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Keywords: District Administration, Refugee Settlement, West Punjab, Partition 1947, Pakistani State Formation, Rural Rehabilitation, Urban Rehabilitation, Camp Administration, Law and Order

Author:

Huma Ashfaq: (Corresponding Author)
MPhil Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of Modern Languages Islamabad, Pakistan.
(Email: huma.ashfaq919@gmail.com)

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Role of District Administration in Managing Refugee Settlement in Punjab (1947–1950)



Huma Ashfaq (Corresponding Author)¹

¹ MPhil Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of Modern Languages Islamabad, Pakistan.
(Email: huma.ashfaq919@gmail.com)

Abstract

This paper analyzes how the district administration contributed to the administration of the settlement of the refugees in Punjab in the period between 1947 and 1950. It advances an argument that the practical center of refugee management during early Pakistan was district administration. It adopts a qualitative research design and utilizes secondary sources, which were founded on official documentation, rehabilitation records and refugee census files and historical literature. Policy was framed in provincial ministries and central authorities and converted into local action by district officials by the administration of camps, security, documentation, property custody, land allotment, urban rehabilitation and mediation of refugees and host society. The article also suggests that the work of the district administration in these years was influenced by a drastic lack of personnel, finances and facilities but the ability to improvise allowed the administration to shift towards emergency relief to more permanent types of settlement.

Keywords: District Administration, Refugee Settlement, West Punjab, Partition 1947, Pakistani State Formation, Rural Rehabilitation, Urban Rehabilitation, Camp Administration, Law and Order

Introduction

The Indian subcontinent partition in 1947 signaled the start of not only the termination of the British colonial rule but a huge humanitarian disaster. The breakup was most bloody and administratively stressful in no place as it was in Punjab, where the clash between communities, the rush in defining boundaries and the abrupt changes in the population disrupted centuries of social and institutional fabric. The two parts of Punjab suffered the immediate effects of the Partition more directly than any other part of the state but in West Punjab the crisis took a different form as the new Pakistani province was to be the target of a huge influx of Muslim refugees and at the same time lose much of its Hindu and Sikh populations. This population inversion created sudden demands of housing, food, transportation, health care, jobs and redistribution of property. It challenged the new Pakistani state as well to one of its first and worst ordeals (Jamil, 2018).



The issue of settlement of refugees in Punjab has regularly been dealt with the view of mass migration, inter-communal conflict and provincial or central government policy. Having said that, those views are significant, yet they may cloud the particular institutional space, where the process of refugee rehabilitation actually took place. The state operated on the most important level, that of the district. It was in districts where refugees had in the first place arrived and been counted and placed in the camps and had been assigned to temporary shelter and had made claims and afterwards sought land and houses and shops and work. This is why the district administration was at the centre of the settlement of refugees. The practical machinery through which the crisis of refugees was worked out on the spot was constituted by the Deputy Commissioner and the subordinate magistrates, the police, the revenue, the custodians of evacuee property, the municipal and the rehabilitation officer (Iob, [2017](#)).

This paper discusses how the district administration was involved in the settlement of the refugees in Punjab between 1947 and 1950. It raises questions about how district authorities orchestrated relief during the emergency period, how they kept the law and order during migration and conflict, how they documented and distributed abandoned property and how they assisted the transition of the refugees policy towards survival to more long-term resettlement. It claims that district administration had no role of being a passive transmitter of orders given out at Lahore or Karachi. However, legal and institutional structures were formed by the provincial government, the newly established ministries but the district officers changed these structures into action by utilizing local knowledge, executive power and improvisation under situations of scarcity (Jamil, [2018](#)).

