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The Banality of Violence: Arendt, Partition and the Walled City of Lahore in 1947

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Abstract
Applying Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil," this paper argues that extreme violence in 1947 became a standardized, daily routine for ordinary citizens. Perpetrators entered a state of moral "thoughtlessness" a psychological condition in which individuals deliberately suspended their independent ethical judgment and adopted popular political slogans to shield themselves from guilt. Violence was stripped of its moral weight and re-framed as "instrumental violence": a practical, cold-blooded tool designed to achieve specific material and ideological ends. By treating the eviction of neighbors as a necessary, functional step toward building the new nation-state, everyday residents neutralized their moral reservations and transformed intimate street corners into operational sites of purgation. Ultimately, this study reveals how localized criminal networks and ordinary neighbors successfully aligned their personal greed, class resentments, and desires for real estate with the grand narrative of state formation. Supported by local police complicity and systematic asset seizures, these actors proved that mass atrocity does not require extraordinary hatred. Instead, as Arendt's theory illuminates, the catastrophic success of Lahore's demographic cleansing relied on the frightening ease with which normal people can turn off their critical conscience, rationalize cruelty as work, and reduce horrific acts of violence into a banal, unthinking daily routine.

Keywords: *Banality, Violence, Arendt, Partition, Walled City, Lahore*

Introduction: The Historiographical and Theoretical Imperative

The Partition of British India in 1947 remains a watershed event in the history of modern South Asia, resulting in the displacement of over fifteen million people and the slaughter of between one and two million individuals (Talbot, 2006). For decades, the dominant historical accounts of this catastrophe were bifurcated. On one hand, high-politics institutional histories mapped the constitutional debates and geopolitical maneuvers of state elites, British administrators, the Indian National Congress, and the All-India Muslim League. On the other hand, a later wave of subaltern, oral, and feminist histories humanized the tragedy by highlighting the lived realities of displacement, abduction, and trauma experienced by victims (Butalia, 2000; Pandey, 2001).

While the latter paradigm succeeded in giving voice to the marginalized, it left a significant analytical gap regarding the subjectivity, motivations, and operational logistics of the perpetrators of the violence. In standard nationalist and popular accounts, the killers, arsonists, and looters of 1947 are frequently dismissed as anonymous mobs or generalized as victims of a temporary "communal madness"—a linguistic and conceptual move that Gyanendra Pandey (2001) criticizes as "blame displacement." By treating collective violence as an aberration, a sudden collapse of civilization, or a pathology, historians have often avoided analyzing the perpetrator as a rational, localized, and historically situated actor.

To understand how the rapid and total demographic transformation of Lahore occurred—a city where Hindus and Sikhs constituted over a third of the population and dominated the commercial, financial, and real estate sectors before being completely purged within a few

months of 1947 (Talbot, 2006)—we must turn to direct perpetrator narratives. This paper utilizes a rich collection of oral history testimonies of perpetrators, accomplices, and close observers in Lahore's old walled city and its suburbs to deconstruct the "mob" into its constituent, highly individualized parts. To interpret these accounts, we construct a theoretical synthesis. We bring Hannah Arendt's philosophical inquiries into the nature of collective atrocities, specifically her formulation of the "banality of evil," her concepts of "thoughtlessness," and the division between "instrumental violence and power," into a critical dialogue with Paul Brass's sociological concept of "institutionalized riot systems" (IRS) and the subaltern studies focus on class antagonism and agency (Arendt, 1963, 1970; Brass, 1997, 2003; Guha, 1983).

Through this synthesis, we argue that the violence in Lahore was produced by localized, pre-existing criminal and athletic networks that converted their physical skills and territory into a communal apparatus. Ordinary people, operating within highly localized enclaves, utilized techniques of moral neutralization to frame acts of murder and plundering as civic duties and heroic sacrifices for their religious community and the emerging state of Pakistan.

Hannah Arendt in the Walled City: Thoughtlessness, Instrumental Violence, and the Banality of Partition

To apply Hannah Arendt's theories to the Partition of Lahore, one must navigate the differences between her original historical subject—the highly bureaucratized, industrialized, and modern totalitarian apparatus of Nazi Germany—and the intimate, visceral, and hands-on violence of the communal riots of 1947. In her seminal work Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, Arendt (1963) argued that extraordinary atrocities are frequently committed not by demonic sadists or ideological fanatics, but by normal individuals who abdicate their personal moral judgment to fit into a system, comply with authority, or complete a task. She identified a profound "thoughtlessness"—an inability to think from the standpoint of the other—as the primary psychological enabler of mass violence.

