# Beyond the Victim: Migrant Agency and the Making of Modern Punjab, 1947–1960

Umer Waheed*

## Abstract

The 1947 Partition of British India is overwhelmingly remembered as a moment of profound trauma, communal violence, and mass displacement. This narrative, while historically vital, often frames the millions who crossed the borders as passive victims of circumstance and state failure. I propose a necessary re-evaluation of this perspective. This essay analyses the aftermath of Partition in Punjab from 1947 to 1960, not as a story of passive suffering, but as a complex process of transition in which migrants acted as central agents in their own resettlement and in the foundational fabric of the new Pakistani state. I argue that these individuals, far from being mere recipients of aid, actively navigated, negotiated with, and even resisted state policies to reclaim their lives. My analysis traces their journey from the chaos of refugee camps and the crisis of evacuee property to their substantive integration into the economic, social, and political life of West Punjab. By examining state rehabilitation schemes, agricultural policies, and early political mobilization, I demonstrate that migrants were instrumental in rebuilding Punjab's shattered economy and shaping the very nature of citizenship and politics in early Pakistan. This study, therefore, reframes the migrant experience as one of resilience, adaptation, and active participation in state-building.

**KEYWORDS:** Migration, Partition, Punjab, Agency, Citizenship

---

The Partition of British India in 1947, particularly the division of Punjab, represents one of the most seismic and violent demographic upheavals of the twentieth century. The drawing of the Radcliffe Line did not merely create a new border; it unleashed a firestorm of communal violence that resulted in the deaths of up to a million people and forced the migration of over fourteen million. The stories of this period are etched in collective memory as narratives of profound loss, brutality, and displacement. The image of the refugee—dispossessed, traumatized, and fleeing for survival—dominates our understanding of this cataclysmic event. This established narrative of victimhood is essential for understanding the human cost of political division (Butalia 1998). This focus on trauma is not incorrect, but I suggest its dominance has created an analytical imbalance. It casts millions of individuals into a singular, passive role, defined only by what was done *to* them, not by what they *did*.

I propose that this focus on tragedy, while necessary, is incomplete. It risks obscuring the complex, messy, and often contradictory realities that followed the initial moment of rupture. The story of the Partition refugee did not end at the border, nor did it conclude in the despair of the refugee camp. My essay proposes a different perspective, one that shifts the analytical lens from passive victimhood to active agency. When I speak of "agency," I do not imply that migrants had a "choice" in their displacement. Their exodus was, for the vast majority, a forced expulsion under the threat of death. Rather, I use "agency" to describe the myriad ways in which these individuals, once stripped of choice, nonetheless made decisions, navigated new and hostile systems, appropriated resources, and collectively organized to reclaim their lives and futures.

This perspective is crucial because the dominant trauma narrative, often amplified by state-centric histories, serves a particular function. In the national mythologies of both India and Pakistan, the "refugee" is a symbol of sacrifice, the price paid for freedom (Pandey 2001). This framing, I argue, conveniently centres the state as the ultimate arbiter of history—the entity that either failed its citizens or heroically saved them. My analysis seeks to de-centre the state and re-centre the people. I argue that the millions of Muslims who crossed into West Punjab were not simply flotsam on a tide of historical events; they were resilient and resourceful individuals who became the primary agents in their own resettlement and, by extension, in the foundational structuring of their new homeland.

I propose to trace the arduous journey of these migrants from their status as 'stateless refugees' in 1947 to their integration as 'participant-citizens' by 1960. To develop this argument, I analyse the administrative, political, and social dimensions of this complex integration. This essay moves chronologically and thematically from the abject failure of the Boundary Commission to the humanitarian crisis in the refugee camps, and from the state's chaotic, ad-hoc rehabilitation policies to the migrants' eventual emergence as a potent force in Punjab's economy and politics. I will examine how migrants interacted with the new and fragile Pakistani state—a state born *in* this very crisis—navigating its nascent bureaucracy, exploiting its legal loopholes, and mobilizing collectively to demand rights and resources. My analysis demonstrates that they were not just *acted upon* by the state; they *acted* to revive a shattered economy and to claim their space within the new political order, fundamentally shaping the future of Punjab (Khan 2010).

