



Blood, Borders, and the Political Geography of Displacement: A Critical Review of Adnan Tariq's Punjab, Blood and Borders

Book under review: *Punjab, Blood and Borders: Understanding Partition Violence through Secret and Archival Records*

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Abstract:

Adnan Tariq's *Punjab, Blood and Borders: Understanding Partition Violence through Secret and Archival Records* intervenes in one of the most consequential and contested fields of modern South Asian historiography by situating the 1947 Partition of Punjab within the global comparative history of forced migration. Drawing on secret intelligence reports, administrative correspondence, and archival records, Tariq argues that forced displacement was not merely an aftermath of communal violence but one of its central mechanisms, produced through the interaction of institutional fragmentation, policy failure, local organization, and territorial anticipation. This review situates the book's principal theoretical claims within the wider historiography of Partition and of twentieth-century forced migration, examines its treatment of state power, contingency, regional differentiation, infrastructure, gender, and princely-state agency, and gives particular attention to three episodes the book uses to reconstruct the deep chronology of Partition violence: the eruption of violence in the Hazara belt, the destruction of Katra Jaimal Singh in Amritsar, and the Sikh political mobilization at the 27 July 1947 Nankana Sahib conference. The review concludes that the book's most significant contribution is not a new classificatory label for the Punjab catastrophe, but its demonstration that forced migration, ethnic cleansing, mass violence, and state fragmentation describe interlocking dimensions of a single historical process.

Keywords: Partition of India, Punjab, forced migration, ethnic cleansing, state fragmentation, refugee studies, comparative genocide studies

1. Introduction

Adnan Tariq's Punjab, *Blood and Borders: Understanding Partition Violence through Secret and Archival Records* enters one of the most consequential and contested fields of modern South Asian historiography. Its intervention is significant because forced migration has become an increasingly important category through which historians, political scientists, refugee scholars, and genocide researchers understand the modern world. The twentieth century witnessed the Armenian deportations and genocide, the Greek-Turkish population exchange, the Holocaust and Nazi population policies, the expulsion of Germans from Eastern Europe, the partition of India, the Nakba, Soviet deportations, and population transfers in the Balkans, all of which were episodes in which states, political movements, armies, and local actors transformed populations through coercion. Tariq's study positions Punjab within this comparative lineage while insisting on the specificity of its own institutional and political conditions.

This review proceeds in three stages. It first situates the book within the historiographical shift from high-political accounts of Partition toward refugee, migration, and everyday-experience histories. It then examines, thematically, the book's principal theoretical contributions, including its treatment of state power, policy failure, organized-but-decentralized violence, regional differentiation, infrastructure, gender, and princely-state agency. Finally, it gives sustained attention to three episodes that the book uses, in effect, to push the chronology of Partition violence backward: the Hazara belt, Katra Jaimal Singh in Amritsar, and the Nankana Sahib conference of 27 July 1947. The review closes with a critical assessment of the book's comparative method and its central conceptual claim.

2. Historiographical Context

The book's emphasis on forced migration is significant because it brings Partition historiography into conversation with the development of refugee and migration studies. Earlier histories of Partition often concentrated on high politics, constitutional negotiations, nationalist leadership, and the Radcliffe boundary. Subsequent scholarship shifted increasingly toward refugees, memory, gender, localities, oral history, resettlement, and everyday experience. Scholarship on Punjabi migration has shown that displacement was not a single chaotic movement across a new border but a prolonged process involving loss, resettlement, compensation, restoration, identity formation, and the reconstruction of social belonging.

Ravinder Kaur's work, for example, has examined the transformation of Punjabi Hindus from ordinary residents into refugees and subsequently into urban citizens in Delhi, emphasizing displacement, resettlement, compensation, and the reconstruction of locality (Kaur, 2007). The comparative volume on Punjab and Bengal edited by Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh (1999) similarly shows that forced migration cannot be understood without attention to differing regional patterns of violence, migration, and governmental response. Tariq's work belongs within this intellectual development but shifts the emphasis toward the relationship between the production of violence and the production of displacement itself.

