

## **Where Borders Cut Through Memory: Partition and Punjabi Identity**

An investigation into the partition of India in 1947 and the impact on cultural identity and dynamics, both in Punjab and Punjabi communities

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## Introduction

The India Pakistan partition of 1947 had profound impacts on South Asian culture and identity. The time period leading up to the partition was characterized by various social and political traits. This essay seeks to explore the extent to which the partition of India in 1947 impacted the cultural identity and dynamics of the Punjabi community, both in Punjab and Punjabi communities.

## Context

### Religious

The Indian state of Punjab is a unique social area of India, as it is tolerant and accepting of various other cultures, oftentimes integrating key values of other cultures into Punjab's own culture. Evidence can be seen of this unique characteristic of Punjab dating back to its early populations and social movements. Starting from the 15th century, a unique Punjabi movement known as the Bhakti religious reform started to spread in the Punjabi community. The movement sprung as a result of socioeconomic divisions, deeply rooted in the changes to Indian culture and religion of the time period. This eventually contributed to the growing divide within Indian Muslims and those practicing Bhramic faiths.

One historian who synchronously believes this is Rekha Pande in her article "The Bhakti Movement—An Interpretation." Pande is a historian who specializes in Indian history, specifically gender studies and cultural movements. Pande's position in "The Bhakti Movement—An Interpretation" is to examine and evaluate the historical significance, social impact, and cultural context of the Bhakti movement, and analyze how the Bhakti movement challenged societal standards and reshaped medieval Indian society. One value of this source is that it is available on JSTOR, a reputable, peer reviewed journal, which makes the subsequent information more trustworthy. Additionally, when the article was published, it was published in the *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* in 1987, a respected platform for scholarly research on Indian history. Another value of this source is that the article contextualizes the Bhakti movement within the broader socio-political framework of medieval India, offering insight to the transformative power it had with caste structures and other hierarchies. The article makes it clear to understand the Bhakti movement's broader implications. One limitation is that as the title states, it is an interpretation, and therefore reflects Pande's perspective, and may not encompass a multifaceted lens or viewpoint of the movement. Another limitation is that since it was published in 1987, it may be missing more recent viewpoints, or information regarding the movement which only became recently available. Overall, Pande's article provides a unique insight into the Bhakti movement.

The Bhakti religious reform promoted Hindu-Muslim unity in Punjab, and both religious groups practiced its teachings.<sup>1</sup> This demonstrates the accepting Punjabi culture. Another religious reform movement which prospered in the Punjabi community is Sufism. Sufism, a branch of Islam, was brought to India from the Muslim world, and had a particular uptake in Punjab. The Sufism movement, similar to the Bhakti movement, promoted Hindu-Muslim Unity and the idea that "among the mystics of both Islam and Hinduism, Muslims and Hindus were not so very far apart".<sup>2</sup> As such, the key religion of Punjab,

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<sup>1</sup>Rekha Pande, "The Bhakti Movement—An Interpretation," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 48 (1987): 214–21, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44141682>.

<sup>2</sup> Babli Parveen, "The Eclectic Spirit of Sufism in India: An Appraisal," *Social Scientist* 42, no. 11/12 (2014): 39–46, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24372901>.

Sikhism was derived from the uptake of Bhakti and Sufi ideology. Guru Nanak Dev, inspired by these movements, was the founder of the Sikh religion.<sup>3</sup>

Sikhism extends beyond just religion, but also into Punjabi culture. This can be seen through Guru Nanak's open dissonance for the caste system, and continued support for Punjabi farmers. The spread of Sikhism and Sikh ideas, even to those who didn't practice the religion, represented the unique social unity of Punjab.

