

THE LIVING ARCHIVE

PART ONE OF FOURTEEN

The Complete History of Punjab

Part One — The Land Itself

How Punjab was built out of a slow crash between two continents, why five rivers ended up in one place, and the first people who ever walked on this ground.

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Why I Wrote This

Lovepreet Singh · *The Living Archive*

I grew up on this land and I could not find the book I wanted to read about it.

There are two kinds of books about Punjab. The first kind is written for scholars. It is careful and it is honest, but it is written in a language most people cannot get through — long sentences, technical words, an assumption that you already know who the Kushans were.

The second kind is written for everyone. It is easy to read, and that is the problem, because it is easy in the wrong way. It leaves out the arguments. It gives you one clean version of events and never tells you that serious people disagree, or why, or what the evidence actually is.

I wanted a third kind. Every argument included. Every assumption dug out and held up to the light. And all of it in words a fifteen-year-old could follow without stopping once.

Nobody had written it. So I did.

How this series is built

This is Part 1 of fourteen. Together they run from the formation of the land itself to the Punjab of today, on both sides of the border.

My working rules are the same three I use for everything in The Living Archive:

- **Plain language.** If a word needs explaining, it gets explained on the spot, not in a footnote you will never read.
- **Show the evidence.** Not "historians believe" — the actual bone, brick, coin or inscription, and what it can and cannot prove.

- **Competing views, fairly.** Where experts disagree, both sides get their best case made for them. I will tell you where I think the weight lies. I will not pretend the question is closed when it is not.

Some of what is coming in later parts is painful and still politically live — the Aryan question, 1947, 1984, the water disputes. Indian and Pakistani textbooks tell some of these events in opposite ways. I am not going to hand you a verdict on those. I am going to hand you the evidence and the arguments, and trust you with them.

That trust is the whole point of this project.

Lovepreet Singh

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BEFORE WE BEGIN

How to Read This Book

Read this page first. It takes two minutes and it will make the other forty pages much easier.

This book is written for you, not for a professor. Every hard word is explained the moment it turns up. Every big number is turned into something you can picture. Nothing is left out to make it shorter.

You do not need to know any history to read this. You do not need to know any science. You only need to start at the top and keep going.

As you read, you will see coloured boxes. Each colour means something. Here is what each one is for.

WORD BOX

A blue box like this one explains a hard word. When a difficult word appears for the first time, a blue box is right there next to it.

Example — Geology: the study of rocks and how the Earth was made. A geologist is a person who does this job.

IN REAL TERMS

A green box takes a number that is too big to imagine and turns it into something ordinary. Numbers like "fifty million years" mean nothing to a human brain. Green boxes fix that.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

A brown box shows you the evidence. Not somebody's opinion — the actual thing. A bone. A broken pot. A mark on a rock. History is only as good as its evidence, so I will always show you what the evidence is.

THE ARGUMENT

An orange box means the experts do not agree. These are the interesting parts. Inside, you get both sides fairly:

One side says...

Their claim, and the reasons they give for it.

The other side says...

Their claim, and their reasons.

Where things stand: what is agreed, what is not, and what evidence would end the argument.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

A purple box points out something everybody has quietly taken for granted without proving it. An **assumption** is a thing you believe is true and then build on top of, without checking it first.

This is the most important box in the whole book. Almost no history book shows you these. But almost every big historical mistake starts with a hidden assumption nobody looked at.

REMEMBER THIS

A dark box comes at the end of each chapter. It says the one thing you must take away, in the simplest words possible.

If you only read the dark boxes, you will still understand the story.

My promise to you

Some parts of Punjab's history are still being argued over today, sometimes angrily. Who the first people were. Who is to blame for the killing in 1947. What happened in 1984. Indian and Pakistani school books tell some of the same events in completely opposite ways.

I am not going to pick a side for you.

What I will do is show you what each side claims, what evidence each side actually has, and where each side is guessing. Then you decide. That is the honest way to do it, and it is also the only way you will really understand the arguments when you hear them.

A note about dates

WORD BOX

BCE means "Before Common Era". It counts backwards. 500 BCE is five hundred years before year one. It is the same as what older books call BC.

CE means "Common Era". It counts forwards. 500 CE is five hundred years after year one. It is the same as what older books call AD.

mya means "million years ago".

c. before a date means "about". Historians use it when the exact year is not known.

One more thing. The further back we go, the less certain the dates are. A date like "1849" is exact — it is written down in official papers. A date like "about 50 million years ago" is a best estimate from measurements, and could be out by a few million years. I will tell you which kind of date you are looking at.

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CHAPTER ONE

What the Word "Punjab" Actually Means

*Before we can tell the story of a place, we have to agree on what the place is.
That turns out to be harder than it sounds.*

1.1 — The name is a description

The word Punjab is not a very old word. It is also not, originally, an Indian word. It is Persian.

It is made of two small words joined together:

- **Panj** — this means "five".
- **Aab** — this means "water".

Put them together and you get **Panj-aab**. Five waters. Five rivers.

So the name of the region is not really a name at all. It is a description. It is like calling a town "Three Hills" or "Big Lake". Somebody looked at the land, counted the rivers, and that became what everyone called it.

