

THE SIKHS AND THE PARTITION OF THE PUNJAB



To what extent did the actions of the Sikhs in the Punjab during the transfer of power and the Partition of India reflect a common, communal interest?

Amabel Crowe

1st April 2014

The University of Edinburgh: MA History



Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Crispin Bates for his guidance and encouragement, Natascha Deininger for her well placed comments and questions, and Susie Dalton for her solidarity and support.

Contents

Glossary	2
Introduction	3
Discussion of sources	9
Chapter 1: The politics of representation	13
Chapter 2: Religion as identity	23
Chapter 3: Sikhs and communal violence	33
Conclusion	45
List of appendices:	
1: Mountbatten's failure to address the Sikh violence, extract of speech by Sir Zafrullah Khan, 24 January 1948	49
2. Map of the distribution of the Sikh population in the Punjab	50
3. Sikhs demand transfer of population and property, article from the <i>Civil Military Gazette</i> , 15 June 1947	51
4. Partition begins to impact Sikh peasants in Khushwant Singh's fictional village of Mano Majra.	52
5. Photograph of Sikh peasants marching at All India Peasants Conference, 1945. Copyright Sunil Janah.	53
6. Description of the leader of a Sikh attack on Muslims in 1947, in Tamas by Bhisham Sahni	54
7. Translation of a pamphlet printed by the Ajit of Lahore, 5 April 1947. An appeal for a Sikh "war fund" of Rs. 50 lakhs	55
8. Viceroy Mountbatten on maintaining the unity of the Sikh people	57
9. Translation of Gurmukhi Pamphlet. (The Rape of Rawalpindi). An account of the events in Rawalpindi Division in March 1947	58
Bibliography:	
Primary sources	60
Secondary sources	64

Glossary

azad Punjab – free Punjab

gurdwara – Sikh place of worship

jatha – organised group, gang or band

Khalsa – The Sikh brotherhood, instituted by Guru Gobind Singh

kirpan – Sikh dagger, one of the '5 Ks' of the Khalsa

kisan – cultivator, farmer

lambadar – cultivator who, as representative of a village, pays government dues

lakh – one hundred thousand

morcha – demonstration

sabha – organisation

tamas – darkness

To what extent did the actions of the Sikhs in the Punjab during the transfer of power and Partition of India reflect a common, communal interest?

The end of the British Raj in India brought destitution, death and displacement for the north of the subcontinent. On 15 August 1947 the Indian people gained their independence; but the price was Partition, and the nation was divided in two. After a dynamic independence movement spanning decades, protracted negotiations between the British, the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League decided the structure of independent India. An agreement to partition the subcontinent was announced on 3 June 1947¹, a mere six weeks prior to its implementation.

The process of independence and Partition demonstrates a concerted effort by the departing colonial government and the Indian political elites to ensure that the transfer of power did not amount to a redistribution of power. The potential for radical change in the political and social structure of India was undermined by elite politicians, who were predominantly interested in replacing the British at the top of a largely preserved hierarchical system. The political separation of religious groups, which had been implemented by the colonial government since the beginning of the twentieth century, was accentuated in the years immediately preceding partition. Rather than challenge this colonial configuration, Indian politicians outside of the Congress staked their claim to authority as representatives of distinct religions. This both entitled politicians to a slice of devolved power, and undermined inter-communal social movements that posed a challenge to the status quo. In contrast to the 'Quit India' campaign of 1942, which saw unprecedented mass participation rock the foundations of British rule, it was

¹ Mansergh and Moon, (eds.), *The Transfer of Power, Vol. XI*, (London: H.M.S.O., 1982), 89.

through political elites and colonial institutions that politics was reorganised in 1947.

The magnitude of Partition has provoked historians to probe every aspect of the transfer of power negotiations. At times, the back and forth between authors seems to be underpinned by apportioning blame, rather than an exercise in academic impartiality. The Muslim League was held responsible with a narrative that begins with the Lahore declaration² in 1940 and emphasises the obstinacy of Jinnah and the violence of Muslim separatism. From the British perspective, 'the Muslim leaders demanded that Britain rip apart the unity that she had so painstakingly erected to give them an Islamic state of their own'³. However, an alternative interpretation attributes Partition to the actions of the Congress. *India Wins Freedom: An Autobiographical Narrative*⁴ by Abul Kalam Azad outlines how Congress betrayed Muslim nationalists; Partition could have been avoided if it were not for some poor policy decisions from Congress high-command. Ayesha Jalal's *The Sole Spokesman* argues that the Pakistan demand was a 'bargaining counter' and it was the intransigence of the Congress that made Partition a reality⁵. Gyanendra Pandey has assigned blame to the British, asserting that communalism 'is a form of colonialist knowledge'⁶ and the racist religious essentialism of the colonial regime was the source of the division.

² The demand for Pakistan was passed as a resolution of the Lahore Session of the All-India Muslim League, 23 March 1940, in Singh, *Select Documents on Partition of Punjab 1947, 2nd edition*, (Delhi: National Book Shop, 2006), 1.

³ Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, (London: William Collins Sons, 1975), 7.

⁴ Abul Kalam Azad, *India Wins Freedom: An Autobiographical Narrative*, (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1988).

⁵ Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁶ Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of communalism in colonial north India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Amidst all of the analysis of how Partition came to occur through party resolutions and negotiations, the history of the millions of people who lived through the divide was consigned to an afterthought. Authors such as Urvashi Butalia and Gyanendra Pandey note the chasm between the historical narrative and popular understanding of Partition⁷. A switch in focus from government archives to oral histories facilitated a new sort of Partition history, which is beginning to expose the diverse experiences of the masses in 1947. Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* looks to uncover the history from below and particularly focuses on the experience of women, children and untouchables as she attempts to understand what Partition meant in human terms⁸. As well as greater attention to oral accounts and testimonies, historians have begun to use fictional representations of Partition in order to better understand the depth of this human tragedy. Literature and films are important sources, revealing the motivations, fears and suffering of ordinary Indians caught up in the events of 1947⁹.

This dissertation will look to bridge the two trends in partition historiography by exploring the relationship between elite politicians and the masses whom they claimed to speak for. In the interest of providing a detailed analysis it will address only the experience of the Sikhs in the Punjab. This is not to say that the Sikhs should be considered representative of the overall dynamic between leaders and constituencies; on the contrary their position in 1947 was unique. The Sikhs were caught between the rival movements of the Muslim League and the Congress. As

⁷ Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: voices from the Partition of India*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 74.

Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering partition: violence, nationalism, and history in India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 6.

⁸ Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*.

⁹ For example, Settar S. and Gupta, I.B. (eds.) *Pangs of Partition Volume II: The Human Dimension*, (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 2002).

the creation of Pakistan appeared increasingly likely, the dominant Sikh political party, the Akali Dal, began to insist on the partition of the Punjab. They hoped that with a favourable boundary the integrity of the Sikh community could be mostly preserved, without submission to Muslim rule¹⁰. This policy would ultimately lead to almost half of the Sikh population leaving their communities, ancestral homelands and religious sites, and migrating to Indian East Punjab. It is consequently pertinent to consider to what extent the strategy reflected the interests of the Sikh community.

Another motive for investigating the Sikh position is the allegation that the communal violence in the Punjab was part of a 'Sikh plan' to affect a population transfer¹¹. Sir Francis Mudie, the first governor of the West Punjab, claimed 'the Sikhs are carrying out a well organised plan to exterminate Muslims and drive them from the Province'¹². On 16 January 1948, Sir Zafrullah Khan charged Lord Mountbatten with failing to take effective action, having been previously informed of the 'Sikh Plan'¹³.

These accusations have stewed unresolved since Partition. Aside from the blame-game in Partition historiography, nobody has been held to account for the violence in 1947 in practical terms. There have been no trials, no prosecutions, not even any official inquiries. Throughout the colonial period, the British avoided any sincere engagement with issues affecting the Indian population by labelling unrest as 'communal'. From the colonial perspective the violence of 1947 was the

¹⁰ Mansergh and Moon (eds.), *The Transfer of Power, Vol. X*, 322.

¹¹ Government of Pakistan, *Notes on a Sikh Plan*, (Lahore: Superintendent, Govt. Print., 1948).

¹² Sir Francis Mudie to Sir Chandu Lal Trivedi, 17 September 1947, in Singh, *Select Documents*, 525.

¹³ See appendix 1.

ultimate manifestation of age-old animosities and the irrationality of the Indian population. Post-independence, the Indian governing elite have, to some extent, found it convenient to continue the narrative of 'communal madness' to explain the violence of Partition¹⁴. Government archives have been closed to researchers since the 1980s and there is no political will to confront the dark-side of India's success against imperialism. This stagnated response to the massacres of 1947 has had serious implications for social cohesion in independent India, with the Sikhs arguing that they have been vilified and used as a scape goat by the Hindu majority¹⁵. Certainly if there had been a process akin to 'justice and reconciliation', there would have been many Sikhs among those found guilty. However, without any such process, in many ways, it is an entire community that is serving the sentence.

It is vital that historians begin to challenge blanket communal categorisation. A more nuanced approach to the history of Partition reveals that divisions were based on class as well as religion¹⁶; that fanaticism could be constructed on practical considerations¹⁷; and that unqualified labels of victims and perpetrators will never be applicable to entire communities¹⁸. Up to and throughout 1947, the Sikhs continued to respond to a variety of concerns, with village, caste and class identities remaining powerful. This diversity within the Sikh community was not translated into pluralistic political representation; the Akali Dal became the sole

¹⁴ Pandey, *The Construction of communalism*, 265.

¹⁵ Principal Gurdia Singh Grewal, *Freedom Struggle of India, By Sikhs and Sikhs in India, The Facts the World must know, Vol. II*, (Ludhiana: Sant Isher Singh Rarewala education trust, 1991), 25.

¹⁶ Adaz, *India wins freedom*, 200.

¹⁷ Paul Brass, "Introduction: discourses of ethnicity, communalism, and violence," in Paul R. Brass, (ed.), *Riots and Pogroms* (New York: New York University, 1996), 19.

¹⁸ Paul Brass, 'Victims, Heroes, or Martyrs? Partition and the problem of memorialisation in contemporary Sikh history', *Sikh Formations*, no. 2, vol.1, (2006), 22.

voice of Sikhs as far as the negotiations for the transfer of power were concerned. Their strategy represented an elite interest and a specific conception of Sikh identity, with which the majority of the community did not identify.

A constant theme in the testimonies of those who experienced Partition was that for the first time the decisions of politicians really affected the people. Rajinder Singh stated 'Politicians, kings, leaders have always fought over power, and kings and leaders may change, but when have the *people* ever had to change?'¹⁹ The communal prism which was applied to Indian politics during the decolonisation process meant that the Akali Dal, as the main Sikh political party, represented the entire Sikh population for the purpose of negotiations. The first chapter will examine how the Akalis came to dominate Sikh politics and to what extent their definition of a 'Sikh interest' expressed the concerns of the Sikh community.

The second chapter will consider the centralisation of religious identity in Indian politics and society prior to Partition. Factors such as economic differences, cultural distinctions and historic memory of Mughal oppression provided a foundation for a common Sikh identity. However, class, caste, village and cultural associations posed restrictions to a coherent, communal outlook. This chapter will examine whether being Sikh subsumed other facets of identity in 1946-47, and if there are any indications, given the characteristics and features of Sikhs in the Punjab, that they acted from a communal interest in 1947.

Religious identity and violence in the years preceding partition developed interdependently; communal identity was expressed through violence, whilst

¹⁹ Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 57.

violence – and the fear or assurance it brought – heightened feelings of identity. As Urvashi Butalia remarked in regard to the anti-Sikh violence of 1984, ‘everyone who had a Sikh name or looked Sikh became painfully aware of their vulnerability. Suddenly, many of us, non-religious at the best of times, began to feel Sikh’²⁰. The third chapter will explore the relationship between violence and religious identity. It will argue that the stimulus in 1947 was fear – the deterioration of state authority and the spread of rumours caused people to seek security with co-religionists. Politicians are implicated in both undermining state apparatus and inciting violence; however, this does not mean that they exercised control over the communal attacks. In the volatile atmosphere of 1947 a host of different motivations and provocations were responsible for the extent of the violence.

