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Partition, Property, and Biraderi: Refugee Settlement and Social Restructuring in Nankana

Sahib

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Abstract

This study examines the migration and refugee settlement process in Nankana Sahib following the Partition of Punjab in 1947. It explores the demographic transformation of the town after the large-scale departure of its Sikh and Hindu population and the subsequent arrival of Muslim refugees from East Punjab. Particular attention is given to the administration of evacuee property, the role of local Muslim communities, and the contribution of Muslim League workers in facilitating refugee rehabilitation. Unlike many regions of Punjab where abandoned properties became a source of violent conflict and widespread looting, evidence from Nankana Sahib suggests that local Muslims generally refrained from appropriating evacuee property, considering it the legitimate entitlement of incoming refugees. The study argues that this attitude, together with organized local assistance, eased the settlement process and contributed to maintaining social stability during a period of profound upheaval. By examining the experience of Nankana Sahib, the article highlights the significance of local social values, political organization, and community participation in shaping patterns of refugee resettlement and post-Partition reconstruction.

Keywords: Partition of Punjab (1947), Nankana Sahib, Refugee Settlement, Migration

Introduction

The Partition of Punjab in 1947 triggered one of the largest forced migrations in modern history, displacing millions of people across the newly established borders of India and Pakistan. The migration not only transformed the demographic composition of Punjab but also reshaped its economic, social, and political landscape. While much of the existing scholarship has focused on communal violence, forced displacement, and refugee rehabilitation at the provincial level, comparatively little attention has been paid to local experiences of migration and resettlement in individual towns and tehsils.

Nankana Sahib presents a particularly significant case. Before Partition, it was an important religious and commercial centre with a substantial Sikh and Hindu urban population, while the surrounding countryside was predominantly Muslim. The migration of non-Muslim residents left the town largely deserted and created extensive evacuee property, which subsequently became available for the rehabilitation of Muslim refugees arriving from East Punjab. This article examines the processes through which refugees were settled in Nankana Sahib, the role of local communities and Muslim League workers in facilitating their rehabilitation, and the administration of abandoned property. It argues that local social norms, communal cooperation, and organized political leadership contributed significantly to the relatively

orderly settlement of refugees and the reconstruction of the town during the immediate post-Partition period.

Migration and Refugee Settlement in Nankana Sahib, 1947:

Nankana city was eighty to ninety percent deserted after large-scale migration of Sikhs and Hindus in the wake of partition of Punjab. It seemed like an abandoned region. Evacuated properties were opened for natives but surprisingly locals were not interested in looting or plundering generally. It was against norms of indigenous Muslims to plunder or loot. They considered that refugees had right to own evacuated property. Migrants did not immediately reach there after partition. First they arrived at refugee camps which were established at four places in Lahore including Railway Station Refugee camp, Shahdara Refugee Camp, Baoli Refugee Camp, and Walton Refugee Camp.¹ They, then, were permitted to move to other districts including Gujranwala, Layalpur, Sheikhpora, and Kasoor. For permanent settlement.² Thousands of the refugees started pouring into Nankana Sahib for livelihood and allotment of property after living few months in different districts. Local Muslims especially the workers of the Muslim League performed marvellous job to welcome refugees in Nankana Sahib.

Alhaj Muhammad Hussain Gohar told that his family went to Lyallpur and settled there, but after spending few months there, his father who was an educated man, got a job in Nankana Sahib as food controller, so they shifted to Nankana Sahib.³ Haji Abdul Hamid Rahmani⁴ shared that after spending fifteen days at Walton Camp, his family went to Gujranwala but later settled at Nankana Sahib.⁵ Rana Muhammad Iqbal, a local politician in city Nankana Sahib, narrated that his village located three kilometres away from Hoshiarpur. India celebrated her independence day on 15th August, 1947. At that time; the Muslims of this locality were in their homes. They left their homes after offering Eid prayer. The Sikhs of their village helped them in departure. On the other side, few Sikhs from different villages attacked on them on their way to refugee camp. They were frightened after attacks, so they decided to leave their motherland. Finally, they reached at the bank of river "*Bias*". They reached at Lahore after crossing Amritsar in great horror. They were welcomed with good food from distributors on the eve of sacrificial festivity at "*Shahdara*". They also provided them salt, peppers, and floor. After spending gala day there, they went to Sheikhpora for one day. Next day, they came to "*Manawala*" for one night. One of their convoy member's relatives lived in Nankana Sahib, so only his family came to Nankana Sahib along with him next morning. The workers of the Muslim League supported them in every way. They also provided them all necessary goods⁶.

