



THE PARTITION VIOLENCE IN MALERKOTLA

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ABSTRACT:

This case study of Malerkotla offers an in-depth engagement with the changing demographic landscape of the region from the founding of the state of Malerkotla in the 17th century, through the communal convulsions in pre-1947 India, to the pattern of inter-communal relationship prevailing in the region in the present day. In so doing, the study presents the following inferences. First, Malerkotla was founded by a Muslim and today stands dominated by Muslims. Even the political upheavals in 1947 and the resultant turmoil affected it temporarily. It has consistently given refuge and solace to people of a particular community.



KEYWORDS: Jagir, Nawab, Sahibzada, Katha.

INTRODUCTION:

Before Partition, the state of Malerkotla formed a compact wedge of territory which dovetails into the northern border of the Phulkian states.¹ Today Malerkotla city is an important tehsil of Sangrur district of Punjab. 'It is situated on the Ludhiana-Sangrur Road at a distance of 34 km towards north of Sangrur'.² Malerkotla lies at the heart of the Punjab.

FOUNDER OF MALERKOTLA

Malerkotla came into existence in 1466. It was founded by Sadrudin, an Islamic theologian known as Sheikh Sadrudin Sadar-i-Jahan, locally known as Haider Sheikh. Behlol Lodhi gave this *jagir* along with his daughter Taj Murassa Begum in marriage to the Sheikh. The *jagir* was in nature of a dowry. The legend goes that he made a hut here, which was then known as Malhergarh.

Malerkotla town was divided into two parts - Maler and Kotla. Maler has probably been named after Malher Singh, who is said to have been ruling here and later, the name got corrupted to Maler. The Kotla area had been established by a sixth-generation descendant of Haider Shaikh, Bayazid Khan. In 1656 he built a protection wall around the palace. 'Nawab Bayazid Khan, on his death in 1665, was succeeded by Nawab Feroze Khan, who in turn bequeathed his heritage in 1672 to the well-known

¹ Punjab, State Gazetteers Volume XVA, Malerkotla State with maps 1904, Compiled and Published - the Punjab Government, (Lahore: The civil and military Gazette Press, 1908). p. 1.

² Master Plan of Malerkotla, Town and Country Planning, p. 7.

Nawab Sher Mohammad Khan.³ In 1901-1902, Nawab Ahmed Ali built Moti Mahal, which linked Maler with Kotla. 'It was earlier named Kotlamaler and later on named as Malerkotla'.⁴

SHER MOHAMMAD KHAN

Punjabi Sikhs challenged the autocratic rule of Aurangzeb in the 17th century. Rulers of Malerkotla sided with the Mughal emperor and participated in continuous and bloody battles against the Sikhs on behalf of Aurangzeb. In fact, they also engaged the Sikhs by supporting the Afghan marauder Ahmed Shah Abdali. Wazir Khan, the governor of Sind and a close relative of the ruler of neighbouring Malerkotla, was the architect of these bloody and cruel acts against Sikhs of this region. On December 12, 1705, Wazir Khan got the captive sons of Guru Gobind Singh, namely Sahibzada Fateh Singh and Sahibzada Zorawar Singh, who were only 6 and 9 years old, respectively, bricked alive into a wall.

Malerkotla's ruler at that time was Sher Mohammed Khan. He is said to have strongly condemned Wazir Khan's cruelty. 'This act of Sher Mohammed Khan is gratefully remembered among Sikhs as Haa da naarah, which is the Punjabi expression of disgust at gross injustice, or a cry for Justice.' Guru Gobind Singh was touched by this gracious act and is said to have blessed Malerkotla for this generous gesture of raising such a cry.

The reason for peace in Malerkotla during Partition, the most turbulent time in the history of Punjab, is attributed to this cry for justice (*Haa daa Naraah*). It has special importance in popular culture and is cited frequently to show the peaceful coexistence between different religious communities. We shall return to the issue of partition later.

After the death of Guru Gobind Singh, Banda Bahadur became the defender of the Sikh faith. People approached him for the redressal of their grievances. One such complaint was against the Ram Rayias, who had used offensive language towards the Guru.⁵ After punishing the offenders, Banda moved to Malerkotla. Due to the confusion caused by the attack on Guru, one Sikh maid, Bibi Anup Kaur, fell into the hands of Sher Mohammad Khan of Malerkotla and was carried away by him. She killed herself and was buried by Sher Mohammad in a grave. Since she had not converted to Islam, so to give her the last rites according to her faith, Banda marched towards Malerkotla. He did not destroy Malerkotla due to Guru's blessings to this place. After performing the last rites, he concentrated on the work at hand and left Malerkotla untouched; though the whole of its neighbourhood was trampled under Banda's horses. It was the sense of gratitude because of which Malerkotla was left un-damaged.