The significance of the book becomes clearer when placed against the international history of forced migration. The Armenian case involved deportation, mass death, and the destruction of a population within the Ottoman imperial context. The post-First World War Greek-Turkish population exchange represented a formally negotiated transfer in which nationality, religion, and territorial sovereignty were closely connected. Nazi Europe combined racial ideology, conquest, deportation, and extermination. The expulsion of Germans from Eastern Europe after 1945 showed how population transfer could become part of the construction of a postwar European order, while Bosnia later demonstrated that ethnic cleansing could operate through territorial conquest, systematic displacement, detention, and murder. These cases are not historically equivalent, and the value of comparison lies precisely in identifying both similarities and differences, a distinction the book largely, though not uniformly, maintains.

3. Central Argument and Thesis

Tariq's book contributes to this comparative history by emphasizing that forced migration can emerge through a combination of formal political decisions and decentralized violence. Punjab is revealing precisely because there was no single mechanism comparable to a fully centralized deportation apparatus. Instead, constitutional decisions, impending borders, administrative fragmentation, political mobilization, local militias, refugee movements, military veterans, rumours, and retaliatory violence interacted. The resulting displacement was therefore neither entirely spontaneous nor reducible to a single centralized master plan. This middle ground is analytically important because it suggests that demographic transformation can occur through multiple, overlapping levels of organization.

4. Thematic Analysis

4.1 State Power and Institutional Fragmentation

The book's treatment of state power is one of its strongest theoretical features. Rather than claiming that the colonial state simply vanished in 1947, Tariq argues that institutions remained in existence but became fragmented, communalized, and politically ineffective. Police forces, military units, and administrative structures continued to operate, but their capacity to act impartially was increasingly compromised; the conclusion emphasizes that the state often failed to protect minorities and that elements of the security apparatus sometimes participated in or facilitated violence. This complicates conventional theories of state collapse: Punjab was not a case of complete institutional disappearance but of institutional continuity combined with declining neutrality and uneven capacity.

This distinction carries wider implications for the study of mass violence. Violence does not require the complete disappearance of the state; it can flourish when institutions continue to exist but lose legitimacy, coherence, or neutrality. Police may exist without effectively policing; armies may be deployed without sufficient resources; administrators may issue orders without the capacity to implement them; intelligence may exist without being translated into preventive action. Tariq's argument thus opens a useful analytical space between "state presence" and "state absence," reframing the relevant historical question as one of the quality, legitimacy, and political orientation of state authority.

4.2 Policy Failure and Historical Contingency

The concept of policy failure is equally central. The book argues that the catastrophe was not simply inevitable: delayed political decisions, insufficient troop deployment, inadequate intelligence, failure to protect transport routes, and the inability to secure vulnerable populations all contributed to the escalation of violence. The Punjab Boundary Force is particularly important within this interpretation because its existence demonstrates that the authorities recognized the security crisis. However, its limited geographical capacity and internal communal tensions restricted its effectiveness. The conclusion thus interprets the catastrophe partly through the history of decisions taken, decisions delayed, and decisions that proved inadequate.

This restores contingency to a history too often treated as deterministic. Communal tension alone did not mechanically produce massacre: political decisions altered expectations, administrative weakness altered opportunities, weapons and organizational experience altered capabilities, refugee movements altered perceptions, and retaliatory narratives altered motivations. Violence therefore emerged from interaction rather than a single cause. This interpretation is consistent with a broader trend in contemporary scholarship on mass violence, which increasingly explains outcomes through the interplay of structural conditions, political institutions, local actors, and individual decisions rather than attributing them solely to either “ancient hatreds” or abstract structural forces.

4.3 Organization without Centralization

The book’s emphasis on local organization is particularly important here. Its discussion of demobilized soldiers and veterans suggests that violence sometimes possessed military characteristics that cannot be explained through the image of an unorganized mob; veterans of the Second World War brought tactical knowledge, organizational skills, and combat experience into communal militias, transforming some violence from conventional riot into something closer to communal warfare. This connects Partition studies with a wider literature on the relationship between military experience and the organization of ethnic violence.

