Riots, Refugees and Rehabilitation: A Case Study of Punjab 1946-56

A SUMMARY

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Supervised by:                Submitted by:

DR. S.M. VERMA                 KANWALJIT KAUR
Professor
SUMMARY

The partition of India was neither the result of the allegedly inevitable clash between Hindus and Muslims ways of life nor was it due to any inherent inability of Islam to co-exist with other religions. It was largely due to the policy of British imperialism encouraging, sometimes openly and often with a consummate sanctimonious mask of impartiality and conflict of interests between the economically powerful and politically ambitious classes of both communities. At the root of partition lay distinct antagonism between the two principal communities of the sub-continent.

The division of humans into mutually exclusive group identities of tribe, nation, caste, religion and class seems to serve two important psychological functions. The first is to increase the feeling of well being in the narcissistic realm by locating one’s own group at the centre of the universe, superior to others, and second the shared grandiose itself, maintained by legends, myths and rituals, seems to demand a conviction that other groups are inferior. Ethnic groups that use ethnicity to make demands in the political arena for alteration in their status, in their economic well being, in their civil rights, or in their educational opportunities are engaged in a form of group politics. They demand a major say for the group in the political system as a whole or control over a piece of territory within the country, or they demand a country of their own with full sovereignty. A nation, therefore, may be seen as a particular type of ethnic community or, rather as an ethnic community politicized, with recognized group rights in the political system. Nation-states are the subjects and creators of a global network or ethnic minorities as political actors. In modern times, especially 20th century ethnicity has become important in politics and ethno-nationalism has been the distinguishing characteristic of nationalism. Nationalism is both an ideology and a form of behaviour. The ideology of nationalism build on peoples awareness of a nation or national self-
consciousness to give a set of attitudes and a programme of action. These may be cultural, economic or political. So nation (as a group of people who feel to be a community bound together by common, history, religion, common descent and citizenship) can be defined in ethnic, social or official sense. Nationalism can also take these forms also. The use of word ethno-nationalism suggests that there is a distinction between an ethnic group and a nation.

It may be pointed out that in plural societies, prevalence of a dominant group, politically and economically, regulates other smaller ethnic groups into a secondary position. It results in discontent in the society in a large or small number because policies of the state become beneficial to few and harmful to others. The process of modernization unfolding social change inserts ethnic consciousness and group solidarity among the desperate ethnic groups. This indeed give rise to a conflictual nationalism. The principle dangers of violent conflict arise when all routes to power in an existing system seem closed to an organized force and when the possibility of changing the political arena is a real one. The existence of one of these conditions is often sufficient to be conductive to ethnic conflict. The existence of both is particularly dangerous. One or both of these conditions have existed in such far-flung places of India in 1947, in Nazi Germany and recently in Yugoslavia and the Hutu-Tutsi killings in Rwanda.

Some historians, both Indian and Pakistani, suggest that the Hindus and Muslims in colonial India constituted two separate nations can be projected back into medieval history. They emphasise that the events of 1947 were intimately connected to the long history of Hindu Muslim conflict throughout medieval and modern times. Communal identities were consolidated by a host of other developments in the early twentieth century. During the 1920s and early 1930s tension grew around a number of issues. Muslims were angered by music before mosque, cow protection movement, and by the efforts of the Arya Samaj to bring back to the Hindu fold
those who had recently converted to Islam. As middle class publicists and communal activists sought to build greater solidarity within their communities, mobilising people against the other community, riots spread in different parts of the country. Every communal riot deepened differences between communities and create violence.

The prospects of League in Punjab was always in doldrums because of the Unionist Party. The League’s prospects further narrowed down after the collapse of Jinnah-Sikander Hayat Khan Pact in 1944. In Punjab, during 1945-46, communal politics burst into villages and their passions were aroused and inspired by the message of Pakistan; the cries of Allah-o-Akbar, Pakistan ban ke rahega were raised in political meetings in Punjab. The proposals of Cripps and Cabinet Mission Plan ultimately brought ‘Direct-Action Day’ and riot started in big way in the country. Pakistan was won, but people on both sides of the fence were tormented by killings, loss of families and by the scale and magnitude of this tragedy.