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This argument is significant in two aspects. First, it assists to understand how settlement of refugees really occurred in Punjab during 1947-50. This magnitude of crisis could not be handled by mere speeches, legislations or central dictates. It was forced to be fragmented into territorial entities, administrative types and daily activities. Secondly, studying district administration illuminates on how the state is formed in Pakistan. The settlement of refugees did not merely demand the intervention on part of government, it assisted in establishing new forms of governance, documentary regulation and intervention of the executive. This process centered on the district administration as it involved a mixture of colonial structures inherited and postcolonial functions. How the refugees were resettled however does not only show how the displaced people were resettled but also how the Pakistani state in its formative years settled down in Punjab (Iob, [2017](#)).

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative research design which relies on secondary sources. The topic of study is the administrative functions, relations within the institution and historical events, which are best examined using an interpretive approach of documentary and academic literature as opposed to quantitative modeling. The article is based on secondary literature which is highly dependent on government documents, cabinet diaries, refugee ministry documents, and published work. With the help of these sources, it is even possible to recreate the duties, restrictions and changing practices of district administration without purporting to have found them in an archives.

This article has a methodology that is thus historical and analytical. It does not just view the district administration as a formal bureaucracy but as a sphere of action that interconnected executive, police, revenue, municipal and rehabilitation. It focuses on the roles of local government in addressing certain issues created by refugee settlement such as the organization of the camps, security, registration and property management, rural allotment and rehabilitation of the city. Since it is based on the years 1947-1950, the article focuses on the emergency period right after Partition and the initial period of more systematic settlement. It does not even seek to encompass the later history of refugee rehabilitation up to the 1950s and later, though some developments in later years are mentioned where they help to shed light on the shaping role of district administration in the earlier years.

Administrative Background of the District in Punjab

The institutional inheritance with which Pakistan started must be taken into account in order to see a role played by the district administration following Partition. The district government of Punjab had been built up by the British up until the year 1947 in the form of a very centralized and adaptable tool of government. The coordinating, executive, magisterial and revenue authority of the district was the centre of the Deputy Commissioner. The district administration was very widespread through assistant commissioners, tehsildars, patwaris, qanungos, police officers and municipal institutions into the rural and urban life. Under normal conditions, this device dealt with issues like the collection of revenue, order in the area, local conflicts, development projects, as well as communications with provincial governments (Ali & Maqbool, [2025](#)).

Partitions changed the environment, in which this machinery was functioning. The shift of authority was marked with violence in the community, sudden change of personnel, interrupted communications, lack of staff and uncertainty in the institutions. Offices were forced to operate in the face of records being lost and staff being relocated as well as general breakdown of order in most places. But territorial and administrative unit that could be offered to the new state was the district. This implied that the colonial system bequeathed was instantly put to work in activities that it had never previously dealt with in such large scale. The district administration was not entitled to deal with unrest but they were to deal with mass displacement and all the attendant requirements of relief, registration, transport, shelter and settlement (Waheed, [2025](#)).

The crisis of the population of the district became inevitable due to the importance of the demographic aspects of the crisis. In 1947, West Punjab had a population of about 19.7 million and in 1948 during the refugee census, the province harbored about 5.5 million refugees which constituted about 28% of the total population of the state. The provincial declarations could not be effective to handle such transformation. Individual districts needed to identify what resources they had available, what buildings were available, the number of refugees coming, where they would be placed and how they could keep the local tensions under control. The issue of refugees was provincial, and highly local (Jamil, [2018](#)).

The state of Pakistan formed special institutions to handle refugees and rehabilitation, after independence. In September 1947, a federal Ministry of Refugees and Rehabilitation was created and since Punjab had suffered most in the attack, the office was temporarily

moved to Lahore, instead of Karachi. Mian Iftikhar-ud-Din was made a Minister in charge of Refugees and Rehabilitation in West Punjab. New departments, the Commissioner of Refugees, the Commissioner of Rehabilitation and new offices like the Rehabilitation Commissioner, the revenue department and the industrial rehabilitation department were slowly formed. But the measures were not able to circumvent district administration. They expanded its mandate by coming up with new activities which were yet to be executed locally. The physical location of refugees was found in districts and property, land and housing had to be located and managed there (Chattha, [2019](#)).