At the same time, the evidence encourages an important conceptual distinction between organization and centralization. A violent operation can be organized without being centrally commanded: local political leaders, veterans, criminal networks, religious organizations, and community militias can coordinate attacks without instructions from a national government. This distinction is essential to the Punjab case and represents one of the areas where Tariq’s archival approach can make its most significant contribution. Secret intelligence reports and administrative correspondence may reveal not simply whether violence was “planned,” but also at what level planning occurred, who participated, how information circulated, and whether different local operations were connected.

4.4 Reciprocity and Regional Differentiation

The book’s treatment of reciprocity is similarly valuable. The violence of Partition cannot be understood without examining how attacks in one region generated fear and demands for

retaliation elsewhere; refugees themselves became carriers of information, memory, and rumour. The arrival of wounded refugees from East Punjab could produce retaliatory attacks in West Punjab, while reports of massacres could be used by political and communal actors to justify subsequent violence, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. Yet reciprocity should not be confused with equivalence: different episodes occurred at different moments and under different institutional conditions, and the historical task is to reconstruct the chain of retaliation rather than reduce it to a symmetrical story of “both sides.”

This bears directly on the book’s distinction between East and West Punjab. Tariq argues that East Punjab often witnessed more organized attacks associated with groups such as Sikh jathas, while violence in West Punjab was initially more strongly shaped by retaliatory reactions to refugee arrivals and reports of atrocities from the east. This challenges the assumption that Punjab experienced uniform communal violence, suggesting instead that its character varied according to local political structures, state capacity, demographic conditions, and organizational resources. The archival approach is particularly well suited to examining these regional differences.

4.5 The Railway as Infrastructure of Displacement

The railway is another significant contribution to the book’s understanding of forced migration. Trains and stations appear not merely as sites of massacre but as infrastructures of demographic transformation: they concentrated refugees, linked contested territories, and made civilian populations visible and vulnerable. Attacks on refugee trains could be both retaliatory and strategic, producing not only immediate deaths but also enough fear to make continued movement or return impossible. This provides a particularly productive way to connect migration history with the history of violence.

Seen from the perspective of forced-migration studies, mobility itself becomes an arena of power: the question is not simply who killed whom, but who could move, who could not, which routes were secured or abandoned, and whether displaced people could ever return. The railway massacre, in this sense, was not merely an event that occurred during migration but part of the process through which migration was produced, accelerated, and made irreversible. This offers a potentially original link between Partition historiography and contemporary scholarship on mobility control. This emphasis also connects the book to the recognition that forced migration is

not a single event but a process; Kaur's (2007) work on resettlement, compensation, and identity reconstruction, and scholarship on the contested politics of refugee rehabilitation in West Punjab, extend the same trajectory from expulsion through to the reconstruction of social life.

4.6 Gendered Violence

The book also connects forced migration with gendered violence. Partition scholarship has established that women were subjected to abduction, rape, forced conversion, and forced marriage, and that women's bodies became symbolic sites through which communities imagined honour, defeat, and revenge. Tariq's framework acknowledges this dimension, though its treatment could be developed further: gender should not be treated merely as an additional category of suffering but as a lens that illuminates the mechanisms through which ethnic and religious communities imagined demographic possession and collective honour. In that respect, gendered violence belongs within the book's central theory of demographic transformation rather than alongside it.

4.7 Princely States and Plural Political Authority

A further strength is the book's attention to the princely states. The inclusion of Patiala, Faridkot, Kapurthala, and other princely territories complicates a purely colonial-administrative narrative. Princely states operated within a different political structure, and their rulers possessed varying degrees of autonomy, military capacity, and political ambition; their involvement demonstrates that the Partition crisis cannot be explained solely through British administrative failure. Local rulers, political elites, and armed groups also possessed agency, strengthening the book's broader proposition that violence emerged from the interaction of multiple political authorities rather than a single state apparatus.