## British Rule

The British Raj established and ruled the Indian subcontinent, including Punjab, from 1858 to 1947.<sup>4</sup> Throughout their rule, policies were put in place which threatened the social unity of Punjab and left long lasting consequences on the region's social, economic, and political landscape including political strategies such as dividing and ruling, economic exploitation, administrative policies, and social engineering. The British Divide and Rule Strategy was one incredibly significant contributor to the partition of 1947, and essentially separated India on religious guidelines. Policies such as The Indian Councils Act of 1909, also known as the Morley-Minto reforms, which established separate electorates for different religious communities. Though these reforms were not necessarily intended to create this religious division, long term it is what ended up happening.<sup>5</sup> The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 further institutionalized religious distinctions in politics.<sup>6</sup> The British also promoted the idea of "martial races" through something called Martial Race Theory. This social theory utilized racial, social and religious criteria to reorganize the British Indian Army and reinforce colonial rule on the Indian subcontinent in the early years of the British Raj.<sup>7</sup> Martial Race theory was often used to exclude educated members of the Indian population from serving in the British Indian Army to reduce the chance of uprisings.<sup>8</sup> As such, the idea of "martial races" particularly favored Sikhs and certain Muslim groups for military recruitment, which created division between communities. This disparity also carried over into the British government, as since the British favored certain communities for recruitment into the army and civil services, there was an imbalance in representation as a whole.

Social engineering also transformed Punjab's structure. The introduction of Western education was put in place to produce Indians fit for colonial administration, and neglected broader and/or enriched educational development.<sup>9</sup> Beyond this, although Punjab did receive education and infrastructural funding throughout this period of time, the Indian government continued to primarily treat it as a "bread basket", exploiting Punjabi farmers for labor and goods.<sup>10</sup> Punjab was a hot spot for British mercantilist policies, which is clearly demonstrated by the cash crop focus and large scale agricultural

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<sup>3</sup> Rajwant Singh Chilana, "Sikhism: Building a Basic Collection on Sikh Religion and Culture," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2005): 108–16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20864473>.

<sup>4</sup> S. A. Wolpert, "British raj," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified March 28, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/event/British-raj>.

<sup>5</sup> Sanjay Kumar, "Deliberating Representation: A Study of Democratization and Identity Politics in Bihar," *Social Scientist* 48, no. 1/2 (560-561) (2020): 53–70, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26899499>.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Philipp Brunner, review of *The Insecurity State: Punjab and the Making of Colonial Power in British India*, review no. 2228, DOI: 10.14296/RiH/2014/2228.

<sup>7</sup> Heike Liebau, "Martial Races, Theory of (Version 1.1)," in *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, February 15, 2017, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10702/1.1.

<sup>8</sup> Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> J. S. Grewal, "The Colonial Context: (1849–1919)," in *Master Tara Singh in Indian History: Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Politics of Sikh Identity* (Delhi, 2018; online ed., Oxford Academic, March 22, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Dilreet Kaur Dhaliwal, "From British Colonization to the Green Revolution: Legacies of Imperialism on the Development of a Sikh Consciousness of Nationhood in the 1980s" (honors thesis, Macalester College, 2016), [http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/poli\\_honors/54](http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/poli_honors/54).

commodification in Punjab. The colonial government encouraged the agricultural growth of cash crops for export, oftentimes at the expense of local populations. One significant example is the cultivation of wheat in Punjab. Wheat had a high export value, and in Chenab, Jhelum, and Lower Bari colonies, wheat itself comprised more than thirty percent of the farming population.<sup>11</sup> New varieties of wheat were created solely to appease the British market, demonstrating how this “breadbasket” policy was only to serve the British abroad. The colonial government failed to build an industrial sector within India and rejected proposals for industrial pursuits because they did not align with Britain’s goals for Punjab. This also put significant pressure on peasants and smallholders as the British terms and conditions changed and water rates, land revenues, agricultural imports, and land prices increased. Punjabis accumulated a large debt, and smallholders were displaced from ancestral lands and as such forced to work as landless laborers. Due to their precarious economic situation, these Punjabis in debt turned to the army for financial benefits. The British Raj became a structure for peace and order with the underlying goal of exploiting the material and human resources of the Punjab.

The British along with urban Sikh reformers also imposed a series of religious reforms, promoting specific forms of Sikhism (keshdhari and Khalsa Dhari) which could be categorized as distinct, and masculine forms of Sikhism, again to reinforce the power the British Raj had over Punjab. This not only redefined what it meant to be a Sikh in society, but also had long term impacts on Sikh identity.

