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Drawing the Line: The Radcliffe Commission, Punjab Boundary Force, and the Turbulent Partition of India

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Abstract

The partition of British India in August 1947 marked a momentous yet tragic event in South Asian history. As British rule drew to a close, the subcontinent was divided into two independent nations, India and Pakistan. This event was accompanied by mass violence, communal riots, and unprecedented human migration. Two entities that played crucial roles during this tumultuous period were the Punjab Boundary Force and the Radcliffe Commission. While the former was tasked with maintaining order in Punjab, the epicentre of partition violence, the latter was responsible for delineating the borders between the two new nations.

The partition of Punjab left an indelible scar on the collective memory of the Indian subcontinent. It not only led to the largest mass migration in history but also symbolized the profound human cost of political decisions made without regard for their consequences. The stories of violence, loss, and resilience that emerged from this period continue to shape the identities and histories of the people of India and Pakistan, serving as a stark reminder of the devastating impact of division and communal strife. This paper explores the roles, challenges, and legacies of these two entities in the context of the partition.

Keywords: Communal violence, Governor-General, Indian National Congress, Muslim League.

Introduction: The partition of British India in 1947 was the dramatic culmination of decades of political negotiations, growing communal tensions, and the clashing aspirations of Indian leaders. On one side, the Indian National Congress, representing a wide spectrum of Indian society, envisioned a unified, independent India where all communities could coexist. On the other, the All India Muslim League, under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, advocated for a separate homeland for Muslims, arguing that the Muslim minority

would face political and cultural marginalization in a predominantly Hindu India. This ideological divergence widened over time, fuelled by mistrust and differing interpretations of future.

The British, reeling from the economic and political toll of the Second World War and grappling with the declining stability of their empire, recognized the urgency of granting independence to India. Initially, June 1948 was set as the target date for British withdrawal. However, Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, hastened the process, moving the timeline forward to August 15, 1947. This abrupt decision left little time to prepare for the complex and delicate transition of power, exacerbating existing tensions and creating a chaotic environment.

Punjab, a region known for its rich history and cultural diversity, became the epicentre of partition politics. Home to a mix of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, the province faced profound challenges as its population was deeply intertwined across religious lines. The decision to divide Punjab between the newly created nations of India and Pakistan introduced contentious issues, including the allocation of resources, the redrawing of territorial boundaries, and the safety of religious minorities on both sides of the border. The division was not merely geographical but deeply personal, as millions were forced to leave behind their ancestral homes, livelihoods, and communities. This upheaval set the stage for one of the most traumatic chapters in the history of subcontinent, with Punjab bearing the brunt of the violence and displacement that accompanied partition.

The Radcliffe Commission: Drawing the Boundaries: The task of demarcating the boundary between India and Pakistan was assigned to a Boundary Commission, headed by Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a British lawyer with no prior experience in India. The commission was divided into two parts: one for Punjab and one for Bengal. The primary responsibility of Radcliffe was to draw the boundary in Punjab and Bengal based on religious demographics while considering other factors like economic resources and administrative convenience. Radcliffe had five weeks to complete the task. The commission relied on outdated census data, maps, and reports, with limited on ground surveys due to time constraints. It consulted representatives from the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League, and the Sikh leadership, but its final decisions were made unilaterally.

One of the key challenges was balancing demographic considerations with economic and strategic concerns. For instance, while Gurdaspur was a Muslim majority district, its inclusion in India was crucial for providing access to Kashmir. Similarly, the allocation of canal networks and irrigation systems posed logistical dilemmas, as the agrarian economy of Punjab depended heavily on shared water resources.

The Radcliffe Line, named after its architect, was announced on August 17, 1947, two days after independence. It divided Punjab and Bengal into East Punjab (India) and West Punjab (Pakistan) and East Bengal (Pakistan) and West Bengal (India). In Punjab, the line cut through districts, villages, and even homes, disrupting lives and livelihoods. Cities like

Lahore went to Pakistan, while Amritsar became part of India, leaving many Sikh and Hindu holy sites in Pakistan.