In the context of Lahore, we find a different yet structurally analogous form of "thoughtlessness" and moral abdication. While there was no centralized, industrial extermination machinery, there existed a highly localized, neighborhood-level system of task delegation, role specialization, and peer pressure. Ordinary young boys and working-class men were integrated into a localized machine of communal warfare. Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil" is reflected in the casual, routine-like manner in which subaltern actors carried out highly destructive tasks. For example, in Ichra, fifteen-year-old Shahab Din recalled that his daily responsibility did not involve direct combat, but rather the systematic collection of kerosene oil from various houses and shops, which was then stored in a dedicated room at Mai Ghunni da Takia. This fuel was later used by older, trained men to carry out night-time arson campaigns. Similarly, in Shish Mahal Ghati, fourteen-year-old Muhammad Munir and other local children were tasked with manufacturing circular mud bullets (ghalileys), drying them in the sun until they were as hard as stone, so their older brothers and cousins could use them as ammunition in slingshots against Hindu and Sikh targets.

For these youth, the manufacture of weapons and the collection of accelerants were normalized as routine neighborhood chores, separated from the immediate physical consequence of a victim burning or being blinded. This is "thoughtlessness" in its purest Arendtian sense: the compartmentalization of a task from its moral reality, where the perpetrator is merely a cog in a localized community-defense machine. Furthermore, Arendt's distinction between power and violence in On Violence (1970) provides a valuable lens for analyzing the tactical choices of Lahore's Muslim majority. Arendt argues that power emerges when individuals act in concert through communication and consensus, whereas violence is purely instrumental, relying on tools

and implements to multiply physical strength. In Lahore, the subaltern Muslim population faced a severe economic and resource asymmetry; while they had the demographic numbers, the minority Hindu and Sikh populations possessed the financial capital to acquire modern firearms and fortify their massive brick and mortar tenement complexes, known as katris. To overcome this power imbalance, the Muslim working classes turned to the ultimate "instrument" of the dispossessed: arson.

As Sadiq Butt of Sheranwala Gate observed, setting fire to a wooden structure like Bawa di Katri required no expensive weaponry—only bravery, coordination, and easily accessible kerosene. Arson was an instrumental equalizer, a physical force utilized to dismantle the spatial and economic dominance of the minority class and compel their immediate evacuation.

Paul Brass's Institutionalized Riot Systems and the "Specialists in Violence"

While Arendt's work helps explain the psychological normalization of atrocities among ordinary citizens, Paul Brass's theory of "institutionalized riot systems" (IRS) explains the actual organizational mechanics of the violence. Brass (1997, 2003) argues that collective violence is rarely spontaneous; rather, it is a produced phenomenon that relies on a network of specialists who maintain communal tensions and activate them for specific political, economic, or territorial gains during crises. An IRS consists of three distinct phases: preparation/rehearsal, activation/enactment, and explanation/rationalization. Within this system, specific actors play highly defined roles, including "fire tenders" (who keep communal passions high), "recruiters" (who mobilize crowds), and "specialists in violence" (often criminals, local toughs, and muscle men who carry out the physical acts of killing and looting). In Lahore, the "specialists in violence" were not outsiders; they were deeply embedded in the social fabric of the walled city through pre-existing criminal syndicates and the traditional pehalwani (wrestling) culture. The most prominent example of an organized criminal specialist group in these testimonies is the Lal Jhandi (Red Flag).

According to eyewitnesses like Aijaz-uddin Rajput and Bashir Husain, the Lal Jhandi was a notorious group of criminals and goons operating in the area between Heera Mandi (the red-light district) and Bhatti Gate. Comprising primarily working-class men from the Kashmiri and Arain clans—such as Jehangir, Aslam, Amin, Shokat (Shouka), Latif, and Islam (Sardar)—the group had existed since the mid-1920s or 1930s as an underground "thaggi" (theft and extortion) network. Prior to the Partition crisis, the Lal Jhandi operated as a non-communal criminal enterprise, extorting protection money from the sex workers of Shahi Mohalla and targeting victims based on wealth rather than religious affiliation. However, as political tensions escalated, the group communalized its operations, excluding Muslims from their targets and systematically directing their criminal expertise toward murdering and plundering wealthy Hindus and Sikhs.