Discussion of sources:

There are a number of collections of official documents which reveal the position of elite Sikh politicians in the years immediately preceding Partition. Lionel Carter has compiled the letters and reports of Sir Evan Jenkins, the governor of the Punjab²¹, which offer a valuable resource for understanding the dynamics of Sikh politics in the context of the transfer of power. Other official documents, such as correspondence between Sikh leaders and the Viceroy directly and notices of Panthic resolutions have also been made accessible with *Select Documents on Partition of Punjab 1947*²², edited by Kirpal Singh. Furthermore, a wealth of British

²⁰ Ibid., 44.

²¹ Lionel Carter, *Punjab Politics, Governor's Fortnightly Reports and other Key Documents, Vols. III, IV, V* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2006-2007).

²² Kirpal Singh, *Select Documents on the Partition of the Punjab*.

documentation has been published in the immense volumes of *The Transfer of Power*²³. Rather than examine these documents in order to illuminate the dynamics of elite negotiations, which has already had comprehensive attention from historians, I will use them to understand the context of the strategy of the Sikh political elites. This is an essential foundation for assessing to what extent their approach reflected the interests of the Sikh community at large.

Surveys of events, produced more or less contemporaneously with Partition, have tended to reflect the position of a particular community. The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) report *Muslim League Attack on Sikh and Hindus in Punjab 1947*²⁴, does not pretend to be anything other than a defence of the Sikhs and an indictment of Muslims. To a lesser extent, G.D Khosla's report, *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of Events Leading Up To and Following the Partition of India*²⁵ also presents a rather one-sided description, which places responsibility for Partition squarely with the Muslim League. No comparable survey was completed in Pakistan; however, in 1948 the government did publish three short reports arguing that the violence was due to a 'Sikh plan' which deliberately terrorised Muslims in order to affect a population transfer²⁶.

Oral histories and testimonies indicate the variety of positions held within the Sikh community during Partition, and inform how the strategy of the Sikh politicians was perceived by those outside of the sphere of elite politics. As it has not been

²³ Nicholas Mansergh, E. W. R. Lumby, and Penderel Moon. *The Transfer of power 1942-7*, (London: H.M.S.O., 1970-1983).

²⁴ Gurbachan Singh Talib, *Muslim League attack on Sikhs and Hindus in the Punjab, 1947*, (Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, 1950).

²⁵ G.D. Khosla, *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of Events Leading Up To and Following the Partition of India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

²⁶ Government of Pakistan, *Notes on the Sikh Plan; The RSS in the Punjab; The Sikhs in Action*, (Lahore: Superintendent, Govt. Print., 1948).

possible to conduct interviews, I will rely on recordings such as Andrew Whitehead's collection *A People Partitioned*²⁷ and oral histories in the Cambridge Centre for South Asian Studies archive²⁸; as well as transcripts of interviews provided in books such as *Amritsar*²⁹, edited by Ian Talbot and Darshan Singh Tatla and *The Punjab bloodied, partitioned and cleansed*³⁰ by Ishtiaq Ahmed. Testimonies from Sikhs in Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*³¹ and Pandey's *Remembering Partition*³² will also supplement the analysis.

Although oral histories reveal diverse attitudes regarding communal differences and political representation during this period, a disproportionate amount of these testimonies come from the middle and upper classes. Discovering the opinions and actions of the Sikh workers and peasants is a difficult task, especially without the capacity to visit the Punjab. However, references to inter-communal peasant uprisings in the *Towards Freedom*³³ volumes indicate that these groups were far from passive spectators, and that their concerns differed greatly from those articulated by elite politicians.

As well as archival documents and interviews, I will use literary sources to develop an understanding of how Partition was experienced. As Mushiral Hasan argues, 'literature exposes the inadequacy of narratives of Partition'³⁴. Novels such as

²⁷ Andrew Whitehead, *A People Partitioned*, SOAS Special Collections, 2009.

²⁸ Cambridge Oral Archives, Cambridge centre for South Asian Studies.

<http://www.s-asian.cam.ac.uk/archive/audio/> accessed on 12/03/2014.

²⁹ Ian Talbot and Darsahn Singh Tatla, *Amritsar*.

³⁰ Ishtiaq Ahmed, *The Punjab bloodied, partitioned and cleansed*.

³¹ Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*.

³² Pandey, *Remembering Partition*.

³³ Sumit Sarkar (ed.), *Towards Freedom, 1946, part 1*, (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1985).

³⁴ Mushiral Hasan, 'Memories of a fragmented nation: rewriting the histories of India's Partition' in Settar S. and Gupta, I.B. (eds.), *Pangs of Partition, Vol. II*, 185.

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, and Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*³⁵, depict the multitude of influences which determined the actions of Sikhs, at both an individual and community level. Although these accounts are fictional, the authors lived through Partition and aim to show the reality of human relationships in 1947; the characters and occurrences in the books are very much inspired by real people and events³⁶.

Chapter 1: The Politics of representation

As to where Pakistan was located, the inmates knew nothing. That was why both the mad and partially mad were unable to decide whether they were now in India or in Pakistan. If they were in India, where on earth was Pakistan? And if they were in Pakistan, then how come until only the other day it was India?

(Saadat Hasan Manto, Toba Tek Singh, p518.)

³⁵ Note: for all literature texts, page numbers are from the compilation *Memories of Madness, stories of 1947*, (Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2002).

³⁶ For example in *Train to Pakistan*, the character of Iqbal Singh is inspired by Daniel Latifi, a communist activist in the Punjab. Khushwant Singh, *A People Partitioned*. Also see, Alok Bhalla, 'The Landscape of Memories and Writing of Tamas: An Interview with Bhisham Sahni' in Settar S. and Gupta, I.B. (eds.), *Pangs of Partition, Vol. II*.

According to the 1941 census, the Sikh population was 3.8 million – 14.9% of undivided Punjab³⁷. As a wealthy community, they contributed disproportionately to the economic and civil life of the region, with high representation in the armed forces³⁸. However, this privileged position in the Punjab did not translate into influence in the transfer of power process because the constitutional arrangement of independent India was being decided at an all-India level. Sir Evan Jenkins, the governor of the Punjab from April 1946 – 15 August 1947, complained that the dogmatism of the Congress and Muslim League high commands prevented any settlement of the political impasse in the region. He claimed ‘if the Punjab were an island, we could settle our disputes very easily’³⁹. The British-Congress-Muslim League triangle in Delhi was intent on a swift transfer of power⁴⁰, which was not conducive to arriving at a settlement that took account of the particular conditions in the Punjab.

Between 1940 and 1946, Sikh leaders responded to the Lahore declaration with various proposals which attempted to avoid Sikh incorporation into a Muslim state. A week after the League’s Pakistan resolution, the Khalsa National Party passed a resolution prophesying that ‘the Muslim League has created a situation which may mean a parting of the ways for Sikhs and the Muslims’⁴¹. However,

³⁷ Gopal Krishan, ‘Demography of the Punjab 1849-1947’, *Journal for Punjab Studies*, no. 11, vol.1, (2004), 83.

³⁸ Report of Mr Justice Reja Singh, 4 August 1947, in Singh, *Select Documents*, 335.

³⁹ Sir Evan Jenkins to Lord Wavell, 28 February 1947, in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol. III*, 365.

⁴⁰ Lucy P. Chester, *Borders and conflict in South Asia: the Radcliffe Boundary Commission and the partition of Punjab*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 13.

⁴¹ Singh, *Select Documents*, xiv.

there were also attempts at unity. On 15th June 1942, Baldev Singh signed a pact with Sikander Hyat Khan, the Muslim leader of the Unionist Party⁴². In the short-term this pact alleviated communal tension between Muslims and Sikhs and marginalised the Pakistan demand. Progress was disrupted by Jinnah's visit to the Punjab in November 1942, and Sikander's sudden death a month later⁴³. With the breakdown of cooperation, the Akali Dal began to advocate the redemarcation of the Punjab province. The scheme was named 'Azad Punjab' and would comprise of Ambala, Jullundur, Lahore divisions, and out of the Multan division, Lyallpur District, some portion of Montgomery and Multan districts, with a population of 40% Hindus, 40% Muslims and 20% Sikhs⁴⁴. It looked to create a situation where no single religious community could dominate over another⁴⁵.

However, the progress of the Pakistan demand and escalation of communal discourse appeared to jeopardise the foundations of Sikh influence in the Punjab, and thus provoked a more radical strategy. In February 1946 Sikh leaders passed a resolution demanding the creation of a separate, autonomous Sikh state. It claimed 'no weightage or protection, promised to the Sikhs by any of the majority communities can be considered adequate to protect the Sikhs and ensure their free and unhindered growth as a nationality with a distinct religious, ideological, cultural and political character'⁴⁶. However, this new demand from the Sikh political leaders was not seriously acknowledged as a possibility by the British⁴⁷.

⁴² Baldev-Sikander Pact in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol.II*, 417-18.

⁴³ Tan Tai Yong, 'Prelude to Partition: Sikh Responses to the Demand for Pakistan, 1940-46', *International Journal of Punjab Studies*, no. 1, vol. 2 (1994), 173.

⁴⁴ See Appendix 2.

⁴⁵ Master Tara Singh, "Azad Punjab Scheme", *Tribune*, Lahore 23 July 1943, quoted in Satya M. Rai, *Partition of the Punjab* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1965), 37.

⁴⁶ Resolution adopted February 1946, Lahore, in Singh, *Select Documents*, 12.

⁴⁷ Mansergh and Moon (eds.), *The Transfer of Power, Vol. VI*, 1090.

Two important developments in 1946 forced the Sikhs to take a more pragmatic approach: the Punjab provincial elections and the announcement of the Cabinet Mission Plan. The Muslim League, after gaining just two seats in the 1937 elections, had become the single biggest party in 1946, winning 75 of the 175 seats⁴⁸. This development was crucial because it was taken as a vote in favour of Pakistan, given that the League's main policy was a homeland for Muslims. Although the proposed area of Pakistan included the whole of the Punjab, and thus the entire Sikh population, Jinnah had failed to articulate a clear policy concerning minority communities in his Muslim nation⁴⁹. Sikh political leaders – drawing on a long history of oppression⁵⁰ – claimed that Pakistan was 'a matter of life and death for the Sikhs'⁵¹.

The second development was the publication of the Cabinet Mission's proposals for the constitutional arrangement of an independent India⁵². The proposals, which arranged India in compulsory groups in an effort to allay fears articulated by the Muslim League about Congress domination, did not include any safeguards for the Sikhs.

In a letter to the Secretary of State, Master Tara Singh asked:

'If the first consideration of the Cabinet Mission's recommendations is to give protection to the Muslims, why should the same consideration be not shown to the Sikhs? It appears that the Sikhs have been studiously

⁴⁸ Khosla, *Stern Reckoning*, 93-94.

⁴⁹ Ahmed, *The Punjab bloodied, partitioned and cleansed*, 543.

⁵⁰ Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, *Amritsar, Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle*, (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1985), 35.

⁵¹ Sikh leaders to Lord Ismay, 30 April 1947, in Singh, *Select Documents*, 51.

⁵² Mansergh and Moon (eds.) *Transfer of Power, Vol. VII*, 582.

debarred from having any effective influence in the province, a group or Central Union.’⁵³

It was argued by the Akali leaders that the plan amounted to securing for the Muslims all the conditions of Pakistan through the system of compulsory groupings. Their outrage was accentuated by the perception of British betrayal, after a long history of cooperation⁵⁴. On the other hand, Lord Ismay, the Secretary of State for India, declared ‘I find it very difficult to understand what it is that the Sikhs want’⁵⁵. The Sikh leaders were in a complicated position; in order to influence the all-India negotiations they had to formulate a coherent strategy which claimed to represent the Sikh interest. Yet, the diversity of outlooks within the Akali party, let alone the wider Sikh community, was not conducive to a simple articulation of the Sikhs’ preferred arrangement.

