



# India from 1900 to 1947

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## Colonial repression

### General Presentation

The British conquest of India was accompanied by large-scale violence, sometimes directed toward the Indian civilian population. During the colonial wars of conquest, there were mass killings, but few are remembered. This is not the case with those linked to what the British called the Sepoy Mutiny, known in India as the First Indian War of Independence. This event is also referred to as the Great Rising of 1857-58 and was the only serious challenge to British rule between 1765 and 1919. The Sepoy Mutiny / Great Rising was accompanied by small-scale killings of British military officers and civilians, including the famous massacre at Cawnpore, which gave rise to one of the main memory sites of the British Empire, as well as by large-scale killings of Indian civilians in the wake of the repression of that rising. There followed some sixty years of *Pax Britannica*, during which the lack of direct challenge to British domination suffices to explain the absence of major episodes of violence. After the First World War, as Indian nationalism became a mass phenomenon, colonial repression sometimes took a violent turn, and killings occurred, albeit on a limited scale compared to other colonial contexts.

### Chronological sequence

**Map of Punjab in 1949**  
**1919, April 13:** Demonstrations were staged all over India from April 6th onwards in protest against the Rowlatt bills. British Judge Rowlatt had promulgated repressive laws curtailing civil liberties in India. In the Punjab, where anger against the colonial regime was particularly strong, demonstrations sometimes took a violent turn. In Amritsar, the Holy City of the Sikhs, however, a crowd of 20,000 including many women and children was demonstrating peacefully in an enclosure known as Jallianwalla Bagh, when British General [Reginald Dyer](#) ordered a platoon of soldiers of the Baluch Regiment to open fire on the unarmed crowd, killing some 380 and wounding 1,500. The general claimed to have wanted to make an example and thus prevent a new Mutiny. British settlers hailed him as a savior and the Indian public at large labeled him a mass murderer. Following Jallianwalla Bagh, as it later became known in India, Rabindranath Tagore, a poet winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, renounced his knighthood in a symbolic gesture of protest against this event\*\*\* (Draper, 1981).

**1921, October 25:** Northern Kerala Muslims, mostly peasants and agricultural laborers, known as Moplahs (Mapillai), rose against British rule and local Hindu landlords. Some landlords were killed by the insurgents, who also proceeded to forcibly convert some Hindus to Islam. This rising was linked to a general movement of Muslim protest against the British anti-Ottoman policy, known as the Khilafat agitation. Soldiers of the Dorset Regiment launched an assault on Melmuri, a locality where some rebels had entrenched themselves. As a consequence, 246 were killed including many women and children, who were not active rebels\*\*\* (Wood, 1987:210).

**1921, November 10:** A group of 100 Moplah prisoners being transported to a camp were asphyxiated in a railway car; 70 died. The administrator responsible for their death was later penalized, but not punished\*\*\* (Wood, 1987:205).

**1925, May:** At Neemuchana in Alwar state, a princely state of Northern India, the state police fired upon peasants protesting against an increase in land revenue. 156 died and 600 were injured\*\*\* (Sarkar, 1983:241).

**1930, April 23:** In Peshawar, capital of the North West Frontier Province (in present-day Pakistan), a

demonstration protesting against the arrest of local Pashtun leader Abdul Ghaffar Khan, known as the Frontier Gandhi, turned violent and the army opened fire on the crowd. This demonstration was part of the Civil Disobedience movement launched by [Gandhi](#), which otherwise remained largely non-violent. The Peshawar demonstration's official death toll was 30, but an unofficial one estimated it at 200 to 250\*\*\* (Sarkar, 1983:288).

**1942, August:** Shortly after the launching by the Congress of the Quit India movement on August 8th that demanded immediate independence, the British unleashed massive repressive operations, using 57 army battalions. The official death toll, mostly in Bihar and the Eastern United Provinces, was 1,060 demonstrators killed (as opposed to 63 policemen and a small number of military personnel), but unofficial estimates were higher (1,761 for Bihar alone according to a Congress source). In some places air power was used against crowds which mostly had crude weapons\*\*\* (Sarkar, 1983:394-404).