The leaders of the Lal Jhandi, such as Ustad Fazla Kashmiri of Mohalla Sathan, Papar Shah, Jhora Pehalwan of Shaikhon ka Tabela, and Zara Pathon Wala, divided the walled city into distinct operational zones, coordinating their stabbings and dividing their stolen loot equally among themselves. As Faqir Syed Rafi-uddin—whose grandfather was the spiritual guide (peer) of these gang members—succinctly observed, despite their spiritual associations, these men were "rascals" and "criminals" who exploited the political crisis to enrich themselves. In addition to formal criminal syndicates, the traditional pehalwani (wrestling) culture served as a primary recruitment ground for riot specialists. The akhara (wrestling arena) was a central institution of masculine physical culture in urban Punjab, where local strongmen commanded deep respect and loyalty from neighborhood youths.

During the Partition riots, these akharas were transformed into localized military headquarters. In Mohalla Jogiyan inside Bhatti Gate, Shafi Pehalwan operated a local hotel that became the

central tactical base for young men involved in stabbing and looting. Under Shafi's direction, local youth carried out attacks against non-Muslims and brought their looted items directly to the hotel, where they were handed over to Shafi for redistribution. Similarly, in Qila Gujjar Singh, Acha Pehalwan mobilized the young Muslim boys training in his akhara into an active militia. This group set fire to non-Muslim properties and executed systematic attacks along the stretch from Abdul Karim Road to the Mubarak Cinema. These accounts support Paul Brass's assertion that communal violence is not a spontaneous eruption, but a highly coordinated campaign led by pre-existing social, physical, and criminal organizations that adapt their peacetime structures to serve wartime goals.

"Ordinary Monsters" and the Subjectivity of the Killer: First-Person Confessions

To fully understand the perpetrator's perspective, we must examine the direct, first-person confessions of the killers, which reveal the cognitive processes and rationalizations that accompanied these extreme acts of violence.

One of the most detailed first-person confessions comes from Ghulam Murtaza Butt Kashmiri (personal communication, n.d.), born in 1930, who lived in Navan Mahalla inside Sheranwala Gate. During the summer of 1947, he was a seventeen-year-old apprentice blacksmith—a background that gave him the physical skills to manufacture weapons. Ghulam Murtaza details his participation in multiple murders with a striking level of tactical specificity and retrospective calm:

"We had killed Kirpa Ram who was the owner of Bija Ram Katri inside Sheranwala gate... in that locality many Hindus were killed by us. I personally killed many Hindus... At that time I was learning the skills of blacksmith. I had made balams [spears] myself in a local style... All the boys of our group were from very poor families... There was a well inside the katri Bawa. In that well we had put so many dead bodies of the Sikhs and Hindus whom we had killed in different incidents. I had myself killed many Hindus and Sikhs during those days. The other boys of my group were Hayat, Saab, Kala Pehelwan, Moma, Yasin. Both Kashmiri and Arain were part of our group... We had crossed the walls of that gurdwara and killed at least 10 sikh only in that incident. I myself killed four Sikhs in that incident. Large knives were our main weapon for all the killings we used to done in those days. Bawa Ram, the owner of the Bija Ram Katri, was also killed by our group... One day we caught the Bawa Ram from behind and stabbed him to death. My friends had sought him and I had stabbed him again and again."

Ghulam Murtaza's confession contains several elements that align with Arendtian and subaltern theories. First, his group of killers was composed entirely of young, working-class boys from poor Kashmiri and Arain families. This class dynamic is central: the acts of violence were directed at wealthy property owners like Kirpa Ram and Bawa Ram, suggesting that class-based resentment was a major driver of the violence. Second, his account shows that the killings were planned and collaborative, rather than wild or frenzied. His group established their operational headquarters at a local iron foundry, systematically manufactured their own specialized weapons, and utilized a local well to dispose of the bodies. Third, his description of the murder of Bawa Ram—where one friend held the victim from behind while Ghulam Murtaza stabbed him repeatedly—reveals the intimate, physical nature of the violence. This hands-on cruelty challenges the notion of "thoughtless" bureaucratic distance, showing instead a conscious, physical engagement in violence that was morally justified by the group's shared goals.