Reception, Relief and Camp Administration

The initial significant area of district administration was the reception of refugees who were coming into West Punjab. The refugees came in various forms, some in organized convoys others in overcrowded trains and many in fragmented groups and this was after experiencing violence, looting or breaking up due to separation with family members. They reached the railway stations, reception points on the road sides and camp sites of various sizes in the border districts and large towns. It was the district authorities which were to accept them, classify them and refer them to temporary accommodation. This was a seemingly simple task but in reality an administrative difficulty. It involved coordination of locals between the civil officers, police, transport, health staffs and the new refugee departments (Khan, [2023](#)).

The uneven geography of arrival of refugees was also another issue that had to be dealt with by district administration. Most of the refugees at the onset of the partition favored to stay in border areas like Lahore, Sheikhupura, Kasur and Sialkot since they anticipated that the Partition would only be temporary and they would one day come back to their homes. This created an unequal burden on the districts as opposed to the equitable distribution of the burden throughout the province. What ensued was overcrowding, a quick depletion of the local resources and increased pressure on the district officials. The effectiveness of a district thus was not just based on the formal powers but also the speed at which the district was able to adjust to the speed of arrival and the uncertainty that the movement of refugees would have (Khan, [2023](#)).

This responsibility was the most apparent through camp administration. The evidence reveals that the provincial authorities have soon realized the inefficiency of the available camps and building material. Camps were already opened in places like Wagah, Dhali, Kasur and Suleimanki but the influx, which continued, necessitated the opening of more camps at the headquarters of the tehsils, and in smaller towns. The district framework is important as shown in this ruling. The administration did not just have a few large centralized camps but spread a network of relief stations by means of district and sub-district institutions. District officers were forced to find spaces to be utilized, requisition or assign buildings, organize tents and supplies, assign staff and communicate provincial authorities of needs and shortages (Jamil, [2018](#)).

The problem of managing the camp was stinging with severe lack. By November 1947, with the number of refugees growing fast, the reserves of wheat in Punjab had dropped as low as 20,000 tons by that time, despite the fact that the number of refugees had increased faster than that. Distribution of food was thus a major administration task. District

authorities were forced to oversee rationing, storage and delivery using stocks that were exceedingly low and at the same time avoid the situation where the local populations would be left totally forgotten. Food and staff shortages were particularly challenging to the management of the camps and the bad health of most refugees and the potential of disease spreading in high density further aggravated the situation (Iob, [2017](#)).

The work of the voluntary organizations and local welfare groups helped in the administration of the camp but the work of these groups was subject to coordination by the district. Guides, guiders and Blue Birds provided valuable services in refugee camps especially in attending to the ill and keeping clean. Important work though it was it did not diminish the importance of district administration. Quite to the contrary, the fact that there were volunteers indicates how the district authorities were forced to incorporate informal help into an all-encompassing system of aid. Camps needed records, oversight, policing, access to medical care, sanitation facilities and systems to guide the refugees to the next location or subsequent allotment processes (Jamil, [2018](#)).

Law and Order, Movement and Protection

The establishment of refugees in Punjab could not be isolated of the general crisis of public order that was a part of Partition. Migration occurred as people were killed, looting, kidnappings, revenge and the breakdown of trust between the communities. Despite larger military and inter-dominion setups at various times, such as the Punjab Boundary Force and the Military Evacuation Organization, local security in Pakistani Punjab was greatly relied on the district magistrates, police officials and the general administrative set up of the district (Salman, [2023](#)).

District administration was accorded with coercive powers of importance by emergency legislation. The Punjab Public Safety Act of 1947 gave the provincial government and the district magistrates the power to arrest and detain people in case of emergency circumstances, some of which included arrest and detention without a warrant. These authorities are indicative of the way in which settlement of refugees and order in the society intersected. Camps were to be guarded and rumors checked and movement guarded. Even the refugees were not just susceptible to communal violence, but also theft, exploitation and anarchy on their way and on their destination. District administration was in this way simply a relief-giver but the primary coercive instrument of the state in the refugee areas (Khan, [2022](#)).