Ramzan Bibi was an old lady lived in Nankana city shared that she belonged to *Arain* family from District Ferozpur.⁷ She mentioned that a lot of bloodshed occurred in India on the eve of partition: their houses were burnt and cattle and assets were occupied by the Sikhs. They crossed river Ravi on boats after paying five buffaloes in place of fare for getting seats in it. The level of water raised in river Ravi which caused flood due to heavy rains for many days. Flood water drowned some of their relative, cattle, and luggage. Life became miserable there, so they decided to move. They left for Nankana Sahib but they reached Buchiana near Jharanwala. They came across with some of their lost relatives there. They told us that there were a lot of empty houses available in Nankana sahib, and then they went to Nankana Sahib and finally settled there.⁸

Shiekh Hanif was the son of Nankana Sahib Muslim League's first president Sheikh Mohammad Ashique narrated that a refugee camp was established at Cotton Factory in the city. All refugees were initially brought there and Government arranged food and other necessities of life for them.⁹ Almost all migrants peacefully settled in Nankana Sahib within two months.

Jannat Bibi, migrant lady, narrated that her family reached Nankana Sahib after partition. She observed that the entire city was empty. A refugee camp was established at gurdwara *Jananasthan* for both Hindu and Sikh communities because there was an apprehension of intrigue in result of holocaust on Muslims in East Punjab, but nothing happened like that in tehsil Nankana Sahib. During the period of two months almost all Sikhs and Hindus had left Nankana Sahib by train and reached East Punjab, India. Her family stayed at broad *Mandar*. The ML workers helped the refugees to settle in the vacant houses. All shops of the city were shut, which were reopened gradually and slowly. Natives lived in villages. They used to come to Nankana city to help the refugees and after seeing refugees, they said that “*Panahi Aye Aa*”(translated: refugees came).¹⁰ This narration showed that natives were sentimental towards refugees which developed their feelings to help the refugees.

Sheikh Mahtab Din described that as Pakistan came into being, migrants started coming to Pakistan in millions. They came to know about it through radio and newspapers. There was shortage of food and other necessary items at refugee camps, so ensured the supply of above mentioned things as per their capacity. The workers of Nankana Sahib Muslim League went from village to village and collected wheat, flour, and rice, after collection all material loaded into trucks and finally reached Walton Refugee Camp. Later, they sent meat, spices, and lentils .. The wife of Shiekh Muhammad Ali Nankanvi along with other Muslim League workers provided cooked food and other items at Railway Station of Nankana Sahib at the arrival of refugees. Hindus and Sikhs had to abandon their properties including glorious houses, fertile lands, packed shops but not a single Muslim League worker involved in despoliation.¹¹ He added that more than one camp was established at cotton factories in Nankana Sahib for refugees. Sheikh Ayub (currently a rice trader at Nankana Sahib) narrated that natives cooperated a lot with refugees. They could occupy everything after evacuation of the region by Sikhs and Hindus but no Muslim tried to occupy any house or property except Malik Shahadat Khan Waseer advocate, who overran a house at Guru Bazaar.¹² No other person or bradery followed the footsteps of Malik Shahadat.