5. Reconstructing the Deep Chronology of Violence

One of the most important contributions of Punjab, Blood and Borders is its attempt to move the chronology of Partition violence backward, challenging interpretations that effectively begin the decisive phase of violence with the 3 June Plan, the Radcliffe Award, or the transfer of power in August 1947. The book argues instead that 1947 must be understood as a developing process in which different regional episodes progressively altered political expectations, communal calculations, and the possibilities of demographic removal. Three episodes are especially

important in this respect: the eruption of violence in the Hazara belt, the destruction of Katra Jaimal Singh in Amritsar, and the Sikh political mobilization culminating in the 27 July Nankana Sahib conference.

5.1 The Hazara Belt

The Hazara episode is significant because it complicates explanations that begin with a generalized Hindu-Muslim-Sikh breakdown across Punjab. The book's reconstruction draws attention to violence in a region where Muslims constituted the overwhelming majority and argues that initial responsibility for this eruption lay with Muslim actors. This is analytically important because it demonstrates that the direction and intensity of violence cannot simply be inferred from the eventual demographic outcome of Partition, nor can later East Punjab violence be projected backward onto the entire chronology of 1947. Different regions entered the cycle of violence under different political and demographic circumstances, and the Hazara case therefore challenges retrospective simplification: local political conflicts, fears, retaliatory narratives, and territorial calculations generated violence at different moments and under different conditions, requiring the historian to reconstruct local conflict before refugees appear as refugees. This is consistent with wider scholarship — Ilyas Chattha's research using local police and intelligence records, for instance, demonstrates that organized violence in Punjab, particularly in Gujranwala and Sialkot, involved political mobilization alongside locally rooted motivations such as revenge, competition, and the acquisition of property (Chattha, 2011). Tariq's intervention extends this scholarship by placing such local processes within a longer trajectory toward demographic transformation.

5.2 The Destruction of Katra Jaimal Singh, Amritsar

The second episode, the destruction of Katra Jaimal Singh in Amritsar, is perhaps even more important for the book's interpretation of the political economy of violence. Its significance lies not simply in the scale of arson and destruction but in what kind of urban social world was being attacked: Katra Jaimal Singh represented an important commercial concentration associated with the Khatri Hindu trading community, and its destruction struck at the economic infrastructure through which a substantial section of Amritsar's Hindu commercial middle class participated in the city's urban life.

This allows the book to connect violence, property, and forced migration productively. The destruction of commercial premises does not merely produce casualties; it destroys livelihoods, credit networks, commercial relationships, inventories, neighbourhood security, and the possibility of remaining. Once shops, warehouses, and residential properties are burned, a community's social capacity to reproduce itself in a locality is weakened, so violence becomes a mechanism of economic dispossession as well as physical intimidation. The episode illustrates what might be called economic violence in the service of demographic transformation: displacement can be produced without requiring the physical killing of every member of a targeted community, once the material foundations of urban life are destroyed. The Amritsar case also helps the book challenge the tendency to treat Partition violence as a predominantly rural phenomenon involving village massacres and refugee columns. Urban commercial neighbourhoods, which were economically interconnected and religiously mixed, were equally important arenas of demographic transformation. This interpretation aligns with growing scholarship, including Chattha's (2011) work on property and looting, which examines property appropriation as both a motivation for and a mechanism of violence rather than merely an incidental consequence.

5.3 The Nankana Sahib Conference, 27 July 1947

The third episode, the 27 July 1947 Nankana Sahib conference, marks a different but equally important stage. Here the book moves from localized violence to the increasingly explicit political organization of Sikh territorial claims. The conference was not simply a religious gathering; contemporary administrative records describe it as a political mobilization intended to demonstrate Sikh claims before the Boundary Commission and the wider public. Sikh leaders encouraged supporters to travel in jathas, while the colonial administration regarded the proposed gathering as sufficiently dangerous to mobilize substantial military and police resources and to restrict railway and road access to Nankana Sahib.

