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## From Colonial Communalism to Post-Colonial Ethnicity: The Enduring Legacy of Partition in Sindh

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### ABSTRACT

*This article traces the transformation of colonial “Partitionism” into post-colonial ethnic conflict in Sindh, with Hyderabad city as the concentrated theatre of violence between 1985 and 1999. Drawing on census data, archival records, and oral testimonies, the study argues that the British ethnographic state’s strategy of dividing society along communal lines did not end with the 1947 Partition but was reframed into a lasting ethnic cleavage between Sindhis and Mohajirs. The mass arrival of Urdu-speaking refugees created a demographic shock that Sindhi nationalism perceived as an outsider takeover, while state-imposed official nationalism denied subnational recognition to both communities and failed to complete refugee rehabilitation. The rise of the MQM and JSQM institutionalised competing ethnic identities, embedding colonial communal templates into democratic politics. Hyderabad’s trajectory from interethnic harmony to the “small war” of 1990, the operations in Pakka Qila, and the persistent misery of un-rehabilitated Mohajir families demonstrate that partition remains an enduring structural condition, perpetuating cycles of grievance, exclusion, and bloodshed. The article conceptualizes partition as a long process that continues to shape belonging, citizenship, and everyday violence in Sindh.*

**Keywords:** Partition, Sindh, Hyderabad, Mohajir, Sindhi Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict

### Introduction

The British colonial regime in India systematically used communal categories as instruments of rule, creating what scholars call an “ethnographic state” (Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001). According to Brass (cited in Faiz 2021, 25), the state was never a neutral arbiter as its institutions favoured certain groups and structured conflict rather than merely containing it. This logic of divide and rule can be termed “partition”, a strategy of keeping subjects divided and dependent on the ruler. Machiavelli (1981) long ago advised that a wise prince will make citizens dependent on the state so that they remain trustworthy. In British India, this took the form of fostering distinct religious culturalisms and stirring controversies such as the Hindi Urdu debate of 1867 and separate electorates. The communal divide was not a by-product of policy but a deliberate construction. In Sindh, after Charles Napier’s conquest in 1843, colonial rule transformed language, culture, education and administration, intensifying Hindu Muslim competition (Faiz 2021). A Hindu commercial class and a Muslim landowning intelligentsia emerged as early ethnic elites. Thus, by independence, the template of partition managing society through fixed, antagonistic communal identities was already firmly embedded in Sindh’s institutional and psychological landscape.

Despite the end of colonial rule in 1947, the logic of partition persisted in Pakistan, reshaped into ethnic divisions. The state imposed an “official nationalism” that suppressed regional identities (Alavi 1989, 1527). Pakistan, one of the world’s most diverse states (Cohen 2005, 201), was dominated by an elite that refused to share power, leading to the secession of

Bangladesh in 1971 (Mushtaq 2009; Nazir 2001). The mass arrival of over seven million Urdu speaking refugees from India, who settled mostly in Sindh's cities, transformed demographics and revived the colonial pattern of marking insiders and outsiders. By 1981, Mohajirs made up 54.4 percent of Sindh's urban population and 49.3 percent of Hyderabad Division's urban residents (Census Report of Sindh 1981). This chapter examines the persistence of partitionist logic in post-1947 Sindh, with a focus on Hyderabad. While earlier works by Ansari (2005), Brass, Siddiqui (2012), Faiz (2021), Verkaaik (2004), Waseem (1996), Yaqoobi (2010), and Alavi have separately addressed colonial communal politics, ethnic movements, and refugee experiences, this study uniquely traces the continuous thread of partition from the colonial "ethnographic state" through the ethnic clashes in Hyderabad between 1985 and 1999. The central argument is that partition endures as a structural condition shaping Sindhi-Mohajir relations, and Hyderabad served as a concentrated theatre where this drama of belonging and exclusion played out through organised violence, police operations, and ethnic cleansing. To substantiate this argument, the chapter employs a multi method approach that combines a review of key literature with analysis of primary sources, including census data, archival records, and oral history. The literature review integrates works that link pre-partition colonial policy to post-partition outcomes: Ansari (2005) on migration and strife in Sindh, Brass (cited in Faiz 2021) on state mediated conflict, Waseem (1996) on Mohajir nationalism's paradox, Verkaaik (2004) on urban violence in Hyderabad, and Siddiqui (2012) on ethnic movements. Archival sources such as the Hyderabad gazetteer and the 1981 census provide demographic evidence of the urban concentration of Mohajirs and rural Sindhi dominance. Crucially, oral testimony from Mohajir and Sindhi residents of Hyderabad captures lived experiences that are rarely centred in academic studies. These interviews reveal persistent trauma, grievances over rehabilitation, and ambiguous narratives of blame. As one respondent stated, "*WO aye or hum par goliyan Chala kr chale Gaye*" (they came, fired on us, and ran away). By placing such oral accounts alongside documentary evidence, the study offers a grounded perspective on how partition was experienced and internalized, thus contributing to a fuller understanding of the long afterlife of colonial division in Sindh.