The scholarly literature on the Punjab Partition is vast and can be broadly clustered around several key themes, each contributing to the foundation upon which my argument is built. The first, and most established, body of work addresses the high-politics and catastrophic failures that led to the violence. Scholars have meticulously detailed the political miscalculations of the British, the Congress, and the Muslim League, with particular criticism levelled at the 'surgical' haste and constitutional ignorance of the Radcliffe Boundary Commission (Hudson 1997). This top-down political analysis is complemented by a powerful and essential second cluster focusing on the "trauma narrative." Historians and writers, most notably Urvashi Butalia (1998) and Gyanendra Pandey (2001), have used oral history to rescue the human experience from abstract statistics. They have given voice to the survivors and focused on the profound psychological scars, the specific and horrific violence against women, and the enduring sense of loss that defined the generation of 1947.

This "history from below" was revolutionary, as it challenged the sanitized official histories of both India and Pakistan, which preferred to speak of freedom and state-building rather than the barbaric violence that accompanied it. Butalia's (1998) work, in particular, introduced gender as a critical axis of analysis, revealing how women's bodies became battlegrounds upon which community "honour" was contested. Pandey's (2001) work similarly deconstructed the "clean" narratives of state-making, showing how the violence was not an aberration but was, in many ways, foundational to the new national identities. This literature provides the essential human context for my study; it establishes the depths

of the trauma from which migrant agency had to emerge.

A second, and growing, cluster of scholarship moves beyond the 1947 event itself to its complex and protracted aftermath, which is where I situate my own contribution. This work examines the monumental and chaotic task of state-building and refugee rehabilitation. Historians like Ian Talbot (2006) and Ilyas Chatha (2011) have provided invaluable local and regional studies on the economic turmoil, the challenges of resettlement, and the administrative chaos that gripped Punjab. They detail the breakdown of civic infrastructure and the ad-hoc nature of the state's response. Their work is crucial for understanding the *environment* in which migrants had to operate. More recently, scholars have begun to explore the legal and bureaucratic creation of national identity through the lens of citizenship, borders, and permits (Zamindar 2007).

This legal-bureaucratic school of thought, including works by Haimanti Roy (2013) and the collective study by Ansari, Sherman, and Gould (2019), has been pivotal in framing the new border not as a simple line, but as a complex, negotiated, and often arbitrary *process*. They analyse how state mechanisms like evacuee property laws, permit systems, and citizenship acts actively "sorted" populations, defining who belonged and who did not. While this literature is crucial, I find it often centres the *state* as the primary actor, with the populace as the object of its (often dysfunctional) policies. My essay builds directly on this work, but with a critical shift in emphasis: I explicitly foreground the *migrant* as an agent, analysing how their actions, demands, petitions, and negotiations *from below* actively shaped and forced the state to adapt and respond. I argue that the state did not just *create* the citizen; the migrant,

through their claims and struggles, *compelled* the state to define what a citizen was.

To capture this elusive quality of migrant agency, my analysis employs a qualitative, historical-analytical approach, built upon the triangulation of diverse primary and secondary sources. The research is grounded in archival materials sourced from the National Archives of Pakistan and the Lahore Museum Library. I have conducted a meticulous analysis of English-language newspapers from the period, primarily the *Civil and Military Gazette* and *Dawn*, focusing on the critical years of 1947-1950. I read these sources not only to reconstruct the chronology of events but also to deconstruct the public framing of the 'refugee problem' and the state's response, listening for the faint echoes of migrant voices in official reports, court notices, and news articles.

Reading these newspapers "against the grain" is a core part of my method. The *Civil and Military Gazette*, a legacy of the British Raj, often projected a tone of "managing chaos," its editorials lamenting the breakdown of law and order. In contrast, *Dawn*, as the voice of the Muslim League and the new state, projected a narrative of "building a nation," emphasizing sacrifice and future prosperity. I argue that migrant agency is visible in the *gaps* between these two narratives—in the reports of protests, the anxieties over resource scarcity, and the government's constant, reactive appeals for order.