## **Investigation Partition**

The British partition was driven by several factors including the British divide and rule strategy, but also additionally communal nationalism, and as a result historical grievances such as Operation Bluestar and the Radcliffe Line came about. Under British rule, communal identities (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh) became politicized. This is no coincidence, as historians such as Ayesha Jalal believed it was colonial policies which led to these divisions.<sup>12</sup>

Jalal is a historian whose credentials, such as recipient of Trinity College, Cambridge Fellowship, MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, and Sitara-i-Imtiaz (Star of Distinction) by the President of Pakistan along with being a professor at numerous prestigious universities make her an expert in the field of South Asian history. She has written extensively in the field of South Asian studies. Her book *Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining* focuses on the historical processes leading to the formation of Pakistan. Jalal’s position in *Conjuring Pakistan* is to critically examine the historical narratives and colonial policies that influenced the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan. She seeks to challenge nationalist and colonial interpretations by focusing on the role of power structures, political motivations, and the impact of colonial rule on communal divisions. One value of using Jalal’s *Conjuring Pakistan* for this research is her extensive background in the field, numerous publications, and work at accredited institutions such as Harvard University, Columbia University, and Tufts University, prove her to be an expert and knowledgeable in the field, thereby increasing the trustworthiness of the information presented in her work. Another value is that this book was published in 1995, thereby offering some introspection of newer secondary sources and declassified colonial archives of the 20th century. One limitation of this source is the historiography—Jalal presents her findings as revisionist history, and her focus on critiquing the traditional narrative of the 1947 partition may limit certain perspectives, such as those emphasizing

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<sup>11</sup> Eschrich, Melissa. "The Global Diffusion of Affirmative Action: Legal Ideas Across Borders." Honors Project, Macalester College, 2016. [https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1058&context=poli\\_honors](https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1058&context=poli_honors).

<sup>12</sup> Ayesha Jalal, "Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 1 (1995): 73–89, <https://doi.org/10.2307/176188>.

grassroots movements. Another limitation is that while the book is deeply reflective, it mostly focuses on the creation of Pakistan, which could potentially overlook other impacts of the division such as other regional impacts or division within the subcontinent.

As the British controlled curriculum and media, the narrative of Pakistani history shifted to a selective one which favored the European standpoint. The accounts of Pakistani history are plagued with inconsistencies and contradictions, specifically in regards to origin and sacrifice. Mahatma K. Gandhi's "Hind Swaraj" (Indian Home Rule) offers a unique perspective showing the divide in visions for an independent India. Hind Swaraj has two characters, The Editor and The Reader. The literature is a dialogue between the two, the editor representing Gandhi, and the reader representing the typical Indian countryman. One particular quote—"The English have not taken India; we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength, but because we keep them"---contradicts other historian's accounts of resisting British rule. However, the differences in individuals and communities' paths to independence is evident. The British "divide and rule" significantly fueled inter-community mistrust. Major British policies including the Morley Minto Reforms and Martial Race Theory fueled divisions explained before. Operation Bluestar and the development of the Radcliffe Line catalyzed long-term trauma that forever influenced Punjabi community dynamics.

### **Immediate aftermath**

The partition caused widespread violence and mass migrations. It is estimated that 1-2 million people were killed and around 75,000 women were abducted and raped only in the immediate aftermath.<sup>13</sup> Punjab was heavily affected, with entire villages being destroyed and long-standing communities becoming enemies. Families and communities were torn apart due to the large-scale migrations, resulting in lasting trauma and significant changes to the region's social fabric.<sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup> Muslims migrated to West Punjab (which became Pakistan) and Sikhs and Hindus relocated to East Punjab (which became India). Punjab's geographic location is right in the middle of the India/Pakistan border, and as such, the state was broken up by the partition. Ten to fifteen million people were displaced. This led to a divide of religions on either side of the border, and Pakistan became primarily a Muslim nation, while India became a Hindu one. This wasn't a peaceful partition however, the impact could be seen by religious persecution on both sides of the border through sources from people who experienced these events. "Ali Shan, now a happy grandfather who enjoys spending his Sundays leading hikes in the San Francisco Bay Area, was orphaned in 1947. He watched a mob murder his family and became the sole survivor of the attack. He lived in refugee camps all alone as an eight-year-old boy and described his emotional journey of overcoming trauma by forgiving his family's murderers." One witness from Larkana in the Sindh Province remembered, "A British officer who was summoned to leave his post quickly picked out my father and handed over his prestigious civil services position."<sup>17</sup> This account shows how the transfer of power was haphazard, and not well thought out. The Sikh/Punjabi communities who were neither Muslim or Hindu were faced with a tough situation.