Another direct confession is provided by Khalifa Muhammad Bashir Arain (personal communication, n.d.), born in 1929, who operated inside Yakki Gate. His testimony is characterized by an unprovoked, matter-of-fact approach to violence:

"I had killed two Sikhs at Yakki Gate. Apart from those killing I also killed many Hindus in different localities of walled city. Many of my friends were also involved in such kind of killings. Once I was going to the main side of Yakki gate, and confronting a sikh I stabbed him a knife in his bell [belly]. He got killed at the spot. He had not attacked on us rather I was attacked him in start."

Khalifa Muhammad Bashir's account strips away the conventional self-defense justification often used in nationalist histories. He openly admits that his attack was entirely unprovoked, demonstrating how the collapse of civil authority allowed individuals to act on opportunistic and aggressive impulses. The casual nature of his description—stabbing a passerby in the belly simply because he was a Sikh—shows how the value of human life was degraded during this period. This casual approach to violence is further highlighted by his subsequent arrest; he was imprisoned not for his attacks on non-Muslims, but for murdering a fellow Muslim refugee in a dispute over looted property. This detail illustrates how the breakdown of the rule of law allowed purely criminal behaviors to flourish under the cover of communal conflict. For an institutionalized riot system to succeed in purging an entire demographic group, it requires both logistical support and the complicity of state authorities. The testimonies from Lahore show a high level of neighborhood organization and point to active support from local police and military units. The logistics of arson required a steady supply of accelerants, which was organized through local neighborhood networks. In Ichra, the community utilized Mai Ghunni da Takia as a storage depot, tasking young boys with collecting kerosene oil from local households and storing it for the older, active arsonists. In Barood Khana, Sharif Bhatti (personal communication, n.d.) recalled that because electricity was not yet widespread, kerosene was a common household item used for lanterns, making it easy to procure without drawing suspicion. This decentralized, grassroots logistical network allowed arson campaigns to be sustained throughout the summer of 1947, even during strict curfews.

State Complicity and Active Cooperation

The physical violence of the mobs was frequently supported by the state's security forces, particularly the local police and specific military units. While some neutral forces, such as the Gorkha Regiment, were feared by the rioters for their willingness to shoot looters on sight, other units actively cooperated with the mobs. For example, Muhammad Sadiq of Bhatti Gate described a siege of a Sikh gurdwara in Mohalla Chomalla on August 12, 1947. When a group of Sikhs barricaded themselves on the upper floor of the temple to escape a Muslim mob that had set fire to the ground floor, a soldier from the Baloch Regiment arrived. Rather than dispersing the mob, the soldier was guided by local residents to the upper floor of a house overlooking the temple, where he systematically shot the trapped Sikhs one by one. Following the massacre, the local community paraded the soldier through the streets, garlanding him with flowers to celebrate his actions. Similarly, in Mozang, Bashir Ahmad Malik (personal communication, n.d.) recalled that the burning of the Temple Road gurdwara was planned and facilitated with the help of the local police, including SHO Malik Maqsood, who assisted the mob in launching their attack from the roofs of adjacent houses. These examples show that the violence in Lahore was not merely a series of lawless riots, but a coordinated campaign that succeeded because the state's security apparatus became partisan, aligning itself with the majority community to expel the minority population.

The Political Economy of Purgation

While the violence was framed in religious terms, the underlying motivations of the perpetrators were heavily influenced by material interests and class dynamics. The departure of Lahore's wealthy Hindu and Sikh residents created an unprecedented opportunity for the redistribution of wealth, property, and commercial dominance. Muhammad Ali Arain (personal

