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The Master and the Maharajas: The Sikh Princes and the East Punjab Massacres of 1947

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Event

During the spring, summer and autumn of 1947 India's richest province, the Punjab, played host to a massive human catastrophe. The trigger for the catastrophe was Britain's parting gift to its Indian subjects of partition. Confronted by a seemingly intractable demand by the All-India Muslim League for a separate Muslim homeland—Pakistan—a campaign which since 1946 had turned increasingly violent, the British government early in 1947 accepted viceroy Lord Mountbatten's advice that partition was necessary to arrest the country's descent into civil war. 'Mahatma' Gandhi notably excepted, the leadership of the Congress party came gradually and reluctantly to the same conclusion. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru's deputy, likened it to the cutting off of a diseased limb. But in accepting the 'logic' of the League's 'two-nation' theory, the British applied it remorselessly. They insisted that partition would have to follow the lines of religious affiliation, not the boundaries of provinces. In 1947 League president Muhammad Ali Jinnah was forced to accept what he had contemptuously dismissed in 1944 as a 'moth-eaten' Pakistan, a Pakistan bereft of something like half of Bengal and the Punjab and most of Assam.

At the time, Mountbatten was much praised for his ingenuity in finding a workable solution to the 'Indian problem'; in the years since, praise has largely been replaced by blame. The viceroy has been accused of self-advertisement, and of needlessly speeding up the British withdrawal to preserve the fading reputation of the Raj. In particular, he has been berated for not forseeing the human consequences that would flow from the partition decision. Yet much of this historical wisdom derives from hindsight. There is no evidence

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in the records that the viceroy, or his close advisers, or for that matter any of the Congress politicians in his cabinet, had even the faintest apprehension of the scale of the calamity that was about to occur. People were prepared for administrative dislocation, especially in Pakistan; there was even some talk of government-sponsored 'population transfers'. But no one expected that between 12 and 13 million people would take it upon themselves to migrate, or that they would act so precipitously, in reckless flight, abandoning homes, businesses, jobs, friends, familiar places and most of their movable possessions. Despite what seem in retrospect very clear warnings from the leaders of the Sikhs, almost no one predicted the scale of the violence that partition would unleash—the attacks on the refugee columns, the abductions, the rapes, the murders. Above all, no one envisaged that so many would perish—at least a quarter of a million and perhaps as many as two million, if the claims of some nationalist commentators are to be believed.[1]

For a long time the historiography of the partition was dominated by accounts of high-level policy-making focusing on its 'causes'. This

[1] It is doubtful whether there will ever be a comprehensive accounting. Even where official bureaucracies were still functioning—and in most places they had broken down by late August—conditions at the time did not permit the collection of accurate data. There are good figures for specific times and places, such as those included in the daily diaries of General Rees' Punjab Boundary Force, and in the Patiala police reports that I cite below, but these are necessarily and admittedly incomplete. In their absence, some observers have tried to calculate the death toll in 1947 by comparing census data. One of the earliest attempts, but a fairly careful one, was made by the West Pakistan government in 1948, using figures from the 1941 Indian census and data from a special West Punjab census commissioned in 1948. First, the authors of this study tried to work out what the Muslim population of East Punjab would have been if partition had not supervened. Allowing for a conservative natural increase of 1.6%, they came up with a figure of 5,935,000 Muslims. They then subtracted the totals for Muslim refugees in West Punjab—5,103,000—and Muslims still living in East Punjab—270,000. By this reckoning 472,000 were 'unaccounted for', presumably killed. Similar calculations, with similar results (in the order of 350,000 deaths) have been done for the Hindu and Sikh populations of West Pakistan. But all these studies suffer from basic statistical flaws: the wartime 1941 census is generally considered to have undercounted by a significant amount; and boundary changes have made district-by-district comparisons difficult. Note by Fazal-i-Ilahi, Supt. Refugee Census Operations, W. Punjab, n.d. [1948], BL, Mudie Coll., 27. Among the historians H. V. Hodson, following Penderel Moon, opts for a conservative figure of 200,000 killed, but others would push the total higher. Robin Moore suggests that some 500,000 died, Leonard Mosley 'over 600,000', and Lawrence Ziring 'perhaps as many as three million'. H. V. Hodson, *The Great Divide: Britain–India–Pakistan* (London, 1969), p. 418; Robin Moore, *Escape from Empire: The Attlee Government and the Indian Problem* (Oxford, 1983), p. 327; Leonard Mosley, *The Last Days of the British Raj* (Bombay, 1971), p. 279; and Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan in the Twentieth Century: A Political History* (Karachi, 1997), p. 69.

was essentially an historiography underwritten by the meta-narrative of the making of the nation-state, and 'partition' was defined accordingly—essentially as an administrative carve-up of territory and 'assets'. The big issues in this interpretation were: could partition have been avoided? and, was the division of the spoils equitable? In recent years, however, a new historiography of 1947 has begun to emerge, one squarely focused on the results of the partition and its impact on society. The big questions posed by this historiography are: how, why and by whom was violence done? and, what effect did it have on the survivors? Notably, this new research has thrown considerable light on the traumatic experiences of those often described as the 'chief sufferers' of the partition—the abducted women. It has also cast doubt on the comfortable supposition that the killing was erratic and spontaneous—merely a collective knee-jerk reaction fuelled by fear and rumour.[2]

Nevertheless large gaps remain to be filled and several important questions about the grim aftermath of the partition have still to be answered satisfactorily. Firstly, while recent work by Suranjan Das and Swarna Aiyer makes it clear that in many cases the aggressors operated in organized groups under 'military style' leadership, apparently to a plan, researchers have yet to determine where and by whom these shadowy schemes were devised or how they were implemented; nor has anyone succeeded in unravelling the links—that must surely have existed—between the actual perpetrators and the fire-brand Bengali, Bihari and Punjabi politicians. Secondly, we still do not know a lot about the motives of the killers. At the time it was generally conceded that in east Punjab most of the killing during the summer of 1947 was done by the Sikhs. With what pur-

[2] e.g., Swarna Aiyer, ' "August Anarchy": The Partition Massacres in Punjab, 1947', in D. A. Low and Howard Brasted (eds), *Freedom, Trauma, Continuities: Northern India and Independence* (New Delhi, 1998), pp. 15–38; Urvashi Butalia, 'Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency during Partition', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, XXVIII (17), 24 Apr. 1993, pp. 12–24; Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905–1947* (Delhi, 1991); Vinita Damodaran, 'Bihar in the 1940s: Communities, Riots and the State', in Low and Brasted, pp. 175–98; Mushirul Hasan, 'Partition: The Human Cost', in *History Today*, 47 (9), 1997, pp. 47–53; Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom*, 2 vols (New Delhi, 1995), esp. vol. 1, pp. 15–42; Andrew J. Major, ' "The Chief Sufferers": Abduction of Women during the Partition of the Punjab', in Low and Brasted, pp. 57–72; Shail Mayaram, 'Speech, Silence and the Making of Partition Violence in Mewat', in Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (eds), *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi, 1996), pp. 126–64; Rita Menon and Ramla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1998).

pose? One theory is that they sought revenge for the massacres earlier in the year of their co-religionists in Rawalpindi and Hazara districts. 'What the Hindus and Sikhs did in East Punjab was of course a reaction to the events in West Punjab', wrote provincial governor Sir Francis Mudie.[3] However, while this thesis might account for some of the ferocity with which the Sikh bands went about their grisly business, it does not explain the systemic nature of the violence. Muslims were not only butchered in east Punjab, but systematically expelled. We would now term this process 'ethnic cleansing'. This points to a political/territorial design. As David Gilmartin observes: 'If we assume that the organized bands . . . that perpetrated a major part of the slaughter operated with some sense of legitimacy, then their weilding of violence (itself, after all, a sign of state authority) can perhaps be read as an attempt, through violence, to lay moral claim to the new territories carved out by partition'.[4] From this angle 'cleansing' (read purification) is an apt metaphor. But what territorial project were the Sikhs embarked upon? Even historians sympathetic to the Sikhs concede that the violence of partition helped consolidate the community, thereby strengthening it politically. However, it remains unclear whether this favourable result was achieved by design or, as most Sikh historians aver, by accident.[5] Thirdly, virtually all the work that has been done so far on the Punjab massacres has focused on the erstwhile British province of Punjab. Almost nothing has been said, at least directly, about the princely-ruled areas of Punjab, namely the states of Patiala,

[3] Gov. of West Punjab to M. A. Jinnah, 5 Sept. 1947, quoted in Harbans Singh, *The Heritage of the Sikhs* (Bombay, 1964), p. 206.

[4] David Gilmartin, 'Partition, Pakistan, and South Asian History: In Search of a Narrative', in *Journal of Asian Studies*, 57 (4), 1998, p. 1086.

[5] The latter view underpins the discussion in Harbans Singh, *Heritage*, p. 196. 'The Sikhs' concern was to save for India and for themselves as much of the Punjab as they could from going into the Muslim state of Pakistan'. In other words, the Sikhs' actions were reactive not pre-emptive. The former view was first expounded in the memoir of another British observer of these events, Bahawalpur Revenue Minister (Sir) Penderel Moon. Moon wrote: the 'basic objective of Sikh policy could only be realised by the forcible expulsion of Muslims from East Punjab, for only so could accommodation be found on the Indian side for the two million Sikhs who would otherwise be left in Pakistan. So in falling upon the Muslims in East Punjab . . . in August 1947 the Sikhs were not only gratifying their desire for revenge but also helping to secure a more rational objective—the integral survival of the Sikh community'. *Divide and Quit* (London, 1961), pp. 279–80. The intentionalist view, not surprisingly, is also popular with Pakistani historians. See, e.g., Syed Nur Ahmed, *From Martial Law to Martial Law: Politics in the Punjab, 1919–1958* (ed. Craig Baxter, trans. Mahmud Ali, Boulder, 1985), p. 253.

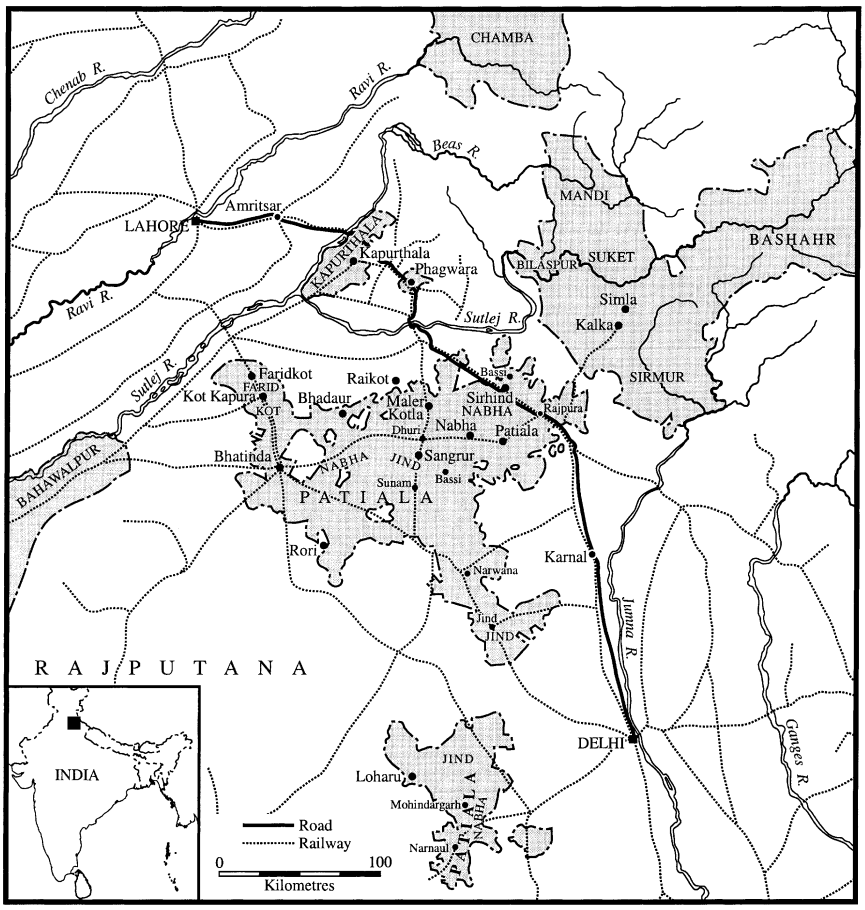
Nabha, Jind, Faridkot, Kapurthala, Kalsia, Maler Kotla, Loharu and Bahawalpur.[6] This is a fairly serious lacuna, not simply because it ignores a significant proportion of the Punjab's land and people (about a quarter and a fifth respectively if one leaves out what became after partition Pakistani Punjab) but because of the inherent importance of the states and their rulers within the Punjabi scene. As map 1 shows, the Punjab states formed an almost unbroken north–south corridor across east Punjab from Rajputana to the hills, bisecting all the main rail and road routes between the United Provinces and Delhi and the cities of west Punjab. They occupied, quite literally, the strategic heart of the province. In addition, for reasons which will be explained presently, the *darbārs* (governments) of the Punjab states exercised considerable political and cultural clout in the larger provincial arena, especially in regard to the Sikh community.

The discussion that follows tries to fill some of these gaps by examining the involvement of the six so-called 'Sikh' states—Faridkot, Kapurthala, Kalsia and the 'Phulkian' states of Patiala, Nabha and Jind—in the east Punjab massacres. I begin by tracing the emergence in the early twentieth century of a militant faction within the Sikh communal leadership, namely the Shiromani Akali Dal or 'Akali party'. I then show why, against the odds, the Akalis tried to augment their power by drawing the Sikh rulers into their orbit and why, also against the odds, the latter gradually fell in with the Dal's grand designs. Next, I try to piece together what ensued, as a result of this alliance, in the summer and autumn of 1947. Finally I assess the success of this 'joint venture' in terms of the political goals of the two parties.

Context

Sheltered by the umbrella of British imperial military power, the Indian princes for a long time had no need to plan for their future; not only was the British Raj all-powerful and benevolently inclined

[6] Now and again one finds references in the literature to happenings in the Punjab states, but they are rarely distinguished as such or differentiated from occurrences elsewhere. See, e.g., Major, 'Chief Sufferers', p. 59. Bahawalpur, although part of the Punjab States Agency, was geographically linked to Sind rather than the Punjab; consequently I have chosen to exclude it from the present analysis, even though it too was the scene of considerable bloodshed in 1947.



Map 1. The Punjab States on the Eve of the Transfer of Power

towards those it thought of as its most loyal allies, but it looked set to rule India for an indefinite period. In so far as there was a princely strategy during this period, it centred on endeavours to secure their borders against intrusions from the provinces, which they saw as a nursery of dangerous ideologies.[7] Towards the end of the First World War, however, the myth of imperial permanence in South Asia was shattered by London's intimation, in the Montagu declaration, that it intended eventually to confer 'responsible government' on India, a phrase later interpreted as meaning dominion status. In retrospect

[7] See, e.g., Patiala Ijlas-i-Khas order of 6 Aug. 1925, P[unjab] S[tate] A[rchives], Patiala, Dharam Arth, 380/12.

this announcement can be seen as committing the British to a process of decolonization. How would the princes and their states fare once the British administrative umbrella was withdrawn?