Creation, Composition and Structure of the Punjab Boundary Force (PBF): The partition of Punjab resulted from the Mountbatten Plan of June 3, 1947, which called for the division of the province along religious lines. The Radcliffe Line, hastily drawn by a boundary commission chaired by Sir Cyril Radcliffe disrupted longstanding communities and created massive insecurity among Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims. The demographic complexity of Punjab exacerbated the challenges. The region was a melting pot of religious communities, with Hindus concentrated in the east, Muslims in the west, and Sikhs scattered across the central districts. Communal tensions had been escalating since the 1940s, and the announcement of partition only intensified these hostilities. By mid-1947, the situation had spiralled into widespread violence, with massacres, arson, and abductions becoming common.

Amid this chaos, the British Indian Army, soon to be divided between India and Pakistan, was tasked with maintaining order. Recognizing the enormity of the task, the Punjab Boundary Force was created on August 1, 1947, under the command of Major General TW Rees. Its primary objective was to prevent communal violence and ensure the safe migration of millions of people crossing the newly drawn borders.

The PBF was a temporary and unprecedented experiment in peacekeeping. It consisted of approximately 55,000 troops drawn from the British Indian Army, including Indian, Pakistani, and British units. The force was divided into four brigades, each responsible for a specific sector along the Radcliffe Line. These brigades were tasked with patrolling vulnerable areas, securing major transportation routes, and responding to outbreaks of violence. However, the neutrality of PBF was often questioned, as communal loyalties among its ranks sometimes influenced its actions.

Operations and Challenges Faced by the PBF: The PBF operated during the peak of the partition violence, between August and September 1947. Its mandate included preventing attacks on vulnerable groups, securing major cities and transport networks, and facilitating refugee movement. Despite these objectives, the force struggled to contain the escalating violence. The PBF faced significant challenges from the outset, among them the primary were:

- a) **Communal Violence and Lack of Resources:** The scale and intensity of communal violence overwhelmed the PBF. Punjab covered an area of over 97,000 square miles, and the population of nearly 30 million people was in flux, with an estimated 10-15 million attempting to migrate. Riots, massacres, and large scale abductions occurred in cities like Lahore, Amritsar, and Rawalpindi, as well as in rural areas. One of the critical shortcomings of PBF was its limited manpower relative to the vast area it was responsible for securing. This disparity rendered the force reactive rather than proactive, often arriving too late to prevent atrocities.

- b) **Communal Bias Within Troops:** The composition of PBF mirrored the communal divisions of Punjab. While soldiers were theoretically bound by military discipline, many were influenced by their personal religious and ethnic identities. Cases of collusion with rioters or failure to intervene during attacks were reported. This eroded public trust in the force and further emboldened perpetrators of violence.
- c) **Logistical Constraints:** The PBF operated in a region where transportation and communication networks were already disrupted by partition. Railways, a primary mode of refugee movement, became frequent targets of attacks. Securing trains and convoys proved a herculean task, and despite the efforts of PBF, countless refugees were killed or injured in transit.
- d) **Political and Administrative Paralysis:** The division of administrative machinery between India and Pakistan further hampered the effectiveness of PBF. As British officials prepared to leave, there was a vacuum of authority, and newly appointed Indian and Pakistani administrators lacked experience and coordination. This administrative disarray limited the ability of PBF to operate efficiently.

Key Incidents Involving the PBF: Several incidents during this period revealed the limited capacity of PBF to handle the widespread communal violence and mass atrocities effectively. The force actively displayed its calibre during Lahore riots. In August 1947, as tensions boiled over following the announcement of partition, Lahore became a site of intense communal violence. The PBF was deployed to control the riots, which saw widespread attacks on civilians, looting, arson, and murders. Despite their efforts to quell the unrest, the force struggled to maintain order amid the chaos. The sheer scale of the violence overwhelmed the PBF, and they were unable to prevent numerous deaths and injuries. Lahore, which had a mixed population of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, became a battleground for sectarian vengeance, and the limited resources and manpower of PBF proved insufficient in curbing the mayhem.

