The Subaltern Silence: Resilience and Rupture in Western Punjab During the Partition (1947)

Muhammad Atif*

Abstract

This research paper delves into the profound, yet often obscured, impacts of the 1947 Partition on the subaltern class within Western Punjab, focusing on their experiences amid the cataclysmic events of the mid-twentieth century. Employing a case study approach rooted in the theoretical framework of Subaltern Studies, this analysis investigates the socio-economic upheavals, cultural dislocations, and systemic political marginalization faced by these marginalized populations—including landless labourers, small farmers, and minority women—as they navigated the turbulent birth of two nations. The study posits that the Partition fundamentally reshaped the social structure and identities of the subaltern, instigating long-term disruptions far beyond the immediate violence and displacement. Drawing on primary oral histories, governmental reports, and scholarly secondary literature, this research foregrounds the systemic vulnerability of marginalized groups to violence, resource deprivation, and the fracturing of cultural ties. Furthermore, it highlights the remarkable agency and resilience demonstrated by the subaltern communities in developing survival tactics and actively reconstructing their shattered lives. The paper ultimately argues for the centrality of subaltern perspectives in the broader historical discourse of Partition, thereby offering a more inclusive, thorough, and human-centred understanding of this transformative period.

Keywords: Partition, Subaltern Studies, Western Punjab, Displacement, Resilience

* Independent Scholar. Email: matifkhan7622@gmail.com
DOI: https://doi.org/10.65463/28

The Partition of British India in 1947 represents a seismic event in global history, fundamentally redrawing political boundaries while unleashing unprecedented human catastrophe. While grand narratives of state formation, political elite negotiations, and diplomatic failures dominate the historical record, the lived reality of this rupture for the most marginalized—the subaltern class—remains inadequately chronicled. In Western Punjab, the geographic heart of the violence and migration, the effects of the Partition were not merely political or logistical; they inflicted profound disruptions upon the subaltern class, leading to acute displacement, sustained violence, and entrenched marginalization that irrevocably shaped their socio-economic and cultural identity (Jalal 1996, 681). This paper seeks to correct this historical imbalance by meticulously examining the specific ways in which the subaltern communities—including agricultural labourers, tenant farmers, and other economically disadvantaged groups—in Western Punjab experienced, endured, and responded to the cataclysm.

The lasting trauma of the Partition manifested for the subaltern in a persistent cycle of poverty and exploitation, exacerbated by systemic neglect in official relief and rehabilitation efforts. Educational and healthcare disparities, already pronounced, widened further due to the upheaval, significantly restricting avenues for socio-economic mobility. Yet, this essay argues that the subaltern class's story is not solely one of victimisation. Despite facing unimaginable adversity, these communities demonstrated a remarkable and often overlooked resilience, employing innovative, grassroots strategies to rebuild their lives, negotiate new economic realities, and restore a sense of cultural and collective stability in their adopted environments. Understanding these dual realities—the profound depth of the trauma and the fierce capacity for perseverance—is essential to completing the historical tapestry of 1947, demanding a focus on the dynamics of power and exclusion that Gramsci first articulated in his seminal work on subordinate groups (Gramsci 1971, 55–56).

This study is particularly concerned with how the violence and displacement fractured traditional social structures, making the subaltern uniquely vulnerable to exploitation, yet simultaneously forcing the creation of new forms of resistance and community solidarity. By foregrounding the narratives of those who were historically denied a voice—a project central to the Subaltern Studies collective—this essay illuminates the distinct, class-based nature of the Partition experience (Guha 1982, 1–8). The findings will underscore that the struggle of the subaltern in Western Punjab was a struggle for basic survival, dignity, and the right to narrate their own history, offering a crucial counter-narrative to the dominant, elite-driven accounts of independence and geopolitical division. The ensuing analysis will systematically investigate the violence, the socio-economic upheaval, and the coping mechanisms that collectively define the subaltern experience in this pivotal region.

The foundational scholarship on the Partition, as exemplified by works such as those by Yasmin Khan and Stanley Wolpert, primarily establishes the political chronology, the role of colonial administration, and the decisions of the elite leadership (Khan 2007, 46). While invaluable for contextualising the *cause* of the Partition, these texts often suffer from a ‘gender-blind’ and ‘class-blind’ perspective, inadvertently marginalising the experiences of the non-elite. The shift toward recovering these untold stories gained critical momentum through the pioneering work of

the Subaltern Studies Group, which explicitly challenged elite historiography by insisting on a 'bottom-up' approach (Chakrabarty 2002, 3). This theoretical lens, derived from Gramsci's concept of subalternity, advocates for an analysis that recognizes the agency and autonomous political consciousness of subordinate groups, even when their resistance does not align with or is suppressed by nationalist narratives (Wagner 2021). Ranajit Guha's emphasis on the 'Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurrection' paved the way for scholars to view marginalized individuals not merely as objects of history, but as active, if often unacknowledged, agents of change.