Jenkins noted ‘there are two strong factions in the Akali party proper...from the party point of view neither faction can afford to be reasonable’⁵⁶. Gyani Kartar Singh led one faction, rivalling him were Udham Singh Nagoke and Isher Singh Majhail. Although Gyani’s group were numerically inferior, with the majority of the rank and file supporting Nagoke-Majhail, he was able to dictate the party line as the most able politician⁵⁷. The wrangling for power at the top of the party encouraged dogmatism, as no politician was willing to be accused of compromising on the interests of the Sikhs.

⁵³ Letter from Master Tara Singh to the Secretary of State, 25 May 1946. India (cabinet mission). *Papers relating to (a) the Sikhs*, (Parliament Papers: 1946).

⁵⁴ Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs, Vol. II*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 274.

⁵⁵ Note by Lord Ismay, 22 April 1947, in Singh, *Select Documents*, 48.

⁵⁶ Jenkins to Mountbatten, 30 June 1947, in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol. V*, 102.

⁵⁷ Khushwant Singh, *The Sikhs*, (Calcutta: Lustre Press, 1984), 143.

The most influential Sikh leader during this period, however, was Master Tara Singh, who managed to transcend the internal disputes of the Akali Party. The British frequently despaired at Master Tara Singh's extremism and believed that he exerted influence beyond his support base⁵⁸. Baldev Singh was the preferred Sikh representative from the British perspective, who perceived him to be more moderate and characteristic of the wider Sikh community. He was the Sikh member of the Executive Council in 1945, and was invited to serve in the interim government in 1946⁵⁹. Master Tara Singh and other leaders of the Akali Party protested that Baldev did not consult with them on vital issues in the transfer of power process. For example, following Baldev Singh's acceptance of 3rd June Plan, Master Tara Singh complained of 'the total lack' of any provision in the plan to give the Sikhs 'any power or status anywhere, or for safeguarding their position and interests'⁶⁰.

Thus the power struggle within the Akali leadership was not conducive to a clear policy, based on the interests of Sikhs. The stakes were high and everyone feared losing control. Concerns for the welfare of the Sikh community were intermingled with personal political ambitions. Ultimately, after weighing up the dangers of the incorporation of the whole of the Punjab into Pakistan, the Sikh political elite demanded the partition of the region, together with the exchange of population in order to consolidate the Sikh community⁶¹. The decision was taken following a Panthic conference, and notably delivered to Mountbatten by Master Tara Singh,

⁵⁸ Jenkins to Abell, May 19th 1947, in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol. IV*, 203.

⁵⁹ Situation Report on the Sikhs, 11 June 1946, in Singh, *Select Documents*, 720.

⁶⁰ *Times of India*, 5 June 1947, p.7 col. 2. Quoted in *Transfer of Power, Vol. XI*, 136.

⁶¹ See appendix 2.

Baldev Singh and Giani Kartar Singh together on 18 April 1947⁶². However, this outward display of unity at the top did not reflect consensus within the ranks. The structure of the Akali Party as well as the system of the transfer of power encouraged an undemocratic approach, where a few strong leaders were able to ignore the protestations of the majority and declare their own version of the Sikh interest.

The strategy of Sikh leaders underwent several evolutions between 1940 and 1947, as they desperately attempted to prevent the Sikhs being swept into an undesirable constitutional arrangement. The demand for the partition of the Punjab and exchange of population and property of Sikhs in the west with Muslims in the east of the region⁶³ remains controversial. Emphasis on the untrustworthiness of Muslims and the vulnerability of the Sikh community provided the basis for a paternalistic justification, which prioritised the integrity of the Sikh community in order to ensure its survival. Giani Kartar Singh stressed to Mountbatten that the Sikh community had been 'placed in jeopardy' and 'every Sikh in whatever situation he is placed feels most acutely about it'⁶⁴. However, oral testimonies and literary accounts contest this statement. For much of the Sikh population, Partition only came to acquire meaning when refugees arrived on their doorstep⁶⁵, when they became victims of violence⁶⁶, or when they were forced to leave their homes⁶⁷.

⁶² Mansergh and Moon (eds.), *The Transfer of Power, Vol. X*, 322.

⁶³ See Appendix 3.

⁶⁴ Note by Giani Kartar Singh given to H.E. at interview on 20 June 1947, in Singh, *Select Documents*, 137.

⁶⁵ See appendix 4.

⁶⁶ 'Only one junoon' in Hasan (ed.), *India Partitioned, the other face of freedom, Vol. II*, (Delhi: The Lotus Collection, 1995), 147.

⁶⁷ Dr Harcharan Singh, *Amritsar*, 93.

Akali leaders were able to articulate a 'Sikh interest' that did not reflect the concerns of Sikhs, partly as a result of the British administrative structure and policies. The colonial administration favoured a system of representational politics, in which power was concentrated in the hands of a few individuals. Jenkins outlined the system in the following terms: 'below the Legislature, the Ministry and the Secretariat there is no effective organisation of independent local authorities reflecting broadly the political opinion of the day'⁶⁸. This structure of centralised control allowed the British authorities and the Indian elites to govern without having to respond to diverse, local demands. This system had wide implications during the transfer of power process, because it meant that the dominant Akali politicians were given exclusive rights to articulate the position of the Sikhs. At an estimated membership of 80,000⁶⁹, The Akali Dal constituted the biggest Sikh party preceding Partition. However, it was by no means representative of the diverse political spectrum within the Sikh community.

The Communist Party in the Punjab was overwhelmingly formed of Sikhs⁷⁰; they were arguably an influential force in popular politics, although they lost out to the Akali Dal in terms of elite-level representation. This was partly due to the limited franchise in provincial elections; at around 11% of the population it excluded poorer peasants and workers, and thus a large section of the Communists' support base⁷¹. The weakness of their electoral performance also needs to be seen in the context of the repressive policies against them. Leaders were prosecuted for their speeches at rural meetings and some of the best communist candidates were

⁶⁸ Jenkins to Wavell, 15 February 1946, in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol. III*, 346.

⁶⁹ Jenkins to Mountbatten, undated, in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol. IV*, 100.

⁷⁰ Singh, *A History of the Sikhs Vol. II*, 251.

⁷¹ Crispin Bates, *Subalterns and the Raj*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 150.

debarred from contesting elections⁷². The position of the Communists in the Punjab was also severely undermined by their own confused and contradictory central policy. Following orders from the Comintern in the USSR, the Communist Party of India adopted a 'People's War' policy, which supported the British government for the duration of World War Two⁷³, a bizarre reversal for the anti-imperialist party. This policy distanced the Party from the Quit India movement and appeared to be a complete betrayal of working-class interests. These circumstances, which resulted in the Communist Party not gaining a single seat in the Assembly in 1946, have generally led historians to consider them a spent force with little over Punjabi politics⁷⁴. However, in April 1947, Jenkins wrote that the Communists 'have done surprisingly well at two recent by-elections, at which their candidates were defeated by quite a small margin'⁷⁵. Moreover, it is clear that the real influence of the Communists did not so much lie in representative politics, but in popular mobilisations. A photograph taken by Sunil Janah of a Punjab Kisan Sabha demonstration in 1945, where the protestors are clutching communist flags⁷⁶, reveals that they were influential in the politics of peasants, even if their power was minimal at the elite level.

Whilst elite politics was turning intensely communal, peasant mobilisations occurred across the Punjab where Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus marched side by side. On the 18th August 1946 *The People's Age* reported the Harsah Chhina *morcha*

⁷² Bhagwan Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-47*, (Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1979), 178.

⁷³ Sohan Singh Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism*, (New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1991), 272.

⁷⁴ Sukhmani Bal Riar, *The Politics of the Sikhs, 1940-1947*, (Delhi: Books and Periodicals Agency, 2006), 133.

⁷⁵ Letter Jenkins to Mountbatten, undated (around April), in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol. IV*, 112.

⁷⁶ See appendix 5.

[mobilisation] as 'a united struggle of all Amritsar's kisans'⁷⁷. Peasants were rising up with slogans of unity between Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs; their attacks were directed only at landlords and imperialism⁷⁸. These movements were met with repression; on the 6th October the *People's Age* reported that the 'Punjab kisan morcha won but the ministry refuses to release 700 prisoners'⁷⁹. These examples show that the political landscape preceding Partition was not simply a case of growing tension between religious communities, but saw increasing alienation of elite politics from popular movements.

From this perspective, the position which the Akali Dal enjoyed as spokespeople for the Sikh community might better be understood as another case of 'dominance without hegemony'⁸⁰. It was, to some extent, engineered by the limitations imposed on the Communist Party and the British administrative structure which dichotomised elite politics from popular movements. The main concerns which governed the Akali strategy were fear of Muslim domination and maintaining the integrity of the Sikh community. On the other hand, the evidence we have of popular movements suggest that it was class divisions, rather than religious ones, which were the principle source of tension. The Akali Dal was functioning in a highly communalised political arena – particularly since the 1946 elections. Their radical strategy was a result of prolonged incapacity to exert any influence over the all-India negotiations, and genuine fear for the future of the Sikh community.

⁷⁷ 'All kisans Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs behind Punjab morcha', *People's Age*, 18th August 1946 in Sarkar (ed.), *Towards Freedom 1946 Part 1*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 665.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 667.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 665.

⁸⁰ Jalal argued that 'emerging mainstream nationalism...like its adversary, colonialism, may well have only achieved dominance without hegemony'. In 'Nation, Reason and Religion, Punjab's role in the Partition of India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, (1998), 33 (32), 2183. Also the title of Ranajit Guha book on subaltern studies, *Dominance without Hegemony*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

However, it was also motivated by the desire to maintain control; a communal outlook was necessary in order for the Akalis to retain influence and not lose out to the Sikh Congressmen and Sikh communists. While the Akalis were seen as the only true protector of the 'Sikh interest', and the Sikh community was concentrated in one state, they could continue to represent Sikhs in regional and national politics following independence.

The vibrant and diverse political culture amongst the Sikhs was incongruous with the proceedings for the transfer of power, which saw a handful of dominant individuals supposedly represent the interests of the whole community. The concentration of political power, and the urgency to articulate a strategy in adverse circumstance, meant that the approach of the Akali Dal increasingly diverged from the concerns of much of the Sikh population.

Chapter 2: Religion as identity

Three hundred years earlier, a similar 'war song' used to be sung by the Khalsa before taking on the enemy. Oblivious of everything they sang, imbued with the spirit of sacrifice. In this unique moment, their souls had merged, as it were, with the souls of their ancestors. Time had come to cross swords with the Turks. The Khalsa was again facing a crisis created by the Turks.

(Tamas p.354)

The political strategy of the Akali Dal was a desperate response to extraordinary political circumstances, yet to some extent it was their vision that ultimately prevailed. They were the only party which called for the transfer of populations, and based this demand on explicit threats of violence⁸¹. The August massacres and almost total exchange of Muslims from East Punjab with Hindus and Sikhs from the West seem to indicate Sikh collective action in line with the Akali strategy. This chapter will investigate the assertion that a militant and anti-Muslim Sikh identity was a crucial factor in determining the course of events in 1947. It will examine the foundations of Sikh identity, such as military involvement and a history of oppression, as well as the social and economic differences which separated religious communities. It will explore the role of political and religious leaders in strengthening communal consciousness and assess the adherence to this elite conception of Sikh identity in 1947.

Separate political representation, which was granted to Muslims in 1909 and extended to other communities in the Punjab in 1919⁸², strengthened ideas of distinct communal interests. Separate electorates and reserved seats gave

⁸¹ Note Jenkins to Abell, 19 May, 1946 in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol. IV*, 202.

⁸² Singh, *Select Documents on the partition of the Punjab*, x.

minority constituencies the impression that only politicians from their own religion could represent their interests. The Lahore Declaration and subsequent demand for a Sikh state⁸³ accelerated this process, projecting onto Punjabi society the view that Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs were distinct communities. This outlook was sustained by evident economic and social differences between religious groups in the Punjab. The Sikhs were the wealthiest community in the region, and were often the landlords or moneylenders for poor Muslims. There was thus, in some areas, an alignment between class divisions and religion, which heightened impressions of distinct communal interests.

