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C O N T E N T S

From the Editors' Desk		1
ARTICLES		
Türkiye-Pakistan Strategic Partnership: Between Geopolitical Convergence and Identity Politics	<i>Md.Muddassir Quamar</i>	3
Resistance in Myanmar: Shaping New Political Realities in the Post Coup Era	<i>Munmun Majumdar</i>	31
Indian Diaspora's Role in Promoting Cultural Diplomacy in Central Asia	<i>Madhusmita Rout</i>	47
Regional Trade Agreements: Redefining Global Trade Networks in a Stagnant WTO Era	<i>Ajay Kumar Mishra & Shraddha Rishi</i>	60
Jammu and Kashmir's Changed Militancy Landscape: The Rise of Hybrid Militancy	<i>Toseef Ahmad Bhat</i>	82
STRATEGIC ESSAY		
Revisiting the Gurdaspur Award: Myths, Misconceptions and the Question of Kashmir's Accession	<i>Amit Krishankant Paul</i>	95
OPINION		
Bangladesh's Garment Industry: Between Empowerment and Exploitation	<i>Faiza Rizwan</i>	107
Bangladesh's Unfinished Revolution: Broken Promises, Rising Instability and Strained Ties with New Delhi	<i>Imran Khurshid</i>	114
BOOK REVIEW		
<i>Middle of Diamond India: National Renaissance through Participation and Enterprise</i> by Shashank Mani	<i>Harsh Pandey</i>	124

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Revisiting the Gurdaspur Award: Myths, Misconceptions and the Question of Kashmir's Accession

Amit Krishankant Paul*

Abstract

This essay examines one of the most persistent claims regarding the Radcliffe Commission's alleged manipulation of the Punjab Boundary Award to grant India three tehsils of Gurdaspur, Batala, and Pathankot from Gurdaspur district, thereby helping it secure a land corridor to influence and facilitate Jammu and Kashmir's accession to India. Drawing upon primary sources, contemporary testimonies, and post-Partition accounts from both Indian and Pakistani officials, the study challenges the assumption of a deliberate cartographic conspiracy, arguing that Pakistan's own rejection of the notional partition plan and its insistence on tehsil-wise rather than district-wise demarcation shaped the outcome of the Gurdaspur Award. It further situates the decision within the context of the Wavell Boundary Demarcation Plan of 1946 and the overriding geographical and administrative logic of protecting Amritsar from encirclement. The analysis concludes that while there is a lack of empirical evidence linking the Gurdaspur Award to Kashmir's eventual accession with India, driven by Pakistan's tribal invasion, there is a need to reframe the historiography of partition beyond conspiratorial interpretations and towards a more evidence-based understanding of decision-making in 1947.



Introduction

Despite the absence of contemporaneous

evidence, it has often been argued that the Radcliffe Commission, or the Punjab Boundary Commission Award, was altered to give India

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three tehsils of Gurdaspur District — namely Gurdaspur, Batala and Pathankot — in order to secure a road link with Kashmir. However, a closer examination of the details of gerrymandering around the newly drawn border between the two successor states of British India reveals that, in seeking additional territory and the encirclement of Amritsar, Pakistan not only rejected the notional partition plan which allocated Gurdaspur to it but was also forewarned about the possibility of the entire district being awarded to India even before the final pronouncement. This article delves into the debate surrounding the often-repeated claims of the Pakistani establishment that the British colonial authorities favoured India when it came to the partition of Punjab to enable it to secure Kashmir.

The Question of Gurdaspur and the Punjab Boundary Commission

In 1947, the only railway line to the State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) ran between Jammu and Sialkot. Its two main roads—the Jhelum Valley Road (Rawalpindi-Muzaffarabad-Baramulla-Srinagar) and the Old Mughal Road (Sialkot-Jammu-Banihal-Srinagar)—also ran through West Pakistan. With rivers and timber

transport from the state flowing into West Pakistan, it rendered J&K heavily dependent on it. By contrast, only an unmetalled road connected Madhopur in Pathankot, the Hindu majority tehsil of Gurdaspur District, with Kathua in Jammu across the Ravi River. Pathankot was also the nearest railhead from India. The other three *tehsils* or subdivisions of the district—Gurdaspur, Batala and Shakargarh—lacked any direct connection to Kashmir.