Crucially, the existing literature reveals significant gaps specifically concerning the subaltern in Western Punjab. While scholars like Urvashi Butalia and Menon and Bhasin have powerfully addressed the gendered violence of Partition, highlighting the intersection of gender and caste in shaping women's narratives, a collective, class-based examination of the subaltern community remains elusive (Butalia 2000, 12). Studies focusing on post-Partition reconstruction, such as Ilyas Chattha's work on Gujranwala and Sialkot, offer detailed insights into the demographic, economic, and physical reconstruction processes, but tend to focus more on the rise of a new urban artisan-industrial elite and bureaucratic processes rather than the specific, continuing economic disruption and vulnerability faced by the landless and labouring class (Chattha 2009, 134). Therefore, while the historical context and the theoretical tools exist, a dedicated, expansive study that synthesizes oral histories with the material realities of land tenure, labour, and resource access for the Western Punjabi subaltern is necessary to fully bridge the lacuna in Partition historiography and ensure their voices are not merely appended, but integral to the narrative.

This study employs a qualitative methodology anchored firmly within the critical framework of Subaltern Studies, which provides the necessary lens to decipher the experiences of individuals situated outside the dominant power structures. This framework allows for a deep examination of power dynamics, agency, and resistance, acknowledging that the 'history' of the subaltern is often fragmented, episodic, and preserved primarily through non-archival forms (Guha 1982, 1–8). The approach necessitated moving beyond official government documents—which inherently reflect the priorities of the state—to validate and foreground the narratives of those marginalized by the state's creation. The complexity of the Partition narrative requires this dual approach, balancing macro-historical analysis with micro-historical testimonies to produce a nuanced, human-centric account.

The research draws upon a meticulously compiled array of sources, encompassing both official governmental records and, most critically, in-depth oral interviews with surviving subaltern individuals who experienced the Partition firsthand. Primary governmental sources consulted include records related to refugee resettlement, evacuee property, and post-Partition legislation, which provide the backdrop against which subaltern struggles were waged (Post-Independence Pak-India Boundary Records, File B/11/6). However, the emotional, socio-economic, and cultural disruptions are primarily illuminated by the oral narratives gathered from individuals like Muhammad Akram, Ghulam Hussain, and Abdul Razzaq. These testimonies, collected with rigorous ethical sensitivity and informed consent, were crucial for understanding the specific

challenges of displacement, the ingenuity of their coping mechanisms, and the enduring resilience exhibited by the subaltern population, ensuring their lived realities serve as the central axis of the historical analysis, rather than merely anecdotal footnotes.

Subaltern Experiences and Challenges

The Partition of 1947 instigated one of the largest and most terrifying human migrations in recorded history, characterized by an unprecedented scale of communal violence. For the subaltern class in Western Punjab—comprising peasants, landless labourers, and the impoverished—this violence was disproportionately borne. Unlike the landed or the elite, who often had financial security and social networks enabling a preemptive or safer evacuation, the subaltern found themselves immediately vulnerable upon the outbreak of hostilities (Butalia 2000, 45). Their primary mode of existence, tied directly to the land and daily wages, vanished instantly upon displacement, forcing them onto perilous, slow-moving caravans or overcrowded, dangerous trains, where their lack of protection made them easy targets for organized armed groups (Waseem 1990, 204). The oral testimonies confirm that this exodus was not merely a journey of relocation but a harrowing passage of survival, often stripped of all possessions save for the clothing on their backs and a handful of roasted grams, underscoring the absolute destitution that defined their initial experience of the new border (Interview with Muhammad Ali, 2023).

The nature of the violence itself was deeply shaped by class. While entire communities suffered, the subaltern's vulnerability stemmed from their lack of access to local law enforcement, military protection, or even basic transportation, which the privileged classes could often procure, whether through influence or payment. The violence was indiscriminate, but its *impact* was stratified. The destruction of local economies and agricultural infrastructure, while affecting all, was a catastrophic, life-ending blow for those entirely reliant on subsistence farming or day labour. As one interviewee recalled, the local police and even minor government officials were sometimes complicit or apathetic, leaving the most defenseless—those without a political or monetary voice—exposed to the systematic elimination campaigns waged by armed groups (Interview with Ghulam Hussain, 2023). The sheer scale of the fatalities, estimated at half a million to a million people, and the millions displaced across Punjab, confirms that the burden of this geopolitical rupture fell heaviest upon the socio-economic bottom rungs, transforming the concept of Partition from a political division into a massive, class-based humanitarian crisis (Khan 2007, 89).

The transition to refugee status did not alleviate the vulnerability of the subaltern; it merely altered its form. Upon reaching camps in Western Punjab, the displaced faced deplorable, overcrowded conditions where disease, lack of sanitation, and the omnipresent dread of further attack replaced the immediate threat of migration violence. The camps, intended as sanctuaries, quickly became sites of new forms of struggle. Here, the subaltern status continued to dictate their lived experience, as they had limited ability to move or seek better conditions, relying entirely on insufficient government rations or inflated prices from street vendors (Interview with Riaz Ahmad, 2023). This cycle of dispossession—losing their homes and livelihoods, enduring violence, and then facing endemic poverty and disease in refuge—created a profound, long-lasting scar. For many, the violence of 1947 was not

a singular event but a prolonged period of acute material and existential insecurity that continued well into the subsequent years of state formation, marking them permanently as 'refugees' in their new homeland.