I supplement this press perspective with a close reading of official government documents, which I suggest are crucial for understanding the daily, contentious interaction between the state and the migrant. Key sources include the compendiums *The Disturbances of Punjab: 1947* and *Journey to Pakistan*. These collections are invaluable as they juxtapose high-level state correspondence (telegrams between governors, cabinet meeting minutes) with harrowing eyewitness accounts of violence and displacement. This juxtaposition allows for an analysis of the profound disconnect between the state's high-level plans and the "ground-up" reality of survival.

Finally, to restore the individual human experience and provide the affective dimension of history, I integrate oral histories, such as the public-facing interviews with Partition survivors Nasreen Azhar and Khawaja Muhammad Zakariya. These narratives are not used as simple, unmediated "truth," but as powerful articulations of memory, trauma, and, crucially, *decision-making*. They capture the fear, the desperation, the quick calculations, and the small acts of resistance that official documents and newspapers invariably erase (Zakariya 2022). By reading these varied primary sources against the grain of the secondary scholarship outlined above, I build a "ground-up" history, one that moves beyond a simplistic state-down model and illuminates the everyday struggles, negotiations, and assertions of will that defined the migrant experience.

## FROM POLITICAL FAILURE TO HUMAN EXODUS

The catastrophe that befell Punjab was not inevitable; I argue that it was the direct, foreseeable consequence of a political process defined by haste, ignorance, and a callous disregard for human reality. The Boundary Commission, led by Sir Cyril Radcliffe, was given a mere five weeks to partition a province that was a complex, integrated tapestry of communities, economies, and canal systems. Radcliffe, who had famously never visited India before, was tasked with drawing a line on a map,

fundamentally ignorant of the geography and social fabric he was dissecting (Hudson 1997). This process was not one of careful consideration but of political expediency, designed to facilitate a rapid British withdrawal at all costs. The British, exhausted by war and eager to abdicate responsibility, opted for a "surgical" solution that proved to be a butcher's hack.

This timeline was not just irresponsible; it was an act of imperial arrogance. The British failed to understand, or simply did not care, that Punjab was not just a territory on a map; it was a single, deeply integrated economic unit. Its prosperity was built on a complex canal system—the largest in the world—that was the artery of its agricultural economy (Talbot and Singh 1999). The grain markets, credit networks, kinship ties, and trade routes all flowed across the very lands Radcliffe was about to sever. To draw a line through this system without any plan for its joint management was to condemn it to chaos. This failure of imagination, this inability to see past the colonial map to the human reality on the ground, was the foundational error of the entire process.

The Commission itself was immediately deadlocked, a microcosm of the communal poison that had already infected the province. The Muslim League, Congress, and Sikh representatives presented competing and irreconcilable claims. The Muslim League argued for a division based on Muslim-majority tehsils, a seemingly straightforward demographic argument. The Congress and Sikhs, however, introduced "other factors," such as property ownership, economic disruption, and the location of sacred sites, in a bid to claim key areas like Lahore and the fertile canal colonies (Ahmad 2012). The tragedy for the Sikhs was particularly acute, as any conceivable line would bifurcate their community and separate them from their most sacred shrines, including Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak. This political impasse, fuelled by maximalist demands, ensured that the final award would be an arbitrary imposition by Radcliffe, guaranteed to satisfy no one.

The resulting award, announced *after* independence on 17 August 1947, was a political disaster that lit a match to a powder keg. The decision to award the Muslim-majority Gurdaspur district to India—thus providing India with a crucial (and, for Pakistan, highly suspect) land-link to Kashmir—was seen by Pakistan as a profound betrayal. This was not just a territorial loss; it was viewed as a deliberate conspiracy to cripple the new state from birth (Ahmad 2012). Similarly, the allocation of Ferozpur and Zira, also Muslim-majority areas, to India confirmed widespread suspicions of a last-minute, bad-faith deal between Radcliffe and Lord Mountbatten. For the Sikhs, the loss of their holy sites was an unforgivable blow. This widespread sense of injustice and betrayal did not just disappoint; it actively *delegitimized* the new border in the eyes of the populace.

I suggest that this political failure was the critical factor that transformed migration from a potential choice to an absolute, immediate necessity. The political leaders, having failed at the negotiating table, now unleashed violent rhetoric to seize what they had lost. Sikh leaders like Master Tara Singh openly called for armed resistance, famously brandishing his *kirpan* on the steps of the Punjab Assembly and vowing to create a Sikh state from the blood of Muslims. Militant gangs—the Sikh *jathas* and the Hindu RSS—began a systematic campaign of "ethnic cleansing" in East Punjab (Singh 1970). They were organized, armed, and operated with a terrifying efficiency. Muslim paramilitary groups, such as the Muslim League National

Guard and the Ahrar Razakars, retaliated with equal ferocity in the West.