### **Partition as Rupture and Reframed Difference**

The 1947 Partition triggered one of the largest migrations in history, bringing over eight million Urdu speaking refugees to Pakistan (Faiz 2022). A large portion of these migrants settled in Sindh's cities, where they remained visible outsiders, unlike those who moved to the Punjab and quickly assimilated and were no longer recognized as migrants. Hyderabad city, in particular, became a great refugee camp after the Hindu exodus emptied old Hyderabad of its earlier inhabitants, and the vacated properties soon turned into flashpoints of tension (Faiz 2022). The demographic transformation was stark: by one estimate, Mohajirs came to form 86 per cent of Hyderabad's population, while in Karachi they made up 71 per cent, making the urban centres of Sindh overwhelmingly Urdu speaking enclaves within a predominantly rural Sindhi province (Faiz 2022). This sudden and concentrated settlement created a sharp distinction between the muhajir and the native, embedding a new communal geography in the province.

Pakistan's new state apparatus imposed an official nationalism that sought to subsume all regional, linguistic and ethnic identities under a single Muslim nationhood, denying sub national groups the political recognition and constitutional accommodation they had expected (Robinson 2010). This centralisation of identity was accompanied by persistent failure in refugee rehabilitation. Fieldwork conducted for this study reveals the depth of neglect, one Mohajir respondent, still living in a satellite town in Hyderabad, recounted that his family had

spent generations in a settlement with no proper sanitation, where children and the elderly were forced to defecate in the open near the local *Kachra Kondi*, an area known as “Odd.” The state did not facilitate the integration of such communities; many Mohajir families who could afford to do so purchased property themselves, while others remained in *kachi abadis*, lacking even the basic rights of citizenship. This mismatch between the rhetoric of a shared Muslim homeland and the daily experience of exclusion deepened the sense of being outsiders.

The demographic restructuring of Sindh was not merely a social fact but a powerful driver of Sindhi nationalist sentiment. Census figures from 1981 illustrate the ethnic polarisation: in the province as a whole, Mohajirs constituted 24.1 per cent of the population but 54.4 per cent of the urban population; conversely, Sindhis formed 55.7 per cent of the total but a dominant 81.5 per cent of the rural population (Faiz 2022). Within Hyderabad Division, Mohajirs held 49.3 per cent of the urban share while Sindhis remained over 85 per cent in the countryside (Faiz 2022). Such concentration fuelled the nationalist narrative of an outsider takeover. As Ansari (1991, 185) observed, the perception of a refugee takeover of Sindh survived as a long running component of nationalist feeling. Faiz (2022, 42) adds that in the British era, Sindhi Hindus had been perceived as the overbearing outsiders; after Partition, the Mohajirs inherited exactly that role, now recast as an ethnic “other.”

These overlapping fissures between state, community and demography laid the foundation for organised ethnic conflict. The sense of relative deprivation among Mohajirs, rooted in declining bureaucratic representation and the exclusionary quota system, led directly to the mobilisation of Mohajir identity under the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (Haq 1995). On the other side, Sindhi nationalists rallied around the demand for recognition and the reversal of demographic change, turning the cities into contested terrain. Zaidi (1991) captured the dynamic as one of contradiction, conflict and uneasy compromise. The rupture of Partition thus reframed difference not as a temporary refugee problem but as a permanent ethnic divide, with Hyderabad emerging as a microcosm of a nation still wrestling with the long shadow of its violent birth.