This episode demonstrates how the politics of territorial insecurity became connected to organized mass mobilization. Nankana Sahib was simultaneously a sacred Sikh centre, a Muslim-majority locality, and a politically contested territory whose future was being determined by the Boundary Commission. The case brings together several of the book's major themes, including sacred geography, demographic claims, political mobilization, territorial

anxiety, the impending boundary, and the possibility of coercive action. Its significance should not, however, be reduced to the claim that the conference itself “caused” subsequent violence. Its importance is more subtle: it represents a moment when influential Sikh political stakeholders increasingly treated the impending territorial settlement as an existential political struggle requiring organized popular mobilization, contributing to a climate in which demographic and territorial questions were framed in increasingly coercive terms.

5.4 A Chronological Grammar of Violence

Together, Hazara, Katra Jaimal Singh, and Nankana Sahib offer more than additional case studies. They establish a chronological pattern of violence that can be understood as a sequence of local eruption, destruction and dispossession, political mobilization, territorial consolidation, and forced migration. This is potentially one of the most original ways of presenting the book’s argument. It avoids the conventional distinction between “politics” and “violence,” because politics increasingly operated through the anticipation of demographic consequences, and it avoids treating forced migration simply as something that happened after violence. Instead, violence progressively created the conditions in which migration became inevitable, desirable to some political actors, or necessary for the survival of others.

This chronological argument also strengthens the book’s critique of the so-called Boundary Award explanation. The conclusion already challenges the idea that the delayed announcement of the Radcliffe Award was the fundamental cause of the August violence, pointing instead to substantial violence and preparations beforehand, including disturbances in Amritsar and Gurdaspur and the Nankana Sahib meeting of 27 July. The three episodes make this argument considerably stronger by demonstrating that the processes producing displacement and demographic transformation were already underway before the boundary was publicly announced. They also complicate the binary opposition between spontaneous communal violence and centrally planned genocide by revealing different forms of organization operating at different levels. Some emerged from local actors, others from organized political or communal networks, while some were facilitated by administrative weakness. Still others acquired a strategic territorial dimension without being directed by a single centralized command. This is precisely why the book’s concept of state fragmentation is useful: the state did not disappear, but

its ability to impose a common political order weakened while competing organizations acquired greater capacity to determine local outcomes.

The three episodes deserve, on this reading, much greater prominence in the overall architecture of the book than as illustrative examples buried within individual chapters. They can instead function as turning points in its master narrative: Hazara as the early eruption demonstrating regional specificity; Katra Jaimal Singh as the urban-commercial destruction revealing the material and demographic consequences of organized arson; and Nankana Sahib as the political moment when Sikh territorial mobilization became increasingly confrontational and connected to the impending boundary settlement.

6. Comparative and Global Historiographical Significance

The comparative framework nevertheless requires methodological discipline. The book's engagement with the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, the expulsion of Germans, Bosnia, the Nakba, and other cases is valuable because it situates Punjab within a global history of demographic transformation, but comparison is most productive when it identifies a specific analytical problem rather than accumulating examples. The most productive comparative question for this book is perhaps not whether Punjab was "like" the Holocaust or Bosnia, but how different forms of political territorialization produce different forms of population removal. This question invites comparison through specific mechanisms, including border-making, population transfer, territorial homogenization, state fragmentation, local militia organization, transportation control, and the creation of refugee populations.

This approach would allow the book to make an especially important intervention in twentieth-century history. Modern state formation frequently involved the aspiration to make political territory correspond to a supposedly coherent national population, yet the relationship between nation-building and population movement has never been straightforward: states have expelled populations, populations have fled in anticipation of violence, local communities have driven out minorities before governments formally ordered removal, states have sometimes tried but failed to prevent expulsion, and authorities have sometimes exploited the consequences of violence to consolidate demographic change. Punjab illustrates this complex spectrum, and the book therefore contributes to an important shift in scholarship from treating forced migration solely as

a humanitarian phenomenon to understanding it as a political mechanism through which electoral constituencies, property ownership, territorial control, citizenship, military security, and national identity can be transformed.