Along with economic divisions, the caste system impacted social relations in the region. Bir Bahudur Singh talks of how Sikhs would not eat in the houses of Muslims, and laments 'if we had been willing to drink from the same cups, we would have remained united'⁸⁴. However, he also claims 'real relations were not so close to us as our Musalmaan friends', and blames the elders of the community for imposing the divisive social practices⁸⁵. Thus class, caste and religious divisions intersected in multiple ways, it was not only the case that generally class divisions aligned with religious ones, but also that social elevation could result in a more antagonistic response to people of another religion. Khushwant Singh described how the upper-middle class were the worst element of society in Lahore for talk of teaching Muslims a lesson.⁸⁶ This can be contrasted to the examples previously mentioned of inter-communal peasant mobilisations. Arguably the hostility that wealthier Sikhs showed to Muslims in 1947 was a response to threats

⁸³ Resolution of Sikh leaders in Lahore, February 1946, in Singh, *Select documents*, 12.

⁸⁴ Bir Bahudur Singh, 1990, Delhi, in Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 175.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*,

⁸⁶ Khushwant Singh, Cambridge Oral Archives.

to their dominant position in society. Firstly, stimulating communal consciousness was a defence against the development of united peasant mobilisations which contested their privileges as landlords. Secondly, it was a response to the Pakistan demand; the pattern of wealth distribution in the Punjab posed a challenge to Muslim authority, even in their own state. As L.C. Mehra described 'if Sikhs continued to own land, they would continue to dominate the economy in Pakistan'⁸⁷. Their advantageous position made Sikh landowners vulnerable in the face of a vastly different political arrangement, and consequently brought them into more direct conflict with Muslims⁸⁸. Overall, the communalisation of Punjabi society was stimulated by the intersection of class and religion; both in terms of the correlation between religious groups and economic classes, and the corresponding ease with which specific class interests, such as maintaining a dominant position as landowner, represented themselves through communal discourse.

Performance in the military was a crucial component of Sikh identity; for generations the Sikhs had enjoyed disproportionately high representation in the British Indian army. Swarna Aiyar argues that the militarisation of Punjabi society affected both the relationship to violence, and the type of attacks that could be carried out in the region⁸⁹. Fictional accounts also refer to the functional application of military experience during the communal violence⁹⁰. Furthermore,

⁸⁷ L. C. Mehra, Cambridge Oral Archives.

⁸⁸ Although this trend can be discerned to some extent, there are also cases of rich Sikhs who acted in solidarity with Muslims, e.g grandfather of Sardar Aridaman Singh Dhillon, in Talbot, *Amritsar*, 36.

⁸⁹ Swarna Aiyar, 'August Anarchy: The Partition Massacres in the Punjab', in D. A. Low, and Howard Brasted (eds.), *Freedom, trauma, continuities: Northern India and Independence*, (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998), 25.

⁹⁰ See Appendix 5.

it was common, even in peacetime, to see Sikh jathas marching from one gurdwara to another, singing military songs⁹¹. Activities such as these indicate that the military was more than an occupation; it was also highly influential in Sikh culture. This militaristic tradition was combined with ingrained convictions of Sikh oppression at the hands of Muslims. In Gurdwaras, prayers would 'hail all those martyrs who suffered for the sake of religion'⁹², signifying those who died under Mughal rule in the eighteenth century. These regular references to a history of oppression shaped the communal identity of Sikhs and instilled fear about living under Muslim rule in Pakistan. In addition to historic symbolism, religious models were also invoked. In June 1947 Master Tara Singh issued a statement declaring that the Khalsa would 'prove to the world that the spirit of Guru Gobind Singh still lives in them'⁹³. Through references to the history of Sikh oppression and the spirit of resistance demonstrated by the Gurus, religious and political elites manipulated Sikh identity into a militant, anti-Muslim form. In this way the Sikh religion provided an ideological motivation for violent actions. The testimony of Khushwant Singh provides an indication of the pervasiveness of this spirit of militancy in the Sikh community prior to Partition; he talks with great regret about passing cartridges to young Sikhs organising resistance, when they came to his house⁹⁴. Pamphlets requesting money and arms for this Sikh 'defence' effort also reveal a degree of collective action based on a common religious identity⁹⁵.

⁹¹ Swarna Aiyar, 'August Anarchy', 25.

⁹² Kirpal Singh, *The Sikhs and the Transfer of Power*, (Patiala: Publication Bureau Punjabi University, 1986), 114.

⁹³ *Times of India*, 5 June 1947, p.7 col. 2. Quoted in Mansergh and Moon (eds.), *The Transfer of Power, Vol. XI*, 136.

⁹⁴ Khushwant Singh, *A People Partitioned*.

⁹⁵ See appendix 6.

However, it must be noted that many Sikhs did not subscribe to this connection between Sikhism and militarism. On the contrary, they perceived violence to counter the teachings of the Gurus and in some instances Sikh identity prevented attacks. In Dhamot in August 1947, a Sikh woman stopped her brother from killing a Muslim family 'Have you gone mad?' she remembers having said 'is this a demonstration of your Sikhi (Sikh *dharma*)?'⁹⁶ In this example, reminding her brother of the fact that he was a Sikh was a tool for stopping violence. The testimony of Aridaman Singh reflects a similar sentiment, he talks of how his grandfather was motivated to help Muslims because 'Sikh religion teaches universal brotherhood'. He claims 'most of the learned Sikhs who know their religion properly would not be carried by emotions to kill people due to their religious bigotry'⁹⁷.

Thus when assessing the extent to which Sikh identity contributed to the communal violence of 1947, we are faced with opposing testimonies. Sikhism, like most religions, was subject to different interpretations; emphasising particular teachings could radically alter the actions which were taken in its name. Jalal argues that 'religion as identity owed nothing to religion as faith'⁹⁸; this distinction is useful in analysing the diversity of actions of the Sikh community. Communal violence was to some extent a consequence of the construction of a particular Sikh identity, which articulated only certain aspects of the Sikh religion and history. Appropriations of the Sikh tradition had previously been linked to social justice

⁹⁶ Mother of a civil servant, interviewed 9 April 1995, Gharuan, in Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 179.

⁹⁷ Sardar Aridaman Singh Dhillon, in *Amritsar*, 37.

⁹⁸ Jalal, 'Nation, reason and religion', 2187.

struggles of working people⁹⁹, but in 1947 it was the elite articulation of Sikh identity, as militant and anti-Muslim, which dominated. On the other hand, the testimonies from Sikhs which talk of their religion as a motivator for peace between the two communities seem to refer more to the Sikh faith, with the identity constructions stripped away. They refer to the 'basic key'¹⁰⁰ of Sikhism and to personal reflections on Sikh dharma which remained outside the influence of elite appropriation.

In the increasingly communal atmosphere of 1947, however, religion as identity gained importance, even if unwillingly or unconsciously. According to Khushwant Singh, 'at one time the communal virus had spread so much that one felt thrown onto Sikh militant side'¹⁰¹. Butalia argues that people were forced to partition their mind in order to fit with the political division, and put aside other markers of identity¹⁰². Sikhs were particularly affected because they could be distinguished by physical markers such as a beard and turban; consequently they were easy targets for communal attacks. However, a common Sikh identity – based on militarism and anti-Muslim sentiment, did not totally subsume other facets of identity, such as class, caste, village or region, prior to Partition.

Jenkins noted that caste differences were strong within the Sikh community. In April 1947 he observed 'the Sikhs are peculiar, in that there is a strong Jat *versus* non-Jat feeling among them'¹⁰³. The Sikh jathas that were largely responsible for

⁹⁹ Shinder Purewal, *Sikh Ethnocentrism and the Political Economy of the Punjab*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 19.

¹⁰⁰ Sardar Aridaman Singh Dhillon, *Amritsar*, 37.

¹⁰¹ Khushwant Singh, Cambridge Oral Archives.

¹⁰² Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 285.

¹⁰³ Jenkins to Mountbatten, 1 April 1947, in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics Vol. IV*, 112.

the attacks on Muslims in 1947 were mostly composed of Jat Sikhs¹⁰⁴. A persistent divide between Jats and non-Jats undermines the notion that the communal violence was the result of entrenched communal identities in Punjab society. Violence and population exchange were called for by the Jat elite in the name of protecting Sikhs from Muslim domination, a threat which was not experienced by much of the Sikh population. Sardar Gurbachan Singh describes how his old Muslim neighbours 'fought among themselves to invite us as guests for the night'¹⁰⁵ when he visited his village in 1960. One popular doctor was told by his Muslim friends 'whatever happens, be in Pakistan or whatever, we are not allowing you to leave Sargodha'¹⁰⁶. Mrs Kulijeet Kaur describes how in her village, Muslims attended the gurdwara and 'it was a very cooperative kind of living', she says 'when we decided to leave the village, those Muslims cried openly while embracing us'¹⁰⁷. Time and time again, survivors of Partition recall the harmonious relations they had with Muslims and blame political leaders for the division of the country.

In addition to the bonds of friendship within village and city communities, a 'Sikh interest' which demanded the transfer of populations was also undermined by the links of the Sikhs to the land. The Punjab was the birthplace of the Sikh religion, and the Sikhs were 'sons of the soil'¹⁰⁸. Ostensibly, the scale of the exchange of populations appears to be an illustration of the power of religious identity to dictate actions in 1947; however, the overwhelming impression given by the

¹⁰⁴ Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 24.

¹⁰⁵ Sardar Aridaman Singh Dhillon, *Amritsar*, 82

¹⁰⁶ Dr Harcharan Singh, *Amritsar*, 94.

¹⁰⁷ Mrs Kulijeet Kaur, *Amritsar*, 137.

¹⁰⁸ Brass, 'Retributive genocide in the Punjab', 96.

accounts of those who moved is that they believed migration would be temporary. Mrs Anant Kaur describes, 'we thought we'd be back in a few days, so we asked our neighbour to look after the house'¹⁰⁹. Similarly Sardar Gurbachan Singh Bhatti recalls, 'we never had any idea that this would mean a permanent migration'¹¹⁰.

There are also many indications of the reluctance of Sikhs to migrate even after the announcement of the border and the spread of violence. On the 5th September, the governor for West Punjab complained 'there is little sign of 3 lakh [300,000] Sikhs in Lyallpur moving, but in the end they will all have to go'¹¹¹. The SGPC report also points to coercion in the Pakistani state of West Punjab which forced Sikhs to leave. According to the report, notices were placed on Sikh houses which said, 'you have been earmarked to quit Pakistan. If you don't follow this warning, none but yourself will be responsible for the consequences'¹¹². The authors use these examples to deny accusations of a 'Sikh plan' which involved attacking Muslims in East Punjab in order to affect a transfer of populations. However, there are a number of examples of the Sikh elite proclaiming that this was their very strategy¹¹³. Consequently, the determination of Sikhs to remain in their ancestral homes, despite them being in Pakistan, must be understood as an absence of commitment to the strategy articulated by the Akali Dal.

Opposition to the strategy of the Akali Dal was not limited to the individual action of refusing to leave homes. There were also demonstrations of collective resistance preceding Partition. On 8 July 1947, Sikhs throughout the Punjab and

¹⁰⁹ Mrs Anant Kaur, *Amritsar*, 22.

¹¹⁰ Sardar Gurbachan Singh Bhatti, *Amritsar*, 83.

¹¹¹ Talib, *Muslim League Attack*, 232.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 234.

¹¹³ See appendix 3.

Delhi wore black armbands in protest against the partition of the Punjab¹¹⁴. Jenkins reflected that 'the average Punjabi would in his heart like to get back to the time before the general election'¹¹⁵ and that 'intelligent people not deeply committed to the political parties are far from happy'¹¹⁶. There was widespread discontent at the direction of political negotiations. The decision to demand Partition put considerable pressure on the Akali Dal, as the Sikh community began to express their dissatisfaction at the division and policy of population exchange.

The 3 June announcement to partition the Punjab thus left the Sikh leaders in disarray; this was principally because the plan had been agreed upon without a clear understanding of the factors on which a division of the region would be based¹¹⁷. Baldev Singh declared that 'the Sikhs had accepted the British statement of June 3rd but acceptance never meant they should acquiesce in decisions that threatened their very existence'¹¹⁸. There was thus a concerted effort by the Sikh leaders to mobilise the community against any boundary which would result in Sikh incorporation into a Muslim state. Master Tara Singh announced 'the time has come when the might of the sword alone shall reign. The Sikhs are ready. We have to bring Muslims to their sense'¹¹⁹.