### **Post-Colonial Ethnicisation: The Rise of Competing Nationalisms**

After independence, Pakistan’s ruling elite refused to accept the country’s ethnic pluralism and instead imposed a highly centralised state structure that suppressed provincial autonomy. The One Unit scheme of 1955, which amalgamated the western provinces into a single administrative block, epitomised this drive toward uniformity and alienated groups such as Sindhis, Baloch and Pashtuns, who saw their distinct identities being erased (Siddiqui 2012). The state’s official nationalism, which insisted on a singular Muslim Pakistani identity, denied subnations the constitutional recognition and political space that the architects of Pakistan had implicitly promised. This denial had catastrophic consequences when the Bengali majority in East Pakistan, having been systematically excluded from power and economic resources, successfully seceded in 1971, demonstrating that the failure to accommodate ethno national diversity could dismember the state (Amin 1988). For Sindhis, the lesson was both a warning and an inspiration: the centralised state could be challenged, and if redress was not forthcoming, the demand for separation remained a potent threat. Consequently, the post-1971 period saw the intensification of subnational movements that recast the colonial legacy of communalism into an internal ethnic partition, with Hyderabad emerging as a frontline city in this new struggle.

Sindhi nationalism found its most articulate voice in G. M. Syed, who moved from being the presenter of the Pakistan Resolution in the Sindh Assembly to the foremost champion of *Sindhu Desh* (Land of Sindh). Syed denounced the Pakistani political system as a set of “repressive

racial regimes based on domination, usurpation, and exploitation,” singling out Punjabis and Mohajirs as the common enemies of Sindh (Syed 2012, 084). His vision constructed an “imagined community” (Anderson 2020) rooted in the ancient Indus civilisation, a homeland betrayed by successive regimes. This ideological foundation gave birth to the Jeay Sindh Qomi Mahaz (JSQM) in 1995, which formally united various nationalist factions and issued a manifesto demanding the due share of water under the 1945 agreement, an immediate ban on the arrival and settlement of new immigrants in Sindh, opposition to army cantonments, guarantees for the survival of the Sindhi language and culture, and the return of Sindh’s resources to the Sindhi people. In this narrative, Mohajirs were cast not as fellow Muslims but as overbearing outsiders whose presence threatened the very existence of the Sindhi nation.

The Mohajir community, for its part, underwent a parallel process of ethnicisation from a migrant population into a self-conscious ethno political bloc. After being shut out of the state’s rehabilitation promises and seeing its bureaucratic and political influence steadily decline, the community formed the All Pakistan Mohajir Student Organization (APMSO) and then, in 1984, the Mohajir Qaumi Movement, later renamed the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM). The MQM claimed that Mohajirs were the “fifth subnation” of Pakistan and articulated a narrative of systematic discrimination: the quota system and the Sindhi Language Bill were presented as instruments that penalised merit and marginalised Urdu speakers in their own urban strongholds (Rahman 1995). The influx of Afghan refugees and Pathan migrants into Karachi and Hyderabad after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan added a volatile dimension, as Mohajirs felt their demographic and economic space shrinking. The 1985 death of Bushra Zaidi, a Mohajir girl killed by a minibus reportedly driven by a Pathan, became a defining moment, with the MQM framing the incident as proof of Pathan criminality and state indifference (Ghosh 2001). Waseem (1996) captured the paradox of this movement: a community without a historic territory was fashioning itself as “sons of the soil,” transforming a migratory identity into an aggressive, urban based ethnic nationalism that competed directly with Sindhi nationalism for power, recognition and control of the city.

#### **Hyderabad as the Epicentre of Ethnic Conflict (1985–1999)**

Hyderabad’s history stretches back to the Indus Valley Civilization, and its strategic location on trade routes gave it lasting importance. It passed through the hands of the Arab Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, the Delhi Sultanate, and the Mughals before Mian Ghulam Shah Kalhoro founded the city proper in the seventeenth century, making it the capital of the Kalhoro dynasty that ruled Sindh. The Talpur Mirs, a Baloch dynasty, later overthrew the Kalhoras and continued to embellish the city. When the British East India Company defeated the Talpurs in 1843 and annexed Sindh, Hyderabad entered a new phase. The colonial administration-built schools such as St Mary High School for Girls and St. Bonaventure High School, established a printing press, and constructed bridges over the Indus. Modern education, administration and irrigation were introduced, deliberately creating fresh arenas of competition between Hindus and Muslims (Faiz 2021). These colonial innovations planted the seeds of communal consciousness in a city that would later become an ethnic flashpoint.

Until the mid-1980s, however, Sindhis and Mohajirs in Hyderabad lived in relative harmony. Inter-marriages were common, and ideological boundaries between the two communities were not rigidly drawn. Even G. M. Syed’s call for *Sindhu Desh*, a separate Sindhi homeland did not immediately fracture daily life. The slogan echoed through the province in the aftermath of Bangladesh’s secession, yet in Hyderabad’s localities, neighbours of both ethnic groups continued to share space without violent confrontation. This peace was fragile, however, and a single, still-disputed event soon became the trigger that ruptured interethnic trust. Once

ethnically organised organisations began to organise and arm themselves, the ordinary coexistence that had characterised the city for decades was replaced by suspicion and then by open violence, pushing Hyderabad into a cycle of conflict that would define the next decade and a half.

