



Communal dynamics and the tribal invasion: Tracing the roots of 1947 violence in Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract

Jammu and Kashmir faced a major turning point in October 1947 when tribal militias, backed by Pakistan, invaded the region. This led to widespread violence, especially targeting minorities living along the western borders of the princely state. As a result, the minorities were forced to leave the region completely. Around 35,000 families were displaced during this time. Today, they are known as the Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir Displaced Persons (PoJK DPs). Although partition literature talks about many kinds of violence during 1947, the violence that happened in Jammu and Kashmir during the tribal invasion has mostly been ignored. This study focuses on understanding the reasons of violence in Jammu and Kashmir in 1947. It tries to find out whether the violence was entirely brought in by the invading tribal militias or if local people, driven by communal hatred, also played a role in supporting it. The research will use different primary and secondary sources. Interviews with survivors and witnesses, as well as personal memoirs, will be an important part of the study.

Keywords: Tribal invasion, 1947 violence, Jammu and Kashmir, communal dynamics, displaced persons (PoJK DPs)

Introduction

Jammu and Kashmir, positioned at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, has long held a crucial place in the region's history and politics. Before 1947, it was one of the largest princely states under British paramountcy, ruled by the Dogra dynasty for almost a century. The political landscape of the state was complex, as it was a Muslim-majority region governed by a Hindu monarch. In October 1947, this fragile balance was shattered when tribal militias from Pakistan launched an armed invasion, forcing Maharaja Hari Singh to seek military assistance from India. The event led to the signing of the Instrument of Accession, marking a pivotal moment in the history of Jammu and Kashmir and setting the stage for a conflict that continues to shape the region today.

During the Dogra rule, there was a persistent resistance from the Muslim population in Jammu and Kashmir, which reached its peak during the reign of Maharaja Hari Singh. His rule witnessed the emergence of organisations like the Muslim Conference and the National Conference^[1], both of which opposed his authority^[2]. The National Conference, led by Sheikh Abdullah, aligned itself with the Indian National Congress and gained strong support in the Kashmir Valley. On the other hand, the Muslim Conference, which represented the interests of Muslims in the Jammu region, maintained close ties with the Muslim League.

After the Partition of India in 1947, these divisions deepened—while the National Conference advocated for Jammu and Kashmir's accession to India, the Muslim Conference pushed for the state to join Pakistan. However, Maharaja Hari Singh chose to remain independent, refusing to join either India or Pakistan^[3]. Pakistan, viewing Jammu and Kashmir as a Muslim-majority state, sought its integration into Pakistan. A section of the Muslim population also supported this idea.

As Maharaja Hari Singh began to show an inclination

towards India, Pakistan responded by organising tribal militias to invade the state. On 21 October 1947, Pashtun tribesmen, supported by Pakistan, launched an invasion of Jammu and Kashmir. This invasion led to widespread violence, including the mass murder and forced exodus of Hindu and Sikh minorities. The violence spread across north-western districts such as Muzaffarabad, Poonch, and Mirpur, continuing for weeks until the minority populations were either killed or fled to safer areas. In response to these atrocities, Maharaja Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession to India on 26 October 1947^[4].

After a year of armed conflict, a significant portion of the state's western border fell under Pakistani control, an area now known as Pakistan-Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK). The people displaced from these regions came to be known as PoJK displaced persons (DPs), marking the beginning of a prolonged struggle for their rehabilitation and recognition.

This study aims to delve into the origins of communal violence in Jammu and Kashmir, going beyond the tribal invasion of 1947 to examine the deeper causes. It seeks to understand the dynamics of Hindu-Muslim relations before the tribal invasion. The research will utilise a diverse range of primary and secondary sources, with special emphasis on interviews with witnesses and personal memoirs.

