

Conflict and Community: Lived Experiences and Local Agency during the 1947 Tribal Invasion in Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract: *In October 1947, Jammu and Kashmir witnessed a major turning point when tribal militias supported by Pakistan invaded the region. The invasion led to widespread violence, particularly against Hindu and Sikh minority communities in the western border areas, forcing nearly 35,000 families to flee their homes. These displaced families are now known as Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir Displaced Persons (PoJK DPs). Despite the vast amount of literature on Partition violence, the events during the tribal invasion of Jammu and Kashmir have not received adequate scholarly attention. This study examines the nature and extent of this violence, focusing on the role of local involvement. It draws on both primary and secondary sources, placing special emphasis on interviews, memoirs, and personal accounts of survivors and eyewitnesses. Through these voices, this study aims to present a more grounded and nuanced understanding of the experiences of those who lived through this period.*

Keywords: Violence, Tribal Invasion, PoJK, Jammu and Kashmir, Partition of India

INTRODUCTION

Jammu and Kashmir has long held historical importance because of its strategic location in northern India. During British rule, it was a princely state governed by the Dogra dynasty for nearly a century and a half. Its last ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, acceded to India following the tribal invasion of October 1947, which Pakistan supported. The state was unique in being a Muslim-majority region, ruled by a Hindu dynasty. According to the 1941 Census, its population was 4,021,616, including 3,101,247 Muslims, 809,165 Hindus, and 65,903 Sikhs. Geographically, Jammu and Kashmir are divided into three distinct regions: Jammu, Kashmir, and Frontier districts. The Jammu province consisted of five districts Jammu, Kathua, Reasi, Udhampur, and Mirpur along with the two jagirs of Poonch and Chenani. The Kashmir province comprises three districts: Baramulla, Anantnag, and Muzaffarabad. The Frontier districts included Ladakh, Astore, the Gilgit leased area, and the Gilgit agency (Census of India 1941: 341-342).

During the Dogra rule, Jammu and Kashmir witnessed important developments in administration, infrastructure, and territorial consolidation, which helped to shape the modern princely state. Simultaneously, there was persistent political resistance from sections of the Muslim population, which intensified during the reign of Maharaja Hari Singh. This period saw the emergence of organisations such as the Muslim Conference and the National Conference, both of which challenged the authority of the Maharaja and demanded political reforms (Vaid, 2007:86; Brecher, 1953:11). While the National Conference allied with the Indian National Congress, the Muslim Conference aligned itself with the Muslim League. The National Conference enjoyed widespread support in the Kashmir Valley, whereas the Muslim Conference garnered support from Muslims in the Jammu Province.

Following the Partition of India in 1947, the National Conference supported the state's accession to India, whereas the Muslim Conference favoured joining Pakistan. However, Maharaja Hari Singh, acknowledging the state's unique demographic issue, chose to remain independent, refusing to join either India or Pakistan (Copland, 1991:258). Pakistan, viewing Jammu and Kashmir as a Muslim-majority state, sought its integration with Pakistan. A section of the Muslim population also supports this idea.

As Maharaja Hari Singh began to show an inclination towards India, Pakistan became uncomfortable and responded by violating the standstill agreement signed (India did not sign) with Maharaja, thereby organising tribal militias to invade the state. On 21 October 1947 Pashtun tribe members, supported by Pakistan, launched an invasion of Jammu and Kashmir. This invasion led to widespread violence, particularly the mass murder and forced exodus of Hindu and Sikh minorities of the region. 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 India. In response to these atrocities, Maharaja Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession to India on 26 October 1947 (Jha, 1996, p.3).

After a year of armed conflict known as the First Kashmir War, 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 in India.

This study explores the extent of violence and the character of local involvement by drawing on a combination of primary and secondary sources. Particular attention is given to interviews, memoirs, and personal narratives of survivors and eyewitnesses, which offer insights that are often absent from official records. Rather than relying solely on numerical data, this study foregrounds these lived experiences to better understand how individuals encountered and responded to the unfolding events.

