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<https://islamicreligious.com/index.php/Journal/index>Print ISSN: [3006-1296](#) Online ISSN: [3006-130X](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**From High Politics to Hyper-Locality: Spatiality and the Historiographical Fault Lines of the 1947 Partition****Dr. Adnan Tariq**

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[mahboobahmad@gcu.edu.pk](mailto:mahboobahmad@gcu.edu.pk)**Abstract**

*The historiography of the 1947 Partition of India has evolved through distinct epistemological shifts, each reconfiguring how South Asia's foundational rupture is conceptualized, archived, and remembered. Traditional historiography operated primarily through macro-teleological paradigms either cantering colonial haute politique or enforcing divergent Indian and Pakistani national narratives. Over the past three decades, however, scholarship has shifted toward subaltern memory, spatial micro-histories, and disaggregated analyses of communal violence. This paper argues that the central fault line running through Partition historiography is the tension between macro-scalar teleologies and micro-spatial realities, and that resolving this tension requires a fundamental shift toward new practices of archive-making one that moves beyond official colonial repositories to unearth the hidden avenues of localized agency, working-class dynamics, and everyday bureaucratic power that actually executed the division on the ground. By critically evaluating the historiographical trajectory across five major waves colonial memoirs, nationalist teleologies, subaltern and gendered turns, revisionist spatial micro-histories, and localized typologies of violence this study demonstrates that 1947 cannot be understood as a singular, uniform national event. Instead, it was an assemblage of localized, hyper-situational transformations where municipal power dynamics, occupational structures, and administrative complicities interacted to execute the rupture. Ultimately, this paper proposes a unified spatial-situational framework anchored in critical archive-making to open new avenues for historicizing the postcolonial state and its enduring borders.*

**Keywords:** *Partition Historiography, Archive-Making, Local History, Community Violence, Subaltern Studies, Retributive Genocide, Decolonization*

**Introduction**

The Partition of British India in 1947 stands as one of the most violent and transformative ruptures of the twentieth century, displacing an estimated 12.5 million people across the former empire and claiming close to a million lives (Ahmad, 2011; Khan, 2007). Beyond its sheer human toll, Partition shattered the socio-spatial matrix of the subcontinent, fundamentally reconfiguring its civilization, politics, and postcolonial state trajectories (Kudaisya & Tan, 2000; Pandey, 2001). As vast as the physical trauma was, the historiographical tradition designed to explain it has proven equally complex, giving rise to an expansive literature that now constitutes a vital object of scholarly inquiry in its own right.

For decades, dominant accounts approached the event from the top down, treating the dismemberment of British India as an inevitable byproduct of constitutional breakdown, imperial haste, or high-level ideological polarization.

However, reading Partition solely through imperial summits or broad national frameworks produces severe analytical distortions. The core argument running through this paper is that Partition historiography has reached an impasse between macro-level theories and micro-level realities, and that uncovering the hidden avenues of 1947 demands an innovative approach to archive-making—one that actively constructs new empirical repositories out of local land registries, police station logs, oral testimonies, and vernacular records to reveal how ground-level actors actually operationalized the rupture. To grasp what occurred on the ground, historical analysis must move fluidly between national frameworks and micro-localities, interrogating how localized socio-political inheritances produced radically uneven outcomes across regions (Talbot, 2006).

To trace this intellectual evolution, this study evaluates five thematic shifts in Partition scholarship: the early genre of colonial memoirs and political autobiographies; the divergent nationalist teleologies of India and Pakistan; the academic turn toward subaltern, gendered, and bureaucratic experience; the revisionist spatial turn toward the micro-locality; and modern efforts to disaggregate Partition violence. Through this critical synthesis, the paper demonstrates how local spatial topographies, occupational networks, and administrative complicities interacted to execute what macro-theories too often flatten into spontaneous madness or generalized ethnic cleansing.