## Caste and class killings

### General Presentation

Although intercommunity tensions figured prominently in Indian historical narratives, and probably generated the largest share of violence, there were additional tensions in Indian society that sometimes gave rise to massacres. For instance, in the countryside, Untouchables (now known as Dalits) and other members of low castes often fell victim to attacks by the upper castes. Some of these attacks were on a scale which would justify the term massacre. However, most attacks went unreported and the memory of them lies buried in the consciousness of often illiterate villagers. At times lower caste affirmation merged with labor militancy and, therefore, attracted the wrath of the colonial state or its princely protégés. One such killing of low-caste workers has become a famous incident in the history of Kerala and is given more detailed treatment below.

#### *Punnapra-Valayar massacre (October 27, 1946)*

In the Alleppey area of Northwestern Travancore state (one of the two large princely states in Kerala, the other being Cochin), the Communists built a powerful base amongst coir-factory workers, fishermen, toddy tappers and agricultural laborers. The latter mostly belonged to the low Ezhawa caste, a group of ex-Untouchables who had climbed the social ladder to a degree. The Communists were on a collision course with the powerful Dewan (Prime Minister) of Travancore State, C.P. Ramaswami Iyer. At the time, the Dewan was attempting to create an independent Travancore, hoping for a transfer of power. In September 1946, the state police started an intimidation campaign against trade-unions in the Alleppey area, and a general strike was declared on October 22nd. On October 24th volunteers attacked a police camp in Punnapra, and after martial law had been declared on October 25th, the Travancore army stormed the volunteer headquarters at nearby Valayar and fired indiscriminately, killing at least 800. The place has become a memory site for Communists in Kerala since 1957, when they first came to power\*\*\* (George, 1975).

## Inter-community killings (until 1946)

### General Presentation

Violence between Hindus and Muslims is one of the most publicized features of colonial India's history. Some, particularly Indian historian Gyan Pandey (Pandey, 1990), hold that its characterization as violence between religious communities was invented by colonial administrators in the 19th century, and that it

misrepresented forms of violence which were in fact extremely complex. Others see in it a faithful reflection of the actual crystallization of communitarian identities based on religion, in response to certain colonial policies. Whichever is the case, Hindu-Muslim riots became a permanent feature of the Indian political scene in the first half of the twentieth century. It is uncertain whether these riots, which were very varied in nature and scale, all qualify as massacres. Often they consisted of isolated stabbings in back alleys of towns and cities.

Pitched battles between two crowds over a procession route or some other symbolic place were rare. Even less frequently did a crowd attack defenseless members of another community. Only the latter type of incident can unquestionably be considered a massacre. The following section lists some of the major riots, as well as minor ones which clearly qualify as massacres.

### **Chronological sequence**

**1917, September-October:** Massive attacks on Muslims by Hindu crowds of up to 50,000, in some 150 villages in the Shahabad, Gaya and Patna districts of Bihar. The immediate issue was cow protection (attempts to stop Muslims from slaughtering cows, which had given rise to a large movement all across Northern India in 1893), but rumors of a collapse of British rule because of the World War also played a part. The number of dead is unknown but is believed to be considerable (it is officially estimated at 41, but this figure is recognized as rather low) \*\*\* (Pandey, 1983).

**1924, September:** In Kohat, an area with an overwhelming Muslim majority (90%), located in the Northwest Frontier Province, a Muslim crowd attacked the local Hindu population, resulting in 155 dead\*\*\* (Sarkar, 1983:233).

**1928, February:** Hindu-Muslim riots in Bombay City killed 149 and injured 739\*\*\* ( Notes on Hindu-Muslim Riots in Bombay/Sind ).

**1931, March:** A Congress-inspired call for a work stoppage (hartal), in honor of a revolutionary who had been hanged by the British, started a major Hindu-Muslim riot in Cawnpore (Kanpur), which left 400 dead and 1,200 injured\*\*\* (Brass, 1997: 209-210).