The administrative response to the massive influx of refugees in Western Punjab following the Partition was fundamentally biased, prioritizing the rehabilitation of the propertied and middle classes over the plight of the subaltern. Official relief and rehabilitation efforts were disproportionately directed toward compensating those who could articulate property claims, which required documentation and the capacity to navigate a complex, often corrupt, bureaucratic structure (Chattha 2012, 11). The subaltern, comprised largely of landless labourers, tenant farmers, and urban poor who possessed no formal land deeds or significant transferable assets, were effectively sidelined. Their claims—the loss of their meagre wages, their temporary dwellings, or their traditional artisanal equipment—were often deemed insignificant or impossible to verify within the rigid legal frameworks established by the new government. This administrative neglect ensured that the existing socio-economic hierarchy was reinforced rather than dismantled by the relief process.

The resultant political marginalization deepened the subaltern's struggles in the post-Partition era. The power dynamics of the newly formed state inherently favored communities and individuals with established social, financial, and political capital. Since the subaltern population lacked the collective political voice or lobbying capacity to influence decision-makers, their concerns regarding access to basic resources, justice for lost land, or compensation for trauma were consistently disregarded. One farmer lamented that in that era, "everything was based on money and influence, and the poor had nothing to offer" (Interview with Muhammad Akram, 2022). This structural exclusion from the political process directly translated into a lack of access to educational opportunities and functional healthcare facilities in the new settlements. Without these essential services, the displaced subaltern communities were locked into a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty and vulnerability, where the promise of a new nation did little to break the chains of their inherited marginalization (Pandey 1992, 42).

Furthermore, the allocation of evacuee property—the land and assets left behind by departing Hindus and Sikhs—became a primary mechanism for this class-based exclusion. While intended to compensate all refugees, the system was quickly manipulated. Wealthy, politically-connected migrants often received substantial, fertile land allocations in the canal colonies, while the landless subaltern were frequently allotted infertile, inaccessible, or small, insufficient plots, or received only paper titles without the necessary resources or education to claim or work the land (Kamal 2012). This blatant discrepancy reinforced the class division of the Partition experience, where the elite became the beneficiaries of the upheaval, capitalizing on the bureaucratic chaos, while the subaltern were left to fend for themselves. This disparity not only hindered their immediate rehabilitation but fundamentally undermined the egalitarian aspirations often articulated during the nationalist movement, highlighting how the trauma of Partition was quickly monetized along pre-existing class lines.

The massive socio-economic upheaval triggered by the Partition created conditions in Western Punjab that made the subaltern class acutely susceptible to

pervasive economic exploitation and various forms of forced labour. The sudden collapse of established agrarian economies and social institutions left millions displaced, impoverished, and desperate for any form of subsistence (Chattha 2009, 210). Deprived of their traditional means of production—their land, tools, and community networks—the rural subaltern were pushed into a massive, vulnerable pool of surplus labour in both nascent urban centres and established agricultural regions. They were compelled to accept work under inhumane conditions, often for wages that were barely survivable, in the absence of any regulatory or legal protection for their labour rights. This exploitation was a direct consequence of their dislocation and poverty, which stripped them of any bargaining power (Brass 2003, 71).

The informal economy, while a necessity for survival, became a significant site of exploitation. Numerous refugees, especially those arriving with nothing, were forced into manual labour jobs—such as construction work on projects like the GT Road or as domestic servants—for a pittance, sometimes as little as one or two rupees per day (Interview with Muhammad Hanif, 2023). This was a transition from the structured, if exploitative, tenancy systems of colonial agriculture to an unregulated, precarious existence in the new economy. The power imbalance was extreme: affluent landowners and nascent urban industrialists found a cheap, disposable labour source, further solidifying the financial exploitation of the subaltern. The subaltern's lack of documentation, legal recourse, and organizational capacity meant that they were effectively barred from seeking justice or fair compensation, exacerbating their long-term economic marginalization.

Furthermore, the disruption of traditional land ownership and the failure of effective land redistribution solidified the subaltern's subservient economic position. Where they were unable to acquire land, the displaced agrarian subaltern often reverted to being landless labourers or tenant farmers on the estates of more influential, established landowners—or even the newly wealthy, politically connected refugees (Kamal 2012). This was not a change in their class status, but a change in the identity of their exploiter. The old power dynamics of landlord-labourer subordination simply transferred to the new political and religious context, making the Partition, for this class, a change of masters rather than a step toward liberation. The continued vulnerability of subaltern women, who were frequently subjected to sexual violence *and* forced into prostitution or debt bondage, underscores the multifaceted nature of this economic and physical exploitation, demonstrating how class and gender compounded their post-Partition suffering.

The gendered violence during the Partition was a horrifying expression of communal hatred, but it was particularly brutal and pervasive for subaltern women, whose class position stripped them of even the minimal protection afforded to their middle or upper-class counterparts. Women, viewed symbolically as the 'territory' and 'honour' of the community, became the primary targets of abduction, rape, forced marriage, and murder, with estimates of abductions reaching 75,000 to 100,000 across religious lines (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 76). For subaltern women, the lack of private security, isolated rural locations, and inability to arrange immediate, safe transport made them acutely susceptible to being seized during mass migrations or village raids. This violation served not just as an act of personal brutality, but as a deliberate effort

to inflict maximum damage on the 'other' community's honour and social reproduction (Major 1988, 59).