#### **Official Epistemologies and Haute Politique: The Colonial Archival Legacy**

The earliest historiographical layer of Partition was compiled by British colonial officials and elite political figures who directly participated in the transfer of power, producing a literature dominated by memoirs, state commentary, and administrative accounts centered on haute politique (Chawla, 2009). British officials consistently emphasized the conservative caution and professional neutrality of their administration amid extraordinary emergency conditions. By framing communal violence as an endemic, indigenous phenomenon that erupted once imperial authority was withdrawn, these accounts retroactively cast indigenous political actors as the primary instigators of the tragedy while shielding the imperial state from administrative culpability (Chawla, 2012). They systematically minimized structural colonial failures, such as the rapid acceleration of the transfer timeline, the delayed release of the Radcliffe Award, and the strategic deployment of military assets to protect European lives rather than civilian populations.

Despite their self-serving framing, these official memoirs remain indispensable primary sources for modern historiography. They preserve crucial records of high-level administrative deliberations, intelligence reports, and official perceptions that later generations of critical scholars have had to reconstruct (Chawla, 2009). Modern revisionist scholarship does not discard this colonial archive; rather, it reads these documents against the grain of their authors' original intentions to demonstrate how imperial anxieties and institutional paralysis directly shaped the ground-level mechanics of division. This early genre established an enduring administrative bias that prioritized summit-level diplomacy over local realities, initiating a macro-scalar teleology that underscores the urgent necessity of creating alternative, community-centered archives.

### **Nationalizing 1947: Teleological Binary Narratives**

As indigenous historical writing emerged, Partition historiography fragmented along strict national lines, transforming historical interpretation into an extension of postcolonial state building in both India and Pakistan. In Pakistan, official scholarship aligned with the ideological imperatives of the Pakistan Movement, framing 1947 as the teleological realization of Muslim self-determination under the Two-Nation Theory. This perspective depicted the Indian National Congress and the British colonial state as aligned actors working to marginalize South Asian Muslims, placing the onus for political failure on Congress leadership. Pakistani accounts focused heavily on anti-Muslim atrocities in East Punjab and the princely states, supported by vernacular collections such as Murtaza Khan Maikush's (1948) documentation of East Punjabi Muslim massacres. While Maikush (1948) operated outside formal academic institutions, his compilation of eyewitness testimony represented an early, grassroots form of archive-making that provided critical empirical evidence of non-Muslim political and state-level complicity.

Conversely, early mainstream Indian nationalist historiography framed Partition as a tragic sabotage of a unified anti-colonial movement, placing primary culpability on the All-India Muslim League and British "divide and rule" strategies. Indian narratives produced a largely one-sided account of Partition violence, focusing almost exclusively on attacks against non-Muslims in West Punjab, Rawalpindi, and Sindh, while downplaying the widespread violence perpetrated against Muslim populations in East Punjab and Bihar. Both nationalisms shared a fundamental analytical flaw: they flattened complex, highly localized urban and rural dynamics into a uniform, subcontinental communal script. By reducing 1947 to a broad ideological contest, these nationalist teleologies erased the situational economic, occupational, and spatial mechanics that actually determined how neighbor turned against neighbor at the micro-level.

### **The Academic Break: Subalternity, Gender, and Bureaucratic Violence**

The publication of the multi-volume *Transfer of Power* archival series in the 1960s catalyzed a major shift toward professional academic scholarship, marking a decisive break from colonial memoirs and nationalist polemics. Scholars gained access to unprecedented documentary evidence, enabling them to decenter high politics and reframe Partition around regional variation, subaltern agency, and human suffering. This academic turn recognized that Partition was not a singular, completed event, but an ongoing process whose human margins—defined by gender, class, community, and locality—demanded rigorous interrogation. Scholars shifted their focus to provincial realities, demonstrating that the mechanics of 1947 in Punjab and Bengal could not be generalized to regions like Sindh, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, or Tripura.