The spread of communalism prior to Partition meant the strengthening of religious identities at the expense of class, cultural or geographical connections. However, this process was by no means complete in 1947. Sikhs orientated themselves in the turbulent times of Partition through diverse referents; the

¹¹⁴ Mansergh and Moon (eds.), *The Transfer of Power Vol. XII*, 17.

¹¹⁵ Jenkins to Wavell, 14 January 1947, in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol. III*, 320.

¹¹⁶ Jenkins to Mountbatten, 15 June 1947, in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol. V*, 75.

¹¹⁷ Mansergh and Moon (eds.), *The Transfer of Power, Vol. XI*, 69. Also see appendix 7.

¹¹⁸ Mansergh and Moon (eds.), *The Transfer of Power Vol. XII*, 18.

¹¹⁹ Master Tara Singh, in Singh, *Select Documents*, 406.

guidance – or call to action – by Sikh political leaders jostled for attention amongst other influences such as faith, friendships and ties to ancestral land or city culture. For these reasons the capacity of political leaders to shape a Sikh communal identity and use this as a foundation for collective action was limited; certainly many subscribed to the appeal for a militant defence against Muslims, but this outlook was by no means shared by the whole of the Sikh community.

Chapter 3: Sikhs and Communal violence

'Well, Inspector Sahib, let them kill,' said Hakum Chand wearily. 'Let everyone kill. Just ask for help from other stations and keep a record of the messages you send. We must be able to prove that we did our best to stop them.'

(Train to Pakistan, p.147)

Although the subscription to a common, communal Sikh identity was limited in 1947, exposure to communal violence reconstituted multidimensional identities into a communal mould. Partition created a new paradigm in the Punjab: people were made refugees in their homes because of their religion; committed, and were made victims of, acts of violence because of their religion; and forced to migrate hundreds of miles because of their religion. These were the experiences that really cemented religion as the dominant marker of identity. The question remains as to the source of the violence, if it was not the result of primordial, irreconcilable, conflicting communal interests. Whilst some historians have argued that it was due to a cycle of revenge and retaliation¹²⁰, the most common assertion is that the Punjab was overcome by 'madness' in 1947¹²¹. Decades later, survivors and agents of the violence of 1947 question what allowed people to behave in such a way¹²²; the massacres are disorientating both on a personal and at a state level. This has led to a tendency to remember and historicise the violence as something that was 'outside'¹²³. Carefully constructed boundaries which isolate those who were

¹²⁰ Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj, 1849-1947*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1998), 225.

¹²¹ Nehru to Gandhi 22 August 1947, in S. Gopal (ed.), *Select works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vol. IV*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 14.

¹²² Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 178.

¹²³ Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 181.

responsible, along with specific narratives of the violence which emphasise honour and sacrifice, remove the necessity for the individual, community or nation to reflect on their complicity in the bloodshed¹²⁴.

The Sikh community is often particularly associated with the violence in the Punjab. It is asserted that their disproportionate involvement in the military, together with elements of the Sikh religion such as the carrying of a kirpan [dagger], result in a greater propensity to violence. Furthermore, the speeches of Akali Dal politicians were notable for their aggressive tone and implicit threats¹²⁵. Akali leaders requested arrangements to be made by officials in order to implement the transfer of populations following the partition of the Punjab. They were principally concerned with maintaining the integrity of the elite Sikh population. Master Tara Singh told Jenkins that he would 'limit the compulsory transfer of population to property owners. Persons not owning property could do what they liked'¹²⁶. The backup plan, however, was to effect this exchange through violence, which could not be demarcated in the same way, and which by the summer of 1947 had effected the whole province¹²⁷.

However, ordinary Sikhs did not participate in communal attacks because a disposition to violence was ingrained in the Sikh identity or from some collective ambition to rid the east Punjab of Muslims in order to consolidate the Sikh community there. In the extraordinarily tense environment of 1947, where even the police and the army started to reveal communal bias, violence was a response to intense anxiety and the development of a mentality which identified Muslims as

¹²⁴ Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 180.

¹²⁵ Note by Jenkins, 10 April 1947, in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol. IV*, 129.

¹²⁶ Jenkins to Abell, 19 May 1947, *ibid.*, 203.

¹²⁷ Jenkins to Mountbatten, 30 June 1947, Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol. V*, 102.

the enemy and a threat. Political elites were undoubtedly influential in mobilising volunteer armies and inciting communal hostility; however, this influence should not be mistaken for having control over the situation. The main impetus to commit violent attacks, or seek safety with fellow religionists, was grave insecurity. The uncertain political situation, the debasement of state apparatus, and the emotional confusion as intercommunal amity disintegrated, meant the power of communal propaganda and rumours to generate fear were multiplied. This volatile situation was ignited by varying political, cultural, emotional or economic stimuli; honour, revenge, and opportunism all came into play.

In June 1947, Jenkins wrote to Mountbatten, 'generally, the atmosphere of fatalism continues'¹²⁸. The deterioration of the situation in the Punjab can be dated back to February. The Muslim League agitation against the Unionist ministry assumed a communal character. Master Tara Singh issued a statement on 12 February 1947 declaring that the Sikhs were in grave danger¹²⁹, which seemed to be confirmed when a Sikh constable was murdered by a Muslim crowd on 24 February¹³⁰. It was speeches and incidents such as these, and the virulent rumours which accompanied them, that contributed to a logic which identified Muslims as a threat, whose very existence appeared to jeopardise the survival of the Sikh community.

As early as 2 March, Tara Singh publically declared 'I do not see how we can avoid civil war. There can be no settlement, if the Muslims want to rule the Punjab'¹³¹.

The following day, the Akali leader made a dramatic speech rejecting Pakistan and

¹²⁸ Jenkins to Mountbatten, 15 June 1947, in Carter, (ed.), *Punjab Politics*, Vol. V, 75.

¹²⁹ Jenkins to Wavell, 12 February 1947, in Carter, (ed.), *Punjab Politics*, Vol. III, 343.

¹³⁰ Jenkins to Wavell, February 28th 1947, *ibid.*, 365-66.

¹³¹ *Pakistan Times*, 2 March 1947, in Ahmed, *Punjab, bloodied, partitioned and cleansed*, 119.

unsheathed his kirpan in front of a crowd, as he exited the Punjab Assembly. This bold display of aggression ignited the situation¹³². One Sikh who later participated in attacks on Muslims in East Punjab recalls how 'the news of Master Tara Singh's speech outside the Punjab Assembly reached Rawalpindi the same day and tension began to rise from that evening'¹³³. Rival communities agitated for or against the creation of Pakistan; at protests, aggressive Islamic slogans from the Muslim League were matched by Sikhs shouting 'those who want Pakistan will instead get the graveyard'¹³⁴. Sikhs were vastly outnumbered in the rural western districts and were the principle victims of the first wave of attacks. Jenkins estimated that the death toll for non-Muslims was six times higher than that for Muslims¹³⁵. The provocation for the violence in March was principally political. The coalition ministry in the Punjab had left the biggest party in the region in opposition: the Muslim League's frustrated agitation, and the incitement from Master Tara Singh and his associates, was all that was needed to detonate the volatile situation.

Nevertheless, communalism had by no means infected all those who were politically active at this time. Sardar Labh Singh, who was an Akali leader in Jullundur, visited Muslim areas in order to ask forgiveness for the aggression of the Sikhs against them. He was assassinated by a Muslim youth¹³⁶. The police, who had been aware of a conspiracy to assassinate him, had failed to act. This example is indicative of one way in which the violence escalated. As peaceful activists became victims, the political scene became increasingly polarised. A sense of

¹³² Khushwant Singh, Cambridge Oral Archives.

¹³³ Amar Singh, interviewed 14 March 2004, Delhi. In Ahmed, *Punjab, bloodied, partitioned and cleansed*, 171.

¹³⁴ Ahmed, *Punjab bloodied, partitioned and cleansed*, 142.

¹³⁵ Jenkins to Mountbatten, 16 April 1947, in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol. IV*, 137.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

security disappeared as Punjabis witnessed people who shared the same physical and cultural space committing horrific atrocities. One witness of the Chowk Pragdas attacks of Muslims against Sikhs said 'it was truly a bloodbath...I was a young boy in those days. The Chowk Pragdas events deeply traumatised me as I saw humanity being debased in the worst possible manner'¹³⁷. As communities faced the trauma of violent attacks, the authorities failed to restore any semblance of normality.

This breakdown of state security was inextricably linked with the unstable political situation. Gurdial Singh who was an intelligence officer in Lahore had imprisoned some Muslim organisers of riots with the help of an informant. His informant explained that when he visited the jail, the officials pretended to interrogate the prisoners, but when he left they would assure them not to worry because 'Pakistan is coming soon'¹³⁸. Authority was fractured as differing political frameworks began to influence the work of officials. Jenkins perceived politicians to be directly responsible for stimulating communal feeling in the Police and argued they were attempting to do the same with the army¹³⁹. He complained to Mountbatten 'many of the stories of partiality are inventions; it has been the deliberate policy of the parties here to smash the services, and they have in some measure succeeded...We are now working with imperfect and unreliable instruments; but it is the political leaders who wished them to be unreliable'¹⁴⁰.

¹³⁷ Ripudaman Singh, interviewed 26 March 2004, Amritsar. In Ahmed, *Punjab bloodied, partitioned and cleansed*, 149.

¹³⁸ Gurdial Singh, *A people Partitioned*.

¹³⁹ Note by Jenkins, 26 May 1947, in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics Vol. IV*, 216.

¹⁴⁰ Jenkins to Mountbatten, 25 June 1947, in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol. V*, 102.

The collapse of dependable services was partly a result of the instability which came from an imminent drastic change in the political structure of the state, and partly due to the intrusion of political agendas into security provision. It was a significant factor in the spread of communal violence, as there was no objective arbitrator to diffuse antagonistic situations. Sikhs were particularly affected by bias in the police force, because its composition was majority Muslim¹⁴¹. Testimonies describe the failure of Muslim officers to put out fires in Sikh areas¹⁴² and an atmosphere where 'anybody could murder anybody'¹⁴³. The behaviour of officials thus furthered the notion of Muslims as the enemy, which was being propounded by Akali politicians.

With the deterioration of trust in state structures, and the mounting atmosphere of despair, fear manifested itself in several ways. For the Sikh community, fear of dishonour in the form of conversion to Islam and the denigration of women, was paramount. Many Sikh women and girls were killed in 1947, not by Muslims, but by their own relatives. Kartar Kaur describes how 'family after family would kill their own daughters and women folk' with the casual justification 'why risk humiliation by Muslims?'¹⁴⁴ Threatened by her own brother several times, Mrs Kaur was only saved by other villagers who prevailed upon him to spare her and her sisters¹⁴⁵. Mangal Singh was not restrained in any such way; along with his two brothers, he killed seventeen women and children in his family. He would describe them as martyrs¹⁴⁶. Famously in Thoa Khalsa, ninety women committed suicide by

¹⁴¹ Jagjit Singh, Cambridge Oral Archives.

¹⁴² Gurdial Singh, *A People Partitioned*.

¹⁴³ Jagjit Singh, Cambridge Oral Archives.

¹⁴⁴ Mrs Kartar Kaur, *Amritsar*, 127.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁴⁶ Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 154.

throwing themselves into a well, to avoid abduction by Muslims¹⁴⁷. This incident is commemorated in the Singh Sabha Gurdwara every year; it is one of the only ceremonies to remember the victims of 1947 anywhere in India. It remembers these victims, however, in a very particular way; as women who had no fear, who willingly sacrificed themselves to maintain the honour of the Sikh community¹⁴⁸. Some accounts of survivors do not comply with this narrative of preferring death to humiliation or conversion. A woman, who was twelve or thirteen at the time, describes 'whoever could – escaped, however we could...wherever we could'¹⁴⁹. Although the commemoration of events has endeavoured to demonstrate the unity of the Sikh community and its codes of action, individual testimonies reveal divergences, and the limitations of communal consciousness¹⁵⁰. The logic of survival could surpass the religious and cultural constructs of honour and sacrifice.