communication, n.d.), born in 1920, was an active participant in the systematic burning of Hindu commercial properties. Operating alongside his friends Malik Ibrahim and Labha, Arain targeted the highly lucrative gold markets located between Chowk Wazir Khan and the Sunehri Mosque:
"I was also involved while setting shops and houses on fire. Me and my friend Malik Ibrahim were involved in that arson activity. Our target was mainly the shops in the markets... The market between chowk wazir khan to sunehri mosque was our main target in those days. As that area was hugely dominated by hindu traders and shop keepers... I had set around 40 shops on fire during all that time. Almost all the shops were located in the chowk wazir khan to sunehri mosque. Majority of them were hindu goldsmith. I don't remember whether any of my friend had looted anything... But I remembered that when I set any shop on fire, that shop was already empty. Either it was looted by somebody else before my action, or it could have been emptied by their owner."
Muhammad Ali's testimony highlights the economic motives of the arson campaigns. The destruction of these shops was designed to permanently dismantle the commercial dominance of the Hindu merchants, ensuring they could not return to reclaim their businesses. The fact that the shops were systematically looted before being burned shows that the violence was accompanied by a massive, organized transfer of wealth. Following the flight of the non-Muslim population, a chaotic scramble began to claim their vacant homes and businesses. Many residents and incoming refugees occupied these properties through informal or illegal means, bypassing official claims processes. For example, Muhammad Yusaf Khaja (personal communication, n.d.), a refugee from Amritsar, recalled that upon arriving in Lahore, a local DSP who was a disciple of his grandfather simply allotted them a house in Gawal Mandi without requiring any formal claim verification. Similarly, the family of musician Yaar Muhammad Haidery (personal communication, n.d.) occupied Katri Bawa di in Chuna Mandi. Before fleeing, the original Hindu owner had handed the keys to a Muslim neighbor, Master Khair Din, hoping the property would be preserved. Instead, the property was absorbed into the informal housing market and eventually placed under the administration of the Evacuee Property Trust Board.
This widespread use of informal occupations and forged registries created a complex real estate landscape in post-1947 Lahore, where the physical properties of the displaced minority were permanently integrated into the new Pakistani state. To understand how these perpetrators maintained their self-image as decent, moral individuals while committing acts of murder and theft, we must analyze the processes of moral neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957). These cognitive techniques allowed the killers to justify their actions as necessary duties for the protection and advancement of their community.

The Cult of the "Social Bandit"

A prominent example of moral re-framing is found in the memory of Jhora Pehalwan (Bao Jhora), a key leader of the Lal Jhandi who was responsible for numerous stabbings and killings of Sikhs and Hindus. Speaking decades later, his son, Samar Gul Khan (personal communication, n.d.), described his father not as a ruthless criminal, but as a noble, community-minded benefactor:
"My father Jhora pehalwan... was very sympathizer of poors and often distributed money of loot among them in order to help them. They were Muslims and acted for the cause of Muslims."
This narrative fits into Eric Hobsbawm's (1969) concept of the "social bandit." By distributing a portion of their stolen wealth to the impoverished Muslim residents of the walled city, leaders of the Lal Jhandi transformed themselves from simple criminals into localized heroes of communal defense. The theft of Hindu property was reframed as a righteous redistribution of wealth, and the murder of non-Muslims was celebrated as a necessary sacrifice for the "Muslim cause". Another powerful technique of neutralization was the appeal to higher loyalties and the

logic of retaliation. Perpetrators frequently justified their actions as necessary responses to atrocities committed against Muslims in East Punjab.For example, Irshad Saleem (personal communication, n.d.) of Lahore Cantt recalled that following the "Amritsar tragedy," local Muslims felt compelled to take vengeance against the non-Muslims of Lahore in their respective areas. This logic of collective responsibility meant that any Hindu or Sikh resident, regardless of their personal innocence, was viewed as a legitimate target for retaliation. By framing their actions as defensive responses to external threats, the perpetrators were able to bypass individual moral constraints and participate in collective violence with a sense of righteous obligation.

Conclusion

The oral history testimonies of the perpetrators and active participants of the 1947 Partition violence in Lahore challenge the conventional view of these events as spontaneous, irrational explosions of communal madness. When analyzed through the theoretical frameworks of Hannah Arendt, Paul Brass, and subaltern studies, the violence emerges as a highly structured, rationalized, and spatially organized campaign of ethnic purgation. The demographic cleansing of Lahore was achieved by mobilizing pre-existing criminal networks like the Lal Jhandi and leveraging the physical power of local pehalwans. These actors used cheap, highly effective methods of arson and targeted violence to displace the wealthy Hindu and Sikh populations, subsequently occupying their properties and businesses. Ultimately, these oral testimonies demonstrate that the birth of the new nation-state was not merely a product of elite constitutional negotiations, but was deeply shaped on the ground by working-class, subaltern opportunists who successfully aligned their personal, materialist, and criminal ambitions with the grand political project of Partition.

Note on Primary Data and Fieldwork

The empirical backbone of this research rests on primary oral history interviews conducted by the author during PhD fieldwork in Lahore in 2015. These semi-structured interviews capture the memory and self-rationalization of subaltern perpetrators, local gang members, pehalwans, and eyewitnesses who inhabited the Walled City during the 1947 Partition. To ensure ethics and participant safety, all informant identities have been anonymized.

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