. Greater emphasis should be placed on localized and rural experiences of displacement and rehabilitation, which differed significantly from those of major urban centers. The Dalit experience of Partition remains particularly under-researched and requires focused scholarly attention to understand how caste and displacement intersected.

Methodologically, cross-border and comparative studies of East and West Punjab are essential to reveal parallel processes of state formation in India and Pakistan. At the same time, as the generation that witnessed Partition is rapidly disappearing, collecting second-generation memories has become increasingly important. Finally, revisiting the long-term impact of evacuee property redistribution can help explain enduring class structures in Punjab, allowing



for a more comprehensive understanding of Partition as a continuing historical process rather than a closed event.

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