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Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**Communal Harmony, Social Stratification, and Refugee Resettlement: Examining the 1947 Partition Dynamics in Tehsil Nankana Sahib****Muhammad Hassan Rai**

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This study investigates the socio-communal dynamics of Tehsil Nankana Sahib during the pre- and post-Partition era of 1947, examining how a high-density non-Muslim center largely escaped the widespread communal violence that engulfed Punjab. Historically divided along socio-spatial lines with a Muslim-majority rural hinterland surrounding urban centers heavily populated by Hindus and Sikhs Nankana Sahib posed a critical flashpoint for potential conflict. This paper argues that the preservation of relative peace in the region was driven by a combination of localized cultural values and proactive political leadership, which subsequently facilitated a smoother socio-economic integration of incoming refugees. Despite extreme tension across Punjab, native Muslims intentionally avoided plunder, looting, and violence, viewing such acts as violations of their personal honor, self-respect, and traditional cultural etiquette. Local Muslim League workers played a pivotal role in preventing the illicit seizure of non-Muslim evacuee property by convincing local residents that abandoned assets belonged strictly to incoming refugees. Mass cross-border migration dramatically restructured Nankana Sahib's social stratification, transforming it from a Hindu-Sikh urban stronghold into a Muslim-majority territory. Driven by post-independence civic pride, the host community actively assisted in settling Muslim refugees, fundamentally reshaping the local biraderi (kinship) system and community dynamics. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that local normative restraint was key factor in averting communal catastrophe during one of the 20th century's largest forced migrations.

Keywords: Communal Violence, Braderi System, Migration, Native Feudal Lords, Refugee Settlement, Nankana Sahib

Introduction

Nankana sahib was a small city; a tehsil of the district Sheikhpura of the West Punjab and had a great historical significance,¹ but only a few works are available on the region's history, society and culture. Two works including *Nankana Sahib* by S. Narain Singh and *Ravi Kinaray Ki Harappaee Bastian* by Zubair Shafi Ghauri are very important in the context of Nankana Sahib's link to pre-historic times. First work declared the region as a main trading centre of the Indus Valley Civilization² and second believed that during pre-historic times, when Kurus and Pandvas fought the battle of Kurukshetra, One Raja Varat of Multan had set up an inhabitation of the name of Kotli at this place. In later age, it was also called Raipur. The earliest available historical reference to the place was of the 15th century when the Lodhi Pathans held sway over northern India. This place was then called *Rai Bhoi Ki Talwandi*. After the birth of Baba Guru Nanak (1469-1539), who got popularity as God-inspired soul, the town came to be known as Nanak-ayan (come to Nanak) or Nankana. It

later emerged as a town of *Gurdwaras* (Sikh temples).³ Before the arrival of the British, Sayyidwala was the commercial hub of this region because it was situated on the banks of the Ravi River; in other words, Nankana Sahib's trade relied on the river. During British rule (1849-1947), Nankana Sahib transformed into an agrarian town due to canal colonization and railway track which replaced traditional modes of transportation and agriculture. Thus, Nankana Sahib's trade shifted from a river-based economy to a railway-based economy. Nankana Sahib was raised to the status of tehsil in 1922. There was no big urban centre in tehsil Nankana Sahib, even Nankana city was a mandi town.⁴

Nankana Sahib was communally a pluralistic land where Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians lived in harmony. Both Hindus and Sikhs were socially and economically more powerful in urban area than the Muslims. However, Muslims were comparatively strong in rural area of the tehsil. In any case, all communities shared a lot of commonalities with each other. The situation, however, was changed with the start of the process of migration. On one side, Muslim feudal lords supported non-Muslim population in every way to reach at Nankana refugee camp. On the other side, Muslims of Nankana city, who were less in number and were financially weak had to face some exploitation from Hindus and Sikhs during last months of colonial rule. This study finds that the region which had remained a true centre of plurality except *Saka Nankana*⁵ had to face lesser degree of conflict from non-Muslim communities in the wake of partition.