At first the threat of abandonment implicit in the Montagu declaration was mitigated for the princes by governmental reassurances and by the knowledge that dominion status did not preclude a continuing connection with the Crown. Nevertheless, it set some of the more sagacious princes and ministers thinking about survival strategies. Out of these reflections and deliberations emerged what I have dubbed, after one of its main sponsors, Baroda minister Manubhai Mehta, the 'Mehta programme'.[8] Adopted as a recommendation to its members by the Chamber of Princes in 1927, the programme called upon the rulers to (1) consolidate their domestic support-base by enacting administrative and constitutional reforms, and (2) forge constructive relationships with friendly elements in British India. As the prospect of independence drew nearer, more and more of the princes accepted the prudence of this dual strategy and began to hedge their bets by striking deals with local and provincial political leaders. In the vanguard were the Sikh princes of the Punjab.

Among the 600-strong princely fraternity, the Sikh rulers were better placed than most to market themselves as regional politicians. All the princes commanded deference by virtue of their office, which automatically placed them near the top of the social pecking order, and which was considered by many to put them in touch with the divine; and most of them also possessed in liberal measure another valuable currency of politics: patronage. Within their states, the rulers controlled appointments to religious offices and, through their governments, the disbursement of grants for the maintenance of religious institutions.[9] This gave them considerable leverage over the local priestly class, which was one of the most powerful shapers of public opinion. However the princes' generosity did not stop at their own borders. Princely purses enriched dozens of British Indian char-

[8] Ian Copland, *The Princes of India in the End-Game of Empire, 1917–1947* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 278.

[9] See, e.g., note by Gurdal Singh, Assist. Administrator, Nabha, dated 14 Oct. 1924, PSA, Nabha, P.M.'s Office, 903/1077E; Gurdial Singh, Home Member Nabha to Presdt. of Council, Nabha, 2 Oct. 1937, PSA, Nabha, P.M.'s Office, 911/1113E; note by Chief Judge, Nabha, dated 10 Oct. 1941, PSA, Nabha, P.M.'s Office, 9369/9202E; and note in Home Dept., PEPSU, dated 22 Sept. 1951, PSA, Patiala, Dharam Arth, 415/74.

ities. Hundreds of provincial schools, temples and shrines benefitted from royal endowments. The Sikh rulers, for instance, gave lavishly to Sikh educational institutions, bankrolled urgent conservation work at Sikh sacred sites and subsidized several regional newspaper ventures. This patronage, too, bought influence, in the case of the Sikh princes quite substantial influence over the management and educational philosophy of the Khalsa College at Amritsar, the principal purveyor of higher education to the sons of the Punjabi Sikh elite.[10]

However, the Sikh rulers also possessed two additional sources of political influence not available to the rest of the princely order. First, they controlled, as sovereigns, about a fifth of the Sikh *panth* (community) resident in Punjab. Sikhs comprised in 1941 36 percent of Nabha's population, 46 percent of Patiala's and over 57 percent of Faridkot's. In only one district of British Punjab, Ludhiana, were Sikhs as thick on the ground.[11] This made them, *de facto*, significant communal players. Second, the Sikh states and their ruling families were important carriers of Sikh tradition. Survivals from the mid-eighteenth century, the states were a direct link with the golden age of the Khalsa's military power when its *misls* (warbands) dominated the Punjab. They served, as the Amritsar newspaper *Khalsa* put it, as a 'symbol of our glorious past'.[12] More specifically, the Nabha and Patiala houses between them owned most of the authenticated relics of the tenth Sikh Guru and founder of the Khalsa Panth, Guru Gobind Singh, including a *kirpan* (dagger) and a *saropa* (cloak) that had once belonged to Gobind Singh, a *hukum nāmā* (decree) signed by the Guru, and Gobind Singh's *kangha* (comb) with some strands of his hair still attached to it.[13] These associations and artifacts con-

[10] Barbara N. Ramusack, 'Maharajas and Gurudwaras: Patiala and the Sikh Community', in Robin Jeffrey (ed.), *People, Princes and Paramount Power: Society and Politics in the Indian Princely States* (Delhi, 1978), pp. 177–9, 182–3. Collectively the Sikh states had the right to nominate 32 out of the 58 members of the Khalsa College Council. Patiala controlled the lion's share, with eleven places in its gift. When the College was reorganized along university lines in the early 1920s, the Maharaja of Patiala was elected its first chancellor.

[11] *Census of India 1941*, vol. VI, table XIII, pp. 42–5.

[12] *Khalsa*, 6 Oct. 1946, in [Nehru Memorial Museum and Library], A[ll] I[ndia] S[tates] P[eoples] C[onference], 86, part II, of 1945–8.

[13] The first two items were bequested by the Guru to the common ancestor of the Nabha, Patiala and Jind families, a Jat landholder named Phul, as a reward for Phul sheltering him, toward the end of the seventeenth century, from searching Mughal troops. The comb was acquired later. The *hukunmama* contained the blessing, *tera ghar so mera ghar*, 'your house is my house'. It may have dated from a later encounter between Gobind Singh and Phul's second son, Rama, in 1696. Note encl. in Administrator, Nabha to Agent-to-the-Governor-General, Punjab States, 8 Sept.

stituted a rich store of what Paul Bourdieu would call symbolic capital.

The Hindu and Muslim princes too served as focii for the aspirations of their respective communities; some of them, such as the maharajas of Udaipur and Alwar, also acted from time to time, as the Sikh princes did, as mediators in religious disputes. However within the relatively small confines of the Khalsa, the Sikh maharajas stood tall in a way that the other princes, in their much bigger arenas, did not and could not. To be sure, they did not aspire to Sikh religious leadership. That function resided with the learned men of the Akal Takht at Amritsar and ultimately with the Sikh sacred book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, sometimes referred to as the living guru. Yet they did see themselves as legitimate secular leaders, and were considered to be so by many Sikhs, subjects and non-subjects alike. This was particularly true of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh, ruler (1900–38) of the premier Sikh state, Patiala, who was frequently honoured with the epithet 'Leader of the Sikhs'.[14]

From the early twentieth century, however, the communal leadership of the Sikh rulers came under increasing challenge as a result of socio-political developments in British Punjab associated with the Sikh reform movement. Although we tend to think of it as a religion in its own right, Sikhism has always struggled to divorce itself from its parent faith, Hinduism. Until quite recently, for instance, it was common for Sikhs and Hindus to intermarry and worship at each other's shrines. But these syncretic tendencies were greatly sharpened in the mid-nineteenth century by the British conquest. With the demise of Sikh political power, Sikhism lost arguably its major prop; over the following decades this blow was compounded by rising prosperity, which fed a spirit of secularism and fostered a lax attitude towards the keeping up of the 'five Ks' that since Gobind Singh's time had been the defining symbols of Sikh orthodoxy. By the end of the century the process of attrition had become so pronounced that the Sikh scholar Kahn Singh felt compelled to rush into print with a tract defiantly entitled *Ham Hindu Nahīn* ('We Are Not Hindus'). Fearful for the survival of the Panth, community leaders in 1873 founded the first of what eventually became a large network of revivalist 'Singh Sabhas'. Over the next forty years these

1923, N[ational] A[rchives of] I[ndia], Home (Pol.), 401 of 1924; and Ramusack, 'Maharajas and Gurudwaras', p. 178.

[14] e.g. note by D. Petrie, C.I.D. Government of India, dated 13 Mar. 1912, cited in Ramusack, 'Maharajas and Gurudwaras', p. 180.

Sabhas effectively rescued the religion by purging it of its Hinduistic elements and promoting 'a coherent and authoritative view of what it meant to be a Sikh'.[15] Then, in 1920, a second movement was launched under the banner of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) for the 'liberation' of Sikh shrines and places of worship from the hereditary control of the Udasis, who were viewed as heretical because they did not observe the five Ks. Those who answered the SGPC's call styled themselves Akalis ('immortal ones'), after the Nihangs who had served as Guru Gobind Singh's bodyguard. Over the next five years this blue-turbaned army, the Akali Dal, occupied dozens of contested gurudwaras, sometimes peacefully but often forcibly, which brought the movement increasingly into conflict with the provincial authorities. Nevertheless the British found it impossible to dampen the Akalis' ardour, and in 1925 the Punjab government legislated to vest the SGPC with the management of all Sikh holy places in British territory.[16]

The Sikh princes did not object to the reformist Singh Sabha movement; on the contrary, they welcomed it. The Sabha at Faridkot, for example, was founded by Raja Bikram Singh himself.[17] Even when after 1902 the movement became more consciously political with the establishment at Amritsar of the Chief Khalsa Diwan to oversee its progress, the rulers and their *darbārs* were placated by the Diwan's moderate tone and consultative style. The stalwarts of the Chief Khalsa Diwan knew their place.

Not so the Akalis who, after 1920, came more and more to dominate Sikh public life. From the first, relations between the Akali Dal and the Sikh royal houses were clouded by mutual dislike and suspicion. Although by 1925 the Dal had been legalized and to some extent incorporated into the system of imperial control (in 1926 several Akalis contested elections to the Punjab legislative assembly), to the princes they remained indelibly suspect because of their militant role in the Gurudwara campaign. During that struggle the Akalis had used violence and mass protest to achieve their ends. They had

[15] N. Gerald Barrier, 'The Singh Sabhas and the Evolution of Modern Sikhism, 1875–1925', in Robert G. Baird, *Religion in Modern India* (New Delhi, 1995), p. 193.

[16] Major A. E. Barstow, *The Sikhs: An Ethnology* (New Delhi, 1985, first published 1928), pp. 35–52. J. S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab (New Cambridge History of India II.3)* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 162, claims that 4,000 Akalis died and 30,000 went to jail in the course of the Gurudwara agitation.

[17] Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Delhi, 1997), p. 296.

solicited the help of the Indian National Congress, an organization committed to the overthrow of the imperial system on which the states depended for their security. This marked them out in the eyes of the Sikh rulers as dangerous revolutionaries. Conversely, the Akalis disapproved of the way the princes conducted themselves both as Sikhs and as rulers. Several of them smoked; some cut their hair; many ate food not prepared in the approved *jatka* manner; Jagatjit Singh of Kapurthala (ruled 1890–1949), was as likely to be seen inside a mosque as a gurudwara; the Patiala house (which treasured dreams of rising to Rajput status) had a tradition of giving its daughters in marriage to non-Sikhs. Just as disappointingly, from the Akali standpoint, the Sikh princes refused to let communal considerations affect the way they ran their states. They distributed their patronage indiscriminately, giving to Muslim and Hindu charities almost as generously as they gave to Sikh ones; they appointed Hindus and Muslims to high positions in their governments, and declined to give preferential employment to Sikhs. In Jind, for example, Sikhs who comprised nearly a quarter of the population and contributed two-fifths of the land revenue, held just nine percent of posts in the state public service. According to the Akalis only Faridkot, of the six Sikh-ruled states, could 'claim to possess any amount of Sikh character'; the rest had 'drifted away from the[ir] sacred heritage'.[18]

Separated by a yawning ideological gulf, the princes and the Akalis were always going to have an uneasy time co-existing within the relatively restricted confines of the Punjab. But that said, neither party put much effort into trying to bridge the gap. For their part, the rulers opportunistically employed their statutory representation on the SGPC to try and split the forces arraigned against them. Patiala's Bhupinder Singh in particular was unrelenting in his efforts to displace the dominant Akalis, consistently backing the election of moderate candidates and lending his influence to anti-Akali factions.[19] But the Akalis, too, meddled. Defying the long-standing convention that provincial politicians did not interfere in the domestic

[18] Note by Sir John Thompson dated 2 July 1926, IOR L/P&S/11/269; Sardar Bhagwan Singh, presdt., Sikh Baradri, Lyallpur City to Master Tara Singh 5 Mar. 1938, IOR R/1/1/3210; 'Patiala Administration and the Position of the Sikhs', by Giani Kartar Singh, sec., SGPC, n.d. [1942]; note by H. S. Craik on interview with Tara Singh dated 4 Dec. 1942, IOR R/1/1/3884; and regional commissioner, E. Punjab States, to under-sec., Ministry of States, 7 Apr. 1948, M[inistry] O[f] S[tates], 4(51)-P/48.

[19] Ramusack, 'Maharajas and Gurudwaras', pp. 185, 190.

affairs of princely states, they supported dissident elements within the states and tried to set themselves up as independent arbiters of religious practice there. In August 1923 following the disruption by *darbāari* police of an *arkhand path* (continuous reading of the *Guru Granth Sahib*) at a gurudwara in the Nabha town of Jaito, the Akalis persuaded the SGPC to authorize the dispatch of *jathas* (bands) of protesters to the state; the incursions continued for two years until 101 *arkhand paths* had been completed.[20] Later they helped establish the Punjab Riyasti Praja Mandal to press for the introduction of representative institutions in the states, and campaigned vigorously for the release of its first (Akali) president, Sewa Singh Thikriwala, who was under detention in a Patiala jail. In 1930 they collaborated in the production of a pamphlet highly critical of the morals and administrative methods of Bhupinder Singh which forced the maharaja to submit to a humiliating inquiry. Shortly after that they launched an agitation, in cooperation with the Riyasti Mandal, to force the Jind *darbār* to transfer control of state-owned gurudwaras to Akali managers.[21]

It would be wrong to suggest that this interventionist policy had universal support. Even within the ranks of the Akalis there were many who thought it imprudent to knowingly antagonize men as powerful and potentially useful to the Panth as the Sikh princes. But these more moderate counsels were consistently swept aside. Increasingly, the hardliners ruled. After 1925, the dominant voice in the latter group was that of Master Tara Singh (1885–1967), a devout, puritanical Khatri from Rawalpindi district who had been one of the first to answer the SGPC's call in 1920.[22] By 1930 Tara Singh was the Sikh rulers' most trenchant critic.

[20] The Jaito episode is described in Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*, pp. 161–2.

[21] Copland, *Princes of India*, pp. 81–2; Ramusack, 'Maharajas and Gurudwaras', pp. 187–9; 'Resumé of Events in the Indian States for the Period Ending 30 November 1931', IOR L/P&S/13/1336; and proceedings of meeting between the Patiala and Jind cabinets at Motibagh Palace, Patiala, 20 Nov. 1931, PSA, Patiala, H-99B.

[22] Tara Singh's zeal for his religion is partly explained by the fact that he embraced it by choice, converting from Hinduism at the age of 17. After the passage of the Gurudwara Bill, Tara Singh became associated with the faction in the Akali party opposed to constitutionalism. He acceded to the vice-presidency of the SGPC in 1925 and the secretaryship of the Sikh League in 1928. In 1930, while in jail for leading a banned march during the Civil Disobedience Movement, he was elected president of the SGPC. From then until 1961 he remained the paramount (if not always undisputed) leader of the Sikh Panth. Baldev Raj Nayar, *Minority Politics in the Punjab* (Princeton, N.J., 1966), pp. 144–6; S. P. Sen (ed.), *Dictionary of National Biography* (Calcutta, 1972–74), vol. 4, pp. 323–5. Paradoxically some of the strong-

The Master and the maharajas came from different social backgrounds, espoused different values, supported different political causes; by the 1930s they were locked in a heated war of words. How did these seemingly implacable adversaries get to be tactical allies in 1947?

