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Every Nook and Corner of Punjab: Students, Women, and the Popular Mobilization for Pakistan, 1937–1947

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ABSTRACT

Histories of the Pakistan movement are written overwhelmingly from the leadership downward, and even revisionist accounts of the demand's public career concentrate on what was argued rather than on who carried the argument. This article reconstructs the popular mobilization for Pakistan in the Punjab as a history of participants: the student federations of Lahore, Aligarh, and Peshawar whose scripted door-to-door canvass carried the demand into the villages of a province the Muslim League had lost in 1937 with under five percent of the Muslim vote; the manufactured symbols, flag, title, and festival calendar, that gave a lawyers' party a mass liturgy; the women whose processions, courted arrests, and jail-going made the campaign of 1946–47 their public debut; and the civil disobedience movement of January to March 1947, the only mass agitation the League ever launched, which broke the Unionist ministry and demonstrated that the demand had become a street power. Against the reading of Pakistan as insufficiently imagined, the article argues that a demand canvassed door to door, from a script, by tens of thousands of volunteers, had been imagined concretely enough to be taught; and it traces the mobilization's repertoire, the procession, the student deputation, the flag day, into the postcolonial arenas where the argument continued.

Keywords: Pakistan movement; mass mobilization; Muslim Students Federation; women; civil disobedience 1947; Punjab; elections 1945–46; popular politics.

Introduction

In the first days of March 1947 a schoolgirl climbed the Punjab Civil Secretariat in Lahore, hauled down the Union Jack, and raised the Muslim League's flag in its place, and the movement kept the scene as its emblem ever after. The episode, preserved in the movement's memory around the name of Fatima Sughra, occurred at the climax of the only mass agitation the All India Muslim League ever launched, a civil disobedience campaign that filled the jails of the Punjab with thousands of ordinary volunteers, women conspicuously among them, and brought down the government of the province within weeks. Nothing about the scene fits the standard picture of the Pakistan movement as a lawyers' negotiation conducted over the heads of a passive public. This article is about the people the standard picture leaves out: the canvassers, the marchers, the students, and the women who made the demand for Pakistan a mass fact.

The article completes a division of labor and must declare it, because two adjacent studies stand on neighboring ground. The arguments of the League's leadership, its public case for

the Islamic state, minorities, geography, and economics, are documented in a published study; the critics of the demand, and the organizational apparatus the League built to answer them, its rebuilt party structure, its writers' committee, its newspapers, are examined in a companion article, which treats that machinery strictly as an instrument of rebuttal.¹ What neither asks is the question of participation: who actually carried the demand, by what repertoire, at what cost, and with what effect on the province that mattered most. The question has its own scholarship, Ian Talbot's recovery of the movement's popular dimension and, recently, Naumana Kiran's documentation of the people's role, and this article joins it from the public-arena perspective.²

The argument, stated at the outset, runs against the most influential reading of the demand's career. If Pakistan was insufficiently imagined, a bargaining counter kept deliberately vague, then its campaign should have been correspondingly thin, a matter of elite resolutions and negotiated seats; what the record shows instead is a demand canvassed door to door from a written script, taught by student deputations in thousands of villages, celebrated on a manufactured festival calendar, and finally defended in the streets by volunteers courting arrest in the tens of thousands. Ideas travel on the backs of people, and the historian can read an idea's definiteness from the discipline of its carriers: a vague demand cannot be taught, and this one was taught, house by house, in every nook and corner of the Punjab. The sections that follow reconstruct the teaching.

From Four Percent to a Mass Party

The mobilization must be measured from its starting point, and the starting point was a rout. In the elections of 1937 the Muslim League received under five percent of the total Muslim vote across India, and in the Muslim-majority Punjab it won exactly two seats, Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan from Jhelum and Malik Barkat Ali from Lahore, against the serried strength of the Unionist Party, the cross-communal machine of the landed interest that had governed the province since the reforms.³ The Unionist establishment did not trouble to hide its contempt: Sir Fazl-i-Husain, the party's architect, declined to preside over the League's annual session and advised that Jinnah be pressed to keep, in his own phrase, "his finger out of Punjab's pie."⁴ Ten years later the League commanded the province's Muslim seats and its streets. The distance between those two dates is the subject of this article, and it was crossed on foot.