Likewise, a committee was also constituted for settlement of refugees at Warburton. It included Chuadry Sardar Muhammad Virk, president and Chuadry Ahmad Hassan Lambardar, Feroz Din Saraf, Haji Shiekh Ghulam Muhammad, Malik Haji Anayat Ali as members.¹³ The committee performed its duty professionally and patriotically. Chuadhry Muhammad Sardar Virk who was the head of influential Virk Family lived in Thaana Warburton, narrated:

I worked with good intention and honestly for the settlement of migrants with the help of my team members. I settled migrants personally in houses and shops after unsealing their seals and provided them all basic needs. We had opened a store in this regard which contained all household goods. We provided all the things which were short from houses and submitted extra things to store. We completed all the tasks about the settlement of migrants¹⁴

Native people provided houses, shops and offered jobs to plundered refugees. They showed generous hospitality on the eve of refugee's arrival at Nankana Sahib.¹⁵ Noori Kambooka beautifully described the whole situation of refugees who had come from India in one of his “*dhola*.”

دیکھ کے نور سی گرا اٹھیا:

ساہ وی وس نہیں رہند اجدوں مندے دیہناں حال پناہیاں دے

راج نہ بد لیا ڈنیا بدل گئی اللہ شرم رکھے ہر دیاں جائیاں دے

ایہناں کماں وچ بے عزتیاں ہو جائدیاں، شرم نہیں رہ جانے بے گناہیاں دے¹⁶

Noori exclaimed with sorrow:

It is hard to breathe when seeing the deplorable plight of refugees.

Human condition is transformed bitterly,

But has not seen the change of rule. May Allah keep the dignity of everyone?

In such livelihood many persons compromised their respect.

A policy for settlement of refugees or rehabilitation was made at central level by the government of Pakistan and also set up a department for rehabilitation which further introduced many schemes for smooth transfer of lands to refugees after addressing the issues relating to the nature of the ownership of land. The government, later, conducted surveys of land and properties including residential, commercial, agriculture, and moveable properties which were left by the migrants. To ensure the transparency in entitlement against claims of refugees, a central record room was established by the government for verification of the record in Pakistan and counter verification from India. Land was given to the applicant against his claim which was based on units: - every unit varied place to place according to its commercial value. The whole process consisted of nine steps including allotment, displaced persons, lands, prescribed, rehabilitation authority, settlement authority, scheme, settlement, and verified.¹⁷

Both Mandi towns of tehsil Nankana Sahib including Nankana city and Warburton city, which emerged as business hub in the region after the installation of railway line in 1911, were immediately desolated. The partition only brought happiness for those who were indebted to Hindu and Sikh owners of commission shops. Partition provided an opportunity for residual Muslim traders to get absolute power in both *Mandi* towns. Sheikh braderies of both towns easily dominated over both the markets because they were already running their business along with Sikh and Hindu traders but they were in minority among business classes of both towns. The partition did not badly affect the rural areas of tehsil Nankana Sahib despite of some villages like both Mandi Towns.

Composition of Major Braderies in Nankana Sahib: Pre and Post Partition

Composition of Braderies was largely transformed due to migration of Sikhs and then settlement of Muslim refugees in the region during and after 1947. First look into the population data of Pakistan for analysing communal population percentage. The numbers represent the following proportion of the total population in Pakistan after partition.

Table: 1

Census Report of 1951	
Communities	Population in Percentage
Muslim	85.9
Hindu	5.7
Sikh and others castes	8.4

Data provided by Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Islamabad, On 25-11-2022

Above table clearly shows that Muslim population increased at large scale. On the other hand, non-Muslim population migrated to India and a sizeable decrease was noticed in that context. As for as Nankana Sahib is concerned, there were two types of habitants in tehsil Nankana Sahib in the colonial era i.e. native population and new settlers (*Abadkar*) who were settled during colonial era. The third community of migrants was also added in the populace. This section is based on census reports of 1941 and 1951 to know the decrease and increase in population of three communities of district Shiekhpora such as Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. According to both census reports, a huge increase in number of Muslims and a great drop in non-Muslim population can be noticed.