Conspiracy

At the root of this unlikely *rapprochement* lay a small vein of princely or (perhaps more accurately) *darbāri* common sense. Much as the rulers disliked the Akalis, it was clear, by the 1930s, that the latter were well entrenched and unlikely, at least in the short term, to be displaced from the leadership of the SGPC. One way or another they would have to be reckoned with. Confrontation having failed, a more accommodating approach was indicated. Moreover, a deal with the Akalis offered potentially substantial benefits, not least a reprieve from the periodic cross-border agitation of dissident groups linked to the Dal, agitation that by the 1930s was beginning to place a fairly serious financial strain on the Punjab states. Patiala's Home Minister Raghbir Singh put the argument thus: 'M[aster] Tara Singh is the only man amongst the Sikhs who has got a following . . . amongst the masses. . . . others are leaders in name only. . . . now, if we make him hostile, he [may] . . . be able to excite our public. . . . A man of his strong will can bring about such things, especially when time favours'.[23] Accordingly, feelers were put out, and some time later, around 1935, a deal *was* struck. Although the respite was short-lived—Tara Singh was soon accusing the rulers of being fickle allies—the princes rightly considered it a major breakthrough, for it showed that the Akalis, too, could be pragmatists if necessity demanded.[24]

est support for Tara Singh's faction came from Akalis resident in the states who resented the fact that the Gurudwara Bill made no arrangement for the management of Sikh holy places in the princely territories. Liaquat Hyat Khan, Home Minister Patiala, to Prime Minister Patiala 2 June 1925, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 212.

[23] Raghbir Singh to prime minister of Patiala 27 Aug. 1937, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2055.

[24] There are only stray references to the deal in the Patiala archives which give no hint as to its terms, although we may suppose that they included a promise by the princes to direct their nominees on the SGPC to support the Tara Singh faction. Nor is it clear exactly why, after holding aloof for several years, they finally agreed to come to the party, though Ramusack offers one possible explanation when she

Secondly, while the two sides remained (with good reason) deeply suspicious of one another, several developments in the 1930s and early 1940s helped dismantle some of the barriers between them. Within the princely camp, this period was something of a dynastic watershed. Bhupinder Singh, seen by the Akalis as their most formidable and persistent princely adversary, died in 1938. Another longtime *darbāri* foe of the Akali Dal, Jind chief minister B. L. Dhingra, passed on a year later. Concurrently two other rulers, Harinder Singh of Faridkot and Pratap Singh of Nabha, reached their majorities, ending an extended period of British tutelage in those states. In turn, these changes brought to the fore a new crop of quite young[25] Sikh princely leaders who, having grown up during the Akali era, tended to accept the Dal as a given of Punjabi politics and a legitimate voice of Sikh aspirations. Moreover, though outwardly well-educated, these young guns struck contemporaries as lacking the political savvy of their predecessors. Bhupinder Singh's successor at Patiala, for example, Maharaja Yadavindra Singh (ruled 1938–48), was described by the acerbic British Political Adviser Francis Wylie as 'magnificent to look at, but very conceited and not very intelligent'.[26] On both counts, the Akalis welcomed this changing of the guard as a positive development, offering the chance of 'better days'.[27] And the Patiala ruler, for one, gave every sign of vindicating their judgement. Having in his youth wedded a Hindu woman, in 1938 Yadavindra Singh remarried; this time he took a bride from within the faith, the daughter of a prominent Akali to boot. In 1940 he resumed the *jagir* of his Muslim prime minister Nawab Liaquat Hyat Khan, brother of the Punjab premier, a move widely hailed as a 'great victory for the Akalis against the British Government and

suggests that the death of Sewa Singh Thikriwala 'removed the principal source of hostility between the Master and the Maharaja'. 'Maharajas and Gurudwaras', p. 190. The cause of Tara Singh's re-think about the arrangement was the sacking of his brother, Professor Nirinjan Singh, one of the people who had helped arbitrate the settlement, from his chemistry teaching job at Khalsa College. Patiala as college chancellor could have intervened to prevent the dismissal, but chose not to do so. This in Tara Singh's view constituted 'a breach of the understanding between the State and the Akali Party . . . almost a betrayal'. Message from Tara Singh to Raghbir Singh, home minister, Patiala, sent via S. Gurjit Singh on 11 Aug. 1937, PSA, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2055.

[25] In 1940 Yadavindra Singh of Patiala was 27, Harindar Singh of Faridkot 25 and Pratap Singh of Nabha 21.

[26] Note by Wylie dated 9 Aug. 1944, IOR R/1/1/4152.

[27] 'Patiala Administration and the Position of the Sikhs', by Giana Kartar Singh, n.d. [1942], IOR R/1/1/3884.

Sir Sikander Hyat Khan', and hinted that he might replace Liaquat with a Sikh if a suitable man could be found.[28]

Meanwhile, the Akali Dal progressively moderated its militant, anti-government position. For almost two decades, the Dal was synonymous with the radical nationalist cause in the Punjab; briefly outlawed in 1923 by the government for its role in the Gurudwara Movement, it was from the start a close ally of the Indian National Congress and an active supporter of the freedom struggle, some 3,000 Akalis offering themselves for arrest during the Congressite Civil Disobedience campaign of 1930. SGPC president Tara Singh personified this alliance, serving on both the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee (PPCC) and the All-India Congress Committee. However, from about 1937 the Akali–Congress relationship began to turn sour. First, Hindu Punjabi Congressmen led by veteran campaigner Satyapal, activated perhaps by communal jealousy, took it upon themselves to smear the Akalis' nationalist credentials, claiming that they had 'nothing in common' with the Congress and, specifically, did not subscribe to its credo of non-violence.[29] When M. K. Gandhi reiterated this charge to Tara Singh's face, the Master resigned from the AICC.[30] Then relations were further strained by the outbreak of war in 1939. Having cooperated with the government since 1934, the Congress in October 1939 dramatically reversed its political stance in protest at the viceroy Lord Linlithgow's failure to consult Indian opinion before committing India to the Allied cause; by 1940 their attitude had hardened into one of passive opposition to a War which many Congressmen felt irrelevant to India's concerns and which, after Winston Churchill's arrival at

[28] Aide-memoir by resdt., Punjab States, encl. with resident's fort. report for the period ending 30 Nov. 1940, IOR L/P&S/13/1358. Getting rid of Liaquat was a long-standing Akali objective. It was anathema to the Dal that 'the brother of [Unionist leader] Sir Sikander, the implacable enemy of the Akali Party, was installed as the Prime Minister of the leading Sikh State'. According to some sources, the Akali campaign to dislodge Liaquat had inside backing from Home Minister Colonel Raghbir Singh. Notes by C.I.O. Lahore dated 20 Nov. and 22 Dec. 1939, IOR R/1/1/3523. Rumour had it that Patiala also did Tara Singh a personal favour, intervening with the Punjab government to have a police case against the Master's family for fraud and misappropriation of funds withdrawn. This was vigorously denied by Tara Singh. Tara Singh to presdt., Indian National Congress, 21 Aug. 1939, Valmiki Choudhary (ed.), *Dr Rajendra Prasad: Correspondence and Select Documents*, vol. 4 (New Delhi, 1985), p. 60.

[29] Satyapal to Rajendra Prasad, quoted in K. L. Tuteja, 'The Sikhs and the Congress 1930–1940', in Paul Wallace and Surendra Chopra (eds), *Political Dynamics and Crisis in Punjab* (Amritsar, 1988), pp. 115–16.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 120.

Downing Street, looked increasingly like a war fought to defend British imperialism. The Akalis, however, saw things differently. Military employment was important to the Sikhs both financially and as a way of maintaining the community's warrior traditions, so integral to its sense of identity. Since the 1920s Sikh recruitment in the Indian Army had fallen, a consequence of the governmental reappraisal that had followed the Gurudwaras struggle. With the War offering the community a golden chance to recoup its losses and to restore its reputation for loyalty, the Akalis opted instead for the path of cooperation. Late in 1939 they announced that they would back the war effort and offered Linlithgow assistance in recruiting. In May 1942 they negotiated an electoral arrangement with their old foes, the Unionist Party, whereby Akali moderate Sardar Baldev Singh became a member of Sikander Hyat Khan's cabinet. Around the same time they joined the Khalsa Defence League, a pro-war lobbyist organization headed by none other than the Maharaja of Patiala.[31] Thanks to the War the Akalis and the princes found themselves by 1942 sharing a common political platform, paving the way for a still closer structural association at a time when the Panth desperately needed to present a unified face to the world to combat the growing threat to Sikh aspirations posed by the Muslim League's plan for Pakistan.

Since Baisakhi Day 1699 the Sikhs have assumed that they are marked out for a special destiny. Had Guru Gobind Singh himself not promised them, in the *Srimukh Vak*, '*raj karega Khalsa*' ('the Khalsa shall rule')? Was this not the purpose of the Guru's call on that last Baisakhi of the seventeenth century for the Sikhs to renounce tobacco and to take on the five symbols? Did not 'Khalsa' mean, 'the pure, the elect'?[32] Consequently, community aspirations after 1699 centred on acquiring the means to fulfil that destiny. Congregations of the faithful meeting in their gurudwaras were regularly reminded that 'religion is not safe without political power'. Tara Singh made much the same point when he wrote, in 1945: 'there is not the least

[31] The Patiala government played a leading role in the negotiations that led to the Sikander–Baldev Pact, which was effectively stitched up at a meeting between SGPC deputy president Giani Kartar Singh and Yadavindra Singh at Patiala in May 1942. Note by home minister, Patiala, dated 30 May, Yadavindra Singh to Sikander Hyat Khan 17 June and Baldev Singh to Yadavindra Singh (teleg.) 20 June 1942, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2177.

[32] Gurbachan Singh and Lal Singh Gyani, *The Idea of the Sikh State* (Lahore, *c.* 1946), p. 17.

doubt that the Sikh religion can live only as long as the Panth exists as an organized entity'.[33] Like their forebears, Sikhs in the early twentieth century nurtured the dream of statehood. More specifically they dreamed of one day restoring the Sikh Kingdom of Lahore which for a brief half century had embodied Gobind Singh's communal vision. As one polemicist wrote in 1946, 'in asking for a Sikh State, we don't make a new demand. We only ask for the *return* of our homeland'.[34]

But how would this restoration be accomplished? Until the 1940s many Sikhs hoped that the British upon their departure would simply hand over the Punjab by way of a reward to the community for its loyal service to the Raj. 'We thought we would be given the whole of the Punjab as it was taken by the British for *safe-keeping*', wrote a bemused Sikh officer of the Indian Army, 'without any [need for] conquest at all'.[35] As events in 1947 would make clear, this was always a naive expectation. Nevertheless it was not so much British perfidy which shattered their hopes for a peaceful restoration of power in the Punjab, as the All-India Muslim League's call in March 1940 for the Muslim-majority provinces of British India to be made autonomous—a call which soon crystallized into a demand for a self-governing Pakistan. From the start the League made it abundantly clear that it required the whole of the Punjab for its Muslim homeland. As if that wasn't bad enough, the Churchill government gave the impression that it viewed the Pakistan scheme sympathetically, indicating in the 'Cripps Offer' of 1942 that it would allow any province that did not wish to join the Indian Union foreshadowed to be established after the War to make its own political arrangements.

Fearing that their own claims were in danger of going by default, the Akalis rushed to the barricades. For some time the Akali Dal had been conjuring with the idea of asking for the Punjab to be administratively partitioned to create a new province of East (or as the Dal provocatively described it) Azad Punjab with a demographic composition 40 percent Muslim, 40 percent Hindu and 20 percent Sikh; as the Akalis figured it, these ratios would leave the Sikhs with the communal 'balance of power'. On 4 June 1943 the Dal formally

[33] Quoted in Rajiiv A. Kapur, *Sikh Separatism: The Politics of Faith* (London, 1986), p. 207.

[34] Sadhu Swarup Singh, *The Sikhs Demand Their Homeland* (Lahore, *c.* 1946), p. 82 (my italics).

[35] Unnamed Sikh officer to Col. Spencer 19 Sept. 1947, BL, Rees Coll., 50 (my italics).

adopted this scheme as party policy; at the same time the Akalis firmed up their definition of the proposed province, which was described as encompassing Ambala, Lahore, and Jullundur divisions, the districts of Lyallpur and Montgomery and a part of the district of Multan. Fourteen months later this demand was overwhelmingly endorsed by a massed 'Panthic meeting' at Amritsar. Watching British observers interpreted this verdict as reflecting a 'growing demand that the Sikhs should be regarded as a separate nation', an assessment that was borne out in March 1946 when the SGPC gave its blessing to an Akali resolution calling for the creation of 'a separate autonomous Sikh State in those areas of the central, northern, eastern and south-eastern Punjab in which the overwhelming part of the Sikh population is concentrated'.[36]

It was at this stage admittedly mainly a contingency plan, to be pulled out only if the Muslim League succeeded in imposing its Pakistan scheme on the British Government and the Indian National Congress. It was also a rather sketchy plan that glossed over a number of practical difficulties, such as the fact that many Sikhs, and many important Sikh shrines, lay outside the nominated boundaries of the 'Khalistan' state. When asked about this by the British Cabinet delegation of 1946, the Akalis could only reply that their scheme depended upon a gradual transfer 'over five or ten years' of 'both population and property', a process they acknowledged would need government assistance.[37] For this reason some historians suspect that it was never meant to be anything more than a handy bargaining chip with which to pressure the British and the Congress to hold firm on their plans for a united India.[38] This interpretation, however, requires a reading which goes squarely against the grain of

[36] Rajwant Kaur Dhillon, 'Demand for Pakistan: Role of Master Tara Singh', in Verinder Grover (ed.), *The Story of Punjab, Yesterday and Today*, vol. 1 (New Delhi, 1995), p. 538; Fort. report from Punjab for second half of Sept. 1944, in P. N. Chopra (ed.-in-chief), *Towards Freedom 1943–44* (New Delhi, 1983), part 3, p. 3270; Singh and Gyani, *Idea of the Sikh State*, pp. 3, 11.

[37] 'Record of meeting between the Cabinet Delegation, Lord Wavell and representatives of the Sikh community' on 5 Apr. 1946, in Nicholas Mansergh and Penderel Moon (eds), *The Transfer of Power, 1942–7* vol. VII (London, 1977) [hereafter *TOP*], pp. 139–40.