Amritsar, another key city in Punjab, witnessed an equally horrifying episode in August 1947. A large group of Muslim refugees, fleeing toward newly created Pakistan, was brutally attacked by armed mobs of Sikhs and Hindus. The attack led to a massacre, with hundreds of refugees killed or severely injured. The response of PBF to this crisis was sluggish, further exacerbating the scale of the tragedy. Delays in their deployment and their inability to pre-empt the mob attacks highlighted significant operational weaknesses. For the fleeing refugees, this failure resulted in devastating losses, further fuelling bitterness and distrust between communities.

In Sheikhupura, a town in what would become Pakistan, a reversal of roles was witnessed. Muslim mobs targeted and attacked Sikh and Hindu villagers. Reports suggest that hundreds, if not thousands, of people were killed in what became known as the Sheikhupura massacre. Although the PBF was dispatched to the area to restore peace, their intervention came too late to prevent the slaughter. The situation in Sheikhupura demonstrated the widespread nature of the violence, where no community was spared and

atrocities were committed on all sides. The inability to control such large scale mob violence further underscored the limitations of PBF.

As partition took effect, the task of evacuating Muslim refugees from East Punjab to West Punjab fell to the PBF. By September 1947, waves of Muslims were fleeing eastward territories where they no longer felt safe. However, the evacuation process was fraught with peril. Refugee caravans and trains were frequently ambushed by Sikh and Hindu mobs, leading to horrific massacres. The PBF, tasked with safeguarding these refugees, faced monumental challenges. They were often outnumbered and outmanoeuvred by organized mobs, resulting in significant loss of life during the migration. These incidents further revealed the struggles to provide adequate protection in the face of coordinated attacks and logistical difficulties.

One of the most notorious incidents that exposed the shortcomings of PBF occurred at the Mari Indus Bridge. A group of Muslim refugees attempting to cross the bridge into West Punjab was ambushed by Sikh and Hindu mobs. The ensuing violence resulted in a massacre, with hundreds of refugees killed. Despite being stationed in the area and tasked with preventing such incidents, the PBF failed to act in time. This failure to intervene and prevent the slaughter not only highlighted their operational weaknesses but also led to widespread criticism of the effectiveness and impartiality of the force.

The PBF deserves commendation for its relief efforts in refugee camps during the partition. Tasked with protecting these camps, the PBF faced immense challenges as the camps became severely overcrowded and disease ridden. Despite providing some measure of security, the force struggled to address the dire humanitarian situation, characterized by a severe lack of basic amenities and frequent attacks on the camps.

Disbandment of PBF: The PBF was disbanded on September 1, 1947, barely a month after it was formed to manage the volatile situation during the partition of India. This decision stemmed from a combination of factors, including the perception of its ineffectiveness, the immense logistical difficulties it faced, and the escalating mistrust and hostility between Indian and Pakistani authorities. The force, initially envisioned as a neutral military unit to maintain peace and order during the chaotic partition, was unable to cope with the scale and intensity of the communal violence that engulfed Punjab. After its dissolution, the task of maintaining law and order fell to the respective armies and police forces of the newly formed nations, India and Pakistan.

The legacy of the PBF is both complex and controversial. While the force did achieve limited success in certain areas, such as escorting refugee convoys to safety and providing protection in isolated incidents, its overall performance was overshadowed by its failure to curb the widespread violence that erupted during the partition. The sheer magnitude of the communal clashes, marked by mass killings, abductions, and the displacement of millions, highlighted the inability of PBF to fulfil its mandate. This failure was not merely operational but also emblematic of deeper systemic issues.

One of the key factors contributing to the shortcomings of PBF was the lack of adequate planning by the British administration for the partition process. The abrupt and hurried division of British India left little time to address the logistical and security challenges that arose, especially in a region as diverse and volatile as Punjab. Additionally, the deep seated communal divisions, exacerbated by decades of political and social tensions, created an environment where violence was almost inevitable. The PBF, despite its neutral stance, struggled to operate effectively in such a polarized and hostile atmosphere.

Furthermore, the force faced significant structural and operational challenges. It was understaffed and under resourced, with a limited number of troops tasked with covering vast and densely populated areas. The lack of coordination between the British officers leading the force and the local Indian and Pakistani authorities further undermined its effectiveness. The growing animosity between the two new nations, coupled with conflicting priorities and interests, made cooperation nearly impossible, rendering the efforts of PBF futile in many instances.