The necessity in such authority was enhanced in the fact that the upper level security set-ups were usually weak or inefficient. Police in Lahore and Amritsar were generally seen as partisan during the crisis and the Punjab Boundary Force never managed to control violence before its abolition at the end of August 1947. In this situation, there was no other option but the district officers to rule when state power was obvious to be weak. They had to maintain a certain degree of order in such areas where the ability of the state had been already challenged. This was not limited to the camps but also expanded to the railway stations, roads, deserted property, urban neighbourhoods and markets where there were high tensions (Jamil, [2018](#)).

District administration was also at the focal point where there was the end of refugee movement and settlement. The evacuation bodies might ferry refugees into Pakistani land but at one point when they get to a district, they would need someone to receive them, count them and determine where they would go. The district authorities were forced to find out the vulnerable groups like widows, orphans, the old and the injured. These differences were also a matter of administrative concern as they dictated who was able to receive aid and who would receive assistance in the future. The district became the institutional site whereby the state was able to transform the refugees into a moving mass into governable populations (Tiwari, [n.d.](#)).

Registration, Documentation and Administrative Legibility

It was not possible to have a long-lasting refugee settlement without documentation. The chaos of Partition had divided individuals out of their houses, territories, documents and trading resources. A lot of refugees arrived in West Punjab with little or no evidence of the things that they had left. The others had incomplete documentation or had to be remembered and testified to. It was the role of the state to establish an administrative order in the wake of such uncertainty and district administration played a principal role in such a process. Arrivals registers, camp registers, list of claimants, revenue registers, local surveys were all crucial instruments of government (Rashid, [n.d.](#)).

It was not a very smooth machine impersonality of the Pakistani Punjab bureaucracy. Instead, it had difficulties in rendering refugees and property claims legible when there were weak information conditions and when they were subject to extreme time constraints. Combination of official regulations, preexisting revenue expertise, local connections and pragmatic perception were the sources of this setting to which the district officials depended. The documentary routine of the district proved to be important as it gave the administrative foundation on which decisions of allotment and rehabilitation in the future could be made based on the routine (Nawaz, [2025](#)).

Legal framework of evacuee property added burden of documents on the district. The government of West Punjab passed an Evacuee Act in September 1947 and soon after, East Punjab government passed an Evacuee Act, to facilitate the appointment of custodians and registration of evacuee property. An ordinance was also promulgated before the close of September to put the Abandoned lands and buildings in West Punjab under the control of the Rehabilitation Commissioner who gave the power to occupy the property to Muslim refugees or other people. These were provincial, but had to be carried out by district surveys, revenue books, and site visits and the local exercise of possession. District administration needed to determine what assets were actually abandoned, and whether they were occupied by anyone, as well as the types of claimants (Jamil, [2018](#)).

This was a crucial work as property in the context of refugees was not the only economic problem. It was too an issue of political legitimacy. Refugees anticipated that the new state would make up on loss by providing them with access to land, houses or business property. In its turn, the state required documentary procedures which would render such compensation to be logical and orderly. The hub of this was the district administration. It classified individuals, justified or unjustified assertions and connected the need of humanitarian to legal rights. In that regard, the local archive of displacement and

settlement of the postcolonial state was created through the help of documenting the district (Mukhopadhyay, [2019](#)).

Evacuee Property and Rural Settlement

The evacuee agricultural property was probably the biggest long term element in the settlement of refugees in Punjab. An extremely high percentage of Muslim refugees into West Punjab was of agrarian origin and the tracts of land had been left by the leaving Hindus and Sikhs. The state attempted to solve these two realities, by reallocating the available land to the cultivators who were refugees. But it was not an easy handing over. There was a variation of land in terms of quality, irrigation, size, location and productive value. Cases needed to be reviewed, village occupation needed to be looked into and village level documents needed to be consulted. Institutional mechanism of this process became a possibility through the district administration (Mubarak & Zaffer, [2025](#)).