According to the 1941 census, which formed the basis for the Radcliffe Commission's partition plan, Batala and Gurdaspur had Muslim majority populations of 55 per cent and 52.1 per cent, respectively, while Pathankot had a 61 per cent Hindu population. However, with Shakargarh included, the entire district had an evenly divided population with a slim Muslim majority of 51 per cent.¹ Consequently, Jinnah anticipated that if the entire Gurdaspur District went to Pakistan, Maharaja Hari Singh of Kashmir would naturally have to lean towards it as and when the question of the princely state's accession arose.² However, the Radcliffe Award of 17 August 1947 allocated Shakargarh to Pakistan and the other three tehsils to India.

Being contiguous to the Princely State, even though India could have

built a new road connecting Bhadarwa and Kishtwar in J&K via Chamba and Dalhousie in Himachal Pradesh, there is no denying the fact that the absence of three tehsils, particularly Pathankot, would have made road connectivity between mainland India and Kashmir more challenging. Lord Mountbatten, then and the last Viceroy of British India, recalled:

"Radcliffe let us in for an awful lot of trouble by making it possible for them to accede to India. If he hadn't made that award, the Maharaja would really have had no option but to join Pakistan. This would have meant they wouldn't have had to put the tribes in. There would have been no fears of massacre and you wouldn't have had to send the troops in. The pressures on the Maharaja would have been built to where he had to accede to Pakistan. I never discussed this with Radcliffe- it never occurred to me that he would be influenced by this question of Kashmir having to accede. That double crosser Mudie giving away Abell's note gave rise to the claim that I, as Viceroy had brought improper pressure to bear on Radcliffe on behalf of my future dominion, as Governor-General designate of India, to open up this route to make it possible for them

*to join us. I am sure Radcliffe had no notion of the consequences."*³

The suspicion of any conspiracy to ensure the award of the three Gurdaspur tehsils to India with an eye on Kashmir has been refuted by both Sir Cyril Radcliffe, the chairman of the Commission, and Justice Mehr Chand Mahajan, a member of the Commission.⁴ The claim that it pressured the Hindu ruler of Muslim-majority Kashmir to accede to India is misconceived because the accession of the state was not even in contemplation at that time. Even when the accession occurred subsequently, it was the Pakistani tribal invasion that threatened the state's existence, rather than Gurdaspur, that became a key factor influencing Hari Singh's decision. The Maharaja had ample opportunity to accede to either of the dominions of Pakistan and India, even before the Boundary Commission's award, which he chose not to.

While the award of the Gurdaspur tehsils later facilitated India in consolidating its position and improving connectivity with Jammu and Kashmir, it did not provide any immediate advantage in the run-up to the accession, nor did India use roads in that district to facilitate the movement of military personnel to Kashmir. Instead, Indian forces were

airlifted to Srinagar on 27 October 1947, a day after Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession (26 October 1947). In fact, the poor condition of the Modhopur-Kathua dirt road even led Home Minister Sardar Patel to initially hesitate in executing a Standstill Agreement, despite the Radcliffe Award having been announced. His Private Secretary, Vishnu Shankar, confirms that Sardar Patel:

had even gone to the extent of declining to conclude a standstill agreement though offered by Sir Janak Singh, feeling that until a road link had been established he would not be able to effectively implement such an arrangement. He, however did authorise on his own, the then Chief Engineer B S Puri to improve the condition of the Modhopur -Kathua road so as to provide such a link. The work was taken in hand and substantial progress had been made by the time we were over taken by the events of October 1947⁵.

H.V. Hodson, noted Journalist and British Civil Servant known for his role in documenting the events of India and Pakistan, writes:

'The innuendo of the Pakistani allegation has been sharpened and embittered by the claim than an important variation concerning the Gurdaspur district deliberately gave

India a route into Kashmir. There is a high degree of myth in this also. The two main routes into Kashmir, via Rawalpindi and Murree and via Sialkot and the Banihal Pass would in any case have gone to Pakistan. The Pathankot tehsil, which on any showing would have gone to India, had at that time no good road into Kashmir and Jammu, nor had the Gurdaspur tehsil, which, if it had gone to Pakistan, could have been bypassed by India in developing a new route into the State via Pathankot. The decisive action at the opening of the Kashmir warfare was accomplished by India with an airlift without overflying any territory that could have been seriously disputed between India and Pakistan. Lord Radcliffe has denied that access to Jammu and Kashmir was at any time one of the 'other factors' affecting the award.⁶