The neighbourhood of Pakka Qila became the most visible symbol of this transformation. Even today, its residents are convinced that the police operation launched in the area was designed to expel Mohajirs from Hyderabad. Oscar Verkaaik (2004, 157) records that statements by Sindhi politicians insisting Mohajirs must become “new Sindhis” stoked fears of forced assimilation. When it became clear that many Mohajirs were not prepared to abandon their distinct identity, some radical figures went further: Federal Minister Syed Ghulam Mustafa Shah threatened to demolish the settlements inside Pakka Qila in order to end the Mohajir occupation of what he called the former royal palace of Sindh (Verkaaik 2004, 157). In Mohajir eyes, the Sindhi-dominated provincial government and its police force were no longer neutral arbiters but instruments of ethnic cleansing, driving a community out of the city that had become its home.

By the summer of 1990, the conflict had escalated into what local journalists described as a *Jang*, or “small war.” Since 1987, violence had largely been confined to armed activists from rival ethnic organisations. In 1990, however, the scope of the fighting widened dramatically. Weapons and ammunition became accessible to a far broader segment of the population. Dealers with connections in Hyderabad’s underworld reported that demand for arms rose so sharply that ammunition prices skyrocketed. As a result, when riots broke out, even people who had never before handled a weapon joined the fighting. What had been a contained militant confrontation turned into a city-wide ethnic conflagration, and the boundaries between organised political violence and communal riot dissolved almost completely. In the aftermath, the voices of ordinary people revealed a profound exhaustion with ethnic politics. When asked about responsibility for the violence, respondents from both communities offered the same ambiguous formula: *WO aye or hum par goliyan Chala kr chale Gaye* “they came, fired on us, and ran away.” They could not, or would not, point to a single perpetrator. Their principal complaint was not about ideology but about neglect: the lack of sanitation in Urdu-speaking areas, the absence of basic infrastructure, the state’s failure to complete rehabilitation even decades after Partition. Verkaaik (2004) observed that Mohajir nationalism in Hyderabad had acquired a different meaning from that in Karachi. In Hyderabad, the term *Mohajir* had already connoted ethnic exclusion long before the movement took shape in the larger metropolis. The city thus stands as a distinctive and tragic case a place where the long afterlife of colonial division was not merely inherited but fought over, house by house, by people who ultimately wanted nothing more than peace.

### **The Enduring Legacy of Partition in Sindh**

The logic of the colonial ethnographic state has resurfaced persistently in Pakistan’s postcolonial governance. The same bureaucratic obsession with classifying populations that Cohn and Dirks identified in British India now reappears in the lingering controversies over the national census, which has remained a hot button issue for ethnic parties (Haq 1995). The quota system, originally designed to redress regional imbalances, was repeatedly denounced by Mohajir leaders as a tool of ethnic discrimination that penalised merit, while Sindhi nationalists saw it as an essential safeguard against Punjabi and Mohajir dominance (Alavi 1983). The state’s response to ethnic tension, particularly in Hyderabad, further replicated the colonial pattern of coercive operations that treated particular communities as suspect. The summer of 1990 showed that the state was no neutral arbiter; instead, its police actions in Pakka Qila were interpreted as attempts to expel an unwanted population. This continuity

confirms Brass's broader argument that the state's repressive, distributive and allocative institutions are never neutral, but consistently align with certain ethnic groups at the expense of others.

The unfinished rehabilitation of the 1947 refugees remains a stark illustration of how partition is not a closed historical event but a prolonged condition of marginalisation. Decades after the migration, the Mohajir community in Hyderabad still inhabits spaces of neglect. This study recorded the testimony of families living in *Oth para* and around *Kachra Kondi*, where multiple households share a single dwelling with no proper toilets or sanitation, and where children and the elderly continue to defecate in the open. Despite their foundational role in the Pakistan movement and their overrepresentation in the early bureaucracy, these communities were never fully integrated into the social fabric of Sindh. The statement of one respondent, crying that his ancestors lived and died in a satellite town with no improvement in their condition, encapsulates a betrayal of the promise that Pakistan would be a secure homeland for all its Muslim citizens. The refugee question, therefore, remains not only unresolved but constitutive of the ethnic divide: the state's neglect has made Mohajir grievance a permanent political resource, while Sindhi nationalism continues to see the unrehabilitated as potential instruments of demographic takeover.