Refugees claimed both urban and rural agricultural property and the government needed to enlist, control, assess, locate and allocate evacuee property to migrants acclaimants. All these activities could not be handled in the provincial capital. They needed the local knowledge of the territories of the district revenue administration. Patwaris, qanungos, tehsildars, and district officers knew the boundaries and land types of villages, the conditions of irrigation, and the land ownership. In the absence of such local knowledge claims could not be related to actual plots. The district administration thus played the role of the interface between the compensation paperwork and geographic settlement of the physical geography.

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Allotment process was very tentative in its early days. Almost 3.5 million acres of evacuee agricultural land were given to refugees in the first stage with some of the land continuing under the tillage of old Muslim occupants until 1952. This demonstrates that the district administration was forced to be pragmatic and not wait till the process of regularization is perfect. The land could not be allowed to go to waste as files took long to pass through the bureaucracy. Refugees had to have a livelihood that could be quickly provided and the province required continuity in agriculture. Temporary growth and temporary allotment was thus an administrative measure of stabilizing countryside in case of emergency (Jamil, [2018](#)).

These temporary solutions also demonstrate the juggling that has to be done by the district officials. They needed to go fast enough not to create disorder and destitution but slow enough not to end up distributing land in a manner that would lead to a litigation and grievance in the future. The local officials had a lot of influence in this process. The fact that they knew the local conditions influenced the interpretation of claims and the properties that were taken to be available. This did not imply that they did not do it with greater oversight but it does indicate that the district administration was not a passive participant in the process of resettlement in rural areas but instead it was directly involved in the process of forming and administering rural resettlement as opposed to being a mechanical execution of centralized policies (Mubarak & Zaffer, [2025](#)).

The policy also has to deal social classification. The resettlement of evacuee land in West Punjab was to be limited to those who had actually cultivated or owned land in East

Punjab and were to rely on it as their livelihood. To make such a principle work, the district administration had to make a distinction between cultivators and non-cultivators and between those agrarian claimants who were there to benefit in the muddling of migration. Such differences impacted social life on a long term basis. They influenced who could have access to the agricultural resources, the process of reconstituting the village society and the integration of refugee population into the agrarian economy of Punjab (Ali & Maqbool, 2025).

Urban Rehabilitation and Local Governance

Urban refugee settlement brought forth another issue of problems. Refugees gravitated towards towns and cities where they were empowered to get jobs and markets, transport, office and be closer to the abandoned houses and shops. Urban concentration however resulted in overcrowding, illegal occupation, strain on sanitation and house, commercial property and industrial unit disputes. The district management in the cities was thus forced to liaise with municipalities, improvement trusts, police, custodians and rehabilitation agencies (Karim, 1985).

One of the best examples of such process is Lahore. Following the Partition the number of people in the city increased by some 800,000 to 1.2 million, whilst some 4,000 houses had been destroyed in the riots. Old havelis and other unsafe buildings were occupied by refugees and some of them collapsed due to their inappropriate conditions. This implied that not just giving shelter to refugees in the city was a simple matter of giving shelter. It entailed the issues of structural safety, crowd, market control, health of people, and city planning. Lahore Improvement Trust was involved in the process of the conditions improvement, however, the district administration was the core as it organized the administrative field in which the improvements occurred.

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Rehabilitation of urban areas was slowly expanded to more than emergency occupancy to the development of more planned housing projects. Small cities were being built up with houses, colonies, townships and satellite settlements being built in cities like Lahore, Lyallpur, Gujranwala, Sargodha, Sialkot and Rawalpindi as well. Shelterless families were also developed in other places such as Ugoki, Dhingranwali, Gujranwala and Dina. The fact that such projects were going on meant that the issue of refugees was transforming the urban geography of Punjab. The role of the district administration was important as it was the administrator of local ownership, the planning organizations and territorial implications of urban growth (Jamil, 2018).