It is crucial to understand that this violence was not a spontaneous, primal outburst of popular rage; it was, in large part, an organized, politically-sanctioned tool to seize territory and expel unwanted populations. It was the "agency" of militant groups, a deliberate campaign to create "facts on the ground" that the nascent, powerless states would be forced to accept. The journeys these migrants undertook were a testament to this organized brutality. The infamous "blood trains" became moving sepulchres, with entire trainloads of refugees massacred by militant gangs who attacked with terrifying precision (Butalia 1998). Khawaja Muhammad Zakariya (2022), a survivor, recalled the sheer terror at Amritsar station, where the choice of which train to board was an unknowable gamble between life and death.

Those who travelled on foot in massive *kafilas* (caravans) were scarcely safer, hunted by gangs and ravaged by disease. These *kafilas*, however, were also the site of the first acts of migrant agency. They were, in effect, nations on the move, and they had to organize themselves for survival. They designated guards, scavenged for food, and managed childbirth and death on the road, all without any state protection (Khan 2010). They could not rely on the British, who had abdicated, or the new states, which did not yet exist in any meaningful way. The violence they fled was indiscriminate, but I argue its *purpose* was specific: to terrorize, to expel, and to ensure the new border was drawn not just in ink, but in blood. This was the crucible of trauma from which the new migrant-citizen of Pakistan would be forged.

## THE CRISIS OF ARRIVAL AND THE FAILED STATE RESPONSE

The arrival of millions of traumatized and dispossessed people in West Punjab created an immediate and overwhelming humanitarian crisis that the new, fragile state of Pakistan was utterly unprepared to handle. The sheer scale of the influx was staggering. It is estimated that between six and seven million Muslims entered West Punjab, a province whose total population in 1941 was only around 15 million. By 1951, migrants would constitute over a quarter of the province's entire population (*Census of Pakistan 1951*). This was not a "refugee crisis" in the modern sense, to be managed in camps by international NGOs. This was a demographic *replacement* on a scale that would have buckled even the most established states, let alone one that was, like Pakistan, less than a few weeks old and born into administrative and financial ruin.

This new state, as I have argued, was born *in* this crisis. It had no functioning central government, no ministries, an empty treasury, and a totally fractured administrative system, as most of the experienced Hindu and Sikh administrators, bankers, and technicians had fled to India (Talbot and Singh 1999). The first point of contact for most migrants was the refugee camp, which became the epicentre of this humanitarian disaster. The Walton camp in Lahore, a former military barracks, became infamous. I suggest that "camp" is a generous term; it was, by all survivor accounts, a scene of unimaginable human misery. Survivors like Khawaja Muhammad Zakariya (2022) described an ocean of tattered tents stretching as far as the eye could see, with no sanitation, rampant disease, and a desperate, agonizing shortage of food.

A report in the *Civil and Military Gazette* in September 1947 detailed the dire health

situation, with overwhelmed officials admitting to thousands of active cases of cholera and smallpox. The state's response was hamstrung by a total lack of resources and personnel. This failure was not for lack of will, but for lack of *capacity*. The state simply did not exist in a form that could manage a crisis of this magnitude.

The next immediate, and far more complex, challenge was the question of evacuee property. The migrants had arrived with nothing, but the five million Hindus and Sikhs who fled West Punjab had left behind homes, businesses, shops, and vast tracts of fertile agricultural land. This created a complex legal and administrative vacuum that became the single most important point of interaction between the migrant and the new state. The government's first response was to issue the Evacuee Property Ordinance, which appointed a 'Custodian' to manage these assets (Schechtman 1951). This was intended to be a temporary measure, to prevent widespread looting and to manage an orderly allotment.

However, it quickly descended into chaos. The demand for property far outstripped the available supply, and the process of verifying claims—what a migrant had "lost" in India— was nearly impossible in the absence of records. The Custodian's office, I argue, became the most powerful and feared arm of the new state (Khan 2022). A migrant's *only* capital was their *story* of loss, their claim. This immediately created a system that was practically *designed* for corruption, favouritism, and conflict.