Pakistan's Rejection of the Notional Partition Plan and Gurdaspur Award

After India's partition became imminent in June 1947, Lord Mountbatten prepared a notional partition plan dividing provinces district by district into Indian and Pakistani zones, based on the 1941 census. This Plan was a temporary administrative arrangement to ensure the transparent division of

assets, services, and staff pending the outcome of the Boundary Commissions. Under the Plan of Mountbatten, Gurdaspur District was shown as part of Pakistan, although the Radcliffe Commission ultimately awarded three of its tehsils to India and one to Pakistan. Such a deviation between the notional partition plan and the final award was not unusual, as it also occurred in Khulna, a Hindu-majority district awarded to East Pakistan, and in Murshidabad, a Muslim-majority district, which was awarded to India. Contrary to popular perceptions,⁷ no notional award was ever passed by the Radcliffe Commission that gave the entire Gurdaspur District to Pakistan.

The Boundary Commission, chaired by Sir Cyril Radcliffe, comprised Justice Mehr Chand Mahajan, Justice Teja Singh, Justice Din Mohammad and Justice Munir. Zafarullah Khan represented Pakistan's case, while MC Setalvad, Sardar Harnam Singh and others represented Hindus and Sikhs. While attributing motives to Lord Mountbatten regarding the Gurdaspur Award, many have overlooked the fact that it was Pakistan itself that argued against receiving the entire Gurdaspur District, fearing that accepting the district-wise partition plan in this region would impact its other

territorial claims. Instead of a district-wise division, it advocated for a sub-district or tehsil-wise division in the hope of maximising its territorial gains, which would also have given it a chance to encircle Amritsar.

In fact, Zafrullah Khan, the League representative in the Boundary Commission who went on to become Pakistan's first foreign minister, later admitted:

"the main contest centered around Gurdaspur District, Ferozepur District and parts of Jullundur District with the crux of the matter being how to interpret and apply the expression 'contiguous Muslim majority areas'. We based our case on adopting 'tehsil' or sub district as the unit for the purpose of determining contiguous majority areas. One could take a village as a unit but that would have resulted in a completely crazy boundary line. It was not possible to determine by villages where the majority on one side ended and began on the other. Then one could take a Police Station as a unit, but even that was too small to give us a workable boundary line. So one could take a Sub-District, as we did or one could take a District as a unit. The choice was a difficult one. If a District were taken as a unit then the notional partition which had already been put into effect for the purpose of

administration ad interim, would have to be confirmed and that would give the whole of the Gurdaspur District to Pakistan. But the risk was that if we confined our case to Districts, it might be argued that we were happy with the notional partition and our claim might be whittled down further to our serious prejudice. Adopting the tehsil as a unit would give us the Ferozpur and the Zira tehsils of Ferozpur District, the Jullundur and Nakodar tehsils of Hoshiarpur District. The line so drawn would also give us the state of Kapurthala (which had a Muslim majority) and would enclose within Pakistan the whole of Amritsar district, of which only one tehsil, Ajnala had a Muslim majority. It would also give us Shakargarh, Batala and Gurdaspur tehsils of Gurdaspur District. One could also take as units what, in the Punjab are known as doabs, that is to say, the area between two rivers. If the boundary had gone by doabs, we could have got not only the sixteen districts which under the notional partition, were later, given to us but also Gurdaspur District and Kangra District in the mountains. Had any of these units been adopted, the boundary line would have been more favorable than what it is now. Everybody knew it already that there was going to be

no unanimous or majority report. The non- Muslim Commissioners took one view while the Muslim commissioners had just the opposite view. Consequently the umpire had to give his award. After studying the record he held discussions with the Members of the Commission at Simla. We were told by the Muslim Commissioners that while Sir Cyril was not quite definite about Gurdaspur District, he was quite clear that the two sub districts of Ferozpur District- the sub district of Ferozpur itself and the sub district of Zira being Muslim majority areas and contiguous to the rest of the Muslim block from part of Pakistan..."⁸

It is evident that Pathankot, the Hindu majority tehsil, would have given India a land route to Kashmir in any case, as per Pakistan's own contentions. Even if the other two tehsils had gone to Pakistan, India could have developed a land route to Kashmir via Hoshiarpur district. It would have been arguable if there had been a controversy regarding the other two Muslim-majority tehsils being awarded to India, but there can hardly be any regarding Pathankot.⁹ Hence, this lays bare that the allegations of malicious intent concerning Kashmir are historically unfounded.