[38] Gupta, for example, believes that 'The idea of a Sikh state was never seriously entertained', but this conclusion appears to be based on a misreading of comments made by a Sikh delegation to the viceroy Lord Wavell. Dipankar Gupta, *The Context of Ethnicity: Sikh Identity in a Comparative Perspective* (Delhi, 1996), p. 49. See also Sen, *Dictionary of National Biography*, p. 324. Ramusack, 'Maharajas and Gurudwaras', p. 193, equivocates.

almost all the Akalis' published and private statements on the issue from 1944 onwards. It also fails to take into account the Dal's *rapprochement* with the Sikh princes. As we have seen, the Akalis harboured no romantic illusions about the Sikh royal families, but they realized their value to the Sikh cause. For one thing, the Sikh states housed a significant slice of the Sikh population. Without them the so-called Sikh homeland would be barely 20 percent Sikh; with the states included the proportion would rise to a more respectable quarter. For another, the states had police, small but efficient armies, supplies of weapons, resources that could mean the difference between victory and defeat if it came to a showdown. Last but not least, the princes were a useful conduit to the government of India, which would have a substantial say in determining where and in whose hands the Punjab ended up. After a frank discussion with Akali MLA Baldev Singh in July 1946, Punjab governor Sir Evan Jenkins wrote: 'I think that the Sikh States might form a rallying point for the Sikhs . . . and enable them, if they so desired, to carve out a Sikh unit for themselves'.[39] This was not an original thought; years earlier Master Tara Singh had come to exactly the same conclusion.

Nevertheless, Tara Singh did not feel that he could conscientiously invite the states to be a part of the imagined Sikh homeland whilst their rulers, the 'Panthic traitors' as he dubbed them, continued to deny their cultural heritage by living heterodox life-styles and entrusting their administrations to non-Sikhs. He argued therefore for a series of targeted campaigns to make the Sikh princes conform. 'The first step of our preparations to face the coming crisis', he told an Akali conference in April 1940, 'is to finish [the] Panthic traitors'.[40] The SGPC agreed and gave its consent. The first campaign was launched almost immediately against the young ruler of Nabha; others then followed at intervals over the next five years against Kapurthala, Patiala and Jind. 'It appears', mused Jagatjit Singh of Kapurthala, that 'Tara Singh has formed an ambition to play the role of a King-maker in Sikh States'.[41]

[39] Sir E. Jenkins to Lord Wavell 4 July 1946, *TOP*, vol. VIII (London, 1979), p. 6.
[40] Speech at Pherala, Lyallpur district, 6 Apr. 1940, IOR R/1/1/3554.
[41] Maharaja of Kapurthala to resdt., Punjab States, 17 Apr. 1940, IOR R/1/1/3554; and see also Sir Bertrand Glancy to Lord Wavell 17 Apr. 1943, *TF 1943–44*, part 3, pp. 2906–7; fort. report on Punjab states by C.I.O. Lahore for second half Feb. 1944, IOR R/1/1/4199; report of meeting of the SGPC on 18/19 Nov. 1944, PSA, Patiala, Dharam Arth, 286/50; resdt. Punjab States to Maharaja of Patiala 21 Dec. 1946, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2261; *The New York Times*, 23 Dec. 1946; and

It was a role the Master relished; other Akali Dal leaders, though, were less convinced of the necessity for a wholesale purge in the states and remained concerned about the possibility of a backlash. One of the most persistent critics of Tara Singh's strategy was his nominal deputy, Giani Kartar Singh, who favoured closer ties with the Raj and worried that attacks on the Raj's princely allies might result in the Panth being cold-shouldered in the transfer of power. As a result the campaign tended to wax and wane depending on which group held the balance of power within the SGPC.[42] Moreover the princes and the *darbārs* proved rather more resilient targets than the cocksure Tara Singh had expected. Among others the Prime Minister of Kapurthala remained implacably defiant, offering this stern advice to Jagatjit Singh: 'Your Highness should seriously consider the possibility that we shall, by trying to humour Master Tara Singh and his friends, lose the sympathy and support of the paramount power. . . . [Soon] it is hoped that Master Tara Singh will see the error of his ways and will call off these puny jackals of the Akali Dal'.[43] These flashes of spirit merely confirmed for Tara Singh what he had long suspected, namely that the rulers were 'completely untrustworthy' allies.[44]

Eventually, however, all the Sikh states broadly fell into line with the Dal's wishes. In April 1943 in return for the Akalis agreeing to call off their agitation the Maharaja of Kapurthala pledged to raise his grandson in the orthodox *keshadhari* tradition and to 'uphold and preserve the tenets of My State religion'; and in March 1945 Yadavindra Singh offered a similar pledge in regard to his children, promising that henceforward all the close family would marry 'amongst

Hira Singh Chinaria, presdt., Jind State Praja Mandal, to presdt., All-Indian States Peoples' Conference, 27 Dec. 1946, A[ll-] I[ndian] S[tates] P[eoples'] C[onference], 86 (part II) of 1945–48.

[42] Nayar, *Minority Politics*, p. 81. At this time the Akali Dal was broadly divided into three factions, one led by Giani Kartar Singh, one by Tara Singh and one by Jathedar Udham Singh Nagoke. Within this framework the waters of Akali politics were further muddied by geographical rivalries between members from the Manjha region beyond the Sutlej and those from the more easterly Malwa region. An extended lull occurred in 1944 following Tara Singh's resignation as president of the Akali Dal and the SGPC, which the British read as a sign that he had been 'outmanoeuvred by the ambitious Giani Kartar Singh'. Fort. report from Punjab for first half of Mar. 1944, *TF 1943–44*, part 3, pp. 3124–5.

[43] Memo. prepared by Sir Abdul Hamid for Maharaja of Kapurthala, dated 21 Jan 1943, PSA, Kapurthala, Sadar Office, PO/3-3-43.

[44] Record of interview between Tara Singh and Howard Donovan, Chargé d'Affaires, American Embassy, New Delhi on 8 Dec. 1947, encl. in Donovan to Sec. State 8 Dec. 1947, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/12-847.

the Sikhs'. Finally Ranbir Singh of Jind bowed to the trend in January 1947, announcing that he had taken a New Year's resolution to grow his hair and beard.[45] And it was a similar story on the administrative side. One by one, faithful Muslim and Hindu retainers were pushed out and replaced by Sikhs—Liaquat Hyat Khan and D. K. Sen of Patiala, Abdul Hamid of Kapurthala and Mohammad Sadiq of Jind some of the more notable scapegoats.[46] Once in office, this new crop of Sikh bureaucrats moved quickly on other Akali demands, such as the lifting of *darbāri* curbs on party rallies and the substitution of Punjabi in the Gurumurkhi script for Urdu as the language of administrative record. The Congress-aligned All-India States Peoples' Conference, though no friend of the Akali Dal, correctly identified these changes as constituting a 'policy of aggressive communalism'.[47]

Why did the states conform? In part, they were motivated by simple expediency. Conformity bought political peace. And it gained them a powerful ally against Congress and its local minions, the AISPC-affiliated *praja mandals*, which were pushing hard for the rulers to introduce responsible government. Secondly, while the princes and their advisers did not particularly like the messenger, the message that the Akali Dal brought struck a chord, especially with the rulers. While the princes might have been flawed vessels from the Akali point of view, they were still Sikhs, with Panthic instincts and loyalties. Even Jagatjit Singh of Kapurthala, who was the least conventionally religious of the group, took his cultural heritage very seriously. Increasingly during the 1940s this identification with the Panth appears to have extended to embracing its ethno-nationalist aspirations for a homeland. Nevertheless, the extent of this princely patriotism varied. From the start, Yadavindra Singh of Patiala and

[45] Draft statement to be given to the Akali delegation dated [Mar.?] 1943, and statement issued by Akali delegation dated 8 Apr. 1943, PSA, Kapurthala, Sadar Office, P/3-3-43; Lt.-Col. Harbans Singh, Revenue Minister, Patiala, to S. S. Deodhi Mualla, 13 Mar. 1945, PSA, Patiala, Dharam Arth, 286/50; and *Akali* (Lahore), 3 Jan. 1947, quoted in IOR R/1/1/1336.

[46] The communal agenda that lay behind these 'routine' changes is laid bare in a letter from Sen to Liaquat's successor at Patiala, Harjot Singh Malik. Sen exclaims at one point: 'The only natural and reasonable inference that one can draw from these repeated attacks on the prestige and powers of the Foreign Minister is that you wish me to leave the State'. Sen to Malik 1 Aug. 1944, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2194. The sketchy statistical evidence available in the annual administration reports of the Punjab states suggests that the Sikh share of public service jobs in the Sikh-ruled states increased by several percentage points during the 1940s.

[47] Note by Jai Narain Vyas, gen. sec. AISPC, dated [Aug. 1945], AISPC, 86 (part II) of 1945–48.

Harinder Singh of Faridkot were far more vocal in their support for Khalistan than the others.[48] What drove them to go further?

Perhaps the main thing was ambition. While the official Akali line remained that Khalistan would be constituted from British Punjab, speakers on the public stage and in internal party discussions now openly canvassed the possibility of the states forming part of the enterprise; increasingly the princes—Yadavindra Singh especially—were spoken of in these discussions as the natural leaders of the new state. It was a prospect they found (not surprisingly) both flattering and politically attractive. 'While the Embassy has been unable to unearth any concrete evidence to support persistent rumours that the Sikh princes are behind a comprehensive plot to turn all or part of the Punjab into a single Sikh State', American diplomat Howard Donovan reported to Washington in September 1947: 'there is no doubt in my mind that the leading Sikh princes would be entirely agreeable to such a project. In conversation with an officer of the Embassy some months ago the Maharaja of Faridkot predicted that neither the Government of Pakistan nor that of India would be able to survive without extensive foreign aid and implied quite clearly that certain Princes might fall heir to some of the territory involved'.[49] As for the Maharaja of Patiala, Yadavindra Singh increasingly saw himself as the Panth's Man of Destiny, his resolve to lead reportedly stiffened by a court astrologer's discovery of a passage in an old Sikh text prophesying that in the next century a ruler would emerge to rebuild the Kingdom of Lahore—a ruler whose description in the book 'tallied' strikingly with that of Yadavindra himself.[50] In keeping with this image, the maharaja on 3 April announced that his army was 'ever ready' to make sacrifices to protect the community, a comment warmly applauded by Master Tara Singh.[51]

[48] Evidenced by their willingness to speak out in favour of Khalistan on the public platform. Yadavindra Singh's appearance at a Khalistan rally at Bhawanigarh, Patiala, in March 1943, is noted by Ramusack, 'Maharajas and Gurudwaras', p. 194.

[49] Donovan to Sec. of State, Washington, 23 Sept. 1947, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/9-2347.

[50] Interview with R. G. Verma, Patiala, 1 Feb. 1998; and statement by former S.P., Narnaul, Patiala, quoted in *The Sikhs in Action* (Lahore, 1948), p. 51. The evidence of this (Muslim) policeman must be viewed with caution, but many of his assertions are supported by other sources. People I have spoken to in Patiala confirm, for example, that the Maharaja had an astrologer named Raj Jotshi, whom the policeman's deposition identifies as the man who brought the *San Sakhi* prophecy to Yadavindra Singh's attention.

[51] Address to the 1st Sikh regiment, Patiala, 3 Apr. 1947, and press statement issued by Tara Singh on 15 Apr. 1947, as recorded in the diary of Ganda Singh, in

To repeat, the Khalistan project had originated as a contingency plan; but by the early part of 1947 the contingency it had been prepared to meet stared the Sikhs in the face. The Cabinet Mission Plan of May 1946 with its loose federal structure had been bad enough; but shortly after Lord Louis Mountbatten took up the viceroyalty in March 1947 it became apparent that the British were seriously contemplating abandoning even that shallow commitment to Indian unity. The nightmare spectre for the Sikhs of Pakistan now loomed as a distinct possibility. To be sure, Congress had made it clear that they would accept the League's Pakistan scheme only if it was pared down by the quarantining of the non-Muslim parts of Bengal and the Punjab. However even this prospect was anathema to the Sikhs because any division of the Punjab along religious lines was guaranteed to split the community. As early as June 1946 Tara Singh was threatening violence if the Pakistan scheme went ahead. Patriotic Sikhs, he told an assembly of the faithful at Amritsar, should be 'prepared to die in the struggle ahead'. In February 1947 he called for the organization of an Akal Fauj, an Akali army. On 3 March, at Lahore, the Master berated a hostile crown of League supporters with the words: 'We may be cut to pieces, but we will never concede Pakistan'.[52]

In the face of these chilling threats renewed diplomatic efforts were made to persuade the SGPC to support the inclusion of the whole of the Punjab in Pakistan in return for guarantees of full religious freedom and limited Sikh provincial autonomy. Some of these overtures came direct from the League, others via British well-wishers such as Penderel Moon, the Revenue Minister of Bahawalpur.[53] But the SGPC remained in thrall to Tara Singh, and the Master could not bring himself to trust. When Punjab governor Sir Evan Jenkins interviewed Tara Singh in mid-May, he found him 'incoherent and obstinate as usual'. Afterwards Jenkins wrote to Mountbatten: 'It is lamentable at this juncture that the affairs of the Punjab should be so largely in the hands of this eccentric old man'.[54] Moreover whatever slim chance of success these overtures might otherwise have had evaporated in April, as reports came in of

Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom* (New Delhi, 1995), pp. 31, 34–5.

[52] Nayar, *Minority Politics*, p. 91; and Moon, *Divide and Quit*, p. 77.

[53] Moon to his son, 2 July 1947, BL, Moon Coll., 21; and Moon, *Divide and Quit*, pp. 43–9, 84–5.

[54] Jenkins to Mountbatten 19 May 1947, *TOP*, vol. X, p. 894.

massacres of Sikhs and Hindus in Rawalpindi and other west Punjab districts, followed soon afterwards by a massive influx of homeless and frightened refugees, each one with a horror story to tell. After April 1947 the Akalis no longer acted just in defence of Khalistan; they also, increasingly, sought revenge. Their preparations intensified accordingly.

As we have seen, Tara Singh had already begun to mobilize the Sikhs for guerilla action. From April *jathas* began to be assembled in earnest, a process facilitated by the onset of the hot weather, which released the Jat Sikhs from farming duties. Initially, much of the organizing in this respect was done by Gyani Harbans Singh, an escaped criminal under the overall direction of a Council of Action in Amritsar whose members included ex-Indian National Army officer Colonel Narinjan Singh, Sardar Baldev Singh, Giani Kartar Singh, Master Tara Singh and Raghbir Singh, the former Patiala minister. The Committee also took on the job of raising money to buy arms and equipment for the *jathas*, eventually amassing a war-chest of between 10 and 12 *lakhs*. Meanwhile, other initiatives were launched on the political front. Approaches were made to Hindu groups who shared the Akalis' desire to save Punjab from Muslim domination, such as the Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).[55] And contact was made with the Sikh states, in particular Patiala and Faridkot. Early in April Harinder Singh was invited by Tara Singh 'to undertake what would amount to military operations in his part of the Punjab'; one version of this encounter has it that the maharaja was offered the district of Ferozepur by way of payment.[56]

By all accounts, the Sikh *darbārs* responded handsomely. Patiala and Nabha are said to have provided rifles, revolvers and ammunition; Faridkot jeeps and trucks; Kapurthala money; Kalsia training facilities for RSS cadres from Ambala.[57] Of course it was all done

[55] Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs* (Delhi, 1977), vol. 2, pp. 272–3 and 273n; and Harbans Singh, *Heritage*, pp. 183–4. For details of the buildup of RSS strength in the Punjab during the War see fort. reports on Punjab States from C.I.O., Lahore for the second half of March and the first half of August 1944, IOR R/1/1/4199. For information about developments in 1947 see the West Punjab government publication, *RSSSb (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh) in the Punjab* (Lahore, 1948), pp. 4–15.