Communal riots occur because there is a development of communal ideology in society. Communalism refers to a politics that seeks to unify one community around a religious identity in hostile opposition to another community. In order to unify the community, communalism suppresses distinctions within the community and emphasis the essential unity of the community against other communities. Communalism nurtures a politics of hatred for an identified “other Hindus” in the case of Muslim Communalism and “Muslims” in the case of Hindu Communalism. This hatred feeds a politics of violence. As an ideology, communalism refers to the belief that people belonging to one religion also share common socio-economic, political and cultural interests. The South Asian societies are threatened by the lack of cultural homogeneity and the lack of a strong state or (a biased state government like British government in India) fails to ensure order in society. In such situations, the
religious bigotry leads to communal frenzy and results in riots. During the course of Indian independence movement, the Muslims always had a fear of majority Hindus, who could dictate them. Occasionally the fear of minority led them to rioting.

In such deteriorating situation, on June 3, 1947, Mountbatten announced the division of the country into India and Pakistan on the basis of religion. Sixteen districts comprising of 55 percent of population and 62 percent of the area were allotted to the West Punjab. In comparison to it, the East Punjab obtained 13 districts, 5 princely states, 45 percent of the population, 33 percent of the area and 31 percent of the income of the united former provinces. When the rest of India was celebrating independence on August 15, 1947, the unhappy land of the five rivers was undergoing the sufferings of migration.

Under the religious garb, anti-social elements came on the surface and paralysed humanitarian efforts. On the one hand administrative machinery collapsed and on the other hand civic organisations failed to fill vacuum. Moreover, the failure of the Radcliff Boundary Commission to submit its final report on August 12, created entire central Punjab as a red zone. Flags appeared on the villages indicating the positions in an uncertain situation. People stayed out and started indulging in murder and arson. When the report was submitted on August 17, much damage had already been done. The terror stricken people took to roads, railways and whatever means of transport were available for life. But every passage was infested by bands of murderers and hooligans out to loot and kill.

It was impossible to make an accurate estimate of the total loss of life or the extant of damage to property caused by riots. The census return of 1941 were not accurate even at the time they were compiled. It became hopelessly wrong at the end of six years when a general increase in population and local movements made it impossible to determine with any degree of accuracy how many non-
Muslims were living in the West Punjab, nor was it impossible to know the total number of Hindu and Sikh refugees prepared.

The magnitude of the problem of such a huge transfer of population came to be realized when people in large numbers started migrating in trains, motor vehicles, bullock carts and even on foot as caravans. While the trains carried out the speedy transfer of refugees on both the sides, it was the organization of foot convoys which proved to be the most effective form of evacuation for the tough peasants of the Punjab. Twenty-four foot convoys varying in strength from 40 to 60 thousand were organized.

To prevent the situation from deteriorating further and on account of the failure of the leadership to check exodus, both the dominions realized the need to set up machinery for the evacuation of the displaced persons. Inter-Dominion Conferences were held between the two countries to sort out the sensitive questions and issues related to the partition. High level organizations of both the dominions were entrusted with the arduous task of deciding the policy with regard to evacuation. While matters of broad policy were tackled by the Partition Council, the Joint Defence Council was given the back breaking responsibility of supplying military services and defining their functions and jurisdiction in the evacuation work. Evacuation movement plan was chalked out well with joint rehabilitation board lying down policies with regard to the reception and rehabilitation of the refugees. East Punjab Liaison Agency comprising of Chief Liaison Officer was especially set up for ensuring the safe migration of people across the border. Yet, bloodshed, communal carnage and extreme hardships marked the process of migration.

As early as the end of August 1947, the Government of India also facilitated the transportation of refugees by air from certain inaccessible points in Pakistan by mobilizing ten aircrafts and carrying out six or seven flights daily to convoy refugees.
Torn from their families environment and occupations these people were bewildered at the catastrophe, which had overtaken them. They had lost their bearings and many of them did not know what to do. The Government of India and Punjab proved equal to the occasion and set up camps at a number of places where these unfortunate people were given rest and shelter.

Although the harshest of words were often used by the displaced masses to describe the state of affairs in the refugee camps, yet it was these camps that were also the symbol of stupendous efforts that was put in by the cash-starved governments of both sides, to give some solace, comfort and security.

The Government of India set up a women organization under Miss Mridula Sarabhai to recover the abducted women. Lady social workers were deputed to all the districts of the West Punjab to assist in the recovery of abducted women. The District Liaison Officers were to supply information regarding abducted persons to be recovered. In spite of the elaborate arrangements, liberal expenditure and efforts many were left behind. East Punjab Liaison Agency recovered 11,129 women and children, whereas West Punjab recovered only 5,616. It was however, claimed by the East Punjab Government that they took up recovery work more honestly in this province than their counterparts in Pakistan.