Wavell Boundary Demarcation Plan of 1946

During the Commission hearings, both sides argued for an alignment of the partition line favourable to them. The line, therefore, underwent several iterations before the final award was announced by the Radcliffe Commission, after taking cognisance of all the submissions and reports presented to it. Although prior plans did not bind Radcliffe, it is possible that he may have been influenced by public-domain information when exercising his discretion. One such reference was Lord Wavell's Boundary Demarcation Plan of 7 February 1946, which allocated Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts to India for geographic and strategic reasons.¹⁰

Wavell emphasised the protection of Amritsar, the holiest Sikh city, and contiguous districts over tehsils. Hence, he made the case for the inclusion of Gurdaspur District in India, as it would otherwise render Amritsar surrounded by Pakistan in the north and west, thereby jeopardising its security. The Ferozepur District in the South had a non-Muslim majority, even though its Zira and Ferozepur tehsils had Muslim majorities.¹¹

The Plan explicitly stated:

'In the Punjab the only Moslem majority district that would not go

*into Pakistan under this demarcation is Gurdaspur (51 per cent Moslem). Gurdaspur must go to Amritsar for geographical reasons and Amritsar being a sacred city of Sikhs must stay out of Pakistan. But for this case for importance of Amritsar, demarcation in Punjab could have been on divisional boundaries. Fact that much of Lahore District is irrigated from upper Bari Doab canal with head works in Gurdaspur district is awkward but there is no solution that avoids all such difficulties.'*¹²

Moreover, besides Sikh religious concerns, the management of all canals that irrigated Amritsar lay in Gurdaspur, which also became a key factor considered by both Wavell and Radcliffe.¹³ Even Pakistan's representative on the Commission, Justice Din Mohammed, admitted that Radcliffe's "main reason for awarding Batala and Gurdaspur tehsils of Gurdaspur District to India was that their award to Pakistan would have isolated the important Amritsar District from surrounding Indian soil."¹⁴

Overall, the Radcliffe Award largely upheld the Muslim League's position in Punjab, which held that the province be divided based on religious contiguity. Deviations occurred only to protect Amritsar, with the Gurdaspur Award achieving

99.9 per cent alignment with Wavell's 1946 plan.

*"Only in the case of Gurdaspur, the Radcliffe Award had deviated from the majority principle by giving three tehsils of Gurdaspur district to India leaving only Shakargarh tehsil, which was on the western bank of the river to Pakistan. The reason was that Amritsar needed to be protected from encirclement on three sides by Pakistan and its Chief protagonist was Lord Wavell. The Radcliffe Award was 99.9 per cent identical to the Wavell Demarcation plan of 7 February 1946."*¹⁵

Jinnah and Muslim League's Awareness of Gurdaspur's Likely Allocation

Mohammad Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League representatives on the Commission were aware of the Wavell Plan and the likely outcome regarding Gurdaspur as determined by Radcliffe. Though the final Commission meeting of 9 August 1947 at the United Services Club in Simla left Justice Muhammad Munir and Justice Din Muhammad contemplating resignation, the two were asked to stay by the League leadership. Justice Munir later confirmed that after a meeting with Radcliffe at Simla, "Justice Din Muhammad came out with the

impression that practically the whole of Gurdaspur with a link to Kashmir was going to India, however we were again asked to proceed with our work." It is later that Justice Munir while writing about the Award, alleges that "there is conclusive proof, oral as well as documentary, that the award was altered in respect of the Ferozpur tehsils and the areas that lie between the angle of the Beas and the Sutlej." However, he makes no such allegations about Gurdaspur, perhaps because both he and Justice Din Muhammad knew that the Gurdaspur District was likely to be given to India.

Kirpal Singh confirms this by quoting from a statement of Justice Munir in *The Tribune* (26 April 1960), where he says:

*"Today, I have no hesitation in disclosing...It was clear to both Mr. Din Mohammad and myself from the very beginning of the discussions with Radcliffe that Gurdaspur was going to go to India and our apprehensions were communicated at a very early stage to those who had been deputed by the Muslim League to help us."*¹⁶

Justice Munir writes that none of their contentions on Gurdaspur were accepted by Radcliffe, thereby confirming that the Commission chairman had already indicated what he intended to do with this district.