Table: 2

Census Report of 1941	
Communities	Population in Percentage
Muslim	63.6
Hindu	9.1
Sikh	18.9

<https://www.punjabpartition.com/single-post/2018/11/18/1941-punjab-census-and-its-interpretation>

Table 2 clearly shows that District Sheikhupura was a Muslim majority District in united India. Other two communities such as Sikh and Hindu were runner up and third in numbers respectively.

As for as the population of tehsil Nankana Sahib was concerned, it consisted of 194225 people (Male: 106102 and Female: 88123) according to the census conducted between 1931 to 1941.¹⁸ Nankana Sahib city was spread to two kilometre in length from gurdwara *Janamasthan* to gurdwara *Kiara Sahib* and a half kilometre in width having about ten thousand population on the eve of partition 1947. All three major communities such as Muslim, Sikh and Hindu were almost equally represented in the town.¹⁹

Four communities of Nankana Sahib i.e. Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians were further divided into many high castes and marginalized classes. The Sikh and Hindu were mostly Jatt and Rajpot respectively. Prominent old Muslim braderies of Nankana Sahib included *Kharals, Bhattis, Syed, Agha* were dominating in *thaana* Nankana. *Gill, Padhar and Chadhar* all three were influential in *Thaana* Mangataan. *Virk, Maan and Chatha* all were in commanding position in *thaana* Warburton during British era. On the other hand, prominent Sikh braderies were *Dhillon, Maan, Menhais, Sidho, Sandho, Rao, Arora, Saini, Ram Garhye, and Khatari*. and Hindus were mostly *Khatari, Chopra, Aarya and Arora*.²⁰ Chirstian braderies were *Bhatti, Gill, Khokhar, Pathan, Mughal and Sahotra*.²¹ These braderies lived in tehsil Nankana Sahib on the eve of Partition. Kharals were in majority among Muslim braderies in rural areas and similarly Sheikh Braderi was dominating Nankana city as well as Warburton.

Demography of Nankana Sahib was changed drastically after large-scale migration. Only three non-Muslim families i.e. Gyan Chand family, Sain Das's family and Ram Lal family, did not migrate from tehsil Nankana Sahib. Ram Laal family lived at Lundianwala (district Lyallpur) before partition. Ram Laal rendered his services as a cleric of Kharal family feudal including Rai Mian Khan Kharal and Rai Umer Khan Kharal. In tehsil Nankana Sahib. Both families including Gyan Chand and Ram Lal families later became relative while developing matrimonial alliance. Gyani Partab Singh was affiliated with gurdwara *Janamasthan* as a *garanthi* but all of his family members migrated to India. He was the first *garanthi* of gurdwara *Janamasthan* in Pakistan. The only reason of his stay after partition was his religious duty in gurdwara.²²

The vacuum, created by a large-scale migration, was later filled by Muslim refugees. A major shift had taken place in caste-stratification as a large number of Hindus and Sikhs were replaced by migrant Muslims, who mostly belonged to *Rana Rajpot, Dogar, Jutt, Awan*,²³*Bhatti*,²⁴ *Ladhoke Wattoo*,²⁵ *Kharal*, and all were settled in *Thaana* Mangtanwala, *Syedwala* and *Bara Ghar*. Less influential but hardworking families such as *Arain, Sheikh, Malik (Teeli), and Rahmani (Kumhaar)* settled in Nankana city as well as in villages. *Arain* family was in majority rather than other refugee families. Many other working class families such as *Jolaha, Shah, Rao, Rawal, Faqeer, Butt, Ghafari (Moochi), Syed, Marasi, Mughal, Bhular, Chohan, Kambo, Ansari, Manjh and Gujar* . were settled in the city and nearby villages. Only Sardar Khan who belonged to well-off family before partition migrated to Nankana city and settled there.