THE NAMDHARI MASSACRE

Namdharis saw themselves as the saviour of the true Sikh tradition. They were the first fighters against British colonialism. They called for a boycott of British goods in the late 19th century. 'They established their own postal system, refused to serve in the British army, and waged active struggles against cow slaughter.'⁶ Slaughter of cows by the Muslims and the British was retaliated by these Namdhari Sikhs in 1872 when they attacked Malerkotla. British sources portrayed Namdharis as fanatics rather than freedom fighters, defenders of the faith. Namdharis succeeded in inflicting some harm on the British and capturing some guns. However, the British retaliated by blowing many Namdharis, including several women and children. They were blown to pieces by placing cannons in their mouths.

Despite this inhuman and brutal massacre of Sikhs, which remains a blot in the history of Malerkotla, the Muslims were not harmed because of the respect Sikhs had for the 10th guru granting blessings to the Muslims of Malerkotla. In 1877 the Nawab was invited to the imperial assemblage held

³Ganda Singh, *Patiala and East Punjab States Union, Historical background*, Archiver Department, Patiala 1951, p. 79.

⁴Master Plan of Malerkotla, Town and country planning, Punjab, p. 5.

⁵www.searchsikhism.com, Ghudani, and Malerkotla.

⁶Anna Biglow, p. 73.

at Delhi on the accession of the Empress of India. 'He was granted an additional salute of two guns as a personal distinction.'⁷

MALERKOTLA AND THE TWO WORLD WARS

The First World War started in 1914, and the state of Malerkotla offered its services readily to the British. 'The number of the inhabitants of the state who served during the third Afghan war was 31.7% of the eligible males in the state.'⁸ The state had contributed far more than its capacity. Due to the exemplary services rendered and high standards of professional efficiency shown by the Malerkotla Army, various titles were conferred on the Nawab by the imperial majesty. Similarly, during the Second World War, Nawab Ahmed Ali Khan fully supported the British and maintained good relations with them during World War II. In this alarming situation, 'His Highness offered his personal service and placed all his resources at the disposal of his imperial Majesty the King Emperor.'⁹

THE TURBULENT 40S AND EVENTUAL PARTITION

In 1942, the Quit India movement started under Gandhi with the idea of "Do or Die" and got the masses into action for complete freedom. After this, Cripps mission of 1942, Wavell Plan 1943 and Cabinet Mission established that the Britishers could no longer stay in India and that the time had come for their departure. The independence in 1947, accompanied by the Partition and the formation of Pakistan, put the status of princely states in the doldrums. Nawab Ahmed Ali Khan signed this instrument of accession in Sept 1947 and died a month later. During the turbulent times of Partition, Malerkotla remained an oasis of life and an island of peace for the Muslims, which even provided refuge to Muslims from elsewhere.

There is no doubt that Malerkotla remained peaceful during Partition. However, several incidents occurred from time to time before and after the Partition, which reflected discord between different religious communities in this region of Punjab.

A correspondent writing to the *Akhbar-i-Am* (Lahore) says that notwithstanding the fact that kine slaughter is prohibited in the Malerkotla state, it is a matter of notoriety that the slaughter of bulls and bull-buffaloes is being carried on to an alarming extent in the Killa Rahmatgarh street which the superintendent of the state resides.¹⁰

The author considers it impossible that the slaughter of bulls and buffaloes is conducted without the connivance of officials as the street is frequented by the public and state officials. The author also deems it equally impossible that the Hindus would not protest against the practice if they were not afraid of being ill-treated by the authorities. The above clearly depicts the reasons for protests by Hindus, which many times became the reason for riots. Similarly, music before the mosque too becomes the reason for communal riots between the two communities.

A Hindu group, in 1935, began an old tradition of '*Katha*' which means the recitation of a sacred text. The building in which this forgotten activity began overlooked a mosque. 'As the recitation involved singing and the playing of instruments, it was objectionable to the Muslim congregation during times of prayer.'¹¹ Riots erupted as the row escalated, resulting in Hindu deaths. The problem could not be resolved fully and emerged in various forms until 1941.

Malerkotla has become a centre of Muslim congregation. Any incidence pertaining to the community anywhere in the world stirs up the Muslims in the area, who are always chaffing for action to avenge any wrong done to their clan. The demolition of the Ram Janmabhumi Temple cum Mosque in

⁷Lepel Griffin, *The Chiefs and Families of Note in the Punjab*, Govt Printing Lahore, p. 533.

⁸Ibid., p. 534.

⁹*Report on the Administration of Malerkotla State for the Year 1942-43*, p. 52.

¹⁰Native Newspaper Report, *Akhbar-i-Am* (Lahore), 12th September 1900, Section 38, p. 501.

¹¹Anna Bigelow, 'Punjab's Muslims: The History and Significance of Malerkotla', in *International Journal of PB Studies*, Volume 12, Summer, p. 72.