Urban rehabilitation was also around commercial and industrial properties. Jamil documents that of 2,473 factories that Hindus and Sikhs left in West Punjab, 1, 798 were handed over to the Muslim refugees, but temporarily. There were other administrative organs involved in industrial rehabilitation such as the Rehabilitation Commissioner of Industries and the Director of Industries but locally owned and managed rehabilitation continued to largely rely on district officials. Shops, workshops, factories were forced to be closed, registered and connected to the refugee claimants. Urban settlement was not an issue of housing, however. It was also an economic recovery plan that geared towards changing the refugees into employed citizens of the new province (Jamil, 2018).

District-Level Administration in Practice

The district administration was not just carried out by a single office but by an administrative ecology that comprised of executive officials, camp authorities, committees and specialized personnel resettlement. These arrangements were based on the extent of the crisis and the necessity to expand the local sphere of the coordination (Ali & Maqbool, [2025](#)).

The blurred line between ordinary and extraordinary governance can also be seen in the district-level administrative practice in the way the refugee crisis undermined the boundaries. The district officer was, nevertheless, supposed to be in charge of routine state operations but the fact that refugees were to be settled on top of the current functions was an extra layer of emergency administration. Revenue staff that would have been dealing with the land records was obliged to help in evacuee property surveys and allotments. Police that were used to police the populace and curb crime were forced to now patrol camps, police movement and guard abandoned property. Urban services were run by municipal bodies and were attracted into sanitation and housing issues that were caused by overcrowding of refugees. It was a complex machine that simultaneously processed continuity and rupture, the district administration (Waheed, [2025](#)).

Such a combination of normal and emergency governance can be used to understand why the role of district administration was such an issue during the refugee crisis. It was widely geographically spread, had established lines of command and was familiar with the local society. Meanwhile, it was sufficiently flexible to take in new tasks via improvisation. Not just failure was testified by that improvisation. It was even indicative of adaptive ability. The crisis could never be completely mastered by the district administration but it could develop processes, categories and short-term solutions that made the crisis manageable (Iob, [2017](#)).

Centre, Province and District

The position of the district administration was influenced by bigger conflicts between central and provincial governments. Financial resources as well as political coordination were necessary to settle refugees but these were not necessarily smooth sailing. Pakistan-Punjab Refugee Council was formed in October 1947 and was to work out the coordination of efforts between the centre and the province. But academic literature on relationship between centers and provinces demonstrates that the policy of refugees has been characterized by controversy, procrastination and conflicting priorities.

Due to the tension the importance of districts increased. In case of disagreement between the federal and provincial bodies in terms of resources, procedures or priorities, district officers had to address real populations of refugees. They were not allowed to postpone feeding of camps and supervision of properties until the political coherence will be attained. District administration in this meaning usually played the role of the stabilizing layer of administration. It failed to resolve conflict at the top level politics but ensured that the local response machinery was in motion even though there was conflict. It is this mediation process that is core in explaining why district administration was so eminent in the process of refugee settlement (Chattha, [2019](#)).

Meanwhile, there was no autonomy of districts. The provincial and central decisions influenced their powers, budgets and legal frameworks. Refugee rehabilitation was thus pegged on an administrative system that was layered with local implementation being limited by a higher-level policy and resource distribution. The significance of the district administration was not based on the independence but indispensability. Higher policy would not be possible without the district structures.

Constraints and Administrative Improvisation

The success of district administration is to be evaluated against tough constraints that it operated against. Staffing shortage was one of the most critical issues. The administrative services to run refugee camps were lacking and the same had been the case with other areas of refugee administration. The division had upset the human resource foundation of the province. Migrations to some officers, reassignment to others and inadequate clerical and field staff were plaguing many of the offices. Under such circumstances, the officials were frequently forced to be able to perform several tasks at the same time and use temporary solutions.