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<sup>13</sup> Asia Society, "The Ongoing Legacies of the Partition of British India," *Asia Society*, accessed November 28, 2024, <https://asiasociety.org/magazine/article/ongoing-legacies-partition-british-india>.

<sup>14</sup> William Dalrymple, "The Great Divide: The Violent Legacy of Indian Partition," *The New Yorker*, June 29, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/29/the-great-divide-books-dalrymple>.

<sup>15</sup> Amandeep Sandhu, "Punjab 1947: Bloodied and Partitioned by Competing Nationalisms," *The Wire*, August 17, 2021, <https://thewire.in/communalism/punjab-1947-bloodied-and-partitioned-by-competing-nationalisms>.

<sup>16</sup> R. M. Kulik, "Partition of India," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 25, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Partition-of-India>.

<sup>17</sup> Guneeta Singh Bhalla, "The Story of the 1947 Partition as Told by the People Who Were There," *National Endowment for the Humanities*, accessed November 28, 2024, <https://www.neh.gov/article/story-1947-partition-told-people-who-were-there>.

## Impact on Cultural Identity in Punjab

The partition had a profound cultural impact on Punjabi cultural identity. As Punjab was split into India and Pakistan, so were the relics of the time, including language, music, and artwork. In Indian Punjab, there was a shift towards the Gurmukhi script and a stronger emphasis on Sikh literature, while in Pakistani Punjab, there was a shift towards Shahmukhi script and the Urdu language.<sup>18</sup> This is especially significant as language was not simply a means of communication, but rather a powerful tool on either side of the partition.<sup>19</sup> Linguistic diversity altered social dynamics in the region. The shift away from a common Punjabi dialect towards the separation between Hindi and Urdu impacted shared literature, traditions, and folklore.

The arts and music of Punjab reflected the trauma of partition as well. One of the most iconic works from this era is Amrita Pritam's poem, "Ajj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu" ("Today, I Call Upon Waris Shah"). Waris Shah was a significant Punjabi poet, and Pritam calls upon him in her poem to speak from his grave to witness the devastation Punjab faced post-partition. Pritam's poem speaks of how the brutal violence tore apart Punjab's once united culture and society. The poem approaches this concept with mourning for the sorrow endured by both the people and the land itself - now blood soaked and broken. From her writing, it becomes evident how Punjab, once known for its harmonious way of life, was now forced into violence and grieving. Pritam used poetry as a way to inspire social change, and advocate for equality.<sup>20</sup>

Paintings and novels from artists and writers captured the identity crisis of those who were forced to flee their homelands. Writer Saadat Hasan Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" reflects the identity struggles imposed upon citizens of Punjab. The story is about the psych ward patients in Punjab, a few years after the partition. In reference to the partition, Manto writes "That was why they were all at a loss whether they were now in India or in Pakistan. If they were in India, then where was Pakistan? If they were in Pakistan, how come that only a short while ago they were in India? How could they be in India a short while ago and now suddenly in Pakistan?"<sup>21</sup> Being in the psych ward, the patients were oblivious to Pakistan and India being different countries. The story shows how specific individuals grasped this concept. One individual in particular, Bishan Singh who also went by Toba Tek Singh for his hometown, was being transferred to the other side of the border, as were the other inmates. Bishan muttered nonsensical mixes of Punjabi, Urdu, and English when irritated. This indirectly further shows how all three cultures are a part of the Punjabi identity, however citizens were forced to choose one at the time of partition. Upon hearing that his hometown is in Pakistan, he refuses to go to the India side of the border. The story concludes with Bishan lying between the two sides of the border: "There, behind barbed wire, was Hindustan. Here, behind the same kind of barbed wire, was Pakistan. In between, on that piece of ground that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh."<sup>22</sup> Literature of this period uniquely highlights the fragmentation of the Punjabi identity. Bishan felt pride in his hometown, Toba Tek Singh, and even to the last moment defended his identity. It reflects the struggle many individuals faced when displaced. Both Pritam's poem, and Manto's short story reflect how creative expression became an essential part of

<sup>18</sup> "The Evolution of Gurmukhi: From Ancient Scripts to Modern Sikhism," *Gurmukhi.in*, accessed November 28, 2024, <https://gurmukhi.in/the-evolution-of-gurmukhi-from-ancient-scripts-to-modern-sikhism/>.