The transformation of braderies in the result of partition brought many changes in social stratification of tehsil Nankana Sahib in respect of *Sandal Bar* culture. Muslim migrants mostly migrated from districts such as Ferozpur, Ambala, Hoshiarpur, Amritsar, Jalandhar and Delhi..²⁶ The refugees settled in Nankana city as well as across the tehsil in different villages but majority of them settled in the area of *thaana* Nankana Sahib.

All villages had their set up which consisted of braderi system, *Punjayat* system, *Kammis*, and ego. The chieftains belonged to all three communities but after partition, only Muslim chieftains remained in Nankana Sahib. Both Hindu and Sikh chieftains left the region forever. In contrast, mostly marginalised classes were settled in Nankana Sahib in result of migration after partition.²⁷ Noori Kambooka also described it into his “dhola”

Jinnah! Aeh ki Keeta e

Sona De Ke Peetal lia e

o, Jinnah look! what have you done,

After giving gold, you just got the brass.”²⁸

Non-Muslim marginalised classes also migrated along with their feudal to India, whereas, no Muslim chieftain except Sardar Khan²⁹ migrated to Nankana Sahib. New braderies filled the vacuum which was created by outgoing braderies of Sikhs and Hindus. They brought new Punjabi dialect and culture with them which was entirely different from natives of Nankana Sahib or people of *Sandal Bar*. Cultural, material, and psychological all three losses did not permit the refugees to be financially independent for many years. It took many years of struggle to recover the material losses, they had incurred. Psychological losses were even harder to recover.³⁰ The biggest challenge for them was to integrate into the local population and culture.

New braderies could not adjust themselves with natives because of socio-cultural diversities. After realising the gap of social status from native braderies, many marginalised classes or braderies changed their caste names with Islamic names to raise their social status after a few years i-e Ansari, Ghafari and Rahmani. in the newly created state in place of Jolaha, Moochi and Kumhaar respectively. An invisible line was drawn between native braderies and refugee braderies. The refugees faced many challenges in this context including identity crisis, class conflict, settlement, rehabilitation, property claims and dominance. It resulted in the adoption of the colonial policy by them to defame the natives through their colonial narrative. They called the locals as *jangali*, uneducated and uncivilised. Native braderies lived with their own cultural identity and respect (ego) but the British government tried to snatch their cultural identity by distorting their history, identity, language, living style, livelihood and local industry on technical grounds³¹.

The distinction between local and native braderies was natural outcome of the partition. The refugee braderies who were struggling for survival, were very well aware of the power of native feudal, so they followed the footsteps of the invaders. They started highlighting all negative aspects of native braderies than positive aspects. This narrative could not be completely changed even after seventy-five years of their migration and their younger generations also believe in the same account, though with less severity. This pessimistic approach promoted racism between both and created two terms included “*jangali*” for natives and “*panahi*” or “*mohajir*” for refugees. This conflict can be very dangerous for the state, if not addressed properly. On initial stage, the impact of migration was visible and negative on both sides because the colour of the society had completely been changed but in later years, cultural harmony started making its place in the local society.

It is concluded that there were many factors behind a peaceful atmosphere in tehsil Nankana Sahib on the eve of partition of the Punjab. Government timely deployed army in fear of riots in the tehsil. Secondly, it was economically under the dominance of Sikh and Hindu communities. Both Hindus and Sikhs were socially and economically more powerful than Muslims. They enjoyed good terms with the Muslim feudal lords in rural areas. They shared a lot of commonalities with each other. Muslim feudal lords supported them in every way to reach at Nankana refugee camp. No communal violence was recorded at larger scale even almost the whole non-Muslim community of Nankana Sahib left their homeland forever and many new Muslim braderies settled in tehsil Nankana Sahib. Despoliation mostly occurred in urban centres in the Punjab and there was no big urban area in the tehsil, even Nankana city was a mandi town, so it remained safe. No religious conflict had ever occurred between Muslims and both Hindus and Sikhs in the region till partition except *Saka Nankana* while contemporary Punjabi poet Noori Kamboka contested that it occurred only because of religious background.³² Thirdly, the workers of Nankana Sahib Muslim League played a very positive role in maintaining communal harmony and settling refugees. They were able to create a perception among the Muslim of the region that evacuee property was the right of refugees only, so indigenous Muslims did not show any interest in occupying it. Above all, Muslims of Nankana Sahib had a sense of pride after getting a new homeland. They always lived under the dominance of Sikhs and Hindus and now they were independent. They were very happy on the freedom of a Muslim state. They helped a large number of refugees to be settled in their region. Migrants mostly belonged to marginalised families, so they filled the vacuum which emerged after partition without disturbing the status quo of the native feudals.