This regionalized lens revealed radically different ground-level realities across the subcontinent. Yasmin Khan (2007) examined Uttar Pradesh, showing how state authorities and right-wing organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Hindu Mahasabha treated incoming non-Muslim refugees with hostility due to deep linguistic and ethnic friction rather than automatic religious solidarity. Romola Sanyal (2014) investigated post-partition Calcutta, uncovering an internal fault line where displaced East Bengali Hindus asserted political dominance over existing urban spaces, reconfiguring the postcolonial city. In contrast, studies of Tripura highlighted state-assisted refugee integration facilitated by a shared Bengali linguistic identity, demonstrating how cultural commonality could soften religious divides. Meanwhile, Sarah Ansari (2005) traced the chaotic settlement of Urdu-

speaking Muhajirs in Sindh, illustrating how administrative resource deficits laid the groundwork for enduring postcolonial ethnic tensions.

Alongside regional micro-histories, academic scholarship introduced powerful theoretical models that re-evaluated violence, memory, and state power. Gyanendra Pandey (2001) argued that Partition violence was not an accidental breakdown of civilization or temporary madness, but a constitutive element of modern nation-state formation and national identity. Urvashi Butalia (1998) as well as Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (1998) pioneered an entirely new methodology of oral archive-making, centering the silenced experiences of women, children, and lower castes to expose how patriarchal violence operated both inter-communally through abductions and intra-communally through "honor killings". Expanding on the long-term impact of displacement, studies on Punjabi migrants in postpartition Delhi demonstrated how refugees rebuilt their lives through self-reliance while navigating official neglect and local urban hostility. Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar (2007) conceptualized "The Long Partition," using ethnographic archive-making in Delhi and Karachi to prove that state power was consolidated through mundane bureaucratic violence—such as evacuee property laws, permit systems, and passport controls—that forcibly fixed fluid borderland identities into rigid national citizenship. Finally, Muhammad Iqbal Chawla (2009, 2012) challenged the viceregal scapegoating of Lord Mountbatten, showing that ground-level violence resulted from long-standing structural decay within the colonial police and military apparatus rather than the decisions of a single official.

#### **The Revisionist Spatial Turn: Micro-Locality as an Analytic Unit**

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, Partition historiography underwent an explicit revisionist spatial turn, establishing the micro-locality—the city, district, neighborhood, or agricultural tract—as a primary unit of historical analysis. Rather than treating space as a neutral backdrop, spatial revisionism recognized locality as an active theoretical parameter with its own logic of scale, social organization, and historical agency. Gyanesh Kudaisya and Tai Yong Tan (2000) pioneered this approach by mapping how Partition transformed the major capital cities of undivided India, tracing urban structural shifts and comparative post-colonial developments.

Building on this framework, Ian Talbot (2006) conducted a landmark comparative study of Lahore and Amritsar, illustrating how communalized municipal politics, spatial intimidation, and arson transformed mixed urban neighborhoods into segregated enclaves. Pippa Virdee (2018) extended this micro-spatial framework to Ludhiana and Lyallpur, demonstrating how local industrial structures and agrarian economies dictated the speed and long-term socio-economic impact of refugee rehabilitation. Similarly, Ilyas Chatha (2011) centered the district locality in his research on Sialkot and Gujranwala, detailing how Muslim perpetrators targeted non-Muslim minorities and how post-Partition local reconstruction was built directly upon confiscated real estate and commercial assets. By centering the locality, these scholars proved that macro-political mandates were always mediated, reinterpreted, and executed through pre-existing local social fabrics.