Honour codes are normally associated with the Sikhs, and certainly no other community murdered their own women and children to the same degree; however, honour and pride legitimised violence in other ways. Muslims in Lahore were taunted for their unmanliness by their Amritsar counterparts because they had not killed so many Hindus and Sikhs. They received bangles and henna as a mockery of their cowardice, which provoked a spree of stabbings and arson across Lahore¹⁵¹. There was a shift in what constituted honourable behaviour; violence in the name of politics and religion became an accepted code of conduct. This can

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 166.

¹⁴⁸ Thoa Khalsa recordings, *A People Partitioned*.

¹⁴⁹ Name withheld, interviewed 4 March 1995, Delhi. In Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 193.

¹⁵⁰ Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 198.

¹⁵¹ Ahmed, *Punjab bloodied, partitioned and cleansed*, 224.

also be seen in the testimony of Shingara Singh who, along with his gang 'the crows', was arrested, and repeatedly told the court in Lahore 'we killed Muslims, we should be rewarded, and you're putting us in jail'¹⁵². Ideas of 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'evil' could be completely re-orientated within individuals, who were working within the confines of knowledge based on vicious rumours.

A cycle of revenge and retaliation is one explanation offered for the communal violence¹⁵³. Alone, it does not offer much insight into the particularities of the violence as it reduces diverse motivations and evidence of pre-planning into a reactionary sequence. However, a desire to avenge the suffering of co-religionists was certainly a factor in some cases. An isolated case of stabbing could ignite a community¹⁵⁴. Politicians ensured that this sense of outrage on a community level was replicated across the region. Akali leaders spread information about Sikh suffering in order to incite reprisals. One pamphlet entitled *The Rape of Rawalpindi* declared 'thousands of innocent Sikhs murdered in cold blood...Sikhs! Read patiently and ponder over it'¹⁵⁵. Jenkins described the account of events in the pamphlet as 'grossly exaggerated'¹⁵⁶.

Oral testimonies reveal the power of rumours to inflame communal tensions¹⁵⁷. According to Ameer Khan, 'it all started with rumours. To this day I still cannot figure out who spread the rumours. The rumour was that Sikhs had gathered in some place and were attacking Muslims. When this rumour reached us, the

¹⁵² Shingara Singh, *A People Partitioned*.

¹⁵³ Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj, 1849-1947*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1998), 225.

¹⁵⁴ Dr Harcharan Singh, *Amritsar*, 109.

¹⁵⁵ See appendix 8.

¹⁵⁶ Jenkins to Mountbatten, 9 April 1947, in Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol. IV*, 117.

¹⁵⁷ Dr Harcharan Singh, *Amritsar*, 109.

Muslims started attacking Sikhs and Hindus'¹⁵⁸. Years of cohabitation degenerated into distrust and fear as news and propaganda of horrific violence debased the foundations of friendships. Furthermore, those who had experienced violence first-hand were influential in demanding and executing reprisals. After the Radcliffe award, Sikhs who had retained cordial relations in their communities tried to remain in their homes, but the arrival of Muslims who had been the victims of violence in East Punjab changed everything. Gurbachan Singh Tandon recalls:

'Reports of the killings and fires in Amritsar and other parts of the Punjab also began to circulate in our village. However, life continued as usual...Soon afterwards, however, our area began to receive refugees...they would remonstrate that while they had lost their family members and homes and had been forced to flee, how was it that Khatri were still living in Pakistan?'¹⁵⁹

Communal attacks were not always impulsive acts of brutality and revenge, but once population exchange had been initiated through violence, it seemingly had to be taken to its logical conclusion. Whereas the first wave of violence was principally related to the political situation – the Muslim League agitation against the Unionist ministry and violent speeches from the Akali Dal – the violence in August, which was ignited by the Radcliffe Award, was intensified by the logic of population transfer and the avengement of killings elsewhere.

¹⁵⁸ Ameer Khan, interviewed on 11 December 2004, Rawalpindi District, in Ahmed, *Punjab bloodied, partitioned and cleansed*, 185.

¹⁵⁹ Gurbachan Singh Tandon interviewed 29 March, Noida. In Ahmed, *Punjab bloodied, partitioned and cleansed*, 349.

Attacks were not only undertaken for the 'practical' purpose of ridding Muslims or Hindus and Sikhs from one side of the border. Murder and abduction was a constant threat for those already in the process of migrating. Chowdhry Abdul Saeed who walked in a caravan [a convoy of thousands of people] to a refugee camp at Karoli described 'we were saved because we were in the front section of the caravan. Those behind were almost all wiped out'¹⁶⁰. Travelling by trains was even more dangerous; in August 1947 it was not uncommon for a train to reach its destination the other side of the border filled only with dead bodies¹⁶¹.

Although Sikh leaders fomented hostility between Sikhs and Muslims; once instigated with such ferocity and brutality, communal violence could not be neatly contained by politicians. In August 1947, Nehru wrote 'Master Tara Singh and Giani Kartar Singh have been trying to get peace restored. Their influence does not seem to go as far as many people have imagined'¹⁶². The pattern of violence was 'neither totally organised nor totally random'¹⁶³. There were suspicions that political leaders on both sides were behind the attacks and some evidence of pre-planning¹⁶⁴; however, there was no consistent direct line of command from politicians to those committing the violence¹⁶⁵. In some cases, communal violence was neither politically motivated nor a result of honour codes or revenge, it was a means to economic gains. Sardar Aridaman Singh claims 'most harm done to Muslims came not through religious bigotry but by looters and bad elements'¹⁶⁶.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 469.

¹⁶¹ Sir Chandu Lal Rivedi to S. Swaran Singh, 12 September 1947, in Singh, *Select Documents*, 523.

¹⁶² Nehru to Gandhi, 25 August 1947, in S. Gopal (ed.), *Select works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vol. IV*, 23.

¹⁶³ Brass, 'Retributive genocide in the Punjab', 85.

¹⁶⁴ Gurdial Singh, *A People Partitioned*.

¹⁶⁵ S. Swaran Singh to Chandu Lal Trivedi 17 September 1947, in Singh, *Select Documents*, 526.

¹⁶⁶ Sardar Aridaman Singh Dhillon, *Amritsar*, 37.

It is clear that there were diverse motivations for the communal violence in 1947. These do not constitute well-defined categories; political motivations of rejecting Pakistan; mobilising to ensure the integrity of the Sikh community; defence of the honour of that community; enacting revenge; and taking the possessions of the 'enemy', all overlapped and fed upon each other as legitimisers of the violence. However, it would be crudely reductionist to contain them within a label of communal Sikh interest.

The clearest demonstration of the limitations of a communal outlook amongst the Sikhs, which had been defined by elites as militant and anti-Muslim, are the examples of Sikhs who put their lives in danger in order to stop the spread of violence. Dr Man Singh Nirankari hid a crowd of Muslims in the hospital in which he worked, and lied to the gang of Sikhs pursuing them¹⁶⁷. Sikhs also gave food and medical assistance to Muslims¹⁶⁸ and participated in Peace Restoration Committees. L.C. Mehra reflects that if it was not for the work of these committees things would have been still worse¹⁶⁹. This reflection expresses an attempt to claim some agency over the course of events. The violence escalated so rapidly, seemingly engineered by politicians and permitted by the police and the army, but individuals were not all swept along by a tide of communalism, there was also ardent resistance to it. Thus, within the Sikh community, varying political outlooks and emotional responses to the communalisation of Punjab society provided motivations for perpetrating violence and attempting to prevent it.

¹⁶⁷ Dr Man Singh Nirankari, *A People Partitioned*.

¹⁶⁸ Khushdeva Singh, *Love is stronger than hate, a remembrance of 1947*, in Hasan (ed.), *The other face of freedom*, 96.

¹⁶⁹ L.C. Mehra, Cambridge Oral Archives.

Attention to the factors which motivated individuals and groups to commit atrocities must be examined in conjunction with an awareness of the broad ideological and specific local contexts that permitted the violence. The British imperial administration had been based on one country's right to rule another; India had been governed by a foreign power for centuries. The decolonisation process thus initiated complex reactions in regards to power and domination. Independence meant freedom; however, this included vulnerability to new forms of oppression for the diverse population of the subcontinent. The Muslim League and the Akali Dal utilised violence to demonstrate their anxiety and determination to reject dominance over them by another community. Communal violence was a mechanism through which power could be exercised, in order to reject the logic of colonial rule and prevent its continuance in independent India. Communal politics and violence should thus not only be seen in terms of cultural identities and the economic and social differences between communities, but also the acquisition of power.

Conclusion

Where was the power? What were the people in Delhi doing? Making fine speeches in the assembly! Loud-speakers magnifying their egos.

(Train to Pakistan, p.201)

Sikh politics was not one-dimensional; the dominant Akali Dal was not representative of the views of the entire community. In the same way, although the articulation of Sikh identity as militant and anti-Muslim powerfully resonated with some, it was not all encompassing. The Akali elites were given the power to decide the Sikh position in the transfer of power; however, this did not mean that the Sikh community blindly succumbed to their advice or leadership. The teaching of universal brotherhood in the Sikh faith, intercommunal class interests, strong village ties, and enduring friendships with Muslims all continued to influence the actions of the Sikhs preceding Partition.

As state authority appeared to collapse around them, personal and practical considerations were just as important as religious and political ideology. The decisions taken in 1947 – to attack Muslims, to leave their homes, to protect Muslims, to kill female family members, to commit suicide – were all taken from a combination of factors. Within the Sikh community, individuals had varying priorities and no set of circumstances exactly resembled another.

However, individualising experience can become another mechanism to divert institutional culpability, and it is also possible to discern some overall reasons why Partition took place as it did. As Tully has argued, fanaticism does not exist in a vacuum¹⁷⁰. The process of decolonisation and resulting power struggles at national, regional and party levels, had created a dogmatic political atmosphere. State authority was in free fall. Neither the Muslim League nor the Akali Dal

¹⁷⁰ Tully, *Amritsar, Mrs Gandhi's last battle*, 218.

perceived it in their interest to diffuse the communal violence preceding Partition and, as the fate of millions of Indians lay in the balance, the British authorities in Delhi prioritised their own image. The boundary line was published two days after Partition, causing mass confusion, death and destruction. During a meeting of British authorities, the point that, 'without question, the earlier it [the boundary line] was published, the more the British would have to bear the responsibility for the disturbances which would undoubtedly result'¹⁷¹, was deemed the most important consideration.

The significance of the final decision to partition the Punjab was not anticipated by any one. Whilst elites appeared barely aware themselves of its implications, there was no attempt to prepare the population. It was only as they became refugees in their own homes, and the threat from communal violence became acute, that many Sikhs finally decided – or were forced – to cross the border.

It may be satisfying to identify one group as 'responsible', or – better still – the faceless beast of communalism, but it does little to illuminate the dynamics and interaction of human agency which resulted in Partition and the explosion of communal violence in the Punjab in 1947. The colonial regime was designed to limit the capacity of the Indian population to influence its politics. This structural disconnect allowed the Indian elites to take decisions in 1947 with minimal concern for those they were supposedly representing. For their part, the majority of Sikhs were not totally passive during this process. While in some ways they were swept along by communal politics, they also orientated themselves through personal and local concerns. For some, initiating violence against Muslims

¹⁷¹ Mansergh and Moon (eds.), *The Transfer of Power, Vol. XII*, 611.

appeared to be justified, others were steadfastly pacifist, whilst most sought neither to perpetrate nor stop the attacks, but pursued physical and material security.

Partition marked the end of the British Raj in India, as Nehru would have it 'dividing the past from the future'¹⁷². Ultimately, however, it was not so much a 'watershed' moment, as communal violence and hatred continue to plague the Indian state. The horror and trauma of the Partition violence has not been addressed by the state; politicians prefer the non-explanation of 'madness', which allows them to continue unperturbed with the 'nation building project'¹⁷³. However, the experience of violence, dislocation and division – all supposedly as a result of religion – has left its mark on the population of the Punjab. Without objective investigation and justice, the chance of learning lessons from 1947 and moving towards a more progressive, tolerant society is minimal, and tension continues to bubble close to the surface.