¹The leadership's arguments are documented in Muhammad Shafi, "Debating the Idea of Pakistan as Modern Islamic State during 1940s," *Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society* 34, no. 2 (2021): 45–60; the critics of the demand and the League's organized apparatus of reply are examined in a companion article derived from the same dissertation. The present study repeats neither.

²Ian Talbot, *Freedom's Cry: The Popular Dimension in the Pakistan Movement and Partition Experience in North-West India* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1996); Naumana Kiran, *People's Role in Struggle for Pakistan (1940–1947)* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 2021).

³Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj, 1849–1947* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1988); David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988).

⁴Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj*.

The organizational reconstruction that made the crossing possible is told elsewhere and enters here only as premise. The companion study of the League's answering apparatus records the new party constitution, the two-anna membership against the Congress's four, and the pyramid of town and tehsil leagues electing upward to the All India council; the present article takes the machine as given and asks what ran through it. For a machine is not a movement. Membership rolls in the lakhs, which the reorganization produced, measure enrollment, not activity, and the distinctive fact of the League's last decade is that enrollment became activity on a mass scale: the enrolled marched, canvassed, celebrated, and finally went to jail. The conversion of members into participants required instruments the constitution did not specify, symbols, festivals, cadres, and scripts, and those instruments are this article's evidence.

The League manufactured its mass symbols deliberately, and the manufacture can be dated. The party adopted its green flag with crescent and star as the demand's visual signature; at the Patna session of 1938 the acclamation of Jinnah as Quaid-e-Azam, the great leader of the community, gave the movement a personal emblem to match; and from 1941 the anniversary of the Lahore Resolution was observed as Pakistan Day, a festival of processions, flag-hoistings, and public meetings that put the demand on the calendar of ordinary life.⁵ These devices are easily dismissed as decoration; they were infrastructure. A flag can be raised by an illiterate villager, a title can be chanted by a crowd, and an annual day organizes participation for people who will never read a resolution: the symbols were the demand's interface for the majority the pamphlets could not reach, and their adoption marks the moment a parliamentary party began building a public.

The United Provinces supplied the mobilization's organizational model, and its exporter deserves separate notice. The ambitious mass-contact plan designed there on Chaudhry Khaliq-uz-Zaman's suggestion became the template for the League's popular work, and its chief executive was the young Raja of Mahmudabad, who accumulated in one person the offices the campaign required: youngest member of the central working committee, the party's treasurer and chief financier, its chief organizer, and chief patron of the All India Muslim Students Federation.⁶ The Raja's speeches on the Islamic state belong to the published study of the leadership's arguments; his place here is as the movement's quartermaster, the man whose purse and patronage connected the party's treasury to its foot soldiers. That the same figure financed the students and theorized the state is itself a datum: in this movement the supply line and the idea ran through the same hands.

The mobilization's social profile widened in recorded stages, and the stages matter for what follows. The earliest and most enthusiastic participation came from the educated urban middle classes, the traders, bankers, merchants, professionals, journalists, and above all the students of the Muslim-majority towns; only later, and decisively in the campaign of 1945–46, did the Muslim landed elite of the Punjab, a substantial section of the ulema, and the shrine communities swing behind the demand, the last a story told in this series' study of the

⁵Khalid Bin Sayeed, *Pakistan: The Formative Phase, 1857–1948* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁶Sayeed, *Pakistan: The Formative Phase*; Kiran, *People's Role*.

pirs.⁷ The sequence corrects a persistent inversion. The League's mass base was not delivered ready-made by rural magnates and then decorated with urban enthusiasm; it was built first by the urban young, whose years of canvassing prepared the ground onto which the magnates and the shrines eventually stepped. The infantry preceded the artillery, and the infantry's history comes next.