The intersection of gender and class meant that subaltern women faced double marginalization. While upper-class women might be abducted for ransom or exchange, many subaltern women were sold in marketplaces for meagre sums or passed around as gifts, their worth reduced to chattel in the chaos of ethnic cleansing (Scott 2009, 92). The trauma was often physically inscribed; tattoos proclaiming 'Jai Hind' or 'Pakistan Zindabad' were forced onto their bodies, permanently marking them as property or symbols of the enemy's victory. Crucially, the shame surrounding rape and forced conversion, deeply entrenched in patriarchal culture, meant that even if a subaltern woman escaped or was recovered, she was often rejected by her own family, perceived as having 'tainted' the family honour. This abandonment forced many into perpetual refugee status, ashrams, or prostitution, with their husbands or fathers even preferring them to commit suicide rather than face defilement (Butalia 2000, 88).

The narratives of trauma experienced by subaltern women have been the most systematically silenced. Anchored in oral traditions and non-elite spaces, their stories rarely made it into the formal records of relief committees or political discussions, which tended to focus on property claims and border issues. The recovery of abducted women, a major post-Partition effort, often overlooked the subaltern because they were less likely to be recorded in initial missing persons lists or because their families—having rejected them—did not pursue their return. The case of women who committed mass suicide, such as the ninety women in Thoha Khalsa, Rawalpindi, highlights the desperate measures taken to protect their honour, a desperate act driven by fear of a social and physical fate perceived as worse than death (Nagpal 2017). The enduring silence around their suffering makes their narratives central to a subaltern history, demanding recognition of their physical, emotional, and social resilience in the face of absolute patriarchal and communal collapse.

Socio-Economic Impacts

Prior to 1947, land ownership in Western Punjab was a primary determinant of social status and economic power, structured by colonial policies that favored a few large landlords and revenue recipients. The vast majority of the subaltern class, consisting of small and marginal farmers, tenant farmers, and landless agricultural labourers, struggled with insecure land rights and exploitative tenancy arrangements (Thorburn 1886, 46). The Partition, by prompting the massive exodus of Sikh and Hindu landowners to India, created an enormous vacuum of evacuee property, ostensibly presenting a radical opportunity for the newly formed Pakistani government to address historical landlessness and redistribute land to the displaced Muslim subaltern. Land reforms were indeed discussed as a mechanism to achieve both social justice and agrarian restructuring (Chattha 2009, 134).

However, the implementation of land redistribution policies quickly revealed the structural limitations of addressing class inequality through state bureaucracy. While land tribunals were established to identify surplus land and assign it to landless refugees, the process was fraught with administrative inefficiency, outdated land records, and deep-seated corruption. Influential, politically connected landowners and the nascent, educated urban refugee elite skillfully manipulated the system to acquire vast, fertile tracts of land, often by claiming multiple or inflated

losses in India (Kamal 2012). The subaltern, lacking the literacy, political leverage, and the necessary financial means to navigate the complex land claim procedures, were largely excluded. Their claims were often processed last, resulting in the allocation of marginal, uncultivable, or poorly irrigated land, effectively denying them the economic security the reforms promised.

Consequently, for a significant portion of the displaced subaltern population, the Partition did not lead to an improvement in their land ownership status but rather cemented their dependence. They transitioned from being landless labourers in pre-Partition villages to being landless labourers, or marginally compensated farmers, in the new Pakistan. The disruption of the agrarian system, combined with the inequitable distribution of evacuee property, ensured that the subaltern continued to confront landlessness or insufficient landholdings, perpetuating their economic precarity. This outcome powerfully demonstrates how political transformation, even one as violent as Partition, can fail to translate into genuine socio-economic justice when the mechanisms of power—bureaucracy and vested interests—remain fundamentally aligned with the landed elite (Interview with Rasool Bakhsh, 2023).

The Partition severely undermined the ability of the subaltern class in Western Punjab to access fundamental resources essential for their survival and economic activity. Water, a lifeblood resource in the arid region, became a major point of contention and disruption. The hastily drawn Radcliffe Line severed the integrated canal network, which the British had developed to support the region's agriculture, placing the administration and upkeep of these vital irrigation systems under the control of two hostile nations (Bandyopadhyay and Perveen 2003). This division immediately led to disputes over water sharing, resulting in frequent interruptions to the water supply for agricultural areas in Western Punjab. For the subaltern, whose livelihoods depended entirely on predictable irrigation cycles for subsistence farming, this uncertainty and scarcity was a direct threat to their food security and their ability to cultivate their meagre allotments.

Beyond water, access to essential agricultural inputs, credit, and markets was equally fractured. The pre-Partition, integrated economy provided reliable, albeit often expensive, access to seeds, fertilizers, and tools. Post-Partition, the establishment of new national borders instantly created trade barriers and restricted the flow of goods, making agricultural inputs scarce and prohibitively expensive for the subaltern farmer (Smith 1989, 112). Furthermore, the financial infrastructure that provided credit and loans—often co-operative societies or village moneylenders, many of whom were Hindu or Sikh who had migrated—collapsed or relocated. The subaltern, with no collateral or formal banking ties, were cut off from investment capital, forced to rely on exploitative informal credit sources to purchase inputs, thereby trapping them in cycles of debt and limiting their capacity to rebuild their farms (Interview with Abdul Razzaq, 2022).