#### **Epistemologies of Violence: Disaggregating Communal Cleansing**

The most recent historiographical development applies spatial revisionism directly to the mechanics of Partition violence, treating conflict not as a single undifferentiated catastrophe, but as a hyper-local phenomenon whose character varied fundamentally across topographies. Generalized frameworks that stretch across all of India fail to capture how violence operated on the ground, obscuring the local logics that activated communal claims. To rigorously

historicize 1947, scholarship must disaggregate violence along four essential axes: regional/spatial variation, the specific typology of force (riots, one-sided ethnic cleansing, or massacres), the distinction between organized paramilitary action and spontaneous crowd violence, and the degree of state or administrative complicity (Ahmad, 2011; Brass, 2003). These spatial dynamics produced radically different forms of conflict across the subcontinent. On the Pothohar plateau in northern Punjab, the massacres at Kahuta and Pir Sohawa arose from deep-rooted rural antagonisms that were militarized by recently demobilized World War II veterans who brought tactical organization to village assaults (Ahmad, 2011). In southern Punjab, the Dera Ghazi Khan region witnessed organized tribal raids against non-Muslim traders, driven by the desire to liquidate agrarian debt registers. In central Punjab cities like Lahore and Amritsar, violence took the form of urban terrorism—random street stabbings and strategic arson aimed at panicking non-Muslims into flight (Ahmad, 2011; Talbot, 2006). Arson targeted real estate so effectively that few bodies were found in burned structures, as residents fled long before buildings were set alight. Meanwhile, in the princely states of Punjab, such as Patiala and Kapurthala, disproportionately high mortality rates resulted from state-assisted or state-directed ethnic cleansing, which cannot be reduced to ordinary civil rioting (Brass, 2003).

This localized heterogeneity exposes major analytical fault lines in Paul R. Brass's (2003) influential theory of retributive genocide. Brass (2003) derived his periodization of retributive violence largely from Punjab Governor Sir Evan Jenkins's administrative reports, which were compiled at the end of July 1947 when the recorded death toll in Punjab stood at roughly 4,632. Applying a theoretical model built on pre-August data to the post-Radcliffe Award explosion—where casualties reached hundreds of thousands—creates serious chronological distortions. Furthermore, retributive models assume a roughly symmetrical chain of mutual action and reaction across groups. In reality, post-August violence operated through unbalanced reactive escalation, where local events were magnified by national political slogans, rumors, and panic. Rather than a simple retributive trigger, violence was sustained by local actors capitalizing on the national crisis to achieve immediate economic and spatial objectives—such as seizing land, commercial property, and urban real estate (Chatha, 2011). Ian Talbot (2006) noted that the All-India Muslim League's official silence regarding the early 1947 Pothohar massacres signaled to local perpetrators that violence would go unpunished, helping ignite the wider Punjabi powder keg. While compelling, this macro-level thesis must be linked directly to micro-level socio-political dynamics to explain how national statements translated into vastly different local crowd behaviors. For example, street violence in Lahore ceased by March 11, 1947, and did not recur in riot form, whereas Amritsar experienced continuous urban warfare through July, and Gurgaon and Delhi faced repeated raids by rural bands (Talbot, 2006).

Disaggregating violence reveals the precise class and occupational dynamics driving local purgation. Ilyas Chatha (2011) demonstrated how blacksmith guilds in Gujranwala manufactured weapons and actively participated in attacks, emerging as primary economic beneficiaries of minority expulsion. A similar analytical lens applied to Lahore exposes how local wrestlers (pehelwans), lower-level magistrates, and police officers formed tactical alliances to engineer neighborhood-level panic (Ahmad, 2011). As Lahore's Deputy Commissioner John Eustace reported to Lord Mountbatten, the crowd in Lahore exhibited a specialized "mob psychology" that required granular sociological analysis. Uncovering these hidden avenues requires a deliberate process of new archive-making—assembling municipal

land registers, court cases, local police station logs (Daily Diaries or Roznamchas), and neighborhood oral histories. Reconstructing these micro-spaces demonstrates how pre-partition social friction and economic ambitions were systematically weaponized by organized local actors to clear non-Muslim communities completely from the city.