This study is based on primary as well as secondary sources. Primary sources including F.I.R of the year 1947, interviews, Dhola (a form of Punjabi poetry) private photo album and, S. Narain Singh (Ex Manager Nankana Sahib 1932 to 1947)'s seminal work entitled "Nankana Sahib" which was published by Guru Nanak Dev Mission, Patiala, India, have been consulted to build the argument. The paper explores that there was comparative peace and harmony in Nankana Sahib amid severe communal violence in other parts of Punjab with diverse communities during Partition 1947. It also observes refugee's settlement in the region in context of braderi system and attitude of natives towards migrants.

Communal Violence and Nankana Sahib, 1947:

Partition of Punjab was one of the bloodiest events in the history of freedom movement. There was looting, plundering, raping and killing of century's old cultural bonding of Punjabis during Punjab partition. The partition had brought miseries for migrants from both sides i.e. East and West Punjab. Over nine millions Punjabis, two-way, transferred in the short period of August-December, 1947.⁶ The migration was unplanned, so riots started almost everywhere because the essential differences between Muslims and Hindus were civilizational and cultural.⁷ The riots mostly occurred in urban centres, where generally Hindus were living. But interestingly Nankana Sahib remained peaceful during communal violence. It was very special case in the context of partition because of its religious importance for the Sikh community. The Sikh community of Nankana Sahib was not willing to leave their Guru's land. They tried their level best to include the city in East Punjab, given to India. After the massacre of Rawalpindi (on 11-13th March, 1947)⁸, Sikh community, in Nankana Sahib felt insecurity from Muslims and then they made their minds for migration. Finally, they left Nankana Sahib forever.

The people of Nankana had started talking about partition of Punjab even before 1945. It was during election campaign in 1945-46 that the debate on this issue had been started. The Sikhs often said that Nankana Sahib would be included in India but Muslims opposed it. A student delegation from Aligarh, with the help of Muslim League workers, motivated the Muslims of the region not only to cast vote in favour of Pakistan but also to be active

participant of the movement. They went on tour from village to village and helped the people to be in favour of the Muslims.⁹ Muslim League candidate Rai Shahadat Ali Khan Kharal comprehensively won the seat. The result of 1945-46 elections was alarming to both Hindu and Sikh communities of the region. The result and general political differences enhanced socio-religious problems among the three communities i.e. Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu for the first time in the region. The Muslim victory broke the status quo of both communities (Sikh and Hindu) and political parties (Congress and Unionist) on politics in the region.

As soon as 3rd June Plan was announced, the movement to include Nankana Sahib in India gained momentum among Sikhs and Hindu especially after the visit of their leader Sardar Tara Singh (1885-1967), founder of Azad Punjab movement, at Nankana Sahib. By 1947, their desire to annex Nankana with India had been transformed into the demand, so they developed bitter feelings towards Muslims in Nankana City. Nathu Ram and his brother Sohnamal, who lived at “*Golchakar*” in Nankana city, Maulana Taj Din¹⁰ of “*Nabipur Peeran*” narrated that when the Muslim League (ML) became a reality after the tireless efforts of workers of the ML and students of Punjab Muslim Students Federation (PMSF), many pro-Unionist party leaders or members were compelled to join the ML. The change of the party created problems for them for the time being but they remained attached to the ML through thick and thin. Rich, poor, and labour classes raised in support of the ML because they disliked the raising of high-handedness of Sikhs and Hindus. Sikhs frequently raised the slogan “*Raj Kare Ga Khalsa Aakhi Re Na Ko*” (*Khalsa* will rule and those who deny will not survive). On the other side, the ML workers also continued their work in difficult circumstances. The ML organised a meeting at Sheikh Muhammad Ashique Ali’s shop and resolved that Pakistan will come into being. Seeing the growing freedom movement of Pakistan, the indigenous non-Muslims became intolerant towards Muslims. They invaded over the marriage ceremonies of Muslims, threw the meat out in presence of the guests. It was a difficult time for Muslims to live and take the name of the ML in Nankana Sahib City. Some Muslim families had to leave Nankana city due to the atrocities committed by the two brothers Nathu Ram and Sohnamal and their allies.¹¹ They went to neighbouring villages of Nankana city.