[56] Sir E. Jenkins to Lord Mountbatten 9 Apr. 1947, *TOP*, vol. X, p. 173.

[57] Statement by former supt. of police, Narnaul, Patiala, *The Sikhs in Action*, pp. 52–5; *Note on the Sikh Plan* (Lahore, 1948), pp. 16, 22; statement by Pritam Singh Jodal of Mehna, Ferozepur dist., n.d., *ibid.*, appendix B; entry 29 Apr.–1 May in diary of Major-Gen. Shahid Hamid, staff officer, Indian Army, Hamid, *Disastrous*

clandestinely, and any records of these transactions, if such ever existed, have been systematically purged from the archives. But the fact that Akali *jathas* were later reliably observed driving around Punjab in jeeps and using modern weapons such as 'light machine-guns, tommy guns, [and] rifles' that could only have come from military stock,[58] seems to put the fact of the matter beyond doubt. However, it would be wrong to see the Sikh states as merely accessories to an essentially Akali plan; as the date for the transfer of power (and the withdrawal of British paramountcy) drew closer, they pushed ahead vigorously with their own preparations against the looming communal shootout in the Punjab, recruiting additional troops and stockpiling arms. Faridkot, for example, dramatically expanded its hitherto minuscule army to battalion strength and augmented it with two battalions, each 1,400 strong, of military police, 45 jeeps and 20 trucks; while Jind added more motorized units to its forces. Of course the rulers possessed a ready-made excuse for this military adventurism which they trotted out routinely every time the Indian government made an inquiry; the weaponry was for defence, an insurance policy against a possible breakdown of order in the Punjab. But reports from reliable sources suggest that its real purpose was more nefarious. Early in August the Home Department's Intelligence Bureau came into possession of documents which suggested that the 'Sikh Rulers of Patiala, Nabha, Kapurthala and Faridkot' had 'divided [up] the Eastern and Central districts of the Punjab . . . and . . . [had] assigned a tract each to the allied States to walk into and annex' as soon as the British withdrew their forces.[59] Later Indian Army commander Sir Claude Auckinlek concluded on the basis of military intelligence reports that plans were afoot to send troops from Sikh States along with Sikh units of the Indian Army to retake Lahore, Lyallpur and Montgomery districts.[60] Yet

Twilight: A Personal Record of the Partition of India (London, 1986), p. 169; note on interview with Rajput officer of the Indian Army, 22 Aug. 1947, encl. in Howard Donovan, counselor, U.S. Embassy, New Delhi, to Sec. State, Washington, 25 Aug. 1947, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/8-2747; note on interview with BBC correspondent Stimson, 1 Sept. 1947, encl. in Henry F. Grady to Sec. State Washington, 1 Sept. 1947, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/9-147.

[58] 'Report On the Punjab Boundary Force' by its commander, Maj.-Gen. T. W. Rees, dated 15 Nov. 1947, BL, Jenkins Coll., 2.

[59] Note by M. K. Sinha, Dep. Director (A), I.-B., Home Dept., dated 6 Aug. 1947, BL, Rees Coll., 50.

[60] Auchinlek to Sir Geoffrey Soames, 5 Oct. 1947, John Rylands Lib., Manchester, Auchinlek Papers, MUL 1263.

another contemporary report alleges that Patiala and Faridkot, in combination with Faridkot's cousin Brijendra Singh of Bharatpur, were planning to establish a Jat Raj from Agra to Lahore.

Not all Sikhs, it must be said, not even all Sikhs within Tara Singh's own party, entirely approved of these macho-displays of bellicosity. However, they were a minority, and a dwindling one as it became clearer that the Sikhs were not going to get the kind of partition they wanted, which was one coterminous with the river Chenab. By the time this gloomy expectation was confirmed by Sir Cyril Radcliffe's boundary award of 17 August, which came down in favour of the more easterly line of the Sutlej, the guns were already blazing.

Execution

The Punjab killings began in the villages of Rawalpindi and Multan districts during the spring of 1947. The aggressors in these first episodes were chiefly Muslims, and the victims primarily Sikhs and Hindus. Then in May the epicentre of the violence shifted east, to the cities of Lahore and Amritsar. In this second phase, the Akali Sikhs increasingly took the initiative. But it was only in the third phase, which began in July, that the Sikh states began to play a pro-active, rather than a merely supporting role, and only after 15 August that extensive violence erupted in the states themselves. To some extent this delay can be attributed to the reluctance of the princes to act while still nominally under British suzerainty; ingrained habits of deference made them chary about openly defying explicit viceregal orders not to meddle in the Punjab troubles.[61] Mainly though, it reflected the Sikh leaders' sense of the strategic necessities. As the Akali Council of War saw it, the most pressing immediate need was the 'cleansing' of Lahore and Amritsar, for

[61] Sec. to resdt., Punjab States, to chief minister, Kapurthala, 22 May 1947, PSA, Kapurthala, Sadar Office, M/6-29-47; and Sir John Colville to Lord Listowel, 26 May 1947, *TOP*, X, p. 994. The viceregal warning was issued after the Punjab residency reported that elements of the Faridkot, Nabha and Patiala state forces had been observed in action in Lahore City and in several villages in Hissar and Jullundur districts. See also gov., East Punjab to Maharaja of Patiala (teleg.), 25 Aug. 1947, and home sec., East Punjab to Maharaja of Patiala (teleg.), 3 Sept. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2030.

Khalistan was unthinkable without possession of these key centres. On the other hand, the Sikh states, already under Panthic rule, were considered qualitatively secure zones whose Muslim 'pockets' could be mopped up at leisure.

However it soon became apparent that the Sikh *jathas* had no chance of capturing any of the large Punjabi towns outright without the help of the military, and there was clearly little prospect of an Indian Army offensive into Pakistan while Jawaharlal Nehru held sway over the Union government in Delhi. This prompted the *jathas* to fall back across the Sutlej in pursuance of easier targets in east Punjab. At the same time, a chain of events forced the Akali leadership to drastically revise their original timetable for the cleansing of the east Punjab princely states.

The first link in this deadly chain was the arrival in the states, from March onwards, of large numbers of embittered Sikh and Hindu refugees from west Punjab. In 1947 Khushdeva Singh was superintendent of a tuberculosis clinic in the Patiala hill-town of Dharampore, on the road to Simla, and she vividly remembers the huge psychological impact the refugees made. 'The unending stream of refugees, and their harrowing tales of woe, had an unpleasant reaction', she wrote in 1973. 'A spirit of retaliation arose. Thousands of people who had been living for centuries as neighbours in homes and in professions, flew at one another's throats. Incidents of stabbing became a regular feature in many parts of the country'. In support of this observation Khushdeva notes that by early July Dharampore merchants were doing a buoyant trade in home-made knives at three and four rupees apiece.[62] Seething with hate and despair, the refugees plotted revenge, at the same time inciting others with their 'gruesome stories of Muslim atrocities'. Even the Patiala government, certainly no friend of Pakistan, acknowledged that these volatile immigrants posed a serious threat to the maintenance of public order.[63]

The second link was the partition, or rather the sudden realization that struck the east Punjab Muslims after 17 August that they had become displaced persons stranded in hostile territory. Fearing

[62] Khushdeva Singh, 'Love is Stronger than Hate: A Remembrance of 1947', in Hasan, *India Partitioned*, vol. 2, pp. 99–102.

[63] Interview with Teja Singh Tiwana, Patiala, 30 Jan. 1998; and prime minister, Patiala, to Ghazanfarali, Food Member, govt. of Pakistan (teleg.), 4 Sept. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2029.

reprisals, especially from refugee elements, Muslims in the states congregated together for safety: as far as possible, they took refuge in towns where there was already a significant Muslim presence, such as Maler Kotla City, Jamalpura, Bassi, Samana, Sanaur and Loharu;[64] where established safe havens were lacking they sought out accessible strongpoints and made their own. In Patiala, for instance, about 25,000 Muslims mustered at the famous Sufi shrine of Rosa Sharif at Sirhind, and a similar number at village Badbar in Barnala district; while 'outsider Muslims' were said to have turned another Barnala village, Daska, into 'a strong fortress'.[65] But the Muslims did not simply rely on numbers for security. Taking a leaf out of the Akalis' book, they armed themselves to the hilt with whatever weapons they could lay their hands on. During the second week of August 'all the Muhammadans of Payal town [in the Bassi district of Patiala] numbering thousands gathered together armed with offensive weapons. With a cry of "Ali – Ali", [they] started to beat drums to call [up] the Muslims of the neighbouring villages'.[66] Similar scenes were enacted in Maler Kotla. On the night of 13 August, Khan Ahsar Ali Khan, a kinsman of the Nawab and a Ludhiana Muslim League office-bearer, went around the city with other League officials 'telling the Muhammadans that there was great fear of an attack from the Sikhs of Patiala and other places and that they should arm themselves and be on guard in groups for the whole night'. By 15 August virtually every adult male Muslim in the town was reported to have acquired at least a *lathi* for his personal protection.[67]

Hindu–Sikh reactions to these developments completed the chain of causation. Predictably, the mere fact of the Muslims massing set alarm bells ringing in the princely capitals. The majority of the

[64] Even before the influx of refugees from surrounding areas, Muslims comprised 91.5% of Jamalpura's population, 74.0% of Samana's, 72.9% of Malerkotla City's, 67.6% of Bassi's and 55.3% of Sanaur's. *Punjab State Gazeteers* (Lahore, 1937), vol. XXIII, p. xiv and vol. XXXIX, pp. xvi–xvii; and *Census of India 1941*, vol. 6, pp. 38–9.

[65] Note by supt. police in charge C.I.D., Patiala, dated 6 Oct. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2028.

[66] Sant Parta Singh Sidhu, dist. nazim Bassi, to prime minister, Patiala, [Aug.] 1947, PSA, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2032.

[67] Batoo Ram Sood, presdt., Malerkotla Riasti Parja Mandal, to presdt., AISPC, 25 Aug. 1947, AISPC file 108 of 1945–8. See also report from Mohinder Singh, I.-G. Police, Patiala, to Supt. Police, Patiala dated 12 Aug. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2028, relating proceedings of a meeting of Muslims in Ghanaur tehsil close to the border with Ambala. According to this report Muslims were urged by their leaders to 'be alert and to prepare themselves for any . . . emergency'.

groups might have comprised harmless refugees, but to nervous *darbāri* officials they looked alarmingly like 'mobs' in search of trouble.[68] What is more, in some cases the categorization was not far wide of the mark. Several of the Muslim formations became hijacked by professional thugs who saw an opportunity for easy loot. Around Sunam, for instance, the Muslim refugees fell under the sway of the notorious Subhan Khan, already wanted by the Patiala authorities on a clutch of armed robbery charges. Others, judging that they were in imminent danger of attack from the roving Sikh war-bands, decided that they had nothing to lose and possibly much to gain by striking first, although initially most of their targets seem to have been poorly defended Sikh and Hindu villages rather than the jathas *per se*. Others again resolved, maliciously, to cause as much damage as they could before they were expelled to Pakistan.[69]

At any rate, the effect of these warlike manoeuvres on the other communities was traumatic. In Mansa and Sardulgarh people grew 'panicky'. In Narwana the Hindu and Sikh railway staff became so 'badly frightened' they refused to work. In Bhatinda Hindu merchants buried their valuables in 'apprehension of urban markets being plundered'. In Patiala City, 'peace committees' of Hindu and Sikh residents, convinced that their lives were on the line, frantically called on the authorities to 'isolate muslim[s] away from Hindu-Sikh localities' and to post Sikh regiments to guard their homes and shops. Soon, thousands of Hindus and Sikhs were in full flight.[70]

On balance, though, more stayed than fled. And among the latter

[68] See, for example, situation report by Lt.-Col. Gobinder Singh dated 1 Sept. 1947, and note by supt. police in charge C.I.D., Patiala, dated 13 Sept. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2028.

[69] Boha, Khanpur, Barin, Chotian, Devigarh, Panbhuan-Kapoori, Chhuna, Kallianon, Majri, Darogawala, Kaithal and the New Basti area of Bhatinda were just a few of the places in Patiala raided and burned by Muslim gangs between late August and early October. Allegedly the Muslims who attacked Kaithal boasted that 'before going to Pakistan they would kill [all the] Hindus [and] destroy all [the] villages' in the area. Sub-divisional magistrate, Bhatinda, to dist. nazim, Barnala, 28 Aug. 1947, and note by supt. of police in charge C.I.D., Patiala, dated 13 Sept. 1947, PSA, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2028; and note by prime minister, Patiala, dated 11 Oct. 1947, and headman village Kaithal to Maharaja of Patiala (teleg.), 14 Oct. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2032.

[70] Telephone message from Gurbachan Singh, I.-G. Police, Sunam, to I.-G. Police, Patiala, 26 Aug. 1947, and note by supt. police in charge C.I.D., dated 13 Sept. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2028; chairman, Bharat and Co. to Maharaja of Patiala (teleg.), 30 Aug. 1947, and S. S. Pawa, presdt., Peace Committee, Hindu–Sikh locality from Sirhind Gate to Shafabadi Gate (teleg.) 5 Sept. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2032.

a strange group-psychosis took hold, reminiscent of the 'great fear' which had gripped rural France in 1789. Almost overnight whole communities of respectable, law-abiding Hindus and Sikhs became consumed with an intense, righteous anger against their perceived tormentors. In some instances the targets of this insensate rage were specific, known Muslim predators such as the bandit-leader Subhan Khan, who was hacked to pieces, along with his son, by a knife-weilding Hindu mob in Sunam on 7 September, or Muslims picked out because they had knowingly or inadvertently given offence to their communal neighbours. In the latter category were the Rafiq family of Mathari village in Patiala, who were targeted for having slaughtered a cow to provide meat for a *chehlum* feast. Seven family members paid for this indiscretion with their lives, and ten more suffered serious injuries.[71] More commonly, though—like the movie-goers blown to bits by the bomb thrown into the Novelty Talkies Cinema Bhatinda on 20 August or the nine passengers indiscriminantly butchered by an 'infuriated mob' at Maur railway station on the 28th—the victims were innocent bystanders, killed for no other reason than that they happened to profess a different religion.[72]

The populist violence unleashed by the Punjab Grand Peur of 1947 was short-lived but ferocious. In the space of about two weeks, perhaps 6,000 Muslims were killed in the Patiala capital alone, half of Narnaul town (essentially, the Muslim parts) destroyed, and scores of Muslim villages burned and looted in the Jat-dominated rural areas of Patiala, Nabha and Faridkot.[73] But its most deadly legacy was an indirect one. It caused the Sikh jathas based in the states, which had been raiding across the border into Punjab on and off since mid July, to redirect their attention to the Muslim 'problem' at home.