In response to the acute housing shortage, the state attempted to engage in urban planning. Improvement Trusts were established in major cities like Lahore, Lyallpur (now Faisalabad), and Multan to repair houses damaged in the riots and to develop new satellite towns (Talbot 2006). However, my

analysis of this policy shows it was deeply flawed and often exacerbated social inequalities. The new houses built in colonies like Samanabad and Gulberg in Lahore were expensive, far beyond the reach of the average, destitute refugee. These properties were snapped up by wealthier, "elite" migrants who had managed to salvage some capital, or by well-connected locals who had influence with the new administration.

This policy, I argue, created a new, visible class divide *within* the migrant community. It shattered any myth of a monolithic "muhajir" identity. The poor remained in makeshift slums (*katchi abadis*) or were crammed into overcrowded tenements in the old city, fostering deep-seated resentment. This inequality, in turn, fuelled a growing social friction between the migrants (*muhajirs*) and the native Punjabi population (*ansar*). While there were many instances of kindness and shared religious identity, the dominant narrative soon became one of resentment. Locals, who were also suffering from severe economic shortages, began to see the migrants as a burden, as competitors for scarce resources, jobs, and housing. Ian Talbot (2006) notes that locals felt their own needs were being ignored in favour of the newcomers, who were receiving (however inefficiently) state support. This resentment created a social barrier, reminding the migrants that despite their shared religion, they were still seen as outsiders. This friction, I argue, was a crucial factor in compelling migrants to organize and assert their presence, not just as recipients of charity, but as stakeholders with a *right* to a new life.

## State Policy and Migrant Negotiation

Faced with a humanitarian catastrophe, a near-total administrative breakdown, and a

looming crisis of legitimacy, the nascent Pakistani state scrambled to create a framework for rehabilitation. I suggest this process was not a simple top-down application of policy; rather, it became a dynamic, chaotic, and often corrupt arena of negotiation between fledgling state officials and increasingly assertive migrants. The government established high-level committees, such as the Pakistan-Punjab Refugee Council, to coordinate the disjointed efforts between the central and provincial governments (*Disturbances in the Punjab* 1948). These committees were, in reality, crisis-management groups, issuing ad-hoc orders to deal with the latest emergency.

To fund this mammoth task, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah launched the Quaid-e-Azam Relief Fund (QARF) in September 1947, appealing to the nation and the world for donations (*Jinnah Papers* 1993). This appeal, I argue, was as much symbolic as it was financial. It was an attempt to *create* a new national identity out of the chaos, to forge a sense of "Pakistani-ness" based on shared sacrifice and mutual support. The actual funds collected were a drop in the ocean compared to the scale of the need. The real work of survival was happening on the ground, driven by the migrants themselves.

These state-led efforts were supplemented by crucial work from non-state actors. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) provided vital medical aid, setting up hospitals and delousing stations to combat the cholera and smallpox epidemics (Rey-Schirr 1998). Internally, organizations like the Khudai Khidmatgar, despite their deep political differences with the Muslim League, engaged in selfless relief work, demonstrating a level of civil society engagement that momentarily transcended politics. However, these efforts were temporary palliatives. The real challenge lay in long-term economic rehabilitation, which I divide into rural and urban spheres, and it was here that migrant agency became most visible.

In the rural sphere, the government's primary challenge was reviving agriculture, the backbone of Punjab's economy, which had been shattered by the flight of Sikh and Hindu farmers. The state implemented a policy of allotting evacuee agricultural land to migrant farmers, granting them semi-permanent rights. This was a pragmatic move to get land back into cultivation and ensure food security. It was also, I argue, a case of state policy *catching up* to migrant agency, as many desperate migrants had already begun squatting on and cultivating abandoned lands. Later, in 1953, the "Grow More Food" campaign offered barren land on lease to refugees, encouraging the digging of tube-wells. To manage this, the government promoted cooperative farming societies, enabling migrants to pool their limited resources to buy seeds, fertilizers, and equipment (Khan and Stark 1952). This policy shows migrants actively participating in their own economic revival, transforming from destitute refugees into productive farmers who would form the new agricultural base of the province.