**1932, May:** Widespread Hindu-Muslim riots in Bombay City. 217 persons were killed and 2,569 injured\*\*\* ( Notes on Hindu-Muslim Riots in Bombay/Sind ).

## **Mass killings linked to the Partition of British India between India and Pakistan (1946-1947)**

### **General presentation**

These killings, amongst the most massive of the twentieth century, have to be seen in light of the complex developments which led to Britain's division of India into the two Dominions: Pakistan and India. They became separate, independent countries respectively on August 14 and 15, 1947. A first sequence of killings followed shortly afterward. The head of the Muslim League, [Muhammad Ali Jinnah](#), called for a Direct Action Day on August 16, 1946, to protest against the British Cabinet Mission's plan for the transfer of power from Britain. The first large-scale violence occurred in Calcutta on August 16-19, 1946 and is widely known as [The Great Calcutta Killing](#). The violence in Bengal and Bihar which followed thereafter, continued during October and November. After a few months of uneasy calm, a second violent sequence started in March 1947, and was almost exclusively centered on the Punjab. This sequence followed [Lord](#)

[Mountbatten](#)'s arrival as India's new Viceroy; his explicit mission was the transfer of power to one or two sovereign governments by June 1948 at the latest. In the Punjab, a province with a mixed population of Muslims (55%), Hindus (33%) and Sikhs (11%), the collapse of a government headed by the Unionist Party, a coalition of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh politicians, led to a confused situation in which the Muslim League emerged as the strongest party, but could not form a government. Since Punjab was to be the heart of Pakistan, in January 1947 the Muslim League launched a campaign to gain power in the province (which was still under a regime of provincial autonomy established by the 1935 Constitution). The campaign led to widespread violence in March against Hindus and Sikhs in some Muslim-majority districts of Western Punjab. While British Governor Sir Evan Jenkins imposed a state of emergency on the province until its independence, rampant violence continued unabated until the beginning of August 1947. Then, with the perspective of the province's partition between a Pakistani Western Punjab and an Indian Eastern Punjab, which the powerful Sikh community was particularly opposed to, violence reached unprecedented heights in August-September 1947. A Punjab Boundary Force hastily assembled, failed in its mission to maintain order in the region, and was dissolved on August 31st, leaving the field to the armies of the two new independent states. It was only by mid-October that a semblance of order was restored in the Punjab. In the meantime, the largest population displacement in human history took place in chaotic conditions. It affected some ten million people (4 million Hindus and Sikhs moved from West to East Punjab and 5 to 6 million Muslims moved from East to West Punjab). The death toll of this terrible episode remains very much contested (see further on). \*\*\*

### Chronological sequence

**1946, August 16-19:** [Great Calcutta Killing](#). 5,000 people lost their lives.

**1946, September:** Sporadic violence in Bombay. 320 people were killed (Sarkar, 1983:433).

**1946, October:** Attacks on Hindus by Muslim crowds in Noakhali and Tippera districts in Southeastern Bengal. 300 people were killed, and many were forcibly converted to Islam (Sarkar, 1983:433).

**1946, October 27-November 6:** Massive anti-Muslim violence in Bihar by Hindu crowds in retaliation against Noakhali. 7,000-8,000 persons were killed in a few days. Nehru, as head of the interim government, threatened to use aerial bombardment against rioting crowds (Tucker, 1950:182).

**1946, November:** Hindu pilgrims attacked Muslims at Garmukteswar in the United Provinces. Members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an extremist Hindu organization, were involved. 1,000 people lost their lives (Sarkar, 1983:434).

**1947, March:** Muslim crowds and Muslim National Guards, the militia linked to the Muslim League, systematically attacked Hindus and Sikhs in Western Punjab, including in rural areas for the first time. Some 3,000 were killed (of whom some 2,000 in Rawalpindi district), and massive destruction of property took place (Carter, 2003: 369).

**1947, April-July:** Incidents of violence and arson continued throughout most of the Punjab, but on a relatively lower scale. Some 1,500 persons were killed (Carter, 2003: 369).