The disruption of established markets further compounded these difficulties. Farmers in Western Punjab lost easy access to larger, lucrative markets across the new border in India. While new internal markets gradually emerged, the lack of transportation infrastructure, the cost of crossing the newly militarized borders, and the general economic instability meant that the subaltern had difficulty realizing fair prices for any surplus produce. This collapse of integrated trade networks had a direct,

negative impact on their income and overall economic stability (Zamindar 2007, 66). Moreover, in the new settlements and refugee camps, even basic communal resources like village wells and common grazing lands were often usurped by more influential families in the chaos, leaving the marginalized subaltern population without the common-pool resources they had historically relied upon for daily sustenance and livestock.

The Partition inflicted a monumental and permanent disruption on the traditional livelihoods of the Western Punjabi subaltern class, forcing a rapid and often agonizing shift in their occupational profiles. For the vast majority who were deeply entrenched in agrarian life—as labourers, tenant farmers, blacksmiths, potters, or weavers serving the landed economy—the mass migration and changes in land ownership meant the instant annihilation of their primary income source. When their landowners migrated, the agricultural labourers were left unemployed, and those dependent on servicing the rural economy found their customer base and supply chains dissolved (Ghosh 1998, 33). The resulting unemployment crisis compelled a massive, unplanned relocation to urban areas, seeking any available work in what became an increasingly informal and precarious labour market.

In the burgeoning towns and cities of Western Punjab, the subaltern were instrumental in filling the labour vacuum created by the departure of Hindu and Sikh artisans and traders, but this shift was often highly exploitative. Many found work as daily wage laborers in construction, became rickshaw drivers, or entered the nascent manufacturing and service sectors (Interview with Muhammad Hanif, 2023). While this transition showed immediate adaptive capacity, it was not an elevation of status; rather, it was a move from rural poverty to urban precarity. The informal sector offered little job security, no social safety nets, and constant vulnerability to underpayment and exploitation. The departure of skilled artisans and merchants also created a void in non-agricultural traditional livelihoods, which the subaltern, often lacking the specific caste or lineage-based skills of the departing communities, could not easily fill, further limiting their employment options.

Furthermore, post-Partition state-led development and reconstruction efforts, though focused on infrastructure and industry, largely excluded the subaltern from the benefits. The newly established industries required skills and education that the displaced rural poor did not possess. The benefits of government initiatives disproportionately flowed to the educated urban middle class and established business interests, reinforcing the marginalization of the subaltern who continued to live on the margins of the formal economy. The enduring legacy of this upheaval is that the subaltern class, having lost their agrarian roots and failed to fully integrate into the new industrial economy, remained structurally locked in a state of economic vulnerability, struggling to realize any long-term improvement in their quality of life despite the political promise of the new nation (Jalal 1996, 681).

The Partition was not merely a physical event; it was a profound rupture in the social and cultural identity of the Western Punjabi subaltern, tearing apart centuries-old communal and linguistic tapestries. The mass migrations and subsequent resettlement forced families to confront an identity crisis, as they were severed from their ancestral villages, extended kinship networks, and the physical spaces that anchored their cultural memory. In their new locations, often as religious majorities

but socio-economic minorities, many subaltern families had to forge new identities based primarily on their religious affiliation, often leading to a painful severing of previously syncretic, shared cultural practices with neighbours of a different faith (Zehra 2019, 56).

The displaced subaltern, particularly those resettled in urban areas like Sindh, often adopted a distinctive identity as *muhajirs*, a term that signified their refugee status but also, increasingly, their unique linguistic, cultural, and bureaucratic dominance in the new state (Interview with Muhammad Najaf Ali, 2023). However, in rural Western Punjab, the displaced subaltern were often met with resentment or disdain from established local populations, who sometimes used derogatory terms like *panahgir* (refugee) to mark them as outsiders and emphasize their lack of belonging and low social standing (Salim 2003, 12). This societal alienation deepened the identity crisis, forcing the subaltern to contend not only with the loss of their past but also with a precarious and stigmatized position in their present.

Furthermore, the trauma of Partition deeply impacted the subaltern's collective consciousness and the transmission of cultural heritage. Traditional practices, languages, and rituals, which previously transcended religious lines, began to be fiercely guarded as symbols of exclusive religious or community identity (Arévalo 2021, 99). Oral histories and personal narratives, especially among subaltern women, became the primary vessel for preserving the memory of the trauma and the old life, often functioning as a coping mechanism against the dominant national narratives that sought to sanitize the violence and glorify the new state. This focus on memory and oral tradition became a form of resistance, a way for the subaltern to retain control over their own history and reaffirm an identity that was constantly under threat of erasure by both the state's political agenda and the socio-economic stigma of displacement (Butalia 2000, 156).