"One of the moot points was Gurdaspur, a Muslim majority district and it became predominantly Muslim area if Pathankot was adjoined to the adjacent Hindu areas to the east. But Pathankot being not exclusively Hindu, the Madhopur Headworks, which would mostly irrigate Muslim majority areas, with the area to the west of it, should be awarded to Pakistan. But the argument had no effect on him (Radcliffe) and he gave both Gurdaspur and Batala, which had a Muslim majority to India. Ajnala Tehsil in Amritsar also, which was Muslim area (59.04) he refused to join with the district of Lahore and gave to India... When I saw the award I was horrified.... To link Kashmir with India he does not go by any main physical feature but chooses an insignificant hill torrent which issuing from Kashmir enters the Punjab..."¹⁷

It is therefore evident that after Simla, everyone in the League was forewarned of Radcliffe's intention to give the entire Gurdaspur District to India, as their own representatives had threatened to resign on that count. If Radcliffe's mind was already made up and he was not inclined to give Gurdaspur to Pakistan, but rather to India, then why would he require someone to influence him to do what

he had already contemplated doing on his own? Clearly, the question of anyone persuading him to move Gurdaspur from Pakistan in any 'notional' plan to India subsequently does not arise. Therefore, all arguments about there being some alteration in the Gurdaspur Award after Simla prejudicial to Pakistan are ill-founded. In fact, the only change which occurred thereafter benefited Pakistan as it ended up getting Shakargarh instead of the entire district being given to India as per the Wavell Plan.

Munir's allegations regarding Ferozepur are not relevant to this discussion, as that district had no connection to Kashmir. Moreover, Justice Mahajan dismissed allegations of Radcliffe's supposed pliability, as he writes :

"It has sometimes been asserted that Lord Radcliffe changed his award in accordance with the wishes of Lord Mounbatten. I for one have no reason for believing that he could be so influenced. It has been asserted that all our labour went for nothing. This is not correct. His award did not concede fully the case of either party."¹⁸

Incidentally, when the Radcliffe Award was passed on 17 August 1947, the Pakistani media opposed it on account of the unjust mutilation of


Punjab and not for enabling India's land access to Kashmir. Importantly, the voluminous record of meetings and communications between Jinnah, Liaquat Ali Khan, Mountbatten, and General Lord Hasting L. Ismay contain no Pakistani accusations of Mountbatten influencing Radcliffe to favour India on Kashmir. Since at that time Pakistan was confident of securing Kashmir's accession, it did not want to antagonise Maharaja Hari Singh or cast aspersions on his intent. Therefore, there is no allegation linking the Gurdaspur Award to Kashmir in any of the available communication records.

It was only after Hari Singh signed accession with India on 26 October 1947 that Pakistan started retrospectively linking the Gurdaspur Award to Kashmir intervention, with Jinnah in a 30 October 1947 broadcast by Pakistan Broadcasting Service, Lahore, calling the Boundary Commission Award as an 'unjust, incomprehensible and even perverse award.'¹⁹ That is why Zafarullah Khan also confesses in hindsight that "the inclusion of Gurdaspur District in East Punjab was a great blow to us because it facilitated the Indian intervention in Kashmir as from the plains only

Gurdaspur district could give the Indians an access to Kashmir."²⁰

Conclusion

Whatever controversies exist regarding the inferences or hypotheses on the conduct of Mountbatten or Radcliffe in the Gurdaspur Award, and whatever the yardstick finally adopted by Radcliffe while exercising his discretion in the matter, other than counterfactual reasoning and arguments, there is nothing thus far to suggest that the Punjab Boundary Commission passed it with an eye on Kashmir. Nor is there any evidence to prove that it influenced Maharaja Hari Singh to such an extent or in such a manner that he acceded his princely state to India. That is why Shereen Ilahi, after an exhaustive scrutiny of the literature and evidence on the Gurdaspur Award, rightly concludes that "If a conspiracy is to be uncovered then, it will not be found in the creation of the partition line. Whatever doubts may persist about Mountbatten's intentions or Radcliffe's pliability will have to remain doubts until more evidence is uncovered to transform circumstantial into the concrete."²¹ As such, the myth that Gurdaspur was given to India to enable Kashmir's accession has no basis in historical fact.



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