The urban industrial crisis was perhaps even more severe. West Punjab's industrial and financial sectors had been almost completely dominated by Hindus and Sikhs. Their departure created a massive vacuum of skilled labour, capital, and managerial expertise (Talbot and Singh 1999). The new state had no capital or expertise to run these abandoned factories. In response, the Economic Committee of the Refugee Council established technical and vocational training centres to reskill the largely agrarian migrant population. More crucially, the state began allotting abandoned evacuee factories and businesses to migrant entrepreneurs, often on

five-year contracts. This policy, born of pure necessity, was instrumental in kick-starting Pakistan's industrialization. It was a massive, if chaotic, transfer of capital. Migrant businessmen from East Punjab, bringing with them their own networks and commercial acumen, quickly revived industries in Lyallpur, Sialkot, and Lahore, creating employment for thousands. This, I argue, was the *birth* of Pakistan's new industrial-capitalist class.

However, I must stress that this entire rehabilitation process was riddled with profound administrative irregularities and corruption. This is where migrant agency took a darker, more complex, and more human turn. The Custodian's office, which held vast, unchecked discretionary power over property allotment, became a hotbed of favouritism and bribery (Khan 2022). As Elisabetta Iob (2019) notes, the bureaucracy and migrants prioritized their respective interests, which were often in direct conflict. My analysis of reports from the period shows that this corruption was a two-way street. Desperate migrants, locked out of the formal system by byzantine bureaucratic delays, resorted to bribery to get their "fair work done."

Furthermore, many migrants demonstrated a clear assertion of agency by actively *defrauding* the system. Officials reported a widespread phenomenon of "bogus claims," where migrants, possessing no documentation, grossly exaggerated the property and assets they had lost in India to claim more in Pakistan (Chatha 2011). This was not passive victimhood; it was a cynical, rational, and assertive strategy to maximize their families' chances of survival and prosperity. In this new moral economy of survival, I argue, the state's dysfunctional system was seen as an illegitimate obstacle or, at best, a resource to be plundered. Having lost everything, many migrants felt *entitled* to whatever they could get. This was not

"corruption" in their eyes; it was *restitution*. This corruption extended to the highest levels. A *Civil and Military Gazette* report from 1950 detailed how high-ranking officials and politicians used their influence to allocate the most valuable evacuee properties—cinemas, factories, and prime urban houses—to their own friends and relatives. This demonstrates that from the very beginning, "migrant" was not a single class identity. Elite migrants used their social capital and connections to slot seamlessly into the new power structure, while the poor were left to negotiate with petty officials. This entire process forged the very character of the new Pakistani state: a system based not on abstract rights, but on personal connections, patronage, and adversarial negotiation.

## THE AFTERMATH: FORGING A NEW CITIZEN

The long-term outcome of this chaotic, migrant-driven process was the complete and permanent transformation of West Punjab. The most immediate impact, as revealed by the *Census of Pakistan 1951*, was demographic. Partition resulted in a profound "homogenization" of the population. West Punjab, once a pluralistic society with significant Hindu and Sikh minorities, became overwhelmingly Muslim (over 98%). This demographic shift had deep and lasting consequences. While it removed the immediate source of communal conflict that had torn the province apart, I suggest it laid the groundwork for future divisions. With the "other" (Hindu/Sikh) gone, the internal fault lines within the Muslim community—sectarian (Shia/Sunni), linguistic (Punjabi/Seraiki), and class (migrant/local, feudal/urban)—became more politically salient. Furthermore, it entrenched a "majority" mindset in Punjab that would later struggle to accommodate the ethnic and

linguistic diversities of Pakistan, particularly with Bengalis, Sindhis, and Balochis.

The next crucial step in the migrants' journey was their legal integration. A migrant, by definition, exists in a state of legal ambiguity. Both India and Pakistan had to formally define who belonged to their new nations. My analysis of the citizenship acts reveals differing, yet parallel, philosophies. India, in its 1955 Citizenship Act, established a cut-off date of July 1948, creating a complex registration process for those who came later (Roy 2013). This secular framework, however, was still fraught with bureaucratic hurdles that often excluded the most vulnerable. As Gyanendra Pandey (2001) pointedly questions, the rights of women, Dalits, and Muslims who remained in India were far from guaranteed, despite the constitutional rhetoric.