At no time was this more apparent than with 'Operation Blue Star' in 1984 and the subsequent attacks on Delhi's Sikh population. Indira Gandhi's military operation to tackle Sikh guerrilla activity involved the siege of the Golden Temple and the rounding up of 'militants' in the surrounding villages. She was subsequently assassinated by two of her Sikh body guards. This triggered the outbreak of anti-Sikh riots in Delhi, where 3000 Sikhs were killed. Joyce Pettigrew argues that 'it is an irony that the Sikh people, after fleeing the establishment of a religious state in 1947, should be murdered in such large numbers, almost forty years on, in what

¹⁷² Nehru, quoted in Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition, The Making of India and Pakistan*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 205.

¹⁷³ S. Gopal (ed.), *Select works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vol. X*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 6.

they, until the army entry into the Darbar Sahib, had regarded as their own home – secular India'¹⁷⁴.

An investigation of the Sikhs during the partition of the Punjab reveals the inadequacy of communal stereotypes; the Sikhs had varying priorities in 1947 and did not act as a homogenous group. The elite negotiations for the transfer of power were seriously disconnected from the majority of the community. The leaders of the Akali Dal did not attempt to conglomerate the diverse concerns and attitudes of the Sikh population. Instead, they articulated an elitist policy which aimed to ensure that the privileged position of wealthy Sikhs would not be undermined by submission to Muslim rule or the fragmentation of the Sikh community, with devastating consequences.

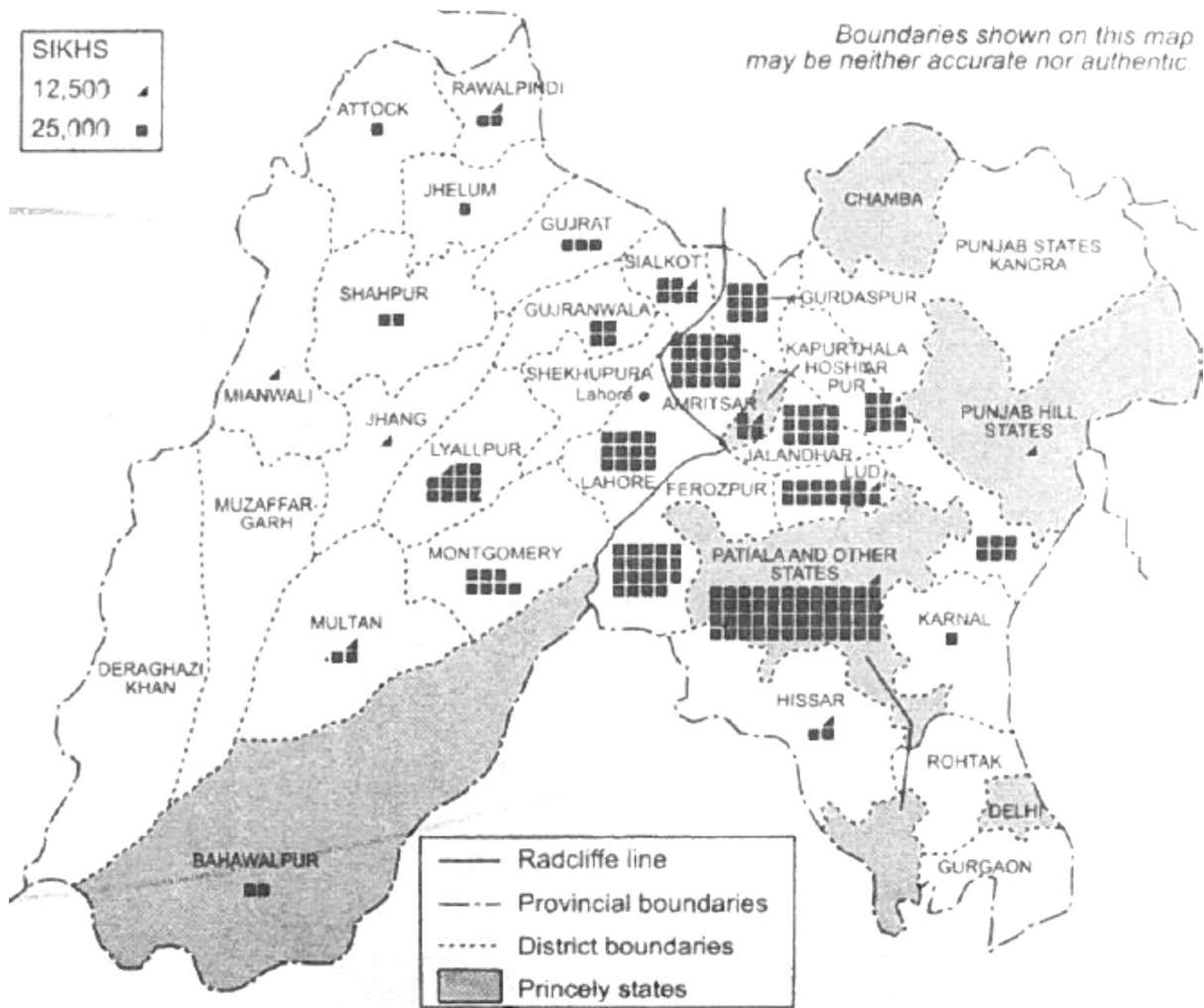
Appendix 1: **Extract of speech by Sir Zafrullah Khan, 24 January 1948.**

¹⁷⁴ Joyce Pettigrew, *The Sikhs of the Punjab, unheard voices of state and guerrilla violence*, (N.J.: Zed Books, 1995), 30.

Early in July 1947 a meeting was held in the Viceroy's house to discuss the measures necessary to combat the Sikh plans for creating widespread disturbances in the Punjab. The meeting was attended by Lord Mountbatten and others. At this meeting a British officer of the Punjab C.I.D. gave a detailed account of how the Sikhs were making elaborate preparations in the Punjab. The evidence on this point was plentiful and reliable, and there could be no doubt as to the extent of the preparations being made by Sikh leaders, including the rulers of some of the Sikh States. Lord Mountbatten stated categorically that he would use all force at his command to crush the disturbances. As an immediate precautionary measure it was agreed to by all present – but reluctantly by Sardar Patel that prominent Sikh leaders including Master Tara Singh, the gentleman of the naked sword – should be arrested. The question was also discussed in the Partition Council at about the middle of July, and Lord Mountbatten again undertook to use all force at his disposal – aircraft, tanks, guns etc., to crush any such movement. He stated that he had warned the Maharajah of Patiala and other Sikh leaders in the clearest terms. No arrests were made, however. A little later Lord Mountbatten stated that he decided not to arrest the Sikh leaders immediately, but to arrest them a week before the announcement of the Boundary Commission's award. Later he changed his ground again, and said he would strike at them simultaneous with the announcement of the Boundary Commission's award which he stated would be made 11 August 1947 at the latest.

(Kirpal Singh, *Select Documents on the Partition of the Punjab*, 712)

Appendix 2: Map of the distribution of the Sikh population in the Punjab



(Ishtiaq Ahmed, *The Punjab bloodied, partitioned and cleansed*, 312).

Appendix 3: Sikh Demand Transfer of Population and Property.

Civil Military Gazette, Lahore, 15 June 1947.

NEW DELHI, June 14, -- The following resolution has been passed by the joint meeting of the Panthic Assembly Party, the Working Committee of the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Panthic Parinidhi Board on the partition of the Punjab.

Under the new plan of H.M.G. of June 3 the province of the Punjab has to be partitioned into the Eastern and Western Punjab. This partition has followed the division of the country into two sovereign States as a solution of the long standing communal tangle created by the Muslim League.

In the opinion of this conference, the Boundary Commission should be given express directive to make recommendations for the transfer of Hindu and Sikh population and property from the western part of the Punjab to the eastern part after the partition has been affected on an equitable basis.

This conference apprehends that in the absence of provision of transfer of population and property, the very purpose of partition would be defeated. – API.

(Quoted in Kirpal Singh, *Select Documents on the Partition of the Punjab*, 108).

Appendix 4: Partition begins to impact Sikh peasants in Khushwant Singh's fictional village of Mano Majra.

'Listen, brothers,' said the lambarder lowering his voice. 'This is no time to lose tempers. Nobody here wants to kill anyone. But who knows the intentions of other people? Today we have forty or fifty refugees, who by the grace of the Guru are a peaceful lot and they only talk. Tomorrow we may get others who may have lost their mothers or sisters. Are we going to tell them: "Do not come to this village"? And if they do come, will we let them wreak vengeance on our tenants?'

'You have said something worth a hundred thousand rupees,' said an old man. 'We should think about it.'

The peasants thought about their problem. They could not refuse shelter to refugees: hospitality was not a pastime but a sacred duty to when those who sought it were homeless. Could they ask the Muslims to go? Quite emphatically not! Loyalty to a fellow villager was above all other considerations. Despite the words they had used, no one had the nerve to suggest throwing them out, even in a purely Sikh gathering. The mood of the assembly had changed from anger to bewilderment.'

(Khushwant Singh, *Train to Pakistan*, 119).

Appendix 5: Peasants marching at the All India Peasants Conference, Jhandiwala village, Punjab, 1945. Copyright Sunil Janah.



Appendix 6: Description of the leader of a Sikh attack on Muslims in 1947, in *Tamas*.

'Jathedar Kishen Singh was organising the defence. Kishen Singh was a war-veteran; he had taken part in the Second World War on the Burmese front and he was now hell-bent on trying the tactics of the Burmese front on the Muslims of his village. On acquiring the command for defence, the first thing he did was to go home and put on his khaki shirt which had been a part of his military uniform and on which dangled three medals received from the British government and a number of coloured stripes.'

(Bhisham Sahni, *Tamas*, 355),

Appendix 7: Translation of a pamphlet printed by the *Ajit* of Lahore, 5 April 1947. An appeal for a “war fund” of Rs. 50 lakhs.

O, Khalsaji! A critical condition has arisen for the Panth which arose after the great Ghallughara (general massacre of Sikhs). The Ghallughara which has occurred specially in Pothohar and the Frontier is too painful for us to describe. It is not yet known what the future will bring. The time is extremely grave and the situation is extremely critical. Now for us matters have gone to the extent of “throne or the coffin”. In order to maintain the existence of the Panth at this juncture, every Sikh should do his duty to the Guru’s Panth. In obedience to the Panth, lies the life of a Sikh. By dint of their strength the Muslims want to thrust Pakistan on Sikhs, Hindus and Christians and they have already shown to us a specimen of Pakistan storm. In their majority zones they have perpetrated such tyrannies as cannot be described. Thousands of Sikh and Hindu women and children have been murdered; Keshas and beards of hundreds have been chopped off and an effort has been made to convert them to Islam; hundreds of women have been abducted; whole villages have been burnt up. Hundreds of chaste women jumped into wells and have sacrificed their lives in many other ways in order to preserve their honour. The Panth which plumed itself on rescuing others’ girls, finds its own daughters in the hands of tyrants. Rest assured, as it is only a small specimen of Pakistan and more terrible incidents are yet to come. But Khalsaji, we are Sikhs of that Guru who having four children slaughtered said: “what if four have fallen. Thousands still survive.” We have to fight this tyrannical Pakistan and have to keep the Panth in high airs. This Panth have been prospering all the more after every Ghallughara and rest assured that even now the Panth will prosper. Be alert; you should recover yourself.

“Fifty lakhs of rupees are required at this time for fighting the Pakistan in which lies our death. Although our community is poor, it has been winning every morcha by dint of sacrifice in the name of Tenth Guru. It is our vigorous appeal that money should be collected from every house, every *mohalla*, every village and every city for achieving victory in the forthcoming clash. Collect one rupee per head. If poor Sikhs are unable to pay one rupee per head, it is the religious duty of the Sikhs of that village or town to make up the deficiency. In this way 50 lakhs rupees should be collected very soon. This sum should be collected up to the 15th Baisakh.