This paper is divided into four main sections. The first section provides a brief historical background to the 1947 tribal invasion. The second section examines the extent of violence, and the third focuses on lived experiences and local involvement, drawing from survivor testimonies to highlight both instances of brutality and acts of compassion. The conclusion section brings together these strands to offer a nuanced interpretation of the events.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach, emphasising narrative accounts to reconstruct the social realities of the period. By engaging with these personal testimonies (about 20 interviews using snowball sampling), this study seeks to uncover the human dimensions of the conflict and its emotional, social, and moral complexities. This approach allows for a more nuanced interpretation of events, highlighting not only the magnitude of violence and displacement but also the varied roles, choices, and responses of individuals and communities during this turbulent time.

RESULTS

Violence during tribal Invasion

The tribal invasion resulted in unprecedented devastation of minority communities in PoJK. The violence unleashed during this period was systematic, widespread, and deeply traumatic, leaving a lasting scar on the region's social and demographic fabric. Non-Muslim communities, in particular, faced extreme brutality at the hands of the

invading tribal forces, who targeted them for religious and communal reasons. They were subjected to horrific acts of violence, including mass killings, sexual assault, torture, abduction and forced conversion. Homes were looted and burned, religious sites were desecrated, and entire villages were destroyed.

The scale and intensity of the atrocities were so overwhelming that survival became nearly impossible for non-Muslim families in the region. A large number of people were either brutally murdered or compelled to abandon their ancestral lands. This led to a massive displacement crisis, with thousands fleeing to safer areas in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir and other parts of the country. The invasion thus not only caused immediate physical suffering but also triggered long-term social, cultural, and psychological trauma among the displaced communities, the effects of which continue to resonate across generations. According to the 1941 Census of India, the religious population distribution of the areas under Pakistan illegal occupation is presented in Table 1.

In addition to the local population, thousands of Hindu and Sikh refugees who fled violence in Pakistan lived in the region. They all became prime targets for tribal invaders. The severity of violence was because of the trained militias armed with modern weapons such as rifles, mortars, and grenades supplied by Pakistan (Vaid, 2005:55). This was state-sponsored violence. The consequences of this were devastating. Over 38,000 Hindus and Sikhs were reported killed, with some estimates suggesting that the death toll could have reached as high as 50,000. According to data from the Provincial Rehabilitation Officer, more than 30,000 families were displaced by the floods. Of these, 26,319 families were registered in Jammu and Kashmir, while 5,460 families were registered outside the region.

Table 1: Population composition of 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

Source: *Census of India 1941, Vol XXII, J&K State, Parts I & II, p. 102.*

Mirpur emerged as one of the worst-affected areas during the tribal invasion and witnessed some of the most horrifying episodes of violence in the entire region. The situation worsened with the capture of the key towns of Bhimber and Kotli in the Mirpur District. Their fall to the invading forces had serious military and administrative consequences, as these towns were strategically located along vital communication routes in the region. Their occupation effectively severed the crucial road link between Mirpur and Jammu, cutting off any possibility of immediate relief, evacuation or reinforcement. This isolation left the remaining civilian population highly vulnerable (Sharma,

2022:119). Mirpur became the site of a horrific massacre. Out of 25,000 people who had gathered from the surrounding areas, nearly 18,000 unarmed civilians, including women and children, were brutally murdered in cold blood (Gupta, 2013).

Rajouri, home to approximately 4,000 inhabitants, many of whom were wealthy businessmen (Vaid, 2005:43), faced a devastating attack on 9 November 1947. Raiders surrounded the town, leading to a gruesome massacre on 11 November (Tamiri, 2023:168), although some accounts place it on 15 November. The non-Muslim youth fought for 18 hours until their ammunition was exhausted. In a tragic act of defiance, many Hindu girls in Rajouri, who had bought cyanide from a doctor's shop, chose to die rather than be kidnapped. They mixed cyanide with *halva* (semolina pudding) and consumed it, resulting in the deaths of approximately 1700 girls. An additional 900 women died by other means of suicide. In an estimate, out of a population of 11000 (some estimates are over 20000) gathered (from surrounding areas as well), only about 100 people survived and reached Jammu. Dozens of girls were kidnapped and taken away from their homes. (Sharma 2022: 121-122). The violence extended to several towns in the Poonch district, including Sudhnutti, Bagh, Rawalakot, and Hajira, where massacres occurred. Over 40,000 refugees sought shelter in the Poonch town. Their evacuation took more than a year because of the rioters surrounding the town (Vaid, 2005:46).