Pakistan's Citizenship Act of 1951, I argue, was a classic example of state policy *retroactively* formalizing a demographic fact. The law defined a citizen as anyone who was born in the territory or who had migrated from India before 1948 with the intent to permanently reside. This law was, in effect, a formal recognition of the *de facto* reality that millions of migrants had already created on the ground. They were *already* there, *already* claiming Pakistan; the law merely rubber-stamped their presence. This is a clear case of state-building *from below*. However, like in India, the law had its exclusions. It contained discriminatory clauses regarding women, making it easier for a Pakistani man to confer citizenship on a foreign wife than for a Pakistani woman to do the same for her husband. For migrants, these laws were the final, formal step in their legal transition. They were no longer "refugees"; they were now, legally, "Pakistanis."

Their socio-economic integration in Punjab was, I argue, remarkably successful compared to other regions, and this was due almost entirely to shared ethnicity and language. The vast majority of migrants to West Punjab were themselves Punjabis from East Punjab. As Muhammad Waseem (1997) notes, the government's policy of settling migrants in 'biradris' (kinship groups) helped maintain social cohesion and assimilate them quickly. This stands in stark contrast to the experience in Sindh (Ansari 2005). There, Urdu-speaking *muhajirs* from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar settled almost exclusively in urban centres like Karachi and Hyderabad. This created a deep linguistic and cultural divide with the rural, Sindhi-speaking native population that persists to this day (Rehman 1997). In Sindh, the label "Muhajir" became a *permanent* political identity. In Punjab, "muhajir" was, for most, a *temporary* label that faded within a generation.

Finally, I propose that the most significant demonstration of migrant agency occurred in the political sphere. The state's initial attempt to manage migrants included allocating reserved seats for them in the provincial assembly in 1949, a top-down move that was quickly reversed due to intense resentment from local politicians. But migrants did not wait for state sanction. They began organizing from the ground up. In the 1950 Lahore Municipal Corporation elections, 16 migrant candidates were elected, demonstrating their ability to mobilize a new and powerful urban voting bloc. This grassroots power exploded onto the provincial stage in the 1951 elections. The Jinnah Awami League, a party led by the migrant politician Iftikhar Mamdot, campaigned heavily on a pro-migrant platform, promising faster rehabilitation and justice in claim allotments. The party won 32 seats, establishing migrants as a decisive, independent force in Punjab's politics (Aziz 1976).

This political integration reached the highest echelons of power, but in a way that reveals the critical class dimension. Migrant *elites*, who brought with them administrative, industrial, and financial experience, became central figures in the new state apparatus. Individuals like Ghulam Muhammad, who became Governor-General, and Chaudhry Muhammad Ali, who became Prime Minister and drafted the 1956 Constitution, were migrants (Ali 1967). I suggest the state—or rather, the new state's core—had a vested interest in promoting this new migrant middle and upper class. They served as a loyal, educated, and urban counterweight to the powerful, entrenched, and often fickle rural feudal landlords who had traditionally dominated Punjab's politics (Saif 2010). The feudals had the land and the votes, but the migrants had the *skills* to run a modern state. This created a new "migrant-military-bureaucratic" nexus that would come to define Pakistan's power structure, supplanting the old feudal order. In this complex interplay, migrants were not just finding their place; they were actively *making* the new political landscape.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have traced the complex journey of the Punjabi migrant from 1947 to 1960. My analysis has sought to move beyond the dominant and necessary narrative of trauma to uncover a story of profound resilience and active, multifaceted agency. The Partition of Punjab was not an event that simply *happened* to millions of people; it was a crisis that these millions actively navigated, survived, and ultimately overcame. From the terror of the blood trains and the genocidal violence of the *kafilas*, they arrived in a new state that offered little more than chaos and an empty treasury. In the squalor of the refugee camps and in the face of native resentment, they began the arduous process of rebuilding.