Another significant constraint was the financial scarcity. In November 1947 36 million was spent on refugee camps between August 1947 and March 1948 and by 1948 spending on camps had increased to Rs. 65 million by 1949. Another issue that was being experienced in this early post-Partition period was the province experiencing budget deficits. Scarcity was thus controlled by the district administration as opposed to abundance. Authorities were faced with the challenge of dealing with relief on a tight budget, unpredictable supply chains and an ever-growing number of displaced individuals. The ideal bureaucracy cannot be used to measure the administrative success in such set up. It should be evaluated in comparison to the huge tax burden that is put on local institutions (Jamil, [2018](#)).

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The fact that the property of evacuees was a legal gray area was also a major concern. Provisional settlement would stabilize the life of refugees although not always title was assured. The administration of the district frequently needed to make temporary and provisional arrangements which could be revised subsequently. This brought about opportunities of conflict, favoritism as well as bitterness. However, it was also indicative of the need to move on the action prior to full documentation and verification being done. Improvisation in this regard was not a fringe aspect of administration of refugees. It was a characteristic of its own (Khan, [2023](#)).

The wider sense of bureaucracy of Pakistani contributes to this argument. The process of resettlement of refugees in Punjab was not a seamless or strictly technical process but a process that was learnt through practice, negotiation and adaptation on the part of the state. This situation was the case in district administration. It was based on the records and legal forms, but it also used the local knowledge and flexible judgement as well as individual power. This mixture not only created unevenness in the administration of the districts, but also rendered it able to act in a crisis situation (Iob, [2017](#)).

District Administration and State Formation

The state formation of district administration was turned into a tool in the face of the refugee crisis. The handling of refugees necessitated the district to shift abstract

sovereignty of Pakistan to tangible practices of registration, custody, allotment and order. Borders only acquired significance when they started to receive and govern refugees who crossed their borders. New laws only attained substance when the district officials applied the new laws to real houses, fields and individuals. In that, the district administration did not react to Partition only. It contributed to the establishment of the local reality of the new state (Rashid, [n.d.](#)).

The process impacted in the long term. To begin with, the settlement of refugees empowered the executive in Punjab since the district officers were most likely the representatives of the state power in the crisis. Secondly, evacuee property administration brought about more state involvement in the areas of land, housing, commerce, and industry. Thirdly, the demographic and political structure of districts, particularly urban districts was changed because of the classification and placement of refugees. These developments did not cease in 1950 but even that year much of the administrative basis of subsequent rehabilitation was in place.

The state was approached by refugees via the district offices, camp registers, claims procedures, allotment files and petitions. The categories of entitlement and legitimacy of the state itself were influenced by the experience of the state on the district level with the refugees who claimed asylum in the state. It was not merely a matter of welfare or compensations that was to be applied in settlement of refugees. It was also concerned with the formation of politics relationships in the new Pakistan (Jamil, [2018](#)).

Conclusion

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The district administration had a leading role to play in the settlement of refugees in Punjab in the period between 1947 and 1950. The district was the main battlefield where the new Pakistani state was facing the human cost of Partition and tried to establish order in the issues of displacement. District authorities led a welcome team, policing camps, kept order in the community, listed property left by evacuees, organized temporary occupancy, rural and urban restoration and reconciled refugees with the local population and the higher authority.

This paper has presented the argument that the critical operational point between policy and practice was that of the district administration. Legal and institutional framework of the rehabilitation of refugees was provided by provincial ministries and central agencies but was put into practice by the district administration. It did it in the harsh circumstances of the lack of staff, absence of funds, legal uncertainty and the ongoing insecurity. Its success could not thus have been achieved without improvisation. The measure of bureaucratic perfection was not the key to effective district administration but its capacity to respond territorial and adaptive to pressure.

History of refugee settlement in Punjab therefore cannot be separated with that of the history of district administration. Displacement was turned into registration, shelter, allotment and settlement, through district institutions. Meanwhile, this process contributed to the establishment of institutional nature of Pakistani state during its initial years. The Punjab experience of rehabilitating refugees was not a one-off relief program. It was a pioneer state-building and the governance of the district was in its centre.

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