A retired assistant professor of Urdu Sheikh Zafar S/O Sheikh Mahtab Din, first general secretary of Muslim League Nankana Sahib Chapter, narrated that the villages including Abianwala, Kot Rai Ameer Ali¹² and Nabipur Peeran, 5 km away from Nankana city to the East of Mangtanwala road were very important villages in this context. During the riots and assaults of 1947, many Muslim families had to leave Nankana city and took refuge in Abianwala, Kot Rai Ameer Ali, and Nabipur Peeran. The chieftains of the three villages warmly welcomed them and provided residences. Rai Sadiq Ali Khan popularly known as “*Rai Saada*” of Abianwala played a significant role in settlement on the request of Hakeem Ashique Ali, president of Nankana Sahib Muslim League. He also endowed many acres of land for their livelihood, even evacuated many houses from his subjects for their accommodation. Rai Sadiq Ali Khan vacated his guesthouse (*Dera*) for Hakeem Ashique Ali. Hakeem Ashique Ali, first president of Muslim League Nankana Sahib Chapter, came to Abianwala along with his “*Duakhana*” and settled there.¹³ Sheikh Waris’s family came to Kot Rai Ameer Ali and settled there.¹⁴ Muslims from Nankana Sahib lived in both villages till partition. They also had been running their business there. After partition many Muslim families went back to Nankana city and a few of them settled there for many years after it.¹⁵ Native chieftains proved to be very compassionate and helpful in every way.

The whole situation was such that a false rumour could destroy communal harmony and such rumours also spread in Nankana Sahib Region. A man from Niazi tribe who was settled in *Sandal Bar* during British rule, Mian Allah Bakash Khan Naizi narrated that Ata Ullah Khan Naizi¹⁶ S/O Jahan Khan Naizi from village 586 GB received a false rumour that both Hindu and Sikh communities burnt many houses of Muslims and also the central mosque of Nankana Sahib. He immediately prepared five hundred armed horse-riders to attack on Sikh and Hindu communities. They reached at “*Shora Khothi*” ground Nankana Sahib and created serious disturbance. After taking the notice of his arrival, magistrate Leasuris along with his force visited to see him out there. Following conversation took place between them:

Who are you?

I am Ata Ullah Khan Naizi B.A.

What is your purpose to come here?

I have come here to destroy Nankana Sahib.

What is the reason behind it?

Reason is this that both Hindus and Sikhs burnt the houses of Muslims and mosque also”.

It did not happen.

You are telling a lie. I do not trust you.

Who is your trust worthy?

I only trust Muslim League president Hakeem Muhammad Ashique Ali and Muslim councillor Sheikh Ghulam Mohio Din.¹⁷

He called upon both persons there. They told Naizi that both Hindu and Sikh communities created affray in the city but mosque remained safe. They just broke only one Muslim confectioner’s pots. Only then Naizi was relaxed and went back along with his men.¹⁸ The Naizi tribes were settled in district Lyallpur along with some other tribes such as Baloch tribe. During the British period to control all the warring tribes such as Kharal and Watto of the War of independence 1857. The settler tribes were under the influence of the British government, so they came to incite riots, but the local people understood the issue and did not allow the fight.

After the Rawalpindi incident, every section of the Sikhs, even if they had a soft corner for Pakistan, now wanted to make Nankana a part of India. Interestingly on the eve of partition, the Sikh community along with Hindu community left Nankana Sahib without considering their religious affinity with Baba Nanak’s birth place and important land holdings. Akhtar Sandhu also quoted the same thing in his book in Sardar Jagdish Singh’s words, all the communal problems were created by the political parties, otherwise the Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims were not concerned with such matters. They had a very peaceful life and lived in harmony. Ian Talbot opined that Sikhs missed the chance of a significant role in Pakistan’s public life that was impossible in a Hindu dominated India.¹⁹ Interestingly, in spite of the fear of violence during partition, no major communal violence occurred at mass level in tehsil Nankana Sahib. This ground reality had further negated the colonial narrative about *Sandal Bar* and its inhabitants that they were uncivilized, plunderer and uneducated. In case of partition and its after-effects, they performed an exemplary benchmark which showed high standards of humanity, civilization and protection. The record of 1947’s FIR supported the point of view raised in this study, which showed that only thirteen cases of murder were reported during the whole year. In year 1947, 169 FIR were registered in three registers included register No. 117(25-01-1947 to 31-05-1947), registered No. 103(01-06-1947 to 17-09-1947), and registered No. 2079(18-09-1947 to 27-12-1947) at *Thana Sadar* Nankana Sahib. Just thirteen FIR of 302(murder)

were reported, just one reported in Register No. 117 and six each in other two registers.²⁰ The nature of those cases was different from the context of partition. Mostly cases were registered on personal grounds rather than partition. Only two out of thirteen cases can be considered in that domain which happened on partition's grounds.