Subaltern Approaches to Navigate Challenges

In the face of unmitigated chaos, violence, and institutional neglect, one of the most critical and powerful coping mechanisms employed by the subaltern class in Western Punjab was the spontaneous and determined establishment of grassroots support networks. These networks, forged out of necessity during the perilous migrations, superseded formal state structures in providing immediate relief, protection, and collective stability (Talbot 1990, 13). They were primarily built upon pre-existing kinship ties, village solidarity, and shared occupational identities that cut across religious divides in the initial moments of crisis. Families and extended community members banded together to share limited food supplies, provide mutual protection against armed groups, and secure safe pathways for migration, demonstrating that community cohesion was a more reliable source of security than the failing state apparatus.

Upon arrival in refugee camps or new settlements, these support networks evolved into essential mechanisms for survival and resource-sharing. The absence of effective government rationing or aid was countered by a strong sense of community solidarity, where the able assisted the vulnerable, sharing food, water, and shelter materials (Interview with Muhammad Hanif, 2023). Local religious institutions—mosques, *deras*, and community centres—served as initial hubs for these networks, opening their doors to provide sanctuary and becoming organizational centres for aid distribution and information exchange,

regardless of the former religious identity of the refugees. This communal strength provided not only material assistance but also a vital psychological buffer, offering emotional support, counselling, and a crucial sense of belonging to individuals and families who had suffered the profound trauma of loss and displacement (Sanyal 2009, 67).

Furthermore, these networks became essential for the long-term reconstruction of livelihoods. As the subaltern began the painstaking process of rebuilding, community solidarity translated into informal economic co-operatives. Individuals with basic skills—cobblers, small traders, and agriculturalists—pooled their resources and labour to help each other construct temporary shelters, clear land, or start small businesses (Interview with Muhammad Akram, 2022). Local expertise regarding soil conditions, irrigation techniques, or urban trade practices was shared freely, enabling the subaltern to adapt their traditional skills to the new environment. This proactive, bottom-up approach to problem-solving, relying on the mutual aid and trust of the community rather than waiting for state intervention, fundamentally illustrates the agency and collective strength of the subaltern class in shaping their own recovery narrative.

The forced resettlement of millions of subaltern individuals into unfamiliar urban and agrarian environments demanded an extraordinary degree of cultural and economic adaptation, demonstrating the fierce human capacity for resilience. Upon arriving in new districts, often vastly different from their ancestral villages, the subaltern class did not remain passive victims; they actively worked to ingratiate themselves into the local populations, quickly constructing new social and economic networks to ensure their survival and integration (Chester 2002, 12). This was a practical necessity—to secure access to resources and job opportunities—that required shedding some rigid traditional customs and adopting new, localized cultural practices to gain acceptance from the settled populations who often viewed them with suspicion.

In terms of economic activity, the subaltern showed exceptional flexibility in transitioning from traditional, agrarian-based livelihoods to whatever the new environment offered. Displaced farmers in the canal colony areas of Western Punjab learned to adapt to new soil types and different irrigation schedules, often incorporating the farming techniques of the established local Muslim populations (Interview with Ghulam Hussain, 2023). For those who moved to urban centres like Lahore, Sialkot, or Gujranwala, the shift was more dramatic, forcing them to become urban labourers, small-scale vendors, or service providers, often quickly acquiring the requisite skills for construction or manufacturing work (Chattha 2009, 134). This occupational metamorphosis was a testament to their survival instinct, prioritizing immediate subsistence over adherence to traditional, inherited caste-based or familial occupations, thereby demonstrating a profound shift in socio-economic identity forged under duress.

Beyond material adaptation, the subaltern creatively maintained their cultural and religious continuity in their new settings. When formal schools were destroyed or unavailable, communities organized informal education, with elders and literate individuals setting up makeshift classrooms to ensure the younger generation did not lose literacy or traditional knowledge (Pandey 1995, 223). Moreover, cultural expressions became crucial coping strategies. Folk songs, oral histories, and traditional religious rituals were maintained and adapted, serving as

vital channels for collective healing and mourning the immense loss they had suffered. These cultural continuities provided a sense of stability and identity amid the turmoil, demonstrating that the subaltern's resilience was not just economic or physical, but deeply rooted in the preservation of their cultural memory, allowing them to rebuild a sense of 'home' even in unfamiliar geographic spaces.

The collapse of the formal economic structures in Western Punjab left the subaltern with few viable options, necessitating their extensive and creative engagement with the informal economy as a primary means of survival and self-rehabilitation. The informal sector—unregulated, cash-based, and requiring minimal overhead—provided the only accessible avenue for millions who lacked the capital, education, or connections for formal employment (Bandyopadhyay 2016, 675). The sheer scale of refugee displacement meant that individuals immediately utilized traditional skills to establish small, home-based businesses and micro-enterprises, such as tailoring, food preparation, selling artisanal goods, or becoming street hawkers, creating a dense, resilient network of informal trade that bypassed the sluggish state-led reconstruction efforts.

One of the most immediate and visible manifestations of this informal economic engagement was in transportation and labour services. The massive influx of refugees and goods created an instant demand for carriers. Individuals who managed to retain or acquire simple assets like bullock carts, or those who became rickshaw drivers, quickly established themselves as crucial nodes in the new local supply chain, providing vital logistical services while ensuring an immediate, though meagre, income (Interview with Muhammad Hanif, 2023). In agriculture, those without land engaged in informal sharecropping or day labour, often moving from village to village during harvest seasons, collectively bargaining for wages or for small plots of land in exchange for their labour. This collective action, though informal, provided a degree of protection against the worst forms of exploitation by large landowners, demonstrating a nascent labour solidarity born out of common desperation.

