The Crucible of Resettlement: Refugee Agency and Socio-Economic Transformation in Pindi Bhattian (1947–1957)

Sheraz Akbar*

Abstract

I examine the complex process of refugee rehabilitation in Pindi Bhattian during the critical decade following the 1947 Partition. I propose that this period (1947–1957) was marked by a profound socio-economic transformation driven by the influx of Muslim refugees, who quickly filled the commercial and educational void left by the migrating non-Muslim communities (Hindus and Sikhs). The study asserts that the rehabilitation process was not merely a state-led logistical exercise; rather, it was a dynamic, grassroots negotiation where the refugees' prior education and business expertise from East Punjab acted as the primary catalyst for the town's modernization. This study utilizes the concept of history from below to foreground the agency of refugee families, detailing how their skills introduced new trade practices, fostered agricultural revitalization, and led to the formation of a distinct cultural hybridity (e.g., new culinary and religious practices). I propose that Pindi Bhattian's refugee resettlement experience demonstrates that displaced populations are not simply burdens, but powerful agents of urban and economic development, reshaping local societies despite bureaucratic and social challenges.

Keywords: Refugee Rehabilitation, Pindi Bhattian, Socio-Economic Transformation, Partition, Cultural Hybridity.

* Independent Scholar. Email: sherazakbar784@gmaill.com
DOI: https://doi.org/10.65463/32

I examine the complex historical reality of Partition's aftermath, moving beyond the well-documented violence and elite political negotiations to focus on the protracted process of refugee rehabilitation at the grassroots level. This essay is grounded in the local context of Pindi Bhattian, a town in Punjab, Pakistan, during the pivotal decade of 1947–1957. I propose that the refugee influx during this time acted as a seismic socio-economic force, fundamentally restructuring the local community after the departure of its politically and commercially dominant non-Muslim populations. The migration patterns and subsequent resettlement here were distinct, shaped by the town's unique ethnography and agricultural structure, demanding a meticulous, localized study to uncover the true nature of this transformation.

The rehabilitation process in Pindi Bhattian was a complex, two-fold phenomenon: first, it involved the physical and administrative allocation of evacuee property by the nascent Pakistani state. Second, and more importantly, it involved the organic economic assimilation of displaced individuals whose skills and entrepreneurial acumen were necessary to sustain the local economy. The departing Hindu and Sikh communities, representing about one-third of the population, held control over approximately seventy percent of the town's commercial sectors, leaving a substantial void that the Muslim refugees were uniquely positioned to fill (Town Committee Record, Pindi Bhattian, 1945–55). This replacement of the commercial elite was the central defining feature of Pindi Bhattian's post-Partition history.

Understanding this localized rehabilitation process challenges the national-level narratives that often portray refugees as passive recipients of state aid or a uniform burden on resources. Instead, I explain the important role of refugee agency and expertise—particularly from urban and educated families from East Punjab (such as the Delhwi and Sheikh families)—in the town's revitalization. Their successful assimilation, which introduced new cultural practices and elevated the local literacy rate, fundamentally redefined Pindi Bhattian's trajectory, demonstrating the powerful and often positive role displaced populations play as agents of change in post-conflict reconstruction (Zamindar 2007).

The scholarly work on Partition is bifurcated, establishing clear themes around political failure, economic dislocation, and social rupture. On the macro level, historians like Yasmin Khan and Ian Talbot establish that the hurried political division led to catastrophic violence and a massive, disorganized flow of people, leaving the new governments entirely unprepared for the subsequent humanitarian and administrative crisis (Khan 2007). This political and administrative turmoil set the stage for subsequent economic hardship, where the abrupt division of financial resources and industrial infrastructure created a universal landscape of scarcity that hampered effective national recovery (Kudaisya 2017). This macro perspective is vital for contextualizing the pervasive challenges faced by local administrators in Pindi Bhattian.

Moving to the micro and thematic levels, I observe that other historians have provided the critical lens necessary for a grassroots study. Vazira Zamindar's work is essential, highlighting the prolonged nature of Partition, where the process of boundary-making and citizenship continued well past 1947, directly impacting how refugees negotiated their rights over land and property

(Zamindar 2007). Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin contribute the crucial gendered perspective, demonstrating that women faced unique traumas of sexual violence and social marginalization, a dimension of suffering often ignored by state-centric rehabilitation policies (Menon 2021). I integrate these perspectives, recognizing that the efficiency of land allocation in Pindi Bhattian, though locally administered, was influenced by both the national bureaucratic framework and the pervasive social stigmas of the time.