[71] The assailants were armed with 'country-made bombs and hand-grenades, rifles, 12-bore guns, revolvers [and] other pistols'. M. Mohinder Singh, I.-G. Police, Patiala, to Supt. Police Patiala, 12 Aug. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2028.

[72] Wireless message from Supt. Police, Barnala, to I.-G. Police, Patiala, 20 Aug. 1947, and teleg. from Bir Davinder Singh to Prime Minister, Patiala 28 Aug. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2028.

[73] A measure of the scale of violence in Patiala is the fact that it took the authorities four days to clear the city of corpses. Interview with Teja Singh Tiwara, Patiala, 30 Jan. 1998; interview with Mohan Singh, Patiala, 3 Feb. 1998; report from acting supt. police, Barnala, dated 25 Aug. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2029; proc's of meeting in prime minister's office, Patiala 11 Sept. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2032; and note by supt. police, C.I.D., Patiala, dated 13 Sept. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2028.

Despite their infamous reputation, not a lot of hard data is available about the membership of the jathas. Even their number, and total strength, is uncertain. Sir Paul Patrick, the permanent undersecretary at the Commonwealth Office, reckoned, on the basis of information received from the British High Commission in New Delhi, that the jathas numbered between 800,000 and a million. At the other end of the scale, former Bengal chief minister Hasan Suhrawardy estimated the number of hard-core killers at no more than a thousand. Considering that we have reliable information about attacks by *single* war-bands of at least that magnitude, it is safe to say that Suhrawardy's estimate is way too low; but on the other hand Patrick's seems excessive, given that the entire Punjabi Sikh population was only about six million.[74] A figure of about 200,000 might be closer to the truth. Nor, in the absence of membership lists, can we say much about the identity of the jathedars. Whilst it is known that Udham Singh Nagoke exercised overall command on the 'Faridkot front' and Narijan Singh Gill and S. Raghbir Singh in Patiala,[75] the names of their lieutenants and followers are shrouded in obscurity. Perhaps the only thing one can say for certain is that many of the jathedars were demobilized Indian Army and I.N.A. men; but this in itself is a point of some importance.

About their methods, however, we can be much more precise. Broadly, the jathas focused on two types of targets: Muslim villages; and refugees on their way to Pakistan. But they did not attack all the Muslim settlements and every refugee train. They selected their victims carefully, with reference to their number, wealth, and vulnerability. By and large, they avoided tackling really big concentrations of Muslims, such as those quartered at Rosa Sharif, and they shied off attacking convoys guarded by regular troops unless they had reason to think that the latter had been suborned. Nevertheless when they did attack they generally acted with the decisive military

[74] American Ambassador, London, to Sec. State, Washington, 1 Oct. 1947, reporting conversation with Patrick on 30 Sept. U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/10-147; dist. magst. Bassi to prime minister, Patiala, [?] Oct. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2032; Suhrawardy to Nehru, 6 Nov. 1947, encl. in Charles O. Thompson, U.S. Consul-Gen., Calcutta, to Sec. State Washington, 28 Nov. 1947, U.S. decimal file 845.00/11-2847.

[75] Statement by former senior policeman, Patiala, in *The Sikhs in Action*, p. 55; notes by Gen. Rees on conversation with Major Short, 18 Sept. 1947, Rees Coll., 50; Nehru to Rajendra Prasad 29 Jan. 1948, Sarvapelli Gopal (ed.), *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, 2nd series (New Delhi, 1988), p. 18; gen. sec., City Cong. Cttee, Kotkapura, Faridkot, to Prasad, 7 Dec. 1948, AICC, file 13 of 1948.

efficiency one would expect from cadres made up largely of ex-army men. Attacks on trains, for example, were planned with reference to the railway timetable and published updates on station billboards. Knowing that an 'UP' or westbound train was due at a certain time, the Sikhs would simply wait for it, either at a station or at some convenient intermediate point along the line; if the latter, logs or stones would be placed across the tracks to force the driver to halt. Then, depending on the type of train (whether a 'Pakistan Special' or a mixed local) it would either be strafed from a distance or boarded and the Muslim passengers picked off individually.[76] Likewise, there was a set pattern to Sikh war-band attacks on villages. First the targeted village would be completely encircled to prevent its occupants from escaping. Then the attack proper would commence. Typically, in this phase, one group of assailants would spray the village with rifles and light machine guns to dislodge the Muslims from the rooftops, while another lobbed grenades and petrol bombs over the walls. Finally, when the Sikhs judged that they had created enough confusion and panic inside, they would move in for the kill. In this last phase, a third group of hardened fighters armed with kirpans and spears would be delegated to finish off the surviving males while another smaller contingent, often made up of older jathedars, concentrated on rounding up the young women. Afterwards, these trophies of battle would be carried off along with any other 'valuables' that had escaped the fires.[77]

As businesslike as they were dedicated, the jathas exacted a terrible toll on the refugee trains and convoys passing through the states, which, as the map shows, straddled all the major east–west road and mainline rail routes in Punjab. One attack, on a Patiala state local at Sirhind, resulted in the massacre of its entire

[76] Identifying Muslims on the mixed local trains was more difficult than one would suppose, since Muslim refugees often tried to evade the jathas by travelling in disguise. Sikh student Teja Singh Tiwana was travelling home to his village that summer on a train bound for Bahawalpur, when it was stopped and boarded near Nabha. Initially he was not disconcerted by this as all the people travelling in his compartment appeared to be Sikhs or Hindus; but when the jathedars entered they quickly established by dint of a body search that three of the group were in fact Muslims. Without a moment's further reflection they beheaded the three in full view of the horrified youth. Interview with Teja Singh Tiwana, Patiala, 30 Jan. 1998.

[77] *The Times*, 25 Aug. 1947; Suhrawardy to Gandhi, 21 Sept. 1947, encl. in Charles O. Thompson, U.S. Consul-Gen., Calcutta, to Sec. State, Washington, 28 Nov. 1947, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/11-2837; and memoir by Major Derek Harrington Hawes, 'Four Days of freedom', in BL, Harrington Hawes Coll., 20.

complement of 300 passengers; another, on a Pakistan Special at Beas station in Kapurthala, led to the deaths of 59 adults and 62 children mostly aged under four.[78] Indeed by far the greater part of the casualties suffered by the westbound refugees in 1947 seem to have been sustained in transiting the territories of the Sikh princes, especially the initial, Patiala, sector which began at the Ghaggar bridges to the west of Ambala.[79] Add to this the countless hundreds of Muslims who died in their villages, and it is easy to see why the government of India was moved, at the end of September, to designate Patiala a 'dangerously disturbed area'.[80] Yet it was not only Muslims who felt the scourge of jathedari violence. One night attack on a village by Sikhs from Kalsia left two Hindus dead, three seriously injured and several cows incinerated.[81] This may have been an accidental occurrence but it testifies to an uncaring fanaticism. In sum we can say that with the entry of the jathas, the ethnic violence in princely east Punjab became at once less frenzied, more ruthless and more indiscriminate.

How did the Sikh jathas manage to inflict so much mayhem? One reason, as noted above, is that they were composed mainly of veterans, men experienced in fighting and inured to killing. Another, related, reason is that they were generally much better armed than their adversaries. A third is that they skilfully exploited the tactical advantages conferred by the terrain. Never staying for long in any one area, constantly hopping between different princely jurisdictions, the war-bands capitalized effectively on the element of surprise and

[78] High Commissioner, New Delhi, to Sec. State for Commonwealth Relations, London (teleg.), 6 Sept. 1947, IOR R/P&S/13/1358; and Suhrawardy to Gandhi 21 Sept. 1947, encl. in Charles O. Thompson, U.S. Consul-Gen., Calcutta, to Sec. State, Washington, 28 Nov. 1947, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/11-2847.

[79] A number of reliable eye-witness accounts testify to the intensity of the violence in this sector. A British army officer who travelled along the Grand Trunk Road between Rajpura and Khumna on 24 September described it as resembling a graveyard, with bodies 'littered on both sides of the road'. Suhrawardy to Nehru, 6 Nov. 1947, recounting a conversation at Ambala, encl. in Charles O. Thompson, Consul-Gen., Calcutta, to Sec. State, Washington, 28 Nov. 1947, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/11-2847. See also the account given to Sir Francis Tuker by the commanding officer of the 2nd battalion, 1st Gurkas. Tuker, *While Memory Serves* (London, 1950), p. 437.

[80] Nehru to Vallabhbhai Patel 31 Aug. 1947, Gopal, *Selected Works*, 2nd series, vol. 4 (New Delhi, 1987), p. 43; and Henry F. Grady, U.S. Ambassador, New Delhi, to Sec. State, Washington, 1 Oct. 1947, U.S. State Dept. decimal file, 845.00/10-147.

[81] Lt.-Col. R. N. P. Reynolds, 21st Gurkha Rifles, to his mother, 3 Sept. 1947, BL, Reynolds Coll.

at the same time made themselves difficult to catch. Units of the Indian army conscientiously pursued the jathas as far as they could within east Punjab, but were precluded from pursuing them beyond, the states being legally foreign territory. Pursuit was hampered, too, by flooding caused by heavier-than-average monsoonal rains, and by a shortage of petrol, which limited the response capacity of the state forces.[82] However, none of these elements would have counted for much if the jathas had been dealt with by the princely authorities in the way that they should have been—as criminal organizations. But they weren't. The attitude of the *darbārs* generally was one of denial. When atrocities were reported to them, they either claimed the reports to be untrue, or tried to place the blame elsewhere.[83] This disingenuous stance was correctly interpreted by the jathas as implying a degree of official sanction for their activities. But in some cases official support for the Sikh 'cleansing' project went well beyond turning a blind eye. On 24 September some 125 Muslim refugees left Ambala in three trucks and headed west along the GT road for Pakistan. Their plan had been to overnight at Ludhiana, but they were delayed by heavy rains, and by six o'clock had got no further than the Patiala frontier, where they were stopped and searched by border guards. By the time they were allowed to proceed, darkness had fallen. They had barely gone half a mile before 'bullets began to be showered upon them'. All bar thirteen women were killed. Their property was sequestered and the women were abducted. Subsequently a police inquiry identified the leader of the assailants as Lieutenant Nirbal Singh of the Patiala army.[84] It had clearly been a

[82] Notes by Supt. Police, C.I.D., Patiala, dated 13 and 27 Sept. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2028. The Jind and Kapurthala governments both ascribed their failure to suppress the jathas to military weakness. The Jind forces were described as lacking proper 'weapon training'; while Kapurthala's small army was claimed to be chronically over-stretched. Maharaja of Jind to Patel 27 Nov. 1947, NAI, M[inistry] O[f] S[tates], 118(1)-P.R./47; and chief minister, Kapurthala to Patel, 3 Sept. 1947, requesting a loan of '2 companies of troops and a tank for at least one month', MOS, 2(9)-P.R./47.

[83] See, e.g., note by priv. sec. to the Maharaja of Patiala dated 28 Aug. responding to a letter from the City Muslim League, Ludhiana, alleging that 200 Muslims had been butchered at Doraha station, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2032. As to passing the blame, the Maharaja's remark to Nehru was typical: such trouble as had occurred was 'largely due to the blood-curdling news that has been steadily flowing in from the Pakistan area'. Local Muslims had exacerbated the situation by refusing to dissociate themselves 'from the fanaticism that led to these crimes in west Punjab'. Patiala to Nehru 19 Sept. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2029.

[84] Note by Supt. Police, C.I.D., Patiala, dated 18 Oct. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2028.

set-up. Another refugee convoy which passed the Doraha barrier about the same time did get through safely, but again the refugees noticed the ominous presence of 'two armed Sikh mobs consisting of soldiers in mufti' ranged behind the border officials. They drew the only logical inference: that the mobs were operating with the consent, if not under the direct orders, of the military.[85] But perhaps the most notorious case of official complicity comes from Kalsia. Early in October a band of Muslims sheltering at Buria were told by state officers that they were going to be moved for their safety across the Jumma into the United Provinces. Instead, the officials led them into the welcoming arms of a jatha lying in wait by the main Jumna canal. Within minutes the canal was 'clotted with [the] dead bodies of Muslim men and women'.[86] The record is full of such stories. To be fair, not all of them can be corroborated.[87] But they are simply too many to be ignored. Without doubt much of the violence in east Punjab in 1947 was state-sanctioned.

To say, however, that the states were involved begs two further questions. Firstly, were the military personnel observed giving assistance to the jathas simply rogue elements acting from personal motives, or loyal servants following orders? Secondly, if the latter was the case, whose orders were they carrying out? Were the string-pullers low-level men or senior bureaucrats answerable to the rulers? That there was a conspiracy seems certain. But who was at the heart of it?

Many knowledgeable contemporaries pointed the finger directly at the Sikh princes. 'It is commonly believed that the rulers of the Sikh States of the Eastern Punjab are behind the campaign of extermination', reported Indian Army commander-in-chief Auchinlek.[88] 'The sin of the innocent blood of two lakhs of . . . unoffending Muslims is on his head', wrote the AISPC's Pattabhai Sitaramayya of Yadavindra Singh.[89] But these charges were denied as vehemently as they

[85] Statement by former senior policeman, Patiala, quoted in *The Sikhs in Action*, pp. 57–8. The ex-policeman escaped to Lahore with this convoy.

[86] Note by Capt. Rattan Amol Singh, Jagirdar of Buria, dated 13 Apr. 1948, NAI, Rajendra Prasad Papers, 5-R/48.

[87] Many of them derive from the testimony of the refugees themselves, or from Muslim army officers who could be regarded as partisan witnesses. See, e.g., *The Sikhs in Action*, p. 40. The incidents described in the text have been independently authenticated.

[88] Situation report to the Indian cabinet dated 28 Sept. 1947, quoted in Hamid, *Disastrous Twilight*, p. 261.

[89] Sitaramayya to Nehru 4 Mar. 1948, AICC, file 1 of 1948.

were levelled. Jagatjit Singh, formally accused of genocide by the Pakistani delegation at Lake Success, dubbed the allegation 'a concoction and mendacious propaganda'.[90] Patiala rejoindered that the suggestion was in his case a nonsense since he was not even in Punjab during the disturbances.[91] For what it is worth, these denials are confirmed by the absence, in the surviving governmental archives, of any incriminating policy directives.

But even if we give the Sikh princes the benefit of the doubt and conclude that they did not specifically order their forces to help the Akali jathas kill Muslims—a position, incidentally, which the Muslim League's Hasan Suhrawardy urged on Gandhi[92]—it is hard to accept that they did not know—and approve of—what was happening under their very noses. We have already noted the Sikh rulers' public (and clandestine) support for the Akali Dal's project of Khalistan. In taking this stand, the rulers knew it would have to be fought for. What is more, when the massacres started, they not only omitted, very conspicuously, to condemn them, but went out on a limb to apologize for the crimes committed by the jathas. 'People in this part of the country', averred Yadavindra Singh, 'have undergone terrible sufferings, and they strongly feel that beyond a certain stage non-communalism assumes the force of cowardice'.[93] (This to arch-secularist Jawaharlal Nehru!) Conversely, Patiala took a very hard line with disaffected Muslim soldiers and public servants and was directly responsible for the order which led to all the state's Muslim troops being disarmed and detained under guard in Bahadurgarh Fort—an order which, construed as the preliminary to a pogrom, set in motion those events described above that culminated in the bloody *grand peur* of late August.[94] Last but not least, there is evidence that Faridkot, and Kapurthala through his son, had direct contact with

[90] Kapurthala to Sir Paul Patrick 10 Feb. 1948, IOR L/P&S/13/1342.