Another problem caused by the partition of the country was the exchange of prisoners and mental patients. The East Punjab Government built a new mental hospital at Amritsar in 1948. The most important event in the working of this hospital for the year 1950 was the transfer of 450 Indian mental patients from mental hospitals in West Pakistan. And in the case of prisoners, with the determined efforts of Indian Government, 4088 non-Muslim prisoners repatriated from Pakistan. Indian Government repatriated 3761 Muslim prisoners to Pakistan.
It has been estimated that over 12½ million people have been uprooted from their settled homes and were cut off from their moorings. Upto June 15, 1948 about 55 lakhs non-Muslims were estimated to have been brought over to India from West Punjab and other provinces of Western Pakistan and during the same period about 58 lakhs Muslims had moved into Pakistan from East Punjab, Delhi, U.P., Ajmer, Marwara, Alwar, Bharatpur, Gwalior and Indore. During the same period about one and a quarter million non-Muslims crossed the borders from Eastern Pakistan into West Bengal.

Since the influx of evacuees appeared to be an unending stream as an aftermath of the partition of the country, steps were taken to settle the rural population on evacuee lands where *Kharif* crops were ripe for harvesting. Sending the evacuees to villages was placed on the top of the priority list of the Government. To rehabilitate displaced farmers, land was allotted to them on temporary basis for sustenance in groups. A rough and ready scheme of distribution of land for the first harvest was drawn. In the absence of agricultural statistics and decisive agreement with Pakistan on evacuee property, permanent settlement could not be worked out immediately. To ensure quick distribution of land the agriculturist evacuees were asked to proceed to the tehsils and acquire lands in the villages. Quasi-permanent settlement replaced the temporary allotment scheme. The announcement of the new scheme in this regard was made on February 7, 1948. According to it, the holdings of the evacuees in West Punjab was to be taken into account for the allotment of land. In order to standardize the claimant right, the tenure of land in different kinds of soil and in different tracts were classified and evaluated. The area of every claimed was then converted into the newly evolved term ‘standard acre’. Formula of ‘graded cuts’ was applied while allotting the land to evacuees farmers in a bid to rehabilitate them. The final account
showed that displaced persons due for settlement in East Punjab could receive in quasi-permanent allotment 2,448,830 standard acres against 3,935,131 standard acres abandoned in West Pakistan.

The scheme of model villages was started. Factors like the area and shape of the village site, the situation of large trees and standing pucca buildings were certain common features in all these villages.

About 5,00,000 displaced families of land holders were settled in villages. Besides these families, landless persons, harijans, tenants, village kamins and shopkeepers were provided with shelter. There were about 3,18,000 evacuee houses in living conditions in rural areas. 2,25,000 houses were no longer fit for repairs and 1,25,000 evacuee houses needed repairs. Many kacha houses collapsed due to heavy rains and floods. Houses belonging to evacuee land holders were given to the allottees of land. Houses of evacuee kamins were given to displaced kamins. Evacuee shops were given to displaced shopkeepers. Houses were reserved for common purposes such as panchayat ghars, schools and dispensaries.

Urban rehabilitation in the Punjab, broadly speaking was the problem of providing about 11 lakh displaced persons of urban characteristics with houses and urban land claimed to have been abandoned in urban areas of West Pakistan was 22,972 standard acres while the urban area available in East Punjab and PEPSU was 19,273 standard acres. Out of which 13,444 standard acres were in East Punjab and 5,729 in PEPSU.

An urban allotment section was started under a tehsildar with 56 clerks. The first and immediate need of evacuees was house where he could shelter himself and his family. While the number of urban houses left on this side was much smaller than those left in Pakistan, they were also poorer in quality and capacity as compared to non-Muslim houses in Pakistan.

For the lower middle class the government evolved the scheme of cheap housing colonies. It was decided to set up houses of small
specification on 8 marla sites. In these colonies sites had been provided for religious buildings and schools. Rather more serious was the problem of the lower class displaced persons who were so poor that they could not afford to spend anything for roofed shelter. For them mud hut colonies were set up. Sites were also provided for services industries to make them self-sufficient to the maximum possible extent. The earliest effort in this direction was the construction of 12 townships called model towns. All the houses in model towns were of uniform designs.