The main reason behind minimal violence was that Muslims and Sikhs jointly lived in villages and enjoyed cordial relations with each other. They shared a lot of commonalities in village life including "saints and legacy of their teachings, conversions within caste, feudal structure of the rural society based on economic prosperity, absence of political and publishing activities, fear of revenge as a mode of deterrence, pure nature of friendship or brotherhood, Panchayat, exchange of turban, communitarian dominance and folklore."²¹ Both the communities had the same folk-tales and attended the gatherings to enjoy the stories of Heer-Ranjha, Sassi-Punnu, and Sohni-Mahinwal. The Muslim-Sikh relations in British Punjab particularly in the rural areas during most of the colonial period remained exemplary.

The narrative has been supported by various interviews of the eye-witnesses, Sheikh Muhammad Hanif aged eighty-five years narrated that there was no violence in tehsil Nankana Sahib at mass level during partition because Sikhs and Hindus both were financially sound rather than Muslims and had good relations with the Muslim feudal, so Muslim elite facilitated and made arrangements for them to reach safe and sound at refugee camp which was established at gurdawara *Janamasthan*. Hindus and Sikhs migrated to East Punjab from Nankana Sahib within almost fifteen days.²² Nankana Sahib proved to be a place of refuge for Sikhs and Hindus of other parts or districts of Punjab. Moinder Singh Saini (Tumber) wrote his memoirs in this account in 2013 while living in the city Wolverhampton, England. He was born on 12th March 1935 at village Saini Bar, Nankana Sahib.

He narrated that all the Sikhs and Hindus of Nankana Sahib wanted Nankana Sahib should be a part of India but it did not happen. Master Tara Singh a prominent Sikh leader visited Nankana Sahib to support the freedom struggle. He politically motivated the non-Muslims to leave Nankana Sahib. When the boundary line between India and Pakistan was announced it was evident that Sikhs would have to leave their village and migrate to Indian side. The hate between Hindus and Muslims gathered momentum and riots started. Each Hindu village organised vigilant groups to guard the villages at night. The riots were erupted in the Punjab, so we were afraid of it and had many sleepless nights. In his native district Shiekhpora's remaining parts rather than tehsil Nankana Sahib, many Hindus were killed and their properties were looted. The villagers decided to leave the village and go to Nankana Sahib. They prepared their bullock carts, loaded their necessities and left the village unwillingly. They reached Nankana Sahib late in the evening and went into the Cotton Mill camp and stayed there for two weeks. Many other villagers also camped inside the mill. The villagers were very sad and all wanted to go back to their homes but it was in vain as the area was in the Pakistan part.²³ According to Manak Singh, there was no bloodshed at the time of partition and even before partition. Sikhs had friendly relationship with Muslims, so they did not face much resistance from locals when they were leaving Nankana Sahib in 1947. Politico-religious oligarchy has divided the lovers of love forever; peace, tolerance, shared history, heroes, religious tolerance, lovers of the arts had been segregated.