The Infantry: Student Federations and the Door-to-Door Canvass

The students organized before the party asked them to, and their federations became the movement's standing infantry. Muslim students in the Punjab had begun organizing independently in the 1930s, and their activism acquired its permanent form with the Punjab Muslim Students Federation, organized in 1937 with Jinnah's own encouragement and drawing its core from Islamia College, Lahore; alongside it worked the All India Muslim Students Federation under Mahmudabad's patronage, the students of Islamia College, Peshawar, and, above all as reinforcement, the students of Aligarh.⁸ A federation is a repertoire as much as a membership: it could produce, on demand, speakers for a meeting, volunteers for a procession, canvassers for a constituency, and marshals for a session, and the League's public presence in the Punjab after 1940 rode on that capacity. Where the party had branches, the students gave them limbs.

Aligarh Muslim University became the campaign's engine room, and the conversion was institutional, not incidental. The university's administration under Vice-Chancellor Dr. Ziauddin Ahmad, with colleagues including A. B. Haleem, Obaid-ur-Rahman Sherwani, Jamil-ud-Din Ahmad, M. B. Mirza, and Afzal Husain Qadri, facilitated the students' political work to the point that contemporaries described the institution as a mouthpiece of the League; and from Aligarh, in the campaign season of 1945–46, student deputations travelled to the Punjab in organized groups, joining the provincial federations in a canvass that reached thousands of rural localities.⁹ The image deserves to displace the drawing-room stereotype of the movement: the demand for Pakistan arrived in much of rural Punjab not as a landlord's instruction or a newspaper it could not read, but as a conversation at the door with a student who had come a long way to have it.

The canvass ran on a script, and the script survives in the instructions issued to the student campaigners. The volunteers were directed to hold themselves apart from local disputes within the Muslim community wherever they campaigned; to stress the unity of Islam; to use Quranic verses in their pamphlets and the example of the life and services of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in their speeches; to draw on the vocabulary of Iqbal's poetry; and to press each rural Muslim to the concrete act, registering and casting his vote for Pakistan and Islam. This scripted mandate is preserved in the *Report of the Rural Propaganda Committee of the Punjab Muslim Students Federation*, a vital primary document anthologized in Sarfaraz Hussain

⁷Kiran, *People's Role*; Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam*.

⁸Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza, *The Punjab Muslim Students Federation, 1937–1947: A Study of the Formation, Growth, and Participation in the Pakistan Movement* (Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan, 1978), 34–40.

⁹Kiran, *People's Role*.

Mirza's foundational history of the organization.¹⁰ The document is small and its implications are large. A movement that scripts its canvassers has decided what its demand means at the door; the script's fusion of scriptural idiom, poetic vocabulary, and electoral instruction is the idea of Pakistan as it was actually transmitted to the majority; and the instruction to stand above local factions shows a campaign consciously protecting its message from the biraderi quarrels that ordinarily consumed rural politics. This is not the conduct of a vague idea; it is the conduct of a taught one.

The federations bred the movement's cadre of future public men, and three names show the type. Hameed Nizami, among the most forceful student voices of the Punjab, founded in 1940 the Urdu newspaper *Nawa-i-Waqt*, which grew into the demand's most influential vernacular tribune and, after 1947, into the standing organ of the Islamic reading of the state; Abdus Sattar Khan Niazi argued the demand in the idiom of a coming Khilafat-e-Pakistan and co-authored, with a fellow student named Muhammad Shafi, the tract *Pakistan Kya Hai aur Kaise Banega*, What is Pakistan and How Will It Be Made, whose very title is a rebuke to the historiography of vagueness; and both men carried their student politics into long public careers.¹¹ The federation, these trajectories show, was the movement's academy as well as its infantry: the young men who explained Pakistan at village doors in 1946 became the editors and politicians who contested its meaning for the next generation.