Another scheme to provide shelter was the construction of 4,200 houses at the laying out of 9800 building in new township colonies built at various places in the Punjab. In PEPSU, 10,000 Bahawalpurias were earmarked for Patiala. Of these some were to be housed in the town itself either by repairing the kholas or in new barracks which was constructed for displaced persons. The bulk of the population was to be housed in a new township in close precincts of the town at Tripuri where 1800 new houses were planned for construction. Nearly 8,000 Bahawaluria evacuees were planned to settle in Jind. 400 houses were planned to build in Phagwara. The PEPSU Government planned six model townships near Patiala, Phagwara, Basti Nau, Bhatinda, Kotakpura and Barnala. A cheap house scheme was prepared for the working classes and the low income groups. This scheme aimed at providing building sites at various places in the Union.

To provide displaced shopkeepers a ready means of earning their living, it was decided to allot evacuee shops and factories only to displaced persons. There were nearly 17,000 evacuee shops. All of these were allotted to displaced businessmen from West Pakistan. The total number of evacuee factories and industrial establishments in the province was 1,392 of these 1,114 had been leased through auction.
To provide financial aid to the poor and middle class evacuees for rehabilitation in business, the government sanctioned a scheme of loans and grants. In the beginning all loans to urban evacuees were granted individually. Later on it was decided that loans, should as a rule be given only to co-operative societies or groups of displaced persons. The Punjab government had by the end of November 1949, sanctioned Rs. 1,25,00,000 as loans and 18,00,000 as grants to displaced persons.

Displaced students from West Pakistan were given financial assistance by the government in the form of loans and grants. Relief was granted to college as well as loans and to school students from 5th to 10th class. They were given other concessions also, like fee, books and etc. Exception was however, made in case of those students who had secured admission to engineering, medical, veterinary or agricultural colleges, recognized by the East Punjab University in which case assistance was to continue till the completion of the full course. The Punjab government disbursed to displaced students Rs. 15,22,000 as loans and Rs. 19,48,000 as grants in the year 1948-49.

The Industry Department of the Punjab Government had also started 32 training centres in which both boys and girls trainees received instruction in various trades and crafts. These centres were located at different towns in the province. To help rehabilitation of the displaced industrialists and to provide gainful employment to other displaced persons new industrial areas were developed in important cities. To restrict the shifting of factories under Factory Act, East Punjab Act, March 1948 ‘Control of Dismantling Act’ was passed by the East Punjab Government. To make up for the loss of capital and skilled labour, the Government of India set up a Rehabilitation Finance Administration for meeting the financial requirements of small and medium level migrant businessman on medium and long term basis.
The industrial development in the East Punjab was based on an economic system under which private enterprise controlled almost the entire industrial field. However, the Punjab government rendered the maximum possible assistance to private enterprise to encourage the growth of industries. The future plans of the state government for the industrial development were in the different directions. These efforts were expected to change the face of Punjab state and to achieve a healthy, happy and prosperous future of urban East Punjab.

The evacuee gardens were reserved for allotment to displaced garden owners. Horticultural facilities were provided by the Government through introduction of a garden colony scheme. Earmarking of certain compact areas in every district was an important step taken by the Government in this direction. Educated persons with gardening experience who were ready to undertake the planting of gardens in conformity with official regulations were allotted units. These units were of the size between 10 to 20 acres of land.

After the partition, the East Punjab was a deficit state in food grains and cotton. The East Punjab government started development schemes like supply of better seeds, agricultural implements, fruit nursery production, compost schemes, tubewell scheme, mechanical cultivation and land reclamation schemes, etc. on a ‘no profit no loss’ basis. The agricultural education and research work was carried on first in Khalsa College, Amritsar and subsequently, since August 1949, at Ludhiana.

The Punjab's economy received a fillip with the inception of first Five Year Plan, 1950-51. The programme of agricultural development was given the highest priority. These included programmes for increasing agricultural production, developing animal husbandry, dairying, forests, fisheries and cooperation. During the plan, irrigation was made available for about 6.3 million
acre of land but the area actually cultivated was a little over 4 million acres. The bulk of the central assistance was devoted to minor irrigation programmes. Under the Indo-US Technical Cooperation Programme, three projects for the construction of 2650 tubewells and for drilling of 350 exploratory tubewells had been undertaken at the cost of rupees twenty-five crores. Forty-five tubewells and five borings out of 350 exploratory tubewells were to be located in the Punjab and PEPSU respectively.