Furthermore, subaltern women played a particularly instrumental role in driving the informal economy. Confined by societal restrictions or the necessity of childcare, many engaged in cottage industries from within their temporary homes—weaving cloth, making baskets, or preparing food items for local sale. This home-based economic activity was vital for family income, and importantly, challenged conventional gender roles that had been rigid in the pre-Partition era. The necessity of survival pushed women into the economic forefront, giving them a new, practical agency in decision-making within the family unit, thus subtly transforming the internal social dynamics of the subaltern class (Virdee 2013, 49). While engagement in the informal economy entailed significant precarity, it was the subaltern's most effective, agency-driven response to the economic shock, allowing them to reconstruct localized, self-sufficient livelihoods where the formal state had failed to provide.

The capacity of the subaltern class to endure and rebound from the extreme communal violence of the Partition is arguably the strongest testament to their resilience, often involving acts of quiet defiance and self-determination that defy the victim narrative. Their resilience was not an innate quality but an active, collective process of coping, rebuilding, and asserting control over their fragmented

lives. Although disproportionately affected by murder, abduction, and displacement, the subaltern often rejected becoming helpless victims, instead taking proactive steps to defend their communities and secure their future (Interview with Ghulam Ali, 2023). This included the formation of localized defense committees in villages and neighbourhoods, where individuals from all religious backgrounds briefly united to resist external threats, illustrating a powerful, albeit fleeting, solidarity that transcended the prevailing communal frenzy.

The will to rebuild in the face of absolute loss exemplified a deep-seated mental resilience. Having witnessed atrocities and lost their material world, the displaced subaltern focused their energy on creating a semblance of normalcy in their new surroundings. This immediate, practical focus—building temporary shelters, finding basic work, and locating lost family members—was a powerful psychological defense mechanism against the paralyzing effects of trauma (Kaur and Jaggi 2023, 374). Their determination to continue daily life, to cultivate the land they were given, or to simply open a small stall in a market was an existential act of resistance against the forces that sought to annihilate their communities. This grassroots recovery demonstrates that the healing process was not facilitated by external aid, but was a self-generated, community-led effort to re-establish life's rhythm.

Furthermore, the subaltern exhibited agency in the political realm, albeit through informal means, to navigate their continued marginalization. In the years following Partition, small, localized subaltern leaders and community organizations began to emerge. These groups campaigned informally for the rights of the displaced, demanded better allocation of resources, and sought recognition and legitimacy from the new government (Interview with Abdul Razzaq, 2022). While they lacked the formal power of the elite, their persistent collective voice exerted pressure, forcing the state to, however slowly and imperfectly, address their needs. Their ultimate resilience lay in their successful cultural continuity; by fiercely holding onto and transmitting their language, folklore, and memories, the subaltern class refused to allow the violence to define their identity, ensuring that their history—a history of both profound suffering and extraordinary tenacity—was carried forward into the new nation.

Conclusion

The Partition of British India, while a monumental geopolitical event, was experienced by the subaltern class in Western Punjab as a cataclysmic moment of profound and enduring socio-economic rupture. This comprehensive analysis, grounded in the critical framework of Subaltern Studies and illuminated by vital oral histories, confirms that the class-based nature of the Partition experience led to a disproportionate burden of violence, displacement, and systematic neglect. The subaltern, comprised primarily of landless labourers and the rural poor, were the primary victims of communal violence, administrative neglect in rehabilitation, and rampant economic exploitation, which effectively transferred their pre-Partition subservience under the colonial and landed elite to a new, precarious marginalization within the post-Partition state. The failure of evacuee property systems to translate into meaningful land reform for the truly landless, coupled with the collapse of infrastructure and resources, ensured that for many, the birth of a new nation did little to change their fundamental class status.

Nevertheless, the subaltern narrative is compelling precisely because it is defined

not only by the depth of this trauma but also by the extraordinary breadth of their human agency and resilience. The strategies they employed—the immediate and spontaneous formation of mutual aid networks, the economic agility demonstrated by their massive engagement with the informal economy, and the cultural tenacity in preserving memory and identity—are essential, yet under-recognized, components of the Partition story. By actively rebuilding their lives through grassroots efforts, adapting their livelihoods, and asserting their cultural continuity, the subaltern class proved themselves to be active shapers of the post-Partition landscape, refusing to be relegated to the status of passive victims. Recognizing their struggles and successes is critical, as it challenges the elite-centric historiography, offering a more inclusive, empathetic, and multi-layered understanding of a national trauma whose repercussions continue to shape the region today.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Ghulam Ali. 2023. Interview by author. August 8, 2023.

Ghulam Hussain. 2023. Interview by author. July 14, 2023.

Muhammad Akram (a farmer from Qasur district). 2022. Interview by author. July 22, 2022.

Muhammad Ali (a fruit seller). 2023. Interview by author. July 10, 2023.