Conclusion

The migration and resettlement of refugees fundamentally transformed the demographic and social landscape of Nankana Sahib after the Partition of Punjab in 1947. The departure of the town's Sikh and Hindu population created extensive vacant residential and commercial properties, while the arrival of Muslim refugees from East Punjab reshaped its population structure and social organization. Refugee rehabilitation was therefore not merely an administrative process but also a significant agent of social and economic reconstruction. Unlike many parts of Punjab, where the distribution of evacuee property became a source of violence, competition, and disorder, the experience of Nankana Sahib demonstrates a comparatively different pattern. Local Muslims generally refrained from appropriating abandoned property, largely because prevailing social norms and the influence of Muslim League workers fostered the belief that such property rightfully belonged to displaced Muslim refugees. This attitude reduced local competition over evacuee assets and facilitated a more orderly process of refugee settlement.

The case of Nankana Sahib also illustrates the importance of local agency in shaping post-Partition outcomes. Community leaders, political activists, and ordinary residents contributed to the reception and rehabilitation of refugees, thereby promoting social stability during a period of exceptional upheaval. Although Partition permanently altered the town's demographic composition and biraderi structure, the comparatively peaceful resettlement process highlights how local social values, political leadership, and community cooperation could significantly influence the nature of Partition at the local level. The experience of Nankana Sahib therefore adds an important local perspective to the historiography of Partition, demonstrating that refugee rehabilitation and communal relations varied considerably across Punjab and cannot be understood solely through narratives of violence and displacement.

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- ² Ibid, 30.
- ³ Ibid
- ⁴ He is 85 years old and well known phelnotherapist and businessman.
- ⁵ Interviewed with Haji Abdul Hameed Rahmani, Mahallah Maalgi, Nankana Sahib city, 10 January, 2017
- ⁶ Documentary, "Karwan e Azadi ke Gumnaam Musafir.
- ⁷ Arain community was in majority in Ferozpur and its adjacent district Jalandhar. All three communities Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim were almost in same numbers in both districts.
- ⁸ Interviewed with Ramzan Bibi, Mahallah Joyianwala, Nankana Sahib, 14 August, 1947
- ⁹ Interviewed with Sheikh Hanif, Mahallah Chaudry Bashir, Nankana Sahib, 10 January, 2017
- ¹⁰ Interviewed with Jannat Bibi, Mahallah Mandarwala, Nankana Sahib, 07 May, 2017.
- ¹¹ Sheikh Mahtab Din's interview in a Documentary: Karwan e Azadi ke Gumnaam Musafir, Umer Farooq's Library, address: Dr Abdul Hai's residence, Bagh Wali Galli, Nankana Sahib
- ¹² Ayub's grandfather friend who was a money lender, had a grand house with full of luggage in Guru Bazar. On his departure, he handed over the keys to his neighbour and friend Mian Sattar on a condition that when circumstances came back to routine, he would return back. Mian Sattar did not take the advantage of above situation and handed over loaded houses and shops to refugees for living and business. Only Malik Shahadat took the advantage of prevailing circumstances and occupied the above mentioned house
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³² Noori highlighted three other factors such as economic, revenge, and ego were more responsible in that context along with religious factor.