This is also why the book remains relevant to the contemporary world. Contemporary displacement crises in Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Myanmar, Afghanistan, and elsewhere demonstrate continuing relationships between armed conflict, state fragmentation, persecution, territorial control, and population movement; UNHCR's current data, which count some 129.4 million forcibly displaced and stateless people, show that forced displacement remains one of the defining global consequences of contemporary conflict (UNHCR, 2026). The historical study of Punjab can therefore contribute to current debates by demonstrating that displacement should be examined not merely as a humanitarian outcome but as a political process produced by decisions concerning territory, security, citizenship, and demographic composition.

7. Critical Assessment

The archival basis of the book gives its central argument particular significance. A study of forced migration and violence requires evidence that can establish chronology, intention, institutional knowledge, and local action. Oral testimony reveals personal experience and memory, demographic statistics indicate the scale of displacement, newspapers document public discourse, and memoirs offer insights into subjective experience. Secret reports, intelligence records, military correspondence, police files, and administrative communications, however, can potentially reveal what governments and political actors knew as the crisis unfolded. The book's promise to reconstruct Partition through such records therefore carries genuine methodological weight, seeking to recover the administrative and political processes behind an event too often remembered principally through trauma and testimony.

The central challenge for the book is consequently also its greatest opportunity: to demonstrate, through its archival evidence, the precise relationship between knowledge, intention, organization, and action. If the records show that authorities received warnings but failed to act, the argument about policy failure becomes stronger. If they demonstrate coordination between local political actors and armed groups, the argument about organized violence gains force. If they reveal that attacks on transport routes were strategically connected to population removal,

the argument about forced migration as a mechanism of violence becomes particularly compelling. And if they demonstrate significant variation between districts, the book can move beyond generalization toward a genuinely differentiated history of Partition violence.

Two limitations are worth registering alongside these strengths. First, as noted above, the comparative apparatus occasionally risks accumulating cases rather than sharpening a single mechanism-based question; the book's argument would be strengthened by consistently framing comparison around specific analytical problems rather than general resemblance. Second, the treatment of gendered violence, although present, remains underdeveloped relative to the book's theoretical ambitions. Gender is acknowledged more often as a category of suffering than used as an analytical lens through which to examine demographic possession and collective honour. Yet these are precisely the areas in which the book's own framework could make its most significant conceptual contribution.

8. Conclusion

Taken as a whole, Punjab, Blood and Borders should be understood not simply as another history of the violence of 1947, but as an attempt to reposition Punjab within the global history of forced migration and demographic transformation. Its central question is larger than Partition itself: how does the creation of new political territory transform populations into objects of political calculation, and how can violence turn anticipated borders into demographic realities? The Punjab case offers a particularly revealing answer because the transformation it describes was extraordinarily rapid, geographically extensive, and socially devastating.

The book's strongest achievement is its refusal to separate violence from migration. The millions who crossed the new Punjab boundary were not merely passive victims who appeared after the violence had ended; their movement was itself part of the historical process through which the new political geography of South Asia was created. It also challenges explanations that rely too heavily on communal hatred as an independent cause, emphasizing instead that Partition violence was not inevitable but intensified by political and administrative decisions. This perspective restores historical agency and contingency to an event sometimes portrayed as an unavoidable consequence of communal antagonism.

In final assessment, Punjab, Blood and Borders is best situated at the intersection of Partition studies, refugee and migration studies, genocide and ethnic-cleansing studies, and the global history of twentieth-century population transfer. Its significance lies less in assigning a single definitive label to the Punjab catastrophe than in demonstrating how border-making, violence, forced migration, demographic engineering, and institutional fragmentation became historically intertwined. Its wider significance lies in challenging scholars to reconsider the relationship between borders and people. Borders are often presented as lines drawn on maps, but the history examined in this book suggests that they acquire political reality through the movement, expulsion, killing, settlement, and resettlement of human beings. In Punjab, the border was not merely drawn through an existing society; the violent transformation of that society helped make the border socially and demographically real. The book's central pairing, "blood and borders," is therefore historically meaningful, and its relevance extends beyond the memory of 1947 to a contemporary world in which more than one hundred million people (UNHCR, 2026) continue to experience forced displacement.

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