In hindsight, the disbandment of the Punjab Boundary Force serves as a stark reminder of the complexities and consequences of partition. Its mixed legacy underscores not only the limitations of military solutions in the face of deep rooted communal conflicts but also the broader failures of governance and planning that characterized this turbulent period in history. While the efforts of PBF to provide protection and assistance in certain areas are commendable, its inability to prevent the large scale violence and suffering highlights the immense challenges of maintaining peace in a region undergoing such a profound and traumatic transformation.

Role of Radcliff Commission and PBF:

Humanitarian Crisis: The partition of Punjab in 1947 triggered one of the most significant and tragic migrations in human history. An estimated 10 to 15 million people were forced to cross the hastily drawn borders, with Hindus and Sikhs relocating to India and Muslims migrating to the newly created Pakistan. This mass displacement of populations was not merely a logistical nightmare but also a humanitarian catastrophe, marked by violence, chaos, and unimaginable suffering. The scale of the violence was staggering, with an estimated death toll ranging from one to two million. Entire villages were burned to the ground, communities were torn apart, and countless lives were lost in the communal bloodshed that accompanied the partition.

Women bore the burden of the horrors of partition. Reports of abduction, rape, and forced conversions were widespread, as women became both targets and symbols of communal revenge. Many families, faced with the prospect of dishonour, resorted to killing their own daughters and wives to prevent them from being abducted or violated by rival communities. The trauma endured by women during this period is a grim reminder of the gendered dimensions of communal violence and the vulnerability of women in times of conflict.

The boundary demarcation by Radcliffe Commission played a significant role in escalating tensions. Tasked with dividing Punjab and Bengal in just five weeks, the work of Commission was hasty and riddled with inaccuracies. The arbitrary nature of the boundaries resulted in entire communities finding themselves stranded on the 'wrong' side of the border, leading to widespread panic and hostility. Villages, towns, and districts with mixed populations were suddenly split, disrupting centuries old ties and exacerbating mistrust between religious groups. In many cases, the decisions of the Commission ignored local demographics, further fuelling resentment and violence.

The humanitarian crisis was further aggravated by the failure of the PBF to maintain order and protect civilians. Despite being established to oversee the transition and ensure peace during the partition, the PBF was ill equipped and overwhelmed by the scale of the violence. It lacked the manpower and resources to cover the vast and volatile region of Punjab, where communal tensions were at their peak. The inability of the force to control the widespread violence allowed mobs to carry out atrocities with impunity, deepening the suffering of those caught in the

Political and Social Ramifications: The partition of Punjab in 1947 left a profound and enduring legacy of distrust and animosity between India and Pakistan. The hurried and ill conceived decisions of the Radcliffe Commission, coupled with the failure of the PBF to maintain law and order, are often regarded as glaring examples of British negligence during the partition process. The rushed timeline, lack of foresight, and limited understanding of the complexities of region resulted in boundary lines that not only deepened communal divisions but also sowed seeds of lasting discord between the two newly formed nations. The economic consequences of partition were equally devastating. Punjab, once considered the agricultural heartland of the Indian subcontinent, saw its industries, trade routes, and meticulously designed irrigation systems arbitrarily divided. Key industrial hubs and trading centres were split, disrupting commerce and economic activity across the region. The partition severed well established supply chains, rendering many businesses non-functional. The division of the irrigation network, a vital lifeline for agriculture in Punjab, created long standing disputes over water rights between India and Pakistan, further exacerbating tensions in the decades that followed.

Beyond the economic disruption, the partition inflicted irreparable damage on the social fabric of Punjab. For centuries, the region had been home to diverse communities-Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and others-who had lived side by side, sharing cultural practices, languages, and traditions. This coexistence was shattered as communal violence, forced migrations, and deep mistrust turned neighbours into enemies. The new borders physically divided communities, uprooting millions from their ancestral homes and leaving behind a legacy of pain and displacement. Families were torn apart, friendships dissolved, and entire villages lost their pluralistic identities.