The students' electoral effect was acknowledged at the time and has been confirmed since, and its mechanism should be stated precisely. In the elections of 1945–46, fought on the single question of Pakistan, the student groups from the Punjab and Aligarh visited thousands of rural areas of the province, and the League's landslide in the Muslim seats followed; Jinnah himself publicly admired the students' work, and the scholarship of the popular dimension assigns the canvass a substantial share of the swing.¹² The mechanism was not enchantment but presence. In constituencies where the Unionist machine commanded the revenue records and the biraderi networks, the students supplied the one thing the machine could not, a rival human network arguing a rival loyalty face to face, and the election's verdict measured, among much else, the reach of ten years of that argument. The demand won rural Punjab in 1946 because, by 1946, rural Punjab had heard it.

The Campaign as Festival: 1945–46

The election campaign of 1945–46 was experienced as a festival as much as a contest, and the festival's forms were the mobilization's harvest. The processions with the green flag at their head, the Pakistan Day observances, the mass meetings addressed from decorated platforms, the chanted slogans binding Pakistan to the profession of faith, the campaign poetry in Iqbal's inherited register, all the instruments assembled since 1937 were deployed

¹⁰S. H. Mirza, *The Punjab Muslim Students Federation, 1937–1947* (Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan, University of the Punjab, 1978). Also see Kiran, *People's Role*; Talbot, *Freedom's Cry*.

¹¹Abdus Sattar Khan Niazi and Muhammad Shafi, *Pakistan Kya Hai aur Kaise Banega*; Kiran, *People's Role* (Maktaba-e-Tehreek-e-Pakistan, 1943).

¹²Kiran, *People's Role*; Talbot, *Freedom's Cry*.

at once, and contemporaries on every side recorded the campaign's extraordinary emotional temperature.¹³ The festival dimension matters analytically because it answers the question of scale. Argument at the door reaches households; festival reaches crowds, and it reaches them in the participatory mode, as marchers and chanters rather than audiences, which is precisely the mode the theorists of South Asian public arenas have taught historians to take seriously as politics. The campaign of 1946 was the demand's greatest public arena, and the province walked through it.

The verdict of 1946 must be entered with the caution the companion study has already established, and one addition. The franchise was propertied and partial, a vote for the League bundled many motives, and the electoral reading of the campaign belongs to the critics study, which uses the result to answer the charge that the demand was never publicly examined; the addition belonging here concerns the losers.¹⁴ The Unionist machine did not merely lose seats in 1946; it lost the streets and the argument, its candidates unable to hold public meetings in towns the federations had organized, its patronage answered by a loyalty it had no counter for. The election registered a transfer of the public arena itself, from the machine that had owned the province's politics to the movement that had built its publics, and the transfer, more than the seat count, is what made the events of the following year possible.

The countryside's conversion had a devotional dimension that this article notes and its companion tells. The swing of the great shrine networks behind the League in 1945–46, the bay'ah wielded against Unionist loyalties, and the festivals of the saints opened to the demand's preaching are the subject of the series' study of the pirs, and the student canvass and the shrine campaign should be understood as the two blades of one shears: the urban young argued the demand at the door in the morning, and the countryside heard it blessed from the shrine in the evening. No account of the mobilization is complete with either blade alone, and the division of labor between the two articles mirrors the division of labor the campaign itself discovered: the federation for the argument, the arena of the saints for the sanction.

The Women's Debut

The mobilization brought Muslim women into public politics on a scale the province had never seen, and the entry was organized, not incidental. The League built a women's organization alongside its main structure, with committees, branches, and public meetings of their own; women of the political families took the platform, students and schoolgirls joined the processions, and by the campaign of 1945–46 the women's meetings and marches were a standing feature of the League's public presence in the Punjab's cities.¹⁵ The significance should be measured against the barrier crossed. For women of respectable households in the 1940s Punjab, appearance in a political procession was a public act of a different order than a man's, purchased against the norms of seclusion, and the movement that could summon it

¹³Talbot, *Freedom's Cry*.

¹⁴Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj*; Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam*.