[91] Yadavindra indeed spent the summer at Chail, his palace in the Himalayan foothills; but since he was in constant telegraphic contact with Patiala, this does not quite let him off the hook.

[92] Suhrawardy to Gandhi 21 Sept. 1947, encl. in Charles O. Thompson, U.S. Consul-Gen., Calcutta, to Sec. State, Washington, 28 Nov. 1947, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/11-2847.

[93] Patiala to Nehru 10 Nov. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2035. Patiala was later accused by the Union government of shielding one of his courtiers who had abducted a Muslim woman from a noble Punjabi family. Nehru to Patel 28 Nov. 1948, Gopal, *Selected Works*, 2nd series, vol. 8, pp. 154–5.

[94] Maharaja's private sec. to prime minister, 27 Aug. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2032.

the Sikh jathas, Harinder Singh at one of these meetings allegedly taking a jathedar to task for admitting that he nurtured an aversion to killing women and children.[95]

A source close to the Sikhs, the Indian Army's Major Short, believed that the rulers had allowed themselves, in respect of the jathas, to be 'carried along' by bad advisers.[96] While this analysis seems a mite generous, at least in the case of the three princes mentioned above, Short is certainly right about the culpability of some of the senior Sikh *darbāri* administrators and military officers, among whom communal attitudes were rampant. While, as we shall see, there were important exceptions, the Sikh ruling elite as a body distrusted the local Muslims and loathed and feared Pakistan. The advice they gave the princes reflected this. For instance, the head of Patiala's C.I.D., Bir Davinder Singh, urged the maharaja to stand firm against Congress efforts to rein in the R.S.S. and the Akal Sena in Punjab: 'Pakistan has got an eye upon [us] ... and it is not unlikely that an attack in force will be launched by that dominion on the East Punjab. In that emergency every able bodied man and woman will be required to put up strong resistance to save the Province from being over-run and devastated by the Muslim Marauders. In that case ... the meek and appeasing policy of the Congress will not stand in their stead'.[97] Not surprisingly, Bir Davinder Singh's is one of the names most frequently mentioned by witnesses to that era, along with those of the Patiala army's Colonel Bhagwan Singh and the chief minister of Jind, when the issue of *darbāri* logistic support for the jathas is brought up. Yet we do not need to know the names of every individual concerned to prove that official connivance was widespread. The imprint of it is easily seen in the pattern of the death toll across the various Punjab states. While Muslims died everywhere in the region, the toll was very much heavier in the Sikh-

[95] Deposition by Muslim refugees, Lahore, n.d., BL, Mudie Coll., 31. The story about Faridkot was related to Hasan Suhrawardy by a Sikh lady who accompanied the maharaja and maharani on their way home from Simla. According to this witness, Faridkot's language to the jathedars was so bloodthirsty that it reduced both her and the maharani to tears. Suhrawardy to Gandhi 19 Nov. 1947, encl. in Charles O. Thompson, U.S. Consul-Gen., Calcutta, to Sec. State Washington, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/11-2847.

[96] Howard Donovan, U.S. Embassy, New Delhi, to Sec. State Washington, 12 Dec. 1947, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/12-1247.

[97] Note by Supt. Police, C.I.D., Patiala, dated 26 Nov. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2028.

ruled states than it was in the two Muslim-ruled states of Maler Kotla and Loharu, where the minority community received adequate official protection.[98]

That said, however, two caveats need to be entered. The first is that official attitudes and practices across the Sikh states varied considerably. Even in Faridkot and Patiala, some officials managed to maintain a professional detachment from the madness going on around them, earning the lifelong gratitude of the refugees for their stalwart efforts. As a measure of this, one conscientious district nazim in Patiala was roundly attacked by the local Hindus for his allegedly 'pro-Muslim policy'.[99] At the same time, Muslims fared rather better in Jind and Kapurthala than in Faridkot, Nabha, Kalsia and Patiala. For instance, there were very few killings in the Jind capital, Sangrur, a remarkable record considering the size of the town and its large Muslim population.[100] Again, the principal reason is that, in the main, the officials there performed with less partiality.

The second caveat is that the behaviour of all the Sikh *darbārs* improved a good deal after the middle of September, most markedly that of Patiala. Having hitherto kept silent, Yadavindra Singh now called upon the Panth to exercise restraint and break the 'vicious circle of retaliation'. More specifically, the maharaja made his district nazims responsible for the safety of the Muslim refugee trains and convoys passing through their jurisdictions and the prompt return of valuables and moveable property taken from the refugees

[98] Commander, Ambala area, to commander, 11 Infantry Brigade (signal message), 28 Aug. 1947, BL, Rees Coll., 49; memo. by Mutaz Ali Khan, chief minister, Maler Kotla, dated 15 Apr. 1948, AISPC, file 108 of 1945–8; interview with R. G. Verma, Patiala, 1 Feb. 1998; interview with Dr S. M. Koreshi, Islamabad, 26 Feb. 1998. One of the places in Maler Kotla that remained peaceful in 1947 was Raikot. According to some Sikhs, Raikot gained immunity from attack by virtue of the local Muslim landlord family's possession of a pitcher, the 'Guru Sagar'. Gifted to the jagirdar's ancestor by Guru Gobind Singh in 1704, the pitcher was (and is) famous throughout Punjab for its ability, though pierced by 244 holes, to retain water. Interview with Bhajan Grewal, Melbourne, 8 Dec. 1997.

[99] Situation report, HQ, east Punjab, to Army HQ, India and Pakistan, 3 Sept. 1947, BL, Rees Coll., 64; telegrams from refugees encl. in Supt. Police, Barnala, to I.-G. Police, Patiala, 30 Aug. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2028; Chanan Singh, pleader, *et al.*, Sunam, to Maharaja of Patiala (teleg.) 20 Sept. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2032.

[100] Interview with R. G. Verma, Patiala, 1 Feb. 1998. Sangrur is recorded in the 1941 census as having a population of 17,132, of whom 5,449 were Muslims. *Census of India, 1941*, vol. 6, pp. 38–9.

for 'safe-keeping'.[101] This policy change did not, however, stem from a moral awakening in high places. It was rather a tactical shift, based on the recognition that circumstances had changed. Unexpectedly, both Jinnah's Pakistan and the Nehru raj in Delhi had survived. Bit by bit, they were beginning to impose their authority on the divided Punjab. This raised the stark possibility that there might be a reckoning for the violence. Prudence told the princes that the time had come for them to mend their bridges with New Delhi. In any case, further violence was hardly necessary; the majority of the east Punjab Muslims were already dead, or on their way to Pakistan. Although estimates vary widely, it would appear that by the end of 1947 no more than 50,000 Muslims were still in residence in the Punjab states, compared to almost a million a year before.[102] As Hasan Suhrawardy complained bitterly: 'What is the use now of the Maharajah of Patiala, after all the Muslims have been eliminated from his State, standing up as the champion of peace and order'.[103]

Afterword

The death toll from communal violence in east Punjab during the summer and autumn of 1947 must remain a matter for speculation. None of the 'official' figures I have seen purport to offer anything more than a partial accounting, and they are in any case not very reliable, the *darbāri* officers who collected this data having a vested

[101] Henry F. Grady, U.S. Ambassador, New Delhi, to Sec. State Washington, Sept. 28 1947, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/9-2847. In just one Patiala district, Sunam, collections from refugees totalled Rs.256,074 in cash, 200 maunds and 33 seers of silver and 3 maunds and 11 seers of gold, and 2,000 cows. Despite the maharaja's order, there is good reason to think that a lot of this property was never returned to its owners. Nazim, Sunam to Prime Minister, Patiala, 12 Dec. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2032; and resolution of the WC of the Kapurthala ML, 25 Oct. 1947, AISPC, file 91 of 1946–8. Reports from the districts show that by mid-October, the vast majority of refugee trains were passing through Patiala safely. See notes by Supt. Police, C.I.D., Patiala, dated 27 Oct. and 11 Nov. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2028.

[102] Figures calculated from tables in *Census of India 1941*, vol. 6, p. 43, and *Census of India 1951*, vol. 8, pp. 298–300. Before August the Muslim population of Kapurthala was about 250,000; an estimate in October put the number of Muslims living there at no more than 6,000. Proc's of conf. of rulers and officials at Ministry of States, New Delhi, 6 Oct. 1947, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2029.

[103] Suhrawardy to Nehru 6 Nov. 1947, encl. in Charles O. Thompson, U.S. Consul-Gen., Calcutta, to Sec. State Washington, 28 Nov. 1947, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/11-2847.

interest in the matter. Nor can one place over-much reliance on Pakistani calculations based on a comparison of refugee numbers with Muslim populations as recorded in the 1941 Indian census. Putting aside the possibility of deliberate manipulation for political ends, the Pakistani figures are also suspect—for reasons indicated earlier—on statistical grounds. Nevertheless there is no disputing that violence occurred on a massive scale, that most of the victims in east Punjab were Muslims, and that the Sikh princely states played a central role in the whole sorry business, perhaps accounting for as many as half the regional Muslim deaths.[104] My argument in this essay is that this centrality was the product of three factors: the strategic placement of the six Sikh states, which gave them command over the major road and rail routes between north India and Punjab; their comparatively large Sikh populations; and the enthusiasm of the Sikh rulers for the Shiromani Akali Dal's project of a Sikh homeland, which, following Ramusack, I attribute to the rulers' pivotal position in the religious politics of the Panth.

From the Sikh point of view, therefore, the killing had a purpose. It was to clear a territorial space for the Sikh homeland—a space bereft of Muslims that the Sikhs could dominate by virtue of their military power and control over the agrarian economy. Of course to modern eyes this Akali plan looks Quixotic. However, we must remember that it was evolved in the context of an unknown and uncertain future—one in which the survival of Pakistan as a state appeared dubious and the position of the Union government in New Delhi distinctly shaky. When hard-headed cabinet ministers such as Patel were confidently predicting the collapse of Pakistan within months, is it any wonder that ambitious and not overly perspicacious princes like Harinder Singh and Yadavindra Singh got somewhat carried away by the dazzling prospect of re-establishing the Kingdom of Lahore?

[104] One Pakistani estimate put the number of Muslims killed in Patiala alone at 250,000. An Indian source puts the number at 100,000. *The Sikhs in Action*, p. 60; and R. J. Moore, *Making the New Commonwealth* (Oxford, 1987), p. 44. To be sure, the published figures for the recovery of abducted women seem to paint a slightly different picture. As of June 1948, 5,378 Muslim women had been recovered from the 14 districts of east Punjab proper and 1,889 from the states. But the shortfall does not necessarily indicate that many fewer women were abducted in the states. It could just as easily be accounted for by the greater reluctance of Sikhs in the states to give up their stolen 'property'. Press note, Govt. of India Information Bureau, 14 June 1948, encl. in Howard Donovan, Counsellor, U.S. Embassy, New Delhi, to Sec. State Washington, 18 June 1948, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/6-1848.

But if we accept (putting aside considerations of morality) that some violence was required to convince the east Punjab Muslims to leave, why then did the jathas feel the need to attack the refugee trains which were carrying these unwilling migrants away? In the foregoing analysis we identified three possible explanations for this 'excess' of violence: the motive of revenge for the attacks on Hindus and Sikhs in west Punjab; the role of myth and rumour; and the galvanizing effect of rumour-induced fear, sublimated into raw aggression. On reflection the list can probably be expanded. For instance, it is safe to assume, given what we now know about the psychology of collective violence, that the perpetrators were driven to some degree by inner compulsions and desires—the need to compensate for a lack of self or bolster a crumbling self, a desire to wallow in 'shameful excitement'.[105] Paradoxically, some people appear to find group-sanctioned violence both redemptive and psychically healing, a way of 'expelling or annihilating the enemy one harbors within oneself'.[106] Alternatively, we may surmise that many people were encouraged to kill that summer by the almost total collapse, in Punjab, of the legal sanctions which normally operate in civil society to inhibit such behaviour. 'It appears as if there is not Government ruling over this area', wrote a jemadar of the Indian Army on leave at Jullundur. 'Every body is at present at liberty to kill as many [people] as he likes'.[107] 'People could literally get away with murder', recalled Punjab governor Sir Evan Jenkins afterwards, '. . . in the knowledge that if the victims were of the right community and they themselves were on the right side of the boundary line on 15th August they had nothing to fear'.[108] But to point to the complexity of the forces which generated the Punjab violence is not to suggest that it was purely and simply reactive and spontaneous. Even the violence triggered by the *grand peur* was typically perpetrated by mobs with leaders, a characteristic suggestive of premeditation and planning. This aspect was still more pronounced in the case of jathedari violence which was not only carried out with military-style precision but often involved the provision of logistic support by elements of the princely armies.

[105] Sudhir Kakar, *Colours of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion and Conflict* (Chicago, 1996), pp. 36, 81, 148.

[106] Stanley J. Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (Berkeley, 1996), p. 277.

[107] Letter dated 22 Sept. 1947 quoted in Tuker, *While Memory Serves*, p. 433.

[108] Memo. encl. in Jenkins to Prof. A. A. Michel 27 Nov. 1967, BL, Jenkins Coll., 1.

It would be morally conforting to conclude, as most Sikh commentators do, echoing Tara Singh's own doleful assessment of 1947,[109] that this campaign of violence did the Panth no good. The truth is otherwise. Admittedly, the Sikhs did not get their own state; and to this day Khalistan remains a cherished but elusive goal. But the ethnic cleansing project did give the Sikhs, for the first time, a plausible territorial claim. As I have remarked already more than once in this essay, before 1947 the Sikhs were at once scattered and thinly spread. But the partition violence, and the migrations that attended it, greatly altered this demography. Simultaneously, the area of east-central Punjab designated as the core of the putative Sikh state was virtually emptied of Muslims and filled with Sikh and Hindu refugees from west Punjab, Patiala alone receiving some 70,000.[110] The combined effect of these changes was to lift the Sikh population in the region from around a fifth to a respectable 35 percent and in some districts to beyond 50 percent. Some observers (though not Master Tara Singh) believed that a *de facto* Khalistan had 'definitely been accomplished'.[111] Significantly, the majority of these new Sikh majority areas were located in the states, which had actively solicited for Sikh (rather than Hindu) refugees. In 1951 the Patiala and East Punjab States union (PEPSU) was home to more Sikhs than Hindus, and was only a percentage point short of having an overall Sikh majority.