“This Baisakh should prove a re-birth of the Khalsa and should serve to give encouragement to the Sikh in history. Besides, entire Sikh public is requested to offer prayers every day for “Victory to the Panth”. Such a terrible conflict is approaching that even the sum of Rs. 50 lakhs collected once cannot be sufficient. Hence all Sikhs are requested to give one-tenth of their income for this task. And in every house one handful of flour should be set apart for the Guru’s Fund at the time of kneading flour.

“Note: For purposes of receiving the money. S. Baldev Singh Defence Member, Government of India, Delhi and Sardar Bagh Singh (of Gurdaspur) Advocate, Teja Singh Hall, Amritsar have been appointed treasurers. Collected money should be sent to one of these two persons by hand or by money order.

(Lionel Carter (ed.), *Select documents on the partition of the Punjab, Vol. IV*, 121-22).

Appendix 8: Viceroy Mountbatten on maintaining the unity of the Sikh people.

It must point out that the people who asked for the partition were the Sikhs. The Congress took up their request and framed the resolution in the form they wanted. They wanted the Punjab to be divided in two predominantly Muslim and non-Muslim areas. I have done exactly what the Sikhs requested me to do through the Congress. The request came to me as a tremendous shock as I like the Sikhs, I am fond of them and I wish them well. I started thinking out a formula to help them but I am not a magician. I am an ordinary human being. I believe it is the Indians who have got to find out a solution. You cannot expect the British to solve all your problems. I can only help you arrive at the correct solution. A lot can be done by a Chairman but he cannot impose a decision on any one. It is up to the Sikhs who are represented on the Committee to take up the case. It is not I who is responsible for asking for partition.

(Justice Din Mohammad 5 August 1947, in Kirpal Singh, *Select Documents on the Partition of the Punjab*, 377.

Appendix 9: Translation of Gurmukhi Pamphlet. (The Rape of Rawalpindi).**An account of the events in Rawalpindi Division in March 1947**

Thousands of innocents Sikhs murdered in cold blood.

Loot and Arson in Attock and Jhelum Districts. Villages after villages

destroyed and razed to the ground.

Sikhs! Read Patiently and Ponder over it.

In order to establish Pakistan, the atrocities committed on Sikhs in the Punjab since 5th March 1947 have not yet come to light because of censorship on news. Although the Sikh population is small in the Districts of Attock, Rawalpindi and Jhelum, they own valuable property in these places. All the Sikh residents of these districts, excepting only a few, have been done to death, their properties looted, houses burnt, women outraged and many young girls forcibly converted to Islam. Their woeful tale is worth your patient hearing. But all this has been done according to a pre-arranged plan. At first, the Muslims took the Sikhs into their confidence on the pretext of providing them shelter from being attacked. Later, they were forced to part with their money in order to pay to the goondas who threatened to attack them. Even so, they were attacked and looted. Besides spears and swords, guns and bombs were also used. Lambardars were the ring-leaders of the goondas. Only the lives of those Sikh women were saved who agreed to their forcible conversion to Islam. The others either committed suicide or were burnt alive. The souls of all these innocent women are crying for help. The goondas had brought camels and bullock-carts to take away the booty. About thirty thousand

Sikh lives have been saved by the Military, and all of them are now in Relief Camps. Those who owned lacs of rupees are today longing for a piece of bread.

~~~

There are thousands of Sikhs in Relief Camps, including women and children. They stand in need of everything. Thousands of young girls need clothing.

Oh Sikhs! Read this and think yourself. What have you to do under the circumstances? In your veins, there is yet the blood of your beloved Guru Gobind Singhji. Do your duty.

(Lionel Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics, Vol. IV*, 119-121).

### Bibliography

### **Primary Sources**

#### Written Sources:

Carter, Lionel, (ed.). *Punjab politics, 1 January 1944-3 March 1947: last years of the ministries: governors' fortnightly reports and other key documents, Vol. III*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2006.

----- *Punjab politics, 3 March - 31 May 1947: at the abyss: governors' fortnightly reports and other key documents, Vol. IV*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2007.

----- *Punjab politics, 1 June-14 August 1947 tragedy: governors' fortnightly reports and other key documents, Vol. V*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2007.

Gopal S. (ed.), *Select works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vol. IV*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986.

----- *Select works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vol. X*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Government of Pakistan, *Note on the Sikh Plan*, Lahore: Superintendent, Govt. Print., 1948.

India (cabinet mission). *Papers relating to (a) the Sikhs, (b) the Indian States, and (c) the European Community, May-June, 1946*, Parliament Papers: 1946.

Josh, Sohan Singh, *My Tryst with Secularism*, New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1991.

Khosla, G. D, *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of Events Leading Up to and Following the Partition of India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Mansergh and Moon (eds.,) *Transfer of Power, Vol. VII, The Cabinet Mission, 23 March – 29 June 1946*, London: H.M.S.O., 1977.

----- *The Transfer of Power Vol. X, The Mountbatten Viceroyalty, Formulation of a Plan, 22 March – 30 May 1947*, London: H.M.S.O., 1981.

----- *The Transfer of Power, Vol. XI, The Mountbatten Viceroyalty, Announcement and Reception of 3 June Plan, 31 May – 7 July 1947*, London: H.M.S.O., 1982.

----- *The Transfer of Power, Vol. XII, The Mountbatten Viceroyalty, Princes, Partition and Independence, 8 July – 15 August 1947*, London: H.M.S.O., 1983.

Manto, Saadat Hasan, *Toba Tek Singh*, in *Memories of Madness: Stories of 1947*, London: Penguin Books, 2002.

Sahni, Bhisham, *Tamas*, in *Memories of Madness: Stories of 1947*, London: Penguin Books, 2002.

Sarkar, Sumit, (ed.), *Towards Freedom 1946, Part 1*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Singh, Khushdeva, *Love is stronger than hate, a remembrance of 1947*, Patiala: Guru Nanak Mission, 1973.

Singh, Khushwant, *Train to Pakistan*, in *Memories of Madness: Stories of 1947*, London: Penguin Books, 2002.

Singh, Kirpal. *Select documents on partition of Punjab, 1947*, New Delhi: National Book Shop, 2006.

Talbot, Ian and Darshan Singh Tatla, *Amritsar: voices from between India and Pakistan*. Greenford: Seagull, 2007.

Interviewees:

Dr Harcharan Singh, interviewed on 22 November 2002, Amritsar

Mrs Anant Kaur, interviewed on 22 November 2002, Amritsar

Mrs Kartar Kaur, interviewed on 14 December 2002, Amritsar

Mrs Kuljeet Kaur, interviewed on 19 February 2003, Amritsar

Sardar Gurcharan Singh Bhatia, interviewed on 13 November 2002,  
Amritsar

Sardar Aridaman Singh Dhillon, interviewed on 21 November 2002,  
Amritsar

Talib, Gurbachan Singh. *Muslim League attack on Sikhs and Hindus in the Punjab, 1947*. Amritsar: Shiromani Gurwara Parbandhak Committee, 1950.

Oral sources:

Cambridge Oral Archives: Cambridge Centre for South Asian Studies.

L. C. Mehra, interviewed on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1974, by Uma Shanker,  
<http://www.s-asian.cam.ac.uk/archive/audio/mehra.html> accessed on  
12/03/2014

Jagjit Singh, interviewed on 27 July 1975, by Uma Shanker,  
<http://www.s-asian.cam.ac.uk/archive/audio/singhj.html> accessed on  
12/03/2014

Khushwant Singh, interviewed on 20 February 1970, by Arun Gandhi,  
<http://www.s-asian.cam.ac.uk/archive/audio/singhk.html> accessed on  
12/03/2014.

Andrew Whiteman, *A People Partitioned*, London: SOAS Special Collections, 2009

Gurdial Singh, interviewed February 1997, Amritsar

Khushwant Singh, interviewed 30 December 1996, Delhi

Dr Man Singh Nirankari, interviewed March 1997, Amritsar

Shingara Singh, interviewed March 1997, near Amritsar

Thoa Khalsa recordings, March 1997, Singh Sabha Gurdwara

### ***Secondary Sources***



Ahmed, Ishtiaq. *The Punjab bloodied, partitioned and cleansed: unravelling the 1947 tragedy through secret British reports and first-person accounts*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Azad, Abul Kalam. *India wins freedom: an autobiographical narrative*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1988.

Ballantyne, Tony. *Textures of the Sikh past: new historical perspectives*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Bates, Crispin, *Subalterns and the Raj: South Asia since 1600*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2007.

Brass, Paul, 'August Anarchy: The Partition Massacres in the Punjab', in D. A. Low, and Howard Brasted (eds.), *Freedom, trauma, continuities: Northern India and Independence*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998,

----- *Riots and Pogroms*, New York: New York University, 1996

----- 'The Partition of India and Retributive Genocide in the Punjab, 1946-47: means, methods, and purposes.' *Journal of Genocide Research* no. 5, vol. 1 (2003), 71-101.

----- 'Victims, Heroes, or Martyrs? Partition and the problem of memorialisation in contemporary Sikh history', *Sikh Formations*, 2.1 (2006), 17-31.

Butalia, Urvashi, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1998.

Chester, Lucy P., *Borders and conflict in South Asia: the Radcliffe Boundary Commission and the partition of Punjab*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009.

Collin., Larry and Dominique Lapeierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, London: William Collins Sons, 1975-

Connell, Joseph T., Milton Israel, and Willard Gurdon Oxtoby, *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, Toronto: University of Toronto, Centre for South Asian Studies, 1988.

Grewal, Gurdial Singh. *Freedom struggle of India by Sikhs and Sikhs in India: the facts world must know*, Ludhiana, India: Sant Isher Singh Rarewala Education Trust, 1991.

Hansen, Anders Bjørn. *Partition and genocide: manifestation of violence in Punjab, 1937-1947*. New Delhi: India Research Press, 2002.

Hasan, Mushiral (ed.), *India Partitioned, the other face of freedom, Vol. II*, (Delhi: The Lotus Collection, 1995).

----- 'Memories of a fragmented nation: rewriting the histories of India's Partition' in Settar S. and Gupta, I.B. (eds.), *Pangs of Partition, Vol. II*, New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 2002.

Jalal, Ayesha, 'Nation, Reason and Religion, Punjab's role in the Partition of India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33.32 (August 1998), 2183-2190.

----- *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Josh, Bhagwan, *Communist movement in Punjab, 1926-47*, Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1979.

Khan, Yasmin, *The Great Partition, The Making of India and Pakistan*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

Krishan, Gopal, 'Demography of the Punjab 1849-1947', *Journal for Punjab Studies*, no. 11, vol. 1, (2004), 77-89.

McLeod, W. H.. *The Sikhs: history, religion, and society*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

Pandey, Gyanendra, *The Construction of communalism in colonial north India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.

----- *Remembering Partition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Pettigrew, Joyce. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: unheard voices of State and Guerilla violence. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.:* Zed Books, 1995.

Shinder Purewal, *Sikh Ethnocentrism and the Political Economy of the Punjab*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Rai, Satya M., *Partition of the Punjab*, London: Asia Publishing House, 1965.

Riar, Sukhmani Bal. *The politics of the Sikhs, 1940-47*, Delhi: Books and Periodicals agency, 2006.

Settar S. and Gupta, I.B. (eds.), *Pangs of Partition Volume II: The Human Dimension*, New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 2002.

Singh, Gurharpal, 'The Communist Party of India and the Demand for a Sikh homeland, 1942-47' *Indo-British review*, (April 1994), 89-95.

Singh, Khushwant, *A History of the Sikhs, Volume II: 1839-1988*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991.

----- *The Sikhs*, Calcutta: Lustre Press, 1984.

Singh, Kirpal. *The Partition of the Punjab*, Patiala: Punjabi University, 1972.

----- *The Sikhs and the Transfer of Power*, Patiala: Punjabi University 1986.

Talbot, Ian, *Punjab and the Raj, 1849-1947*, New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1998.

Tully, Mark and Satish Jacob, *Amritsar, Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle*, London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1985.

Yong, Tan Tai, 'Prelude to Partition: Sikh Responses to the Demand for Pakistan, 1940-46', *International Journal of Punjab Studies* no. 1, vol. 2, (1994), 176-195.