<sup>19</sup> Tariq Rahman, *Language and Politics in Pakistan*, ResearchGate, 1996, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271718531\\_Language\\_and\\_Politics\\_in\\_Pakistan](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271718531_Language_and_Politics_in_Pakistan).

<sup>20</sup> "Aja Akhan Waris Shah," *Sikh Heritage Museum of BC*, accessed November 28, 2024, <https://www.sikhheritagebc.ca/ajjaakhanwarisshah>.

<sup>21</sup> Saadat Hasan Manto, "Toba Tek Singh," *South Asia Citizens Web*, accessed November 28, 2024, <http://www.sacw.net/partition/tobateksingh.html>.

<sup>22</sup> IBID.

grappling with what it meant for the people during partition. Literature and art have kept the memory of cultural unity alive.

Many shared religious sites also became inaccessible to communities on the other side of the border, furthering the religious divide and making certain religious practices inaccessible. This led to the development of new pilgrimage sites and practices. The Kartarpur Corridor, for example, was established decades later to reunite Sikh pilgrims to their religion within Pakistan.<sup>23</sup>

The partition also caused significant economic disruptions.<sup>24,25</sup> Punjab, known as “the farming state” of India, has always been heavily reliant on agriculture. Partition disrupted the basis of the Punjabi economy. It led to problems in Punjab's agriculture, such as dividing up farmland and irrigation systems, and in turn the loss of fertile land, displacement of skilled farmers, and changes in cropping patterns. This affected the amount of crops that could be grown. In addition, cities were devastated by the sudden departure of skilled workers and business owners. Many industries faced labor shortages which had large scale community impacts such as factories closing and businesses relocating. The division also caused social issues in Punjab, as traditional community systems broke down and millions of refugees were forced to find new places to live. This, in part, contributes to the development of diaspora communities. The cultural impact of the breaking apart of the agricultural industry was immense. The shared identity once fostered by the pride of being a farmer, or “jatt”, was fragmented. This disruption caused mistrust between communities on either side of the border, impacting interpersonal and community relationships.<sup>26</sup>

### **Conclusion/Analysis:**

The formation of Punjabi diaspora identities is a complex process that involves balancing multiple cultural influences and the preservation of heritage with adaptation to new environments. This process has been shaped by the 1947 Partition of India, which led to significant displacement and the formation of large Punjabi communities in countries like the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States.

One significant diaspora study is that in the UK. British Asian identities are shaped by processes within South Asia as well as the UK. The diaspora groups are shaped by social and cultural processes and expectations originating from Punjab. The meaning of home as a diaspora community can be context dependent, contradictory and affecting the way in which inclusion or exclusion affect an individual.<sup>27</sup> The formation of hybrid cultural forms within the diaspora such as festivals, marriages, and religious practices in places such as Canada and the UK emphasize how the Punjabi identity has been reshaped by both tradition and modernity.

While the partition created divisions, it also set the stage for a resilient cultural identity. The diaspora is proof of Punjabi adaptability in times of hardship. Communities were able to reinvent themselves while also holding onto cultural identity. The continued impact of partition on present-day Punjab remains an interesting focus for discussions on identity, memory, and resilience.

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<sup>23</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, "Prakash Purb 550," accessed November 28, 2024, <https://prakashpurb550.mha.gov.in/kpr/>.

<sup>24</sup> Ian Talbot, "Partition of India: The Human Dimension," *Journal of Punjab Studies* 14, no. 1 (2007): 1–15, [https://punjab.global.ucsb.edu/sites/default/files/sitefiles/journals/volume14/no1/14.1\\_Talbot.pdf](https://punjab.global.ucsb.edu/sites/default/files/sitefiles/journals/volume14/no1/14.1_Talbot.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Melissa Eschrich, "The Global Diffusion of Affirmative Action: Legal Ideas Across Borders" (Honors Project, Macalester College, 2016), [https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1058&context=poli\\_honors](https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1058&context=poli_honors).

<sup>26</sup> "The Partition of Punjab 1947," *National Heritage Punjab*, accessed November 28, 2024, <https://nhpunjab.com/the-partition-of-punjab-1947/>.

<sup>27</sup> Steve Taylor, Manjit Singh, and Deborah Booth, "A Diasporic Indian Community: Re-Imagining Punjab," *Sociological Bulletin* 56, no. 2 (2007): 221–42, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23620730>.

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