To be sure, ethnic consolidation was only a preliminary; the Akalis' ultimate goal was hegemonic political power. And the results of the first democratic elections of 1952 showed that translating the one into the other might be a more difficult task than it had initially seemed, the Akali Dal capturing only 23.4 percent of the vote in PEPSU and a measly 12.4 percent in Punjab, losing out badly in both contests to the Congress which received heavy support from the Hindu community and from refugee Sikhs.[112] However, the Sikhs had never been ones to let mere numbers stand in their way. As they had done, successfully, during the British period, they argued that their

[109] The Master summed up the events of 1947 thus: 'The Hindus have got Hindustan, the Muslims have got Pakistan, but what have the Sikhs got?' Quoted in Gopal Singh, *Politics of the Sikh Homeland (1940–1990)* (Delhi, 1994), p. 77.

[110] Note by I.-G. Police, Patiala, dated 1 Mar. 1948, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2242.

[111] Note by member of the Punjab Boundary Force, n.d., quoted in Tuker, *While Memory Serves*, p. 449.

[112] V. B. Singh and Shankar Bose (eds), *State Elections in India: Data Handbook on Vidhan Sabha Elections 1952–85, Vol. 1* (New Delhi, 1987), pp. 44, 47.

contribution to the Army and the land revenue and their close historical connections with the Punjab entitled them to weighted representation in government; and despite the new constitution expressly prohibiting communal weightage, they managed to secure over the 1950s a better than 45 percent share of Punjabi cabinet posts, a similar share of public service posts and a dominant position within the police.[113] At the same time the Akalis attempted to redress the numbers problem by using their executive power in the new Punjab to pressure Hindus into converting and Muslims who had converted to Hinduism during the partition disturbances to leave and go to Pakistan. These strategies led to a slow but steady improvement in the Dal's vote-share in the Punjab Vidhan Sabha from a low of 11.9 percent in 1962 to a high of 31.4 percent in 1977, which was only two percentage points behind the share won by Congress.[114]

But it was in the states that the Akalis' communalist project was pursued most ruthlessly and achieved its greatest success. Since the 1940s all the princely states had been battling to contain an insistent and growing popular demand for the introduction of responsible government—a demand backed, at one remove, by the Nehru-led Congress, which was committed to reconstituting the monarchical states as democratic units of the Indian federation. One common and fairly effective princely counter-measure was to introduce ministerial government while prevaricating on franchise reforms which would have made the ministers responsible in the full Westminster sense of the term. In the Punjab states, this strategy worked particularly well because the mainstream popular movement, in the shape of the Congress-linked *praja mandals*, was largely restricted to urban Hindus, and already faced a well-organized and powerful opposition in the form of the Akali Dal. It proved a relatively easy matter for the Sikh rulers, with the lavish patronage at their disposal, and their close fraternal links with the Dal leadership, to channel this communal-based dissent into a campaign for the preservation of the Punjab states as autonomous entities.[115]

[113] Nayar, *Minority Politics*, p. 113.

[114] Singh and Bose, *State Elections*, pp. 44–6.

[115] Amongst other methods Patiala employed illegal land grants to Sikh ex-soldiers to bolster his government's support within the community. In late 1947 he set up a new Sikh party, the Panthic Durbar, to coordinate the anti-Congress opposition, and many prominent Akalis such as Jathedar Udham Singh Nagoke and (for a time) Tara Singh were prevailed on to join. Local GPCs were also coopted for this purpose. In February 1948 15,000 Sikhs turned out in Patiala City at the urging of the *darbār* to denounce the policies of the Patiala Riasti Praja Mandal. Baboo Ram

Thus in contrast to the majority of princes in other regions, the Sikh rulers were able to confront New Delhi from a position of relative strength, an advantage reflected in Yadavindra Singh's blunt warning to Patel: 'any attempt to attack the Sikhs here is likely to release volcanic forces. . . . it would be wise [for you] to leave . . . Patiala alone'.[116] The Nehru government was impressed. While it did not (and could not) resile from its goal of abolishing the 'feudal' Indian monarchies, in the case of the Punjab states New Delhi significantly watered down the practical effect of disestablishing the rulers by ignoring the declared preference of the east Punjab government, the AISPC and large sections of its own Congress constituency for a full merger, and cobbling the states into a union of their own (PEPSU) with the Maharaja of Patiala as its *rajpramukh* (governor). Similarly, the Nehru government held its peace when Yadavindra Singh arrogantly set aside the Praja Mandal's candidate for prime minister, Brish Bhan, and appointed his maternal uncle, Giani Singh Rarewala, to the coveted job. Watching these events from the sidelines, AISPC president Sitaramayya commented spleenfully: 'he is playing a consummate game, well-armed with the consciousness that he is *persona grata* with Authority at the Centre'.[117] It appeared as if the Patiala prince, at least, was well on the way to re-inventing himself as a regional powerbroker.

At first sight, too, the survival of princely influence within PEPSU looked to have significantly advanced the Akali cause. The Akalis had backed the princely campaign against merger with the Punjab because they saw the states as offering a means of realizing their dream of a Sikh homeland by administrative stealth. They were not disappointed. On the plea of 'democratising' their governments, the princes jobbed Akalis and Akali sympathizers into ministerial positions. Even the Nawab of Maler Kotla followed suit in this respect, appointing an Akali, S. Balwant Singh, as his Minister of Health.

Sood, presdt., Maler Kotla Riasti Parja Mandal to Pattabhi Sitaramayya, 3 Feb. 1948, AISPC, file 108 of 1945–8; note by I.-G. Police, Patiala, dated 1 Mar. 1948, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2242; Nehru to Baldev Singh 17 July 1948, NMML, Nehru Papers, 1st Instalment, 11; and proc's of meeting of the Panthic Durbar at Motibagh Palace, 7 Feb. 1949, and resolution of the GPC, Mata Sahib, Kanr Dal, dated 23 July 1949, PSA, Patiala, Dharam Arth, 1090/115.

[116] Patiala to Patel 29 Feb. 1948, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2242.

[117] Nehru to Sitaramayya 3 Mar. 1948, Nehru Papers, 1st Instalment, file 7; Sitaramayya to Nehru 4 Mar. 1948, AICC file 1 of 1948; Harbans Lal, gen. sec., East Punjab Union CC to Rajendra Prasad, 15 July 1948, Choudhary, *Prasad*, vol. 9, p. 214.

More generally, Sikh ex-soldiers and refugees were given preferred access to former Muslim properties.[118] By contrast Hindus were overlooked, marginalized, and occasionally harassed by the police.[119] There are even stories of Hindu refugees being refused food until they had embraced Sikhism.[120] Not surprisingly, many concluded that they had no future in PEPSU. 'Hindus [here] are getting panicky', reported a nationalist worker in Faridkot.[121] 'Already there is great panic among the Hindus of Bathinda and Barnala. . . . The more prosperous Hindu merchants and industrialists are planning to shift . . . to Delhi and other Hindu States', wrote an official of the Sanatan Dharma Sabha, after touring Patiala.[122] 'I have no mind to return to Jind at the moment for the Sikhs being in power there, Hindus stand no chance', lamented a senior bureaucrat from Sangrur, on leave in Simla.[123]

But the PEPSU experiment proved short-lived. In 1956, as part of a general reorganization of Indian state boundaries, PEPSU was stripped of its hill-districts and absorbed into the rump of Punjab. The Sikhs found themselves once again in the position of a statutory minority, a come-down that was only partially ameliorated by the equal official status afforded the Gurumukhi language. Not until 1966, with the creation of Punjabi Suba, did the Sikhs get their long-sought-after majority state, and even this triumph was soured for many Sikhs—the Master among them—by New Delhi's insistence upon language rather than religion as the ethnic marker of Punjabi statehood. As for the Akali Dal, its electoral fortunes continued to

[118] Nehru to Baldev Singh 17 July 1948, NMML, Nehru Papers, 1st Instalment, file 11.

[119] Nehru to Patel 30 Sept. 1947, Gopal, *Selected Works*, 2nd series, vol. 4, p. 110; and Mehan Singh, sec., Faridkot Riast Praja Mandal, to Jai Narain Vyas, 26 Dec. 1947, AISPC file 53, part 1 of 1946–8. This was particularly the case with local Muslims who had converted to Hinduism during the partition disutrbances. For instance the District Nazim of Sunam received reports that the police were 'making it impossible for them [the converts] to remain in their homes . . . [by] harassing their womenfolk and . . . taking away their household articles by force'. District nazim, Sunam, to prime minister, Patiala, 4 Mar. 1948, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2035.

[120] 'Hindus of Patiala State' to Vallabhbhai Patel [rec'd] 3 Oct. 1947, NAI M[inistry] O[f] S[tates], 2(11)-P.R./47.

[121] Memo. by Zail Singh, presdt., Faridkot Riasti Praja Mandal, dated 30 May 1948, AISPC file 54 of 1948.

[122] Goswami Ganesh Datt, gen. sec., All-India Sanatan Dharma Sabha, to maharaja of Patiala, 16 Mar. 1948, PSA, Patiala, Ijlas-i-Khas, 2035.

[123] Puran Anand Sharma to Major D. G. Harrington-Hawes, 26 Nov. 1948, BL, Harrington-Hawes Coll., file 35.

languish, prompting a number of the party's prominent leaders to defect to Congress.[124] Ironically, one of the reasons for the Dal's mediocre showing during the 1950s and 1960s seems to have been the perception among lower class and Left-leaning voters that it had become something of a 'king's party', the vehicle of wealthy Sikh landlords and clients of the ex-rulers.[125]

Nor, in the main, were the Sikh princes' high hopes for the new era realized. Their party vehicle, the Panthic Durbar, folded withn a year after the Akali Dal pulled its support,[126] and despite impressive individual victories, the Sikh princely families failed to make a substantial impact in the electoral or ministerial arenas—less, in fact, than their peers in Rajasthan and Central India (Madhya Pradesh) who on the surface appeared to have inferior political credentials. Yadavindra Singh, who seemingly had the best credentials of all, got elected to the Punjab Assembly in 1967, but lasted only one term, after which he retired from politics in disgust. In the last Lok Sabha poll, Yadavindra's son, Amarinder, contested on a Congress ticket, but neither the popularity of his wife, nor the maharaja's employment of *kaveershars* or court-singers to recount the valorous exploits of his dynasty, nor the support of veteran jathedar Bir Davinder Singh sufficed to upset the sitting member—the Akali Dal's Prem Singh Chandumajra.[127]

The alliance between the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Sikh princes of the Punjab was a marriage of opposites, consummated for the purpose of achieving a Sikh state and homeland. When Khalistan did not materialize, the alliance lost its *raison d'être* and rapidly disintegrated. Tara Singh welcomed the breakup, which he interpreted as a vindication of his revolutionary line and the beginning of a revival of his flagging influence over the SGPC. In fact, the Master

[124] The defectors included Udham Singh Nagoke, Giani Kartar Singh and Baldev Singh. Paul Wallace, 'Religious and Secular Politics in The Punjab: the Sikh Dilemma', in Paul Wallace and Surendra Chopra (eds), *Political Dynamics and Crisis in Punjab* (Amritsar, 1988), pp. 19–21; and Nayar, *Minority Politics*, p. 127n.

[125] Brish Bhan, presdt. Punjab States Regional Council, *et al.*, to Rajendra Prasad, 10 May 1948, AICC file 13 of 1948–9. On the relations between the Akali Dal and the Left in the early 1950s, see, Mridula Mukherjee, 'Communists and Peasants in Punjab: A Focus On The Muzara Movement in Patiala, 1937–53', in *Studies In History*, vol. III, nos 1–2 (1981), esp. pp. 413–21.

[126] Resolution of the Akali Dal WC dated 19 Mar. 1948, quoted in Henry F. Grady, U.S. Ambassador, New Delhi, to Sec. State Washington, 6 Apr. 1948, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/4-648.

[127] The campaign for the Patiala City seat is described in *The Statesman* (New Delhi), 7 Feb. 1998.

never revived the authority he had exercised during the 1940s, and in 1962 he was displaced as paramount leader of the Panth by a Malwa Jat, Sant Fateh Singh.[128]

Nationalist historians have more or less drawn a veil over the events described in this essay. The Punjab killings are seen as shameful, but nonetheless as an aberration, the work of 'communal' elements on the political fringe. Specifically, when the killings are touched upon, we hear that they were carried out by Akali Sikhs assisted by a handful of royal reactionaries. This view echoes the Congress propaganda put out at the time, that the Sikh rulers were 'bad' men who had exhibited a deplorably 'unpatriotic attitude'.[129] Having, to an extent, added grist to this mill, I want to conclude by suggesting that the question of responsibility for the east Punjab massacres cannot begin and end with the Akalis and their princely allies, but must also comprehend the Congressmen at the Centre who sent wholly wrong and mischievous signals to the Sikh perpetrators. During the six months that the killings went on, the Union government did virtually nothing to stop them. Its principal excuse was that it lacked the legal authority to intervene in the princely states, something that the nizam of Hyderabad would have been most surprised to hear, in the light of New Delhi's intervention there in September 1948. And afterwards, when it did have the authority, it made only a token effort, in conjunction with the government of east Punjab, to bring the leaders of the Sikh jathas to book for their manifest crimes. But that is not all. If the wayward ruler of Faridkot is to be believed, the Deputy Prime Minister, Sardar Patel, was actually a closet suporter of the Sikh ethnic cleansing project. According to Harinder Singh, Patel in August offered him 800 rifles to help 'defend' the East Punjab, and later congratulated him on having cleared the Muslims out of his state.[130]

[128] Wallace, 'Religion and Secular Politics', p. 15. For Yadavindra Singh's explanation of his 'falling out with Tara Singh', see Nehru to Patel 11 Feb. 1949, Gopal, *Selected Works*, 2nd series, vol. 9, p. 421. Yet even after this the two men continued to meet occasionally, and as late as October 1949 Yadavindra Singh had not given up hope of winning back the Master's support. See report on their meeting at Doraha by Regional Comm'r, PEPSU, dated 31 Oct. 1949, R[egional] C[ommissioner's] O[ffice], Rajasthan, 18-P/48-C.

[129] Note by Lord Ismay on conversation with Nehru dated 3 Oct. 1947, BL Mountbatten Coll. 90; and resolution of the AICC dated 15 Nov. 1947, encl. in Nehru to Prasad 24 Nov. 1947, Prasad Papers, 14-C/48.

[130] Howard Donovan, Counsellor, U.S. Embassy, New Delhi, to Sec. State Washington, 18 Sept. 1947, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/9-1847; and note on conversation with Lord Ismay, encl. in Henry F. Grady, U.S. Ambassador, New

Unsubstantiated, these allegations must be treated with caution (although they are consistent with Patel's publicly-expressed view that the national interest would be best served by a full 'transfer' of populations in the Punjab). But if they were found to be accurate, they would force us to seriously revise our scholarly assessment of the Nehru government, which has always been considered a champion of secularism. Such a rethink might help to explain why it took the Hindu Right so long to mount an independent electoral challenge to the hegemonic Congress.

Delhi, to Sec. State Washington, 10 Nov. 1947, U.S. State Dept. decimal file 845.00/11-1047.