A notable gap exists in the literature regarding localized, micro-level studies that detail the actual socio-economic impacts of refugee skill transfer at the *tehsil* or *qasba* level. Most scholarship has focused intensely on 'high politics,' provincial centers like Lahore and Amritsar, or the major refugee camps. This focus overlooks smaller, agrarian-commercial towns like Pindi Bhattian, where the non-Muslim exodus created a clear, immediate economic void in skilled trades, education, and transport. My research directly addresses this absence by using local records and oral testimonies—such as the *Register records of Anjuman Islah ul-Muslimeen*—to track the physical and economic replacement of one social group by another (Register records, 1932-1963). This focus allows me to measure the transformative agency of the incoming population against the baseline of the former colonial structure.

The existing research often analyzes refugees primarily as victims or administrative problems, but rarely as economic catalysts who actively engineered local development. While Ilyas Chattha's work on Gujranwala hints at competition for resources, I intend to detail the process of co-operation and revitalization in Pindi Bhattian, where the high business and educational backgrounds of the incoming refugees led to local advancement, rather than mere struggle for survival (Interview with Haroon Rasheed Dehlwi, 25 March 2024). I use the comparative perspective from the provided scholarly work to establish that Pindi Bhattian's experience was unique: its localized stability and the complementary skill set of the migrants enabled a relatively smooth, albeit profound, transition.

I anchor this study in a qualitative methodology within the theoretical framework of 'history from below,' which mandates foregrounding the daily experiences, negotiations, and resistance of the displaced individuals over elite or bureaucratic narratives. I assert that this approach is uniquely suited to Pindi Bhattian, an under-researched area where official primary sources are sparse and prone to bureaucratic bias. My method involves a triangulation of sources, juxtaposing the written intentions of the state with the lived realities captured through oral testimonies (El Habib Louai 2012). This process reveals the gap between administrative fiat (e.g., property allocation policies) and the complex social dynamics on the ground.

I utilize two main categories of primary sources to build the empirical foundation. First, I employ documentary sources, including the Town Committee Records of Pindi Bhattian (1945–1960), which contain crucial house allotment records, demonstrating the administrative response to the property void left by non-Muslims. This quantitative data is cross-referenced with the operational records of the local Muslim organization, the *Anjuman Islah ul-Muslimeen* (1932-1963), which reveal the internal social and political mobilization of the host community before and immediately

after Partition. Second, I rely on oral history, conducting structured and unstructured interviews with both migrated families (Delhwi, Sheikh, Arain) and host families (Meher, Sheikh) to evaluate their mutual cooperation, initial tensions, and long-term socio-economic effects.

Pindi Bhattian during British Rule: The Baseline of Change

Pindi Bhattian's administrative structure was fundamentally reshaped following the British annexation of Punjab in 1849. The British, seeking to secure control and gather intelligence, strategically collaborated with local Muslim clans, primarily the Bhattis and Chathas, especially after the 1857 War of Independence. This colonial patronage, exemplified by land grants to figures like Rehmat Khan Bhatti, elevated these Muslim elites, gradually marginalizing the local non-Muslim communities from the political sphere (Gujranwala Dist. Gazetteer, 1883-84). This early political realignment, engineered by the colonial state, created an underlying power imbalance despite the non-Muslims' commercial dominance, setting the stage for the later socio-political shift in favor of the Muslim population.

Despite the Muslims' political elevation through colonial support, the educational status of the region remained heavily tilted toward the non-Muslim population. Before 1882, the town maintained several Gur-Mukhii and Mahajani schools, which contributed to a high literacy rate and commercial acumen among Hindus and Sikhs (Registers Record of High School, Pindi Bhattian). The subsequent introduction of the English educational system undermined the traditional Muslim *madrasas* where Arabic and Persian were taught, leading to a decline in Muslim literacy compared to non-Muslims, who adeptly utilized the new system. This disparity meant that prior to 1947, Hindus comprised most of the educated individuals, directly translating their educational capital into commercial and professional dominance over the majority Muslim population.