**1947, August-September:** Unprecedented violence across the Punjab region. In Western Punjab, there were massive attacks against Hindus and Sikhs and their property (since many Hindus and Sikhs were prosperous farmers or moneylenders), by Muslim crowds, Muslim National Guards, and members of the police and the army. In Eastern Punjab and the adjoining Sikh princely states (particularly Patiala) the pattern of violence was marked by the prominent role of Sikh jathas (bands of 20 to 600 men); the police

and the army remained rather passive. Since most Muslims in East Punjab were poor farmers, their lives, rather than their property, were the main targets. There were three main types of violence:

1. attacks on villages, accompanied by widespread looting and rape;
2. attacks on refugee trains, with explosives to derail the trains, and use of crude weapons to kill the passengers;
3. ambushes on refugee columns moving on foot through the countryside under military protection (the military personnel sometimes sided with the attackers).

The death toll was in the hundreds of thousands; cases of rape and abduction of women numbered in the tens of thousands, and the victims were often murdered afterwards. The most deadly attacks were those against refugee trains. These were highly organized affairs in which ex-military personnel, with knowledge of explosives and sabotage techniques, played a prominent role. These trains generally carried three to four thousand refugees, and were accompanied by small military escorts, which were often incapable of preventing considerable loss of life, however. Here death tolls sometimes reached two to three thousand. Indian writer Khushwant Singh recounted one of these harrowing train journeys in a famous novel (Singh, 1956) (Ayar, 1998).

**1947, September:** Large-scale anti-Muslim violence in Delhi, where Muslim refugees were concentrated in view of their departure for Pakistan, when Hindu and Sikh refugees arrived from Western Punjab. [Gandhi](#)'s personal intervention helped put an end to the killings (Sarkar, 1983:438).

**1947, October-November:** Gradual decrease of violence in the Punjab and progressive return to normality.

### **Epilogue: counting the dead in the Punjab mass killings**

There is no authoritative estimate of the total casualties in the Punjab killings of August and September 1947. These casualties are glossed over in most standard histories written in India or Pakistan and seen as detracting from the main themes: Indian independence from Britain or liberation from Hindu domination in Pakistan. For this reason most estimates originate from British sources. Yet the number of casualties in the Punjab had become a bone of contention in British political circles: supporters of [Lord Mountbatten](#), the last Viceroy, tended to favor a fairly low count, whereas his critics quoted higher figures. For a summary of the British debate, from an anti-Mountbatten point of view, see Roberts, 1994:127-132. Figures quoted range between a minimum of 180,000 and a maximum of 1 million. Here are some of the estimates found in the literature, from the lowest to the highest, with comments.

Moon, 1961: less than 200,000. The author, a non-conformist British civil servant, claims to have based his estimate on first-hand accounts (from the state of Bahawalpur, a princely state in which he was serving at the time) and on information from other British administrators. However, his figures appear low in comparison with other estimates for these areas. [Lord Mountbatten](#) supported Moon's estimate, but as mentioned previously, the former had reasons to favor a fairly low count, given that some held him responsible for not doing more to stop the killings while he was still India's Viceroy.

Khosla, 1989: 400,000 to 500,000. The author, an Indian official engaged in refugee rehabilitation presents detailed data for Western Punjab based on an Indian fact-finding commission, which interviewed Hindu and Sikh refugees. Khosla assumes that the number of Muslims killed in Eastern Punjab was the same as the number of Hindus and Sikhs killed in Western Punjab. However, he does not provide detailed evidence to support his view.

Mosley, 1961: 600,000. While the figure appears plausible (although high), the author, who interviewed participants in the events, does not give a detailed account of how he reached his estimate.

Bristow, 1974: 1,000,000. The author is a senior British officer who was in command of a brigade that was in charge of internal security in Eastern Punjab immediately after independence. According to him this figure is based on intelligence reports from the Headquarters of the East Punjab Area. Officers of the Punjab Boundary Force with whom he was able to confer regarded this figure as a conservative estimate. It is not clear whether this figure refers to the total number of the dead (including many who died in refugee camps from disease and exhaustion) or to those actually killed in massacres.

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