The Poonch district witnessed a series of brutal massacres across many villages. The estimated deaths included 230 in Siya Pattan and Lasriyat, 550 in Dhar Dharchha, and as many as 1,200 in Beri Bramपुरa. Other affected villages included Ben Padat, Bhagpur, and Chhalad Fawat (91), Mensera (500), Kayeda (230), Pepadian (300), Sehar (40), Talbari (20), and Kahar (4), reflecting the tragic scale of killings across the region. Some converted to Islam and remained until they were later brought to India. Several Hindu-majority villages, including Thohrad, Minjadi Brahmna, Tridda, Horah, Pajja, and Ram Pattan, experienced Hindu exoduses, leaving behind abandoned homes and disrupted communities (Sharma 2022: 197).

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE AND LOCAL INVOLVEMENT

The brutal violence inflicted on minority communities in the region cannot be fully understood through the data and figures provided by various government and non-government agencies alone. One of the most meaningful ways to grasp its true impact is to listen to those who witnessed it firsthand. Displaced persons from Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK DPs) have preserved many such experiences in their memories, offering valuable insights that deepen and enrich our understanding of the tribal invasion.

The massacre in Mirpur was a horrifying event and is mostly known through first-hand accounts. Sh. Bal K Gupta witnessed the violent days through his eyes and expressed them in his book: "Throughout the night of Nov 25, 1947, I could hear the incessant firing of machine guns and heavy artillery as the Pakistani Army and the Pathans began their final assault on Mirpur. The Pakistani Army and the Pathans had started the invasion from the west,

and my family and some of my relatives lived on the east side of Mirpur City. On 25 November at about 10:00 A.M., my relatives mostly women and children from the west side poured into my great-grandfather's house, tears flowing down their faces. Wives had lost their husbands, and children had lost their parents. Others watched generations of memories vanish as the Pakistani Army and Pathans ransacked and burned the Hindu and Sikh homes. Everyone was in a state of shock or panic (Gupta, 2012: 19)."

In another horrifying incident, Permanand shared, "When the rioters came, a Sikh man, Sardar Kartar Singh, armed himself with a sword and bravely confronted them. Tragically, he was caught, and both his legs and arms were amputated before he was tied to a fig tree to instil fear among the people." It was not a lone brutal incident. "In Muzaffarabad, Hindu youngsters were lured by the raiders to the hospital under the pretence that rations would be distributed there. However, it was a trap, and the participants were captured. When their relatives came to enquire about their sons, they were also captured. In total, approximately 60 men were included. On a dark, cold night, they were stripped naked and made to stand in line. Then, they were all murdered (Mehta 1954: 116)."

Taravanti shared her own harrowing experience, saying, "I was only 5 years old and was left alone in the village, and spent many horrifying nights there by myself." Kundan Lal recounted, "When I was 6 years old, we had to flee amidst cries of '*Nara-e-takbeer, Lessa Jammu te Kashmir*' (We will take Jammu and Kashmir). During our escape, my mother bit off my *shikha* (tuft) to prevent anyone from recognising me as a Hindu." Many Hindus were detained in camps in Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir, where women were particularly vulnerable. Some families converted to Islam to ensure their survival. As Bhagat Ram recalled, "Many people died in our area, but we were fortunate to survive. We stayed there for four years, having converted to Islam and cutting our *shikha* and *janu* (sacred thread). I changed my name to Bahadur Ali and worked as a school teacher in the village. This was our only option, as in the neighbouring village of Brahmapura, 1100 people were burned alive. However, we only pretended to embrace their festival and religion until we could be evacuated."