¹⁵Kiran, *People's Role*.

had reached into the household itself, the one arena no canvass ordinarily enters. The demand for Pakistan was argued, by 1946, across the purdah line.

The agitation of 1947 was the women's stage above all, and contemporaries understood it so. When the civil disobedience campaign described below filled the Punjab's jails, women courted arrest in organized batches, led processions in defiance of the prohibitory orders, faced the police lines in Lahore and the district towns, and went to prison in numbers that startled the administration and electrified the movement's press; the flag raised over the Secretariat by a schoolgirl's hand, the scene with which this article opened, was the campaign's chosen self-image precisely because the women's daring had become its proof of depth.¹⁶ A movement whose respectable women will go to jail has passed the last test of mass commitment a colonial society could set, and the League's leadership, whatever its private conservatism, published the fact to the world.

Honesty requires the debut's limits to be recorded with its drama, and the record is sobering. The women's mobilization was led from the political families and the schools, urban far more than rural; it was summoned for the movement's purposes and largely demobilized after the movement's victory, the postcolonial arenas this series has mapped, the tea house, the mosque forecourt, the party press, reverting to the male preserves the companion studies have described; and the demand the women carried made no promises about their own place in the state it demanded.¹⁷ The debut was real and the sequel was retreat, and both belong to the mobilization's history. What the campaign of 1946–47 proved was capacity, that the women of the Punjab could be organized as a public when a movement chose to organize them, and the proof stood on the record, available to every later movement that chose to remember it.

The Graduation Exam: Civil Disobedience, January–March 1947

In the last week of January 1947 the Punjab government handed the League's mobilization its final examination, and the movement sat it in the streets. The Khizar Hayat ministry, alarmed by the drilling of political volunteer corps, banned the Muslim League National Guards along with other private bodies and raided the League's offices in Lahore; the League answered with the only mass civil disobedience campaign of its history, its leaders courting arrest at the banned organizations' doors, and the movement's publics, assembled over ten years, poured into the province's streets behind them.¹⁸ The irony of the sequence was lost on no one: a party born constitutionalist, which had watched the Congress's agitations from the sidelines for a generation, closed its colonial career with an agitation of its own, and won it.

The campaign's repertoire was the mobilization's accumulated craft performed under prohibition, and its scale overwhelmed the province's machinery of order. Daily processions defied the prohibitory orders of Section 144 in Lahore and the district towns; the green flag went up on public buildings; the volunteers courted arrest in organized relays until the jails of

¹⁶Talbot, *Freedom's Cry*; Kiran, *People's Role*.

¹⁷Kiran, *People's Role*.

¹⁸Talbot, *Freedom's Cry*; Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam*.

the Punjab held thousands, with the leadership, the students, and the women's batches passing through them in turn; and the administration found that every instrument it deployed, the ban, the lathi charge, the mass detention, recruited for the movement it was meant to suppress.¹⁹ Ten years earlier the League could not fill a Punjab meeting hall; in February 1947 it could fill the Punjab's prisons on schedule. No single fact measures the decade's work more exactly, and none better justifies this article's insistence that the demand's history is a history of participants.

The flag over the Secretariat crowned the campaign's theater, and its keeper was a schoolgirl. In the movement's memory, preserved in the popular histories and the participants' accounts, it was the young Fatima Sughra who scaled the Civil Secretariat in Lahore, brought down the Union Jack, and raised the League's flag over the seat of the province's government, an act of pure symbolic capture performed by the campaign's youngest and, by the era's norms, least public participant.²⁰ The historian records the scene's function along with its fame: the raising of a flag decides nothing and declares everything, and what it declared in March 1947 was that the province's public space had changed proprietors. The government still held the Secretariat; the movement held its roof, and in the politics of arenas, which this series has argued is the politics that mattered, the roof was the greater prize.