Ethnic identity has been structurally embedded into democratic politics through parties such as the MQM and JSQM, which draw directly on the template of communal mobilisation pioneered under colonial rule. The MQM's rhetoric, which declared Mohajirs the fifth sub-nation of Pakistan while simultaneously demanding population census adjustments and merit-based quotas, transformed a migratory community's sense of loss into an electoral machine capable of dominating urban Sindh (Haq 1995). On the other side, JSQM's call for a ban on new immigrants, the return of Sindh's resources to Sindhis, and the guarantee of linguistic survival directly echoed the demands of earlier ethnic elites who, in the 1920s, had framed provincial autonomy as a shield against outsider encroachment (Ansari 1991). The democratic framework thus became a channel for ethnic partition rather than a mechanism of integration, with elections functioning as ethnic censuses and party strongholds serving as de facto communal territories. What appeared to be a democratic competition was, in Hyderabad, a low-intensity war over space, language and identity, sustained by the very institutions that were supposed to dissolve communal antagonism.

The experience of Hyderabad confirms a crucial theoretical insight: partition must be understood as what Vazira Fazila-Yaqoobi (2010) terms a "long partition," a process that continues to shape belonging, citizenship and violence long after the drawing of borders. The fact that ordinary residents, when asked to identify the perpetrators of violence, could only say "they came, fired on us, and ran away" suggests that the trauma of ethnic cleansing has generated a pervasive sense of victimhood that transcends the ability to assign blame to any single group. Benedict Anderson's (2020) concept of imagined communities helps explain how both Mohajir and Sindhi identities were constructed as bounded nations with historical narratives stretching back to ancient civilisations, yet neither imagination could accommodate the presence of the other without violence. The enduring legacy of partition in Sindh is therefore a condition in which the colonial categories of difference have been naturalised by the postcolonial state, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion, grievance, and bloodshed that, as the oral histories from Hyderabad show, falls most heavily on those who simply want to live in peace with basic necessities of life.

## **Conclusion**

The arc of this article has demonstrated that the logic of partition, far from being confined to the colonial period, evolved and intensified after the birth of Pakistan, reshaping Sindh's social landscape into a terrain of enduring ethnic conflict. What the British introduced as an ethnographic strategy of control, marking and manipulating communal categories, was inherited and repurposed by the postcolonial state. The centralisation of power, the imposition of an official Muslim nationalism, and the refusal to accommodate regional and linguistic diversity transformed the colonial template of Hindu-Muslim division into a new ethnic axis that pitted Sindhi against Mohajir. Hyderabad, a city with an ancient and layered history, became the microcosm in which this transformation was most brutally enacted. The mass influx of Urdu-speaking refugees after 1947 turned the city into a demographic flashpoint, and the state's failure to provide dignified rehabilitation gave rise to a permanent refugee question that fed both Mohajir grievance and Sindhi fears of dispossession. The census controversies, the quota system, and the coercive police operations of the 1990s all reflect the same ethnographic reflex: a state that continuously categorises, discriminates, and mobilises force against particular communities under the guise of neutrality.

What emerges from the oral testimony of Hyderabad's residents is a deeply human account of suffering that defies the neat narratives offered by ethnic parties. The repeated phrase "they came, fired on us, and ran away" captures a pervasive sense of victimhood that clings to no single ethnic perpetrator but instead exposes the broader failure of the political system to guarantee the most fundamental needs of safety, sanitation, and shelter. The ordinary people of Hyderabad, whether living in the *kachi abadis* of *Kachra Kondi* or the threatened lanes of Pakka Qila, have paid the highest price for a partition that was supposed to resolve communal conflict but instead rewrote it in ethnic script. Their desire for peace and basic necessities stands in stark contrast to the machinations of political parties that embed colonial-communal templates into electoral machines. In this sense, the MQM's construction of Mohajir identity as a fifth sub-nation and JSQM's demand for a Sindhi homeland are not anomalies but logical products of a state that has never genuinely abandoned the principle of governing through division. The theoretical insight of a "long partition" thus finds its empirical confirmation in Hyderabad: partition is not an event completed in 1947 but a continuous process that structures belonging, citizenship, and violence into the present. Until the state reorients itself from managing ethnic categories to ensuring equal citizenship, the shadow of partition will keep falling across Sindh's cities, and the unhealed wounds of Hyderabad will continue to bleed.

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