I have argued that they were central actors at every stage of this process. They engaged with the flawed policies of the state, not as passive recipients, but as assertive and often desperate negotiators. They used every tool at their disposal—legal petitions, political mobilization, bribery, and even fraud—to secure land, property, and a future for their families. Their labour and entrepreneurial spirit were the driving force behind the revival of Punjab's shattered agricultural and industrial economy. They did not just find new homes; they built new cities and new industries from the rubble of the old.

Most importantly, they organized politically, transforming themselves from a faceless "refugee problem" into a powerful "citizen bloc" that could not be ignored. They populated the new state's bureaucracy and rose to its highest offices, fundamentally shaping its character and its politics. I therefore conclude that the story of West Punjab's first decade is inextricably the story of the migrant-citizen. Their agency did not just ensure their own survival; it laid the very foundation of the new society. The trauma of 1947 was the price of entry, but the story of the following years, I have argued, is one of creation.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

*Census of Pakistan 1951*. 1951. Karachi: Ministry of Home Affairs.

*Civil and Military Gazette* (Lahore). 1947-1950.

*Dawn* (Lahore). 1947-1950.

*Disturbances in the Punjab: 1947: A Compilation of Official Documents*. 1948. Karachi: Cabinet Division.

*Jinnah Papers*. 1993. Vol 1. Islamabad: Cabinet Division.

*The Journey to Pakistan: A Documentation of Refugees of 1947*. 1993. Karachi: Cabinet Secretariat.

*The Pakistan Citizenship Act of 1951*. 1951. II of 1951.

Zakariya, Khawaja Muhammad. 2022. "Leaving the Homeland in Amritsar: Witness to Partition." Interview by The Centrum Media. YouTube Video. August 17.

### Secondary Sources

Ahmad, Ishtiaq. 2012. *The Punjab Bloodied: Partitioned and Cleansed*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Ali, Chaudhary Muhammad. 1967. *The Emergence of Pakistan*. Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan.

Ansari, Sarah. 2005. *Life After Partition: Migration, Community and Strife in Sindh, 1947-1962*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Ansari, Sarah, Taylor Sherman, and William Gould. 2019. *Boundaries of Belonging: Locality, Citizenship and Rights in India and Pakistan*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Aziz, K. K. 1976. *Party Politics in Pakistan 1947-1958*. Islamabad: National Commission on Historical and Cultural Research.

Butalia, Urvashi. 1998. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. India: Duke University Press.

Chatha, Ilyas. 2011. *Partition and Locality: Violence, Migration and Development in Gujranwala and Sialkot*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Hudson, H.V. 1997. *The Great Divide: British-India-Pakistan*. London: Hutchinson and Co Ltd.

Iob, Elisabetta. 2019. *Refugee and the Politics of the Everyday State in Pakistan: Re-settlement in Punjab; 1947-62*. London: Routledge Press.

Khan, Rafiq, and Herbert S. Stark. 1952. *Young Pakistan: a Citizenship Reader for Secondary Schools and Adult Institution*. London: Oxford University Press.

Khan, Tahir. 2022. "Refugee Sufferings: The Role of the Custodian, Civil Bureaucracy, and Litigation in the Punjab." *Pakistan Perspectives* 2 (1).

Khan, Yasmin. 2010. *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*. Yorkshire: Yale University Press.

Pandey, Gyanendra. 2001. *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

Rehman, Tariq. 1997. *Language and Politics in Pakistan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Rey-Schirr, Catherine. 1998. "The ICRC's activities on the Indian subcontinent following Partition (1947-1949)." *International Review of Red Cross* (323): 267-291.

Roy, Haimanti. 2013. *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947-65*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Saif, Lubna. 2010. *Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment in Pakistan 1947-1958: The Role of the Punjab*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Schechtman, Joseph B. 1951. "Evacuee Property in India and Pakistan." *Pacific Affairs* 24 (4): 411-412.

Singh, Kirpal. 1970. *Partition of Punjab*. Patiala: Registrar Punjabi University.

Talbot, Ian. 2006. *Divided Cities: Partition and its Aftermath in Lahore and Amritsar 1947-1957*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Talbot, Ian, and Gurharpal Singh. 1999. *Region and Partition: Bengal, Punjab and Partition of the Subcontinent*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Waseem, Muhammad, and Sikandar Hayat. 1997. "Political Development and Conflict Resolution in Pakistan." *Pakistan Institute of Development Economics* 36 (4).

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