The emotional and psychological scars of partition have persisted across generations. In both India and Pakistan, the partition is remembered with a mix of grief, anger, and

nostalgia. The shared cultural heritage of the region became overshadowed by narratives of victimhood and betrayal, further entrenching hostilities. Politically, the animosity between the two nations has fuelled decades of conflict, including wars, border skirmishes, and a relentless arms race. The unresolved disputes that emerged from partition, such as the Kashmir issue, continue to strain bilateral relations and shape national identities.

Timeless Lessons from Partition Tragedy: The roles of the Radcliffe Commission and the Punjab Boundary Force during the partition of 1947 offer invaluable lessons that remain relevant for understanding the complexities of political decision making, conflict management, and humanitarian response in times of crisis. These lessons highlight key shortcomings and offer insights for future scenarios where similar challenges might arise.

The Importance of Preparation: The rushed withdrawal of the British and the hasty boundary demarcation by the Radcliffe Commission underscored the perils of inadequate planning. The Commission had mere weeks to determine the borders of Punjab and Bengal, regions with intricate socio-cultural and economic ties. The lack of detailed surveys, consultations with local communities, or input from neutral experts led to arbitrary decisions that caused widespread dislocation and violence. This teaches the importance of thorough preparation, data driven decision making, and inclusive consultations in managing complex territorial or political transitions. A well thought out process could have potentially mitigated the chaos and bloodshed that ensued.

The Challenges of Neutrality: Operating in an environment of intense communal polarization, both the Radcliffe Commission and the Punjab Boundary Force faced significant challenges in maintaining neutrality. The Commission, tasked with drawing impartial borders, found itself under immense pressure from both Indian and Pakistani representatives, while the PBF struggled to act as an unbiased peacekeeping force amidst growing hostility. These experiences demonstrate the need for robust institutional mechanisms to ensure fairness and transparency in such volatile situations. Clear guidelines, independent oversight, and mechanisms for accountability are essential to bolster the neutrality of those tasked with managing transitions or mediating conflicts.

The Human Cost of Political Decisions: Perhaps the most sobering lesson from the partition of 1947 is the devastating human cost of rushed political decisions. Millions were displaced, communities were torn apart, and the loss of life was staggering. Women and children bore the brunt of the violence, enduring abductions, sexual violence, and forced conversions. This tragedy underscores the critical importance of prioritizing humanitarian considerations when implementing large scale political changes. Safeguarding lives, protecting vulnerable populations, and ensuring basic human rights should always take precedence over political expediency.

The Role of International Actors: The British, as colonial rulers, played a pivotal role in the partition, but their actions were largely driven by a desire to expedite their withdrawal rather than a commitment to ensuring stability. This lack of foresight and long term planning left India and Pakistan to deal with the aftermath of partition on their own. The

British approach serves as a cautionary tale for international actors involved in mediating or overseeing transitions in regions of conflict. It highlights the necessity of acting with responsibility, foresight, and a long term commitment to justice and stability. International interventions should be guided by ethical considerations, with a focus on sustainable solutions rather than short term gains.

Conclusion: The Punjab Boundary Force and the Radcliffe Commission were pivotal in shaping the partition of Punjab in 1947. While the hurried boundary making process of Radcliffe Commission left a legacy of division and resentment, the inability of PBF to control violence underscored the complexities of maintaining peace in a deeply divided society. Together, their roles highlight the challenges of managing large scale political transitions and the importance of prioritizing human security and welfare in such processes. The partition of Punjab remains a poignant chapter in history, serving as a sobering reminder of the costs of division and the responsibilities of those tasked with navigating them.

The role of PBF during the partition of 1947 underscores the complexities of managing communal violence in a deeply divided society. While the efforts of PBF were commendable in certain instances, its overall impact was limited by structural and operational constraints. The PBF's experience highlights the importance of comprehensive planning, impartiality, and collaboration in peacekeeping operations. As one of the earliest examples of organized peacekeeping in a postcolonial context, the story of PBF remains a poignant reminder of the human cost of division and the challenges of maintaining peace in the face of deep seated communal tensions.

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