The ministry fell on the second of March, and the victory must be entered with its shadow. Khizar Hayat Tiwana resigned, the Unionist order that had ruled the Punjab for a generation collapsed under an agitation it could neither suppress nor outlast, and the League's mobilization had achieved by the street what the election had not delivered, the end of its great provincial rival; within days, the collapse opened onto the March violence in the Punjab's districts, the first act of the catastrophe of partition, a sequel that lies beyond this article's subject but must stand beside its triumph in any honest ledger.²¹ The campaign of 1947 thus closed the mobilization's decade with a double demonstration: that the demand had become a street power no government of the province could withstand, and that street power, once summoned, answers to no script. Both lessons crossed into the new state, and the second cost it dearest.

What the Mobilization Proves

The historiographical yield of this reconstruction can now be collected, and it bears directly on the debate over the demand's coherence. The claim that Pakistan was insufficiently imagined rests on the elite record, the resolutions' silences and the negotiator's ambiguities; the mobilization's record answers from below. A demand taught door to door from a written script has a content, the content its script transmits; a demand celebrated on a festival calendar has a meaning its symbols carry to the illiterate; a demand for which schoolgirls climb government buildings and respectable women go to jail has been imagined vividly enough to be worth those prices; and the scholarship of the demand's public career, from the print

¹⁹Talbot, *Freedom's Cry*.

²⁰Kiran, *People's Role*.

²¹Talbot, *Freedom's Cry*; Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj*.

sphere of the United Provinces to the popular dimension of the Punjab, converges on the same conclusion.²² Vagueness, if it existed, lived in the leaders' papers; the campaign was concrete, and the campaign is what the province experienced.

The mobilization's deepest legacy was its repertoire, and the repertoire's afterlife is this series' connecting thread. The instruments assembled between 1937 and 1947, the procession under a sacred flag, the student federation as political infantry, the commemorative day, the scripted canvass, the courted arrest, did not retire with the movement that built them; they crossed into the new state as the standing equipment of its public arenas, wielded after 1947 by the religious parties whose campaigns the companion study of the right documents, by the left whose processions and student fronts the companion study of resistance documents, and by every claimant to the streets of the Punjab down to the period's end. The League taught the province how to be mobilized, and the province never forgot the lesson; the postcolonial arenas were furnished, to a striking degree, with the movement's own tools, turned upon the state the movement had made.

The limits of mobilization belong in the ledger, and they were structural, not incidental. A scripted canvass simplifies as it spreads: the demand that traveled as Islam, the flag, and the vote could be claimed afterward by every reading of Islam, which is one root of the thirty-year quarrel over the state's meaning that the rest of this series recounts. Participation was mobilized, not deliberative: the crowds were summoned to affirm a demand, not to define it, and the habit of summoning crowds outlived the occasion that justified it. And the mobilization's greatest triumph, the demonstrated power of the street, was also its most dangerous bequest, as the sequel of March 1947 announced and the postcolonial agitations confirmed. The people entered the movement's history as its strength; they entered the state's history as its unresolved question, and both entries were made in the same decade, by the same doors.

Conclusion

The demand for Pakistan was carried, in the province that decided its fate, by identifiable people using learnable methods, and their history changes the demand's. Between the two-seat humiliation of 1937 and the flag over the Secretariat in 1947 stands a decade of construction: the symbols manufactured, the federations organized, the canvass scripted, the festivals kept, the women summoned, and at the last the jails filled, until a party of barristers had become the proprietor of the Punjab's streets. The leadership's arguments, told elsewhere, gave the demand its content; the participants, told here, gave it its force, and the historian who would explain how an idea became a country must hold both in one account. Pakistan was walked, chanted, canvassed, and marched into existence, by the young, the ordinary, and, at the great moments, the women of the Punjab.

Note: This article is extracted from Muhammad Shafi, "Debating the Idea of Pakistan in Public Arenas: A Case Study of the Punjab (1947–1977)" (PhD diss., Department of History, Institute

²²Venkat Dhulipala, *Creating a New Medina: State Power, Islam, and the Quest for Pakistan in Late Colonial North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); K. K. Aziz, *A History of the Idea of Pakistan* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 1987).

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