The non-Muslim community established a nearly complete commercial monopoly over Pindi Bhattian's economy, making the local Muslim population economically vulnerable. Hindus and Sikhs controlled all major enterprises, including the key retail sectors, cloth businesses, finance (money-lending), and the lucrative transport sector, exemplified by figures like the transporter Sardari Lal. Up to 1947, only two shops in the Main Bazaar were owned by Muslims (e.g., Sheikh Muhammad Hussain's sewing machine shop), with the vast Muslim majority relegated to roles as tenants or laborers indebted to Hindu financiers (Sheikh 2015). This economic structure meant that while the Bhattis had political influence, the town's wealth and commercial stability rested entirely on the non-Muslim minority, creating a fragile economic baseline before Partition.

The prosperity of Pindi Bhattian during the late British period was irrevocably linked to a major irrigation project, specifically the digging of the Jhang Branch canal from the Chenab River in 1887. This canal system transformed barren tracts into arable land, causing Pindi Bhattian to emerge as a pivotal center for the trade of ghee and rice (Census Report, Gujranwala, 1908-1919). This agricultural boom led to the establishment of the grain market in 1877, cementing the town's position as a major regional agricultural hub. Although this prosperity benefited local Muslim landholders, it further strengthened the commercial non-Muslim elite who controlled the market infrastructure and finance necessary to

capitalize on the heightened agricultural production.

Factors Leading to the Migration of Non-Muslims

I consider the establishment of Anjuman Islah ul-Muslimeen in 1926 as a critical moment that initiated the political and social mobilization of local Muslims against their socio-economic marginalization. Founded by local figures like Ghulam Muhammad and Mian Meher Moula Bakhsh, the organization's initial focus was not political, but socio-economic reform, aimed at addressing the educational backwardness and financial dependency of poor Muslims (Register records, 1932-1963). The *Anjuman* provided the Muslims of Pindi Bhattian with a collective institutional voice for the first time, challenging the dominant influence of the non-Muslim commercial elite and laying the groundwork for a unified political identity that would later align decisively with the Muslim League.

The activities of the *Anjuman Islah ul-Muslimeen* quickly translated into political action, fostering a gradual decline in the influence of the local Congress branch, which was predominantly led by non-Muslims such as Haveli Ram Sachdev. The passing of the Pakistan Resolution in 1940 spurred Muslim League activism in Pindi Bhattian, with workers disseminating the message of Pakistan from house to house (Sheikh 2015). I find that incidents of civil disobedience and communal tension, such as the burning of the local Congress President's house, signaled the irrevocable shift in the political landscape as the Muslims ascended to dominate political discourse, ultimately forcing the non-Muslim elites to distance themselves from a rapidly changing political reality.

The 1946 provincial elections served as the definitive electoral referendum on the demand for Pakistan, and in Pindi Bhattian, they were marked by intense ideological campaigning. The Muslim League campaign strategically invoked religious fervor, with influential figures delivering sermons and issuing *fatwas* in favor of the Muslim League candidate, Raj Muhammad Tarar, framing the election as a matter of religious duty and national survival (Interview with Ghulam Muhammad Pakistani, Pindi Bhattian). The Muslim League's significant victory over the Unionist Party, securing 8290 votes, validated the popular shift towards a separate Muslim state. This electoral triumph confirmed the ascendancy of Muslim political power over the former non-Muslim commercial and political establishment, making the ultimate decision to migrate inevitable for many Hindu and Sikh residents.

The final decision of non-Muslims to evacuate was a result of escalating communal tensions at the national level, exacerbated by the political shift. News of brutal massacres in East Punjab and Bihar against Muslims created a reactionary climate in West Punjab, despite the local historical harmony (Talbot 2016). Although the local Muslim population and administration—led by figures like Town Committee Chairman Dost Mohammad Bhatti—actively worked to secure a peaceful exit for their non-Muslim neighbors, incidents of violence, including the killing of a Sikh and the rape of a Hindu girl, demonstrated the fragility of the local order amidst the regional chaos (Sadar Thana Record, 1955-58). The creation of Pakistan on August 14, 1947, served as the formal break, compelling non-Muslims to migrate with heavy hearts, understanding their continued presence was no longer tenable in the new political environment (Khan 2007).

Partition, State Policy, and Refugee Rehabilitation (1947–1957)

Despite the widespread communal violence engulfing the Punjab region, the evacuation of non-Muslims from Pindi Bhattian was achieved with relative local harmony and dignity. Local Muslim leaders and the community actively provided support, demonstrating a deep sense of shared history and customs that transcended the religious partition (Interview with Basherah Begum, 9 November 2022). This localized success was due to the decisive action of the local administration, such as Dost Mohammad Bhatti's intervention against local dacoits who attempted to loot non-Muslims (Town Committee Record, 1945-55). This local stability ensured that non-Muslims migrated primarily due to the overwhelming political and regional security concerns rather than direct, systemic persecution by their immediate neighbors.