Scale of violence

The tribal invasion brought unparalleled devastation to the minorities of Pakistan-Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK). Non-Muslim communities became victims of extreme violence, including rapes, murders, torture, and kidnappings. The scale of the violence was so catastrophic that the non-Muslims were either brutally killed or forced to flee to safer areas. According to the 1941 Census of India, the religious population distribution in these areas is detailed in Table 1^[5].

Table 1: Population composition in the regions under illegal occupation of Pakistan

S No.	Region	Total Pop.	Hindu	Muslim	Sikh
1	Mirpur	386655	63576	310880	12111
2	Poonch	421828	24137	382722	14877
3	Muzaffarabad	264671	5846	245858	12922
4	Astore	17026	113	16878	30
5	Gilgit (leased area)	22485	108	22296	70
6	Gilgit agency	76526	74	76427	21

In addition to the local population, thousands of Hindu and Sikh refugees who had fled violence in Pakistan were living in the region. They all became the prime targets of tribal invaders. The severity of violence was because of the trained militias armed with modern weapons like rifles, mortars, and grenades supplied by Pakistan^[6]. The violence was not merely spontaneous but had elements of state sponsorship, leading to catastrophic consequences. Reports indicate that over 38,000 Hindus and Sikhs lost their lives, with some estimates placing the death toll at nearly 50,000. The displacement crisis was equally severe. According to records maintained by the Provincial Rehabilitation Officer, more than 30,000 families were uprooted from their homes. Among them, 26,319 families sought refuge within Jammu and Kashmir, while 5,460 families registered as displaced in other parts of India^[7].

Mirpur witnessed one of the most horrifying attacks in the region, orchestrated by Pakistan-backed militias. The capture of the towns of Bhimber and Kotli in Mirpur district severed the crucial road link to Jammu^[8]. According to Dr Gupta, "We, the residents of Mirpur, were cut off from all sides and surrounded by Pak-sponsored guerrillas. There had been no supply of fresh vegetables for over six weeks from the neighboring villages. Fortunately, there were adequate stocks of food grains in the town, and almost every household had a milch animal to supply milk for the children. We had a very cohesive society and cared for each other, including the refugees. Gurudwaras and temples opened up their reserves to feed and accommodate the refugees^[9]." Mirpur became the site of a horrific massacre. Out of 25,000 people, who had gathered from surrounding areas, nearly 18,000 unarmed civilians, including women and children, were brutally murdered in cold blood^[10].

In Rajouri town, around 11,000 people had gathered, but only about 100 managed to survive and reach Jammu. In a heart-wrenching incident, women and girls consumed poisoned *halva* to end their lives and protect their dignity from the attackers^[11]. The violence extended to several towns in the Poonch district, including Sudhnutti, Bagh, Rawalakot, and Hajira, where massacres took place. Over 40,000 refugees sought shelter in Poonch town. Their evacuation took more than a year due to the presence of rioters, surrounding the town^[12].

Roots of violence

For centuries, Hindus and Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir shared a complex yet intertwined social and cultural existence. While parts of the Jammu province had significant Hindu populations, the majority of regions like Muzaffarabad, Mirpur, Poonch, and the frontier districts were predominantly Muslim. These areas later became central battlegrounds during the tribal invasion of October 1947. However, the roots of communal discord in the state can be traced back to the early 1930s. This period witnessed

a gradual rise in sectarian tensions, marked by sporadic riots, inflammatory rhetoric, and attacks on religious sites. The issue of religious conversions also deepened the divide. Movements like Shuddhi, which sought to reconvert Muslims and other non-Hindus to Hinduism, gained ground in certain areas of Jammu, fostering fear and resentment within the Muslim community^[13].

There were also incidents that further strained relations, such as cases of disrespect towards the Muslim holy book, which sparked communal riots^[14]. Additionally, disputes between Hindus and Muslims over access to a water tank on the eve of Eid created further divisions between the communities^[15].