Ayodhya took place in 1992, which enraged the Muslim community. A group of Muslims, out of sheer vengeance, took to the streets and damaged a Hindu temple, the Vishvakarma Mandir and the main Jain Sabha Hall in the centre of the bazaar. Taliban destroyed the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2000 in Afghanistan, it provoked the non-Muslims and led to several incidents of anti-Muslim nature in the region, such as the throwing of pig meat into the mosque and burning of the Quran.

In 2006 the controversial cartoon images of Prophet Muhammad bought together Muslims of Malerkotla in a protest to express their outrage. In September 2010 Malerkotla was again provoked by an attack on a Christian Church sparked by the alleged burning of the Quran in Lansing, Michigan. In 2014, a cow carcass was found followed by a day of shut down. In July 2016, pages of Quran were found near a drain on Khanna Road.¹²

It's ironic that despite having a Muslim majority, Malerkotla has frequently been involved in conflicts with Sikh/Hindu groups, yet a reputed publication like India Today has tried to depict Malerkotla as *'The Island of Peace'*. Any development that takes place in the Muslim world affects Malerkotla.

MALERKOTLA AFTER PARTITION

On July 15, 1948, Sardar Patel referred to the Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU) as a Sikh homeland when he inaugurated the new state. It was formed by merging the Sikh states of Patiala, Nabha, Jind, Faridkot, Kapurthala and Kalsia, together with the states of Malerkotla and Nalagarh. The area of this new state was a little over 10,000 square miles, and in 1951 it had a population of nearly 3,500,000.

REHABILITATION OF REFUGEES IN PEPSU

Rehabilitation of refugees was another major task before the government. A sizable number of refugees from West Pakistan were attracted towards these areas. The lawless forces made the task even more challenging. However, the PEPSU government, undeterred by such threats, was able to solve the problem of rehabilitation with a great measure of success. With its enormous superior resources, sagacious guidance and leadership, the Central government came to the rescue of the newly formed union and rendered full support to them in this demanding task. 'The central government withstood all the jerks and enabled the infant state to face the arduous task of rehabilitation of the refugees.'¹³

Society

Status of Women prior to Independence

The status of women in Malerkotla was inferior to its male counterpart. Women of all religions were put under all sorts of restrictions. There was mass conversion of lower-class Hindus in this area, but the Hindus did retain a few of their customs. We do see the influence exerted by the two religions on each other. Sikhism too was preached in this area, and many Sikh population resides here even today despite excessive Muslim influence.

Marriage

The girl's parents arranged the marriage without asking for her preference or opinion. It was the same in the case of all religions. Early marriage was prevalent. Inter-caste marriages were not allowed. In the Muslim Society of Malerkotla, matrimonial alliances between first cousins were uncommon. Muslims of Malerkotla followed the system of batta marriage (also called watta satta marriage, by which sister-brother pairs from two different households are married). Mehr in a

¹² *The Indian Express*, "Arson in Malerkotla: Punjab's Muslim majority town tries to get over unfamiliar communal tension," written by Divya Goyal, July 1 2016.

¹³ *Ibid*, 107.

particular marriage was fixed which commensurated with the 'financial position as well as the status of the parents of the bride and the bride-groom'.¹⁴

Education

The concept of education was unknown in the Muslim families of Malerkotla, though the effort by the Britishers brought some fruits. Few affluent families gave some elementary education to their girls through private tutors or in an all-girls school in the town. The educational condition of Hindu and Sikh girls was the same in Malerkotla as for Muslim girls. Muslim families of Malerkotla did not practice family planning as they did not believe in controlling what was bestowed on them by Allah. 'The Muslims, including those in Malerkotla believed that effecting change in the scheme of God is a fiendish act'.¹⁵ Islam considers the concept of family planning and birth control to oppose the essence and spirit of Muslim marriage. Procreation of the human race and sexual gratification is the very purpose of Muslim marriages, so practising birth pills would obviously interfere with the work of God. Also, it will limit the size of their families and will reduce their strength as the community thrives on their numerical strength.

Malerkotla was founded by a Muslim and today stands dominated by Muslims. Even the political change in 1947 and resultant turmoil affected it temporarily. It has consistently given refuge and solace to people of a particular community. but the candidates are always Muslim with the exception of Chanda Singh in 1957. Party may change but the ruler will always be Muslim. After partition Indian National Congress(INC) and Shiromani Akali Dal(SAD) have continuously engaged in the struggle for power. The so-called dance of democracy shows the futility of the power of the people when continuously coalition governments are formed. Just glancing through the above facts, it is obvious that the Muslim domination has been total from the time of its inception and continues to remain so to date. This is a reality despite it being surrounded by Hindu or Sikh dominated districts all around.

¹⁴ Anila Sultana, Status of Women in Muslim Society of Malerkotla, in *Proceedings of Punjab History Conference*, Twenty-Sixth Session March 18-20 1994 Post I, Department of Punjab Historical Studies, Punjabi University, Patiala, p. 264

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 266.