The greater attention was paid to the developmental work. The consolidation of holdings and prevention of their fragmentation, improvement of cattle wealth, use of pure seeds of improved varieties, maintaining the fertility of soil, eradication of weeds and control of insects, pests and diseases, provision of irrigation facilities, supply of improved agricultural implements at reasonable costs, reclamation of cultivable waste lands and mechanical cultivation and general improvement in the methods of agricultural were the main area of concentration. With partition, Punjab inherited a legacy of increasing economic pressure in form of reduced holdings and poorer lands, fall in number of actual workers on the soil, insufficient irrigation facilities, slender capital resources and the rise of tenant interests. However, it had a healthy outcome in the form of migration of the rich farmers of West Punjab into the Indian territory. These enterprising farmers had shifted to the irrigated tracts of the West Punjab from the interiors of the Punjab a few decades back where they engineered the agricultural transformation. The partition marked the return of these displaced Sikh and Hindu farmers of Pakistan. Being mobile in character and well versed with the mechanics of agrarian experiment, they were conscientious innovative and more receptive to new and novel ideas. They were the ones who spearheaded the Green Revolution in the province.

The scheme of sinking wells continued to run on subsidized basis. *Taccavi* loans for 4,150 wells were advanced upto June 1950.
Since the partition up to December 31, 1950 about 23 lakh implements had been supplied to farmers. Panchayat Raj gave an opportunity to the masses to manage their own affairs. After independence, the Punjab government started the experiment of Panchayati Raj. The introduction of the Punjab Bill in the state legislature was the first step towards the establishment of the Raj.

As the result of the partition, there was a sharp decline in the morals of the people. The serious economic crisis created by the forced migration brought immorality in large number. The prevailing lawlessness common in the East and West Punjabs removed all social restraints and scruples. About fifty thousand women were abducted in both the Punjabs. The violent communal riots, murders and heinous crimes brought the people’s morale to the lowest ebb.

The partition gave a severe blow to the common village traditions. Persons belonging to the same biradari were scattered over different villages and towns in the same and even different districts, with the result that social restraint exercised by the biradari got relaxed. People were invariably strangers to their neighbours, because belonging as they did to different places, they had settled at one place. There was so much antipathy among the refugee settlers in the same village that it sometimes resulted in thefts and abduction of women in East Punjab.

People from both the Punjabs intermingled and it led to many new social developments. A large number of the Sikhs and Hindus from Rawalpindi and Multan division who were engaged in trade resettled in the backward towns and villages of East Punjab. This quickened the pulse of social life. The free and easy culture of the West Punjab had a liberalizing influence on the women of East Punjab, who emulating the example of their counterparts from West Punjab began to discard the purdah and were becoming co-shareriness of their husband’s business.
Due to partition of Punjab, the Pakistani Punjabi began to develop on different lines with large number of Persian words and Punjabi in India began to absorb Hindi words.

The partition caused an upheaval in the social structure. The refugees found themselves aliens in their new surroundings. The very places, the physical and geographical environment and people among whom they were required to spend their lives and develop new relationships were unfamiliar. In the West Punjab, this led to the evil practices of beggary, prostitution, delinquency and crime.

‘Refugees’ everywhere in the world have generally found at first a warm response from those among they are placed, but with the lapse of time they develop a feeling that they are not really getting what they had counted upon, their sufferings have not been properly appreciated, and that they are generally misunderstood. In the case of evacuees from West Pakistan a similar complex had developed. The sudden uprooting from their homes due to political reasons led the refugees to believe that the Republic of India was the direct outcome of the immense sacrifices made by them. Hence they legitimately expected more consideration from the local population. This led to the development of more aggressive attitude among them.

It is beyond doubt that partition dealt a severe blow to the economy of Punjab. It adversely affected the condition of both agriculture and industry. The entire economy of the nation including that Punjab could be seen in a shattered and disintegrated state. Independence brought with it a change in the dynamics of political power game. It signified the transfer of power from the hands of the colonial masters to the national elite. In the Punjab, rural elites came to wield power in the political set up. The political and economic compulsions led the state to divert its energy in the rehabilitation of the province. A series of challenges were posed before the newly formed state. Rehabilitation process could be accomplished largely
owing to the patience, perseverance, will power and mobility displayed by the Punjabis in their character.

The collaborative efforts of the state and overwhelming response of its people cumulatively, resulted in gradual recovery of the agricultural, industrial and economy of the province from the hard hitting blow of partition.