Mostly Hindus and Sikhs from Syedwala, Buchke, Chakook, and Chaindpur gathered at refugee camp at Nankana Sahib. Sheikh Mansoor narrated his father's account that large-scale violence did not occur in tehsil Nankana Sahib.²⁴ Government timely deployed

military forces to control law and order vigilantly. Refugee camps had been established at gurdawara *Janamasthan* and Government Guru Nanak High School which was adjacent to it. About forty thousand injured non-Muslims reached the Nankana camp through the train running between Lahore – Shorkot which passes through Nankana Sahib. They mostly hailed from districts including Faisalabad, Sahiwal and Jhang.²⁵ The Sikhs of Nankana Sahib and those who took refuge in camps of the tehsil used three routes to cross border, Ghanda Singh, Amritsar and Wagha.²⁶

The land of Baba Guru Nanak remained peaceful during partition when most parts of Punjab were burning in the flames of plundering, looting, and raping. Landlords as well as common Muslims of Nankana Sahib did not participate in exploiting the situation of outgoing migrants. They did not occupy their land and property even after their departure though they supported migrants in every way for reaching at refugee camp in Nankana Sahib. This shows that the people of Nankana Sahib were civilised and had high moral values. The Muslims of the region were mostly tolerant on the eve of partition.

Conclusion

The experience of Nankana Sahib during the Partition of Punjab demonstrates that the events of 1947 cannot be understood solely through narratives of indiscriminate communal violence. Although Punjab witnessed one of the largest episodes of forced migration and bloodshed in modern South Asian history, the case of Nankana Sahib reveals that local social structures, political leadership, and community values could significantly influence the course of Partition. Despite being one of the most sacred centres of Sikhism and home to a substantial Hindu and Sikh urban population, the tehsil experienced comparatively limited communal violence. The study suggests that several factors contributed to this outcome. The long-standing traditions of inter-communal coexistence, the intervention of local Muslim League leaders, and the support extended by influential Muslim landlords, and the prevailing belief that evacuee property belonged to incoming Muslim refugees rather than the local population collectively helped prevent widespread violence and looting. Government measures, including the timely deployment of security forces and the establishment of refugee camps, further facilitated the orderly evacuation of non-Muslim residents and the rehabilitation of displaced Muslims.

Nevertheless, Partition profoundly transformed Nankana Sahib. The migration of Hindus and Sikhs to India and the settlement of Muslim refugees from East Punjab fundamentally altered the tehsil's demographic composition, social hierarchy, and biraderi networks. A town once characterized by its religious diversity became overwhelmingly Muslim, while refugee rehabilitation reshaped patterns of landownership, commerce, and local society. The history of Nankana Sahib therefore offers an important local perspective on the Partition of Punjab. It demonstrates that experiences of Partition varied considerably across regions and were shaped by local social relations, political institutions, and cultural norms. By highlighting a case of comparatively peaceful coexistence amid widespread violence, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the Partition, challenging generalized interpretations and emphasizing the importance of regional studies in reconstructing the complex human experiences of 1947.

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³There are seven *Gurdwaras* in Nankana Sahib such as Janam Asthan or birth place of Nanak, Gurdwara Pati Sahib where Nanak had his first lesson, Gurdwara Bal Lila where Nanak played with his playmates in childhood. Other three Gurdwaras such as Mal Sahib, Tamboo Sahib and Kiara Sahib were constructed as sacred to the memory of the boy Nanak. The 7th one is Gurdwara of Hargobind was built in memory of the 6th Guru Hargobind visited and stayed this place while returning from the Kashmir valley about the year 1621-22. These Gurdwaras were originally got constructed by Baba Gurbakhsh Singh under orders of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

⁴A place where trade of goods was performed. Colonial rule established mandi towns adjacent to railway tracks for replacing ancient river based economy.

⁵ A bloody fight was fought on gurdwara's possession in 1921 between Mahant Narain Das(manager of Gurdwara Janam Asthan) and Sikhs.

⁶Ian Talbot,*Pakistan A New History* (Karachi:Oxford University Press,2014),25.

⁷Aitzaz Ahsan,*The Indus Saga And The Making Of Pakistan*(Karachi:Royal Book Company,2009),349.

⁸Testimony of Sardarni Basant Kaur,http://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Main_Pag_2

⁹Documentary, "Karwan e Azadi ke Gumnaam Musafir," Umer Farooq's Library, Dr Abdul Hai's residence,Bagh Wali Galli, Nankana Sahib.

¹⁰He was scholar of Ahl-e-Hadis sect. He was very popular among Muslims due to his speeches and knowledge. He played a vibrant role to motivate Muslims for Pakistan Movement. He also sent telegraphs to Viceroy and British Prime Minister on the arrival of Crips Mission (1942).

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