In many areas, local people acted as informers and helped the raiders by providing them with information. According to Badrinath, a pattern was often followed: Hindu villagers were usually not attacked by their own Hindu neighbours, but Hindus from other villages were targeted, often with the involvement of Muslims from those areas. Several survivors and writers, including Saraf, have also mentioned the participation of local Muslims in looting and the abduction of women (Saraf 2015:183).

Survivors recalled their neighbours' repeated betrayals. In Bagga village, Tulsidas remembered how Muslim neighbours promised protection, but later it was found that it was a conspiracy to prevent Hindus from escaping and to hand them over to the raiders. He described wandering alone through forests for nine days before reaching safety in the Poonch Valley. Burning people alive after locking them in rooms was a common method of killing, as recalled by Permanand and Badrinath, both of whom lost family members in such incidents.

At the same time, several survivors remembered acts of humanity. Several Muslims provided crucial assistance during these difficult times. Some travelled long distances to deliver letters from Hindus to authorities, urgently seeking aid when Hindus were trapped. Others took the risk of warning Hindus in advance about the arrival of raiders, which enabled them to hide, escape, and save their lives. Tulsidas said, "One of our neighbours, whose family my uncles had supported when his father was imprisoned, told me to escape immediately to save our lives. He warned, 'Tomorrow, either you will survive or we will.'" In another instance, he remembered, "I was once captured by the rioters and was on the brink of being killed when a retired Havildar named Khan Mohammad arrived with a rifle and saved my life

Badrinath survived with the help of a Muslim family who sheltered him during the riots. Master Abdul Aziz and Molana Mohammad Sayyid Masoodi were well-known leaders. In fact, Master Abdul Aziz, who saved many lives, was killed by Kabaili invaders (Sharma 2022:95). Many memoirs, including those by Charanjit Lal Sehgal (Sehgal 2008) and Krishan Mehta, record similar instances of Muslims who risked their lives to protect Hindus during the violence (Mehta 1954).

Thus, the events of the 1947 tribal invasion were not one-dimensional but reflected a complex interplay between violence and humanity. People responded differently depending on their circumstances, fears, and personal values. On the one hand, there were instances where some local individuals joined the tribal invaders and participated in attacks against their own neighbours, particularly targeting minority communities, leading to widespread suffering, loss of life, and displacement. However, there were also examples of courage and compassion, where individuals chose to stand by and protect their neighbours despite the risks involved.

These contrasting experiences demonstrate that this period cannot be understood solely through the lens of conflict or communal hostility. Alongside brutality, there were moments of moral strength and solidarity. Individuals were not merely passive victims or active perpetrators; rather, many navigated difficult choices in uncertain and dangerous circumstances. Therefore, the lived experiences and local involvement during this time reveal a more nuanced reality that highlights both the depths of violence and the enduring presence of humanity amid chaos.

CONCLUSION

Violence during the 1947 tribal invasion of Jammu and Kashmir was widespread, systematic, and profoundly devastating, resulting in mass killings, large-scale displacement, and deep social and psychological trauma that continues to resonate across generations. Survivor testimonies and historical records reveal that the brutality was not confined to the invading tribal militias alone; in many instances, local participation, collaboration, and acquiescence intensified the scale of atrocities. At the same time, these accounts also document significant acts of courage and compassion by local Muslims who risked their lives to protect their Hindu neighbours, demonstrating that human solidarity persisted even amid communal breakdown.

Taken together, these lived experiences underscore the complex and deeply human dimensions of conflict. They show that violence was shaped by both external aggression and internal communal tensions, rather than being a one-sided or monolithic phenomenon. The invasion, therefore, not only altered the political and territorial landscape of the region but also fractured its social fabric, leaving behind enduring scars of loss, mistrust, and displacement, alongside fragile memories of coexistence that remain vital to understanding this tragic chapter of history.

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