### **Critical Archive-Making and Uncovering Hidden Avenues**

The critical synthesis of Partition historiography leads to a fundamental conclusion: traditional colonial and national archives are structurally incapable of explaining the actual ground-level mechanics of 1947. Because official repositories were built to preserve state power, high-level diplomatic records, and viceregal correspondence, they inherently obscure the hidden avenues where local actors negotiated, executed, and benefited from the partition process. To develop a truly new understanding of Partition, historical scholarship must engage in a deliberate, rigorous practice of new archive-making. This process involves actively seeking out, compiling, and analyzing non-traditional primary sources that have remained hidden in local municipal offices, police stations, district courts, and private family holdings. New archive-making allows historians to uncover hidden avenues of inquiry that redefine our understanding of South Asia's division: District Police Station Records (Roznamchas): Local police station daily logs contain immediate, unedited reports of neighborhood stabbings, arson attacks, and crowd movements. Analyzing these records reveals the exact temporal and spatial progression of violence, exposing how local police officers actively colluded with perpetrators or chose to ignore calls for assistance. Municipal Property and Land Registries: Urban real estate registers and rural land records document the transfer of property before, during, and immediately after 1947. Mapping these records exposes the economic drivers of Partition, proving that much of the local violence was targeted directly at liquidating debt records, seizing prime commercial shops, and acquiring urban real estate. Custodian of Evacuee Property Files: State administrative records regarding "evacuee property" reveal the bureaucratic machinery that institutionalized the displacement of minorities. These files document how postcolonial states converted private property claims into permanent instruments of state allocation, favoring political elites and transforming urban sociology. Vernacular Pamphlets and Community Tracts: Local language publications, political flyers, and community memoirs—such as Murtaza Khan Maikush's (1948) compilation—preserve the immediate ideological claims, rumors, and local political motivations that animated grassroots mobilization. Oral and Ethnographic Archives: Systematic oral histories with survivors, lower-level municipal workers, and subaltern community members provide indispensable evidence regarding gendered trauma, intra-community dynamics, and personal choices that official state documents systematically suppressed. By integrating these diverse sources into a new, multi-layered archive, historians can move beyond the false dichotomy between top-down political failure and bottom-up irrational madness. This new archive-making reveals that Partition was carried out through an intricate web of localized partnerships. High-political decisions created an administrative vacuum, but it was local occupational guilds, neighborhood strongmen, corrupt magistrates, and police officers who actively used that vacuum to achieve immediate spatial and economic dominance. Constructing this new archive provides the empirical foundation necessary to build a truly situational, ground-level mechanics of 1947.

### **Conclusion**

This study has mapped the historiographical trajectory of the 1947 Partition of India, tracing its evolution from conservative colonial memoirs and polemical nationalist scripts to

subaltern oral histories, spatial micro-histories, and disaggregated analyses of violence. Each wave of scholarship has added vital layers to our understanding of South Asia's foundational trauma. However, evaluating these approaches reveals that no single trend can comprehend Partition in isolation. The crucial task for contemporary scholarship is to bridge the remaining fault lines in the literature by pioneering new practices of archive-making that illuminate the hidden avenues of local agency and state power.

The central argument running through this paper establishes that Partition was neither a purely top-down administrative breakdown nor an indiscriminate eruption of spontaneous religious madness; it was a deeply spatialized, situational process where macro-political collapse was operationalized through localized class interests, occupational networks, and micro-urban topographies. High-political decisions created the structural vacuum, but local actors—from municipal strongmen and occupational guilds to complicit local magistrates—executed the actual purgation of space to capture real estate, land, and economic dominance. Developing a truly original understanding of 1947 requires moving beyond the elite colonial repository to build new, non-traditional archives out of vernacular literature, district-level administrative files, municipal property transfers, and subaltern memories. By adopting an inclusive, multi-scalar framework that connects summit diplomacy directly to neighborhood-level mechanics, future historical inquiry can overcome inherited ideological biases. Recognizing how local spatial realities mediated national mandates allows historians to historicize the postcolonial state, its physical borders, and its enduring spatial memories with far greater empirical precision and theoretical rigor.

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