The arrival of Muslim refugees in Pindi Bhattian began after they left the major staging camp in Lahore, seeking permanent resettlement. These hundreds of migrant families arrived having suffered profound loss and trauma during their journey, needing immediate humanitarian support (Interview with Muhammad Ali, 15 April 2024). The local community responded with immediate and organized support, forming a Relief Committee that collaborated with the Municipal Committee to establish a temporary refugee camp near Lari Ada Chowk. This local-migrant collaboration was essential for providing basic necessities, demonstrating that the initial phase of rehabilitation was driven by local collective action rather than centralized state bureaucracy, reflecting a strong sense of community responsibility.

The crucial phase of permanent rehabilitation involved the formal allocation of properties left by non-Muslims, designated as "Redline Property" (Town Committee Record, Pindi Bhattian, 1945–1960). The state policy, although susceptible to widespread corruption and illegitimate acquisition attempts elsewhere, was executed in Pindi Bhattian with a focus on settling refugees primarily in the town's Androon area, previously the heart of non-Muslim residence. The allotment process, which involved numbering and registering these abandoned homes and shops, transformed the demographic geography of the town, establishing the incoming Muhajir population in the most commercially and spatially significant neighborhoods.

The most significant outcome of the migration was the immediate economic void in skilled trades, which the refugee population was ideally equipped to fill. Non-Muslims had monopolized trades such as cloth merchandising, medical services, and goldsmithing (Interview with Jewan Perkash Sharma, 25 March 2024). The incoming refugees, many of whom were educated and skilled businessmen from urban centers like Delhi and Panipat, quickly stepped into these spaces, opening superstores, tailor shops, and medical services after receiving property allotments (Interview with Haroon Rasheed Dehlwi, 25 March 2024). This complementary skill set, where the economic capital of the migrants matched the commercial demand of the locality, was the primary engine of economic revitalization in Pindi Bhattian (Kudaisya 2017).

Socio-Economic Impact and Cultural Hybridity

The economic rehabilitation process led to the revitalization and subsequent dominance

of the local trade by the refugee community. The closure of non-Muslim businesses, particularly in the Galla Mandi (grain market) and Main Bazaar, was swiftly countered by the entrepreneurial energy of the incoming migrants. Refugee families not only re-established the closed shops but also worked in cooperation with local Muslim farmers and politicians, leveraging their expertise in trade management (Interview with Sheikh Waheed, 4 April 2024). This rapid takeover of the commercial sector by the Muhajir population not only prevented economic collapse but also introduced new, sophisticated business practices, cementing their new status as the town's commercial elite within a few short years.

The refugees, many from educated backgrounds in places like Ambala and Khurampur, served as crucial catalysts for educational uplift in Pindi Bhattian, effectively reversing the prior educational disparity. Facing a lack of job opportunities in the formal sector, educated migrants, such as Syed Mustafa Shah Naqvi and Master Gulab Dehlwi, invested their efforts in the local educational field (Registers Record of High School, 1870-1960). Their collective contribution was instrumental in raising the local literacy rate, which climbed substantially to 22.43 percent by 1961 (Census Report, 1908-1919). This success demonstrates a profound, positive socio-economic impact, where the human capital of the displaced population directly addressed a systemic weakness in the host community.

That the resettlement process catalyzed a significant cultural and religious hybridity in Pindi Bhattian. The migrants introduced new culinary traditions, such as *Nihari* and *Kari Pakora*, alongside new social rituals, like the *Mehendi function*, that were quickly adopted by the local population. More critically, the arrival of educated religious followers, like the family of Sheikh Abdul Qayyum, introduced and solidified the Brelvi school of thought, challenging the existing religious landscape (Interview Shehzad Qadri, 2 April 2024). This cultural synthesis, while leading to minor religious-organizational splits (e.g., the founding of *Anjuman-e-Ghousia*), fundamentally diversified and enriched the social fabric of the town, confirming that the transformation was holistic, touching commerce, education, and religious identity.