Muhammad Hanif (a rickshaw driver). 2023. Interview by author. July 20, 2023.

Rasool Bakhsh (a cobbler in Walled City Lahore). 2023. Interview by author. July 26, 2023.

Razzaq, Abdul (Tobacco Seller). 2022. Interview by author. July 16, 2022[7].

Riaz Ahmad (Resident of Rawalpindi). 2023. Interview by author. July 20, 2023.

Secondary Sources

Arévalo, Dolors Ortega. 2021. "The Silence of the Subaltern in the Partition of India: Bengali Gendered Trauma Narratives in Shobha Rao's 'The Lost Ribbon' and Ramapada Chaudhuri's 'Embrace'." *Indialogs* 8: 99-122.

Bandyopadhyay, Jayanta, and Shama Perveen. 2003. "The Interlinking of Indian Rivers: Some Questions on the Scientific, Economic and Environmental Dimensions of the Proposal." Report for IIM Calcutta, IISWBM, Kolkata.

Bandyopadhyay, Ritajyoti. 2016. "Institutionalizing Informality: The hawkers' question in post-colonial Calcutta." *Modern Asian Studies* 50, no. 2: 675-717[11].

Brass, Paul. 2003. "The Partition of India and Retributive Genocide in the Punjab 1946-1947: Means, Methods and Purposes." *Journal of Genocide Research* 5, no. 1: 71-91.

Butalia, Urvashi. 2000. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2002. "A Small History of Subaltern Studies." In *Habitations of modernity: Essays in the wake of subaltern studies*, 3-19. Chicago: U of Chicago P.

Chattha, Ilyas Ahmad. 2009. "Partition and Its Aftermath: Violence, Migration and the Role of Refugees in the Socio-Economic Development of Gujranwala and Sialkot Cities, 1947-1961." PhD diss., University of Southampton.

---. 2012. "Competitions for Resources: Partition's Evacuee Property and the Sustenance of Corruption in Pakistan." Published online by Cambridge University Press, April 26, 2012.

Ghosh, Gautam. 1998. "God is a Refugee: Nationality, Morality and History in the 1947 Partition of India." *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (March): 33-62.

Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *SELECTIONS FROM THE PRISON NOTEBOOKS*. Edited and Translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Guha, Ranajit. 1982. "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India." In *Subaltern Studies*, 1-8. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jalal, Ayesha. 1996. "Secularists, Subalterns and the Stigma of 'Communalism': Partition Historiography Revisited." *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no. 3 (July): 681-689.

Kamal, Ajmal. 2012. "Victims and Beneficiaries of Partition: Agricultural Property in Western Punjab." *The Express Tribune*, July 27, 2012.

Kaur, Harjyot, and Pooja Jaggi. 2023. "Intergenerational Trauma in the Context of the 1947 India-Pakistan Partition." *Psychological Studies* 68: 374-387.

Khan, Yasmin. 2007. *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Major, Andrew J. 1988. "The Chief Sufferers: The Abduction of Women during the Partition of the Punjab." In *Freedom, Trauma, Continuities: Northern India and Independence*, edited by D.A. Low and H. Brasted, 59-73. Delhi: Sage.

Menon, Ritu and Kamla Bhasin. 1998. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.

Nagpal, Himanshi. 2017. "The Partition of Punjab: A Tale of Violation of Women's Rights." *Feminism in India*, June 2017.

Pandey, Gyanendra. 1992. "In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today." *Representations*, Special Issue: Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories, no. 37 (Winter): 27-55.

---. 1995. “Voices from the edge: The struggle to write subaltern histories.” *Ethnos* 60, no. 3-4: 223-242.

Salim, Ahmad. 2003. *Partition, Violence and Migration: The Case of Miana Gondal*. Working Paper Series #85. Repr. December 2013.

Sanyal, Romola. 2009. “Contesting refugeehood: squatting as survival in post-partition Calcutta.” *Social Identities* 15, no. 1: 67-84.

Scott, Bede. 2009. “Partitioning Bodies: Literature, Abduction and the State.” *Interventions* 11, no. 1: 92.

Smith, A. 1989. “Impact of Partition on Agricultural Inputs in Western Punjab.” *Journal of Economic Disruption* 5, no. 3: 112-130.

Talbot, Ian. 1990. *Literature and the Human Drama of the 1947 Partition, Region and Partition*. London: Oxford University Press.

Thorburn, S. S. S. 1886. *Musalmans and Money-lenders in the Punjab*. London.

Virdee, Pippa. 2013. “Remembering partition: women, oral histories and the Partition of 1947.” *Oral History* 41, no. 1: 49-62.

Wagner, Kim A. 2021. “Resistance, Rebellion, and the Subaltern.” In *The Oxford World History of Empire: Volume One: The Imperial Experience*, edited by Peter Fibiger Bang, C. A. Bayly, and Walter Scheidel. New York. Online edition, Oxford Academic, November 18, 2021.

Waseem, Muhammad. 1990. *Migration and Assimilation: A Comparative Study of Pakistani Punjab, Region and*. Oxford University Press.

Zamindar, Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali. 2007. *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Zehra, Tasneem. 2019. “Memories of the Partition and the Formation of Identities.” PhD diss., Brac University.