On June 21, 1931, a man named Abdul Qadir incited violence against Hindus during a public speech and was subsequently arrested. His trial led to widespread protests, during which many Muslims were killed in police firing. This sparked mass riots, resulting in attacks on Hindu shops, the destruction of temples, and harassment of passersby, regardless of gender^[16]. In response, Hindus retaliated in areas where they were in the majority. The anti-moneylender movement also escalated into anti-Hindu riots in places like Mirpur, Bhimber, Kotli, and Poonch. In 1932, around 677 houses belonging to non-Muslims were destroyed, although they were later rebuilt by the government, as noted in the administrative report of 1933^[17]. These incidents of communal riots also occurred in the year of 1947 before the tribal invasion, highlighting the strained relations between the communities during that period.

The divide between communities deepened as the Muslim Conference and National Conference opposed the Maharaja, with Hindus often viewed as sympathisers of the Maharaja. This political tension contributed to the growing communal divide, which also began to influence Hindu-Muslim relations in Jammu and Kashmir. While historical accounts suggest that there was an element of communal hostility, the testimonies from real-time witnesses interviewed for this study paint a different picture.

Several eyewitnesses and survivors recalled a time when relations between Hindus and Muslims in the region were marked by mutual respect and social harmony. They spoke of a shared community life where people from both faiths regularly visited one another's homes, participated in each other's festivals, and maintained close personal bonds. As one interviewee recounted, 'There was no sense of hostility between us. We lived like neighbours, friends, and companions. Muslims came to our homes during Hindu festivals, and we visited them during their celebrations. Greetings, good wishes, and gifts were freely exchanged.' These memories reflect a period of coexistence that stood in sharp contrast to the violence that unfolded later. However, during the tribal invasion, many locals sided with the invaders, though some remained loyal to their friends from non-Muslim community. Several interviewees recounted how locals provided information to the rioters, while others helped their Hindu neighbours to escape the violence. These mixed accounts suggest that, while some individuals supported the rioters, others showed great courage and solidarity in times of crisis.

Discussion

Communal violence during the Partition of India was a subcontinent-wide tragedy, but in Jammu and Kashmir, the

narrative often focuses on two specific episodes: the violence in Jammu and the tribal invasion of October 1947. This narrow lens tends to overlook the deeper causes of the unrest, particularly the communal tensions that had been simmering for years before Partition.

The tribal invasion undoubtedly unleashed brutal violence in the region, but it did not occur in a vacuum. It was, in many ways, an eruption of pre-existing communal anxieties and hostilities. This raises a critical question: Was the violence simply brought in by the tribal invaders from outside, or did it also reflect long-standing divisions within local society? To answer this, it is important to examine earlier instances of communal conflict and the political climate of the time. Oral histories gathered from survivors reveal a mixed picture. Some accounts mention local support for the tribal raiders, while others emphasize the peaceful coexistence between communities prior to 1947. However, most of these recollections come from individuals who were children at the time, which naturally limits their understanding of the broader political and social dynamics. Many of them also lived in rural areas, perhaps shielded from the communal tensions and outbreaks of violence that were more pronounced in the towns and urban centers.

Nevertheless, the available evidence suggests that communal mistrust and animosity already existed before the invasion, though its intensity varied across regions. This underlying hostility contributed to how quickly violence escalated when the tribal forces entered the state. The events of October 1947 were not solely the result of an external attack; they were part of a broader pattern of Partition-era violence, reflecting deep-rooted divisions that had been growing for years.

Conclusion

The violence in Jammu and Kashmir during the 1947 tribal invasion was not just caused by the invaders themselves. It was also rooted in the communal hatred that had been growing in society for years. Although the tribal militias brought violence into the region, the existing political and communal tensions made it easier for the violence to spread quickly and on a large scale. This hatred between communities, which had been building up before Partition, played an important role in triggering and fueling the attacks. Therefore, the violence of 1947 was not a simple case of outside invasion—it was the result of both external aggression and deep internal divisions. These long-standing communal tensions made Jammu and Kashmir especially vulnerable to such a tragic conflict.

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