The relationship between the host and refugee communities was one of negotiated social relations, moving from initial welcoming cooperation to a subtle, refugee-led dominance (Zamindar 2007). While locals genuinely welcomed the migrants and collaborated economically, the refugees' superior education and business experience eventually translated into a quiet form of social and economic authority over the local population. This new hierarchy was rooted in merit and economic necessity rather than colonial fiat, demonstrating the power dynamics inherent in mass skill transfer. This nuanced relationship highlights that while integration was successful, it was not symmetrical, ultimately reinforcing the economic power of the Muhajir community.

The immediate administrative task of property allocation left an enduring legacy of legal insecurity and administrative contestation, despite the localized success in resettlement. The swift and often undocumented nature of the allocation process meant that legal claims remained tenuous for decades, with many descendants still facing issues related to proper land and property titles (Town Committee Record, 1945-1960). This persistence of legal ambiguity is a direct result of the systemic and bureaucratic incapacity of the nascent

state to accurately manage the scale of evacuee property (Khan 2007). This historical moment thus serves as a powerful reminder of how policy failure in the foundational years can produce generational socio-economic instability.

The Pindi Bhattian experience strongly refutes the narrative that refugee populations are merely economic burdens. The rapid economic turnaround and the significant improvements in the town's educational standards demonstrate the transformative agency of the displaced population. The financial and educational capital brought by migrants was essential for the locality's modernization, filling a developmental vacuum created by the prior non-Muslim commercial elite. This localized case study illustrates that the success of post-conflict reconstruction often depends on recognizing and mobilizing the human capital of the refugees, turning displacement from a humanitarian crisis into an engine for development (Talbot 2016).

Conclusion

The refugee rehabilitation in Pindi Bhattian (1947–1957) was a pivotal and successful exercise in localized socio-economic transformation, decisively shaped by the agency of the displaced community. I demonstrated that the economic void left by the non-Muslim exodus was efficiently and proactively filled by the skilled Muhajir population, who revitalized trade, boosted literacy, and fostered a significant cultural hybridity in the region. This success story was built upon a foundation of local cooperation and the strategic use of refugee expertise, despite the institutional fragility and bureaucratic pitfalls of the nascent Pakistani state.

The experience of Pindi Bhattian offers a vital historical lesson: the full impact of mass migration on a developing nation can only be understood through meticulous, grassroots analysis that prioritizes lived experience over state-centric narratives. The enduring legacy of this decade is not one of scarcity and failure, but one of resilience, economic revitalization, and the permanent redefinition of local identity, cementing the refugee community's role as the definitive agents of modernization in Pindi Bhattian's history.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Census Report of District Gujranwala. 1908–1919.

Creation of National Press Trust. 1964.

Gujranwala Dist. Gazetteer. 1883–84.

Interview with Basherah Begum (Local). Pindi Bhattian, 9 November 2022.

Interview with Haroon Rasheed Dehlwi (migrant). Pindi Bhattian, 25 March 2024.

Interview with Shehzad Qadri (son of the one of the main founders of Anjuman-e-Ghousia). Pindi Bhattian, 2 April 2024.

Interview with Sheikh Waheed (migrant). Pindi Bhattian, 4 April 2024.

Press and Publication Ordinance. 1963.

Register records of Anjuman Islah ul- Muslimeen. 1932–1963.

Registers Record of High School No. 01, Pindi Bhattian. 1870–1960.

Sadar Thana Record (DIR), Pindi Bhattian. 1955–58.

Town Committee Record, Pindi Bhattian. 1945–1960.

Secondary Sources

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

Kudaisya, Gyanesh. 2017. *Partition and Post-Colonial South Asia: A Long View*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Louai, El Habib. 2012. “Retracing the concept of the subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak: Historical developments and new applications.” *African Journal of History and Culture (AJHC)* 4 (1): 4–8.

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*. Sage.

Malik, Azmeh Waleed. 2022. "Partitioned Time: An Exploration of the Multiplicity of Temporality Produced by the Indian Partition 1947."

Menon, Ritu. 2021. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Shafqat, Saeed. 2010. *The Hidden Agenda: Uncovering Propaganda in Pakistani Print Media*. Vanguard Books.

Shaikh, Asad Saleem. 2015. *Dulle De Bar*. Lahore: Fiction House.

Talbot, Ian. 2016. *Violence, Memory, and Partition*. Cambridge: Cambridge 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.

Ziring, Lawrence. 1997. *Pakistan in the Twentieth Century: A Political History*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.