This tells you something important straight away. The most obvious thing about this place — the thing a stranger notices first, the thing worth putting in the name — is the water.

WORD BOX

Persian: the language of Iran. For hundreds of years it was also the official language of government in northern India, in the same way English is the official language of a lot of government work today. That is why so many words in Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi come from Persian.

1.2 — When did people start using this name?

Here is a fact that surprises most people.

The name "Punjab" is only about five hundred years old.

It starts appearing in written records in the 1500s and 1600s, in the time of the Mughal emperors, whose court worked in Persian. Before that, this same land had many other names. In the very old Sanskrit texts it was called **Sapta Sindhu** — "seven rivers". In Greek writings it was part of a region they called **Pentapotamia**, which is Greek for, once again, "five rivers".

Notice something. Sanskrit said seven. Persian said five. Greek said five. The number keeps changing.

Why? Because rivers are not fixed things. Some dry up. Some join together. Some split. Whether you count a stream as its own river or as a branch of a bigger one is a judgement call. We will come back to a river that vanished completely in Chapter 4.

IN REAL TERMS

Think of how strange this is. The land is billions of years old. People have lived on it for hundreds of thousands of years. But the name we use for it is younger than the Mughal Empire.

If the whole history of this land were one full day, the name "Punjab" would appear in the last fraction of a second before midnight.

1.3 — Which five rivers?

The five rivers, from east to west, are:

MODERN NAME	OLD SANSKRIT NAME	THE EASY WAY TO REMEMBER IT
Jhelum	Vitasta	The most western of the five. Alexander the Great fought his famous battle on its bank.
Chenab	Asikni	The biggest of the five by water volume. Its name also means "moon river".

MODERN NAME	OLD SANSKRIT NAME	THE EASY WAY TO REMEMBER IT
Ravi	Parushni / Iravati	The smallest. Lahore sits on it. Amritsar is near it.
Beas	Vipasha	The one Alexander's army refused to cross. It ends his story in India.
Sutlej	Shatadru	The longest. The most eastern. Today it is roughly the dividing line in Indian Punjab.

All five of them eventually run into one much bigger river: the **Indus**, called **Sindhu** in Sanskrit. The Indus then carries all that water down to the sea.

So the five rivers are really five branches of one great river system. Picture a hand. The Indus is the arm. The five rivers are the fingers.

1.4 — Where is Punjab on a map?

This is where it gets complicated, and you need to hold two different answers in your head at once.

THE ANSWER FOR TODAY

Today there is no single Punjab. There are two, in two different countries.

- **Punjab, Pakistan.** The bigger one, by a long way. Its main city is Lahore. Around 130 million people live there. It is the most powerful province in Pakistan.
- **Punjab, India.** Much smaller. Its main city is Chandigarh. Around 30 million people live there.

They were split in 1947, when British India was divided into India and Pakistan. A line was drawn straight through the middle of Punjab. We will spend a whole part of this series on how and why that happened, and what it cost.

THE ANSWER FOR HISTORY

For almost all of the story in this book, Punjab was *much* bigger than either of those two places.

At its largest — under Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the early 1800s, and again as a British province — "Punjab" stretched from near the Khyber Pass in the west to near Delhi in the east. It included places that are now completely separate states and provinces: Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Delhi's western edge, parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Islamabad.

So when a history book says "in Punjab", you have to ask: which Punjab, and in which century?

THE ARGUMENT — WHAT COUNTS AS "PUNJAB"?

People genuinely disagree about where the borders of the real Punjab are. This is not a small argument. It has fed political movements and, in some cases, violence.

The land-and-water answer

Punjab is wherever the five rivers run. It is a physical place made by geography. If the rivers water it, it is Punjab. By this test, Punjab is a single unbroken region and the 1947 border is an artificial line cut across a natural whole.

The language answer

Punjab is wherever people speak Punjabi as their mother tongue. This is the test used by the movement that redrew Indian Punjab's borders in 1966. It produces a different map from the river test — it cuts out Haryana, where most people speak Haryanvi or Hindi, and it stretches into parts of Pakistan beyond the rivers.

The political answer

Punjab is whatever a government currently draws on a map and calls Punjab. This is the answer that decides real things — taxes, police, schools, water rights. It is also the answer that has changed the most often.

Where things stand: All three answers are used, often by the same person in the same conversation, without them noticing they have switched. There is no way to settle it, because the three tests measure genuinely different things. The useful move is not to pick a winner but to *notice which test somebody is using* when they make a claim about Punjab. Very often the whole disagreement disappears once you spot that two people are using two different tests.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Here is something almost every history book quietly assumes and never says out loud: **that a region is a real thing with a continuous life of its own.**

We say "Punjab was invaded", "Punjab was rich", "Punjab suffered" — as if Punjab were a person who was there the whole time, having experiences.

But it was not. The people who lived on this land in 2000 BCE spoke a language we cannot read, worshipped gods we cannot name, and had no idea they lived in a place called Punjab. They would not have recognised a farmer from 1900 CE as one of their own, and he would not have recognised them.

What actually continues is not a people or a culture. It is **the land and the water**. The soil stayed rich. The rivers kept flowing. The mountain passes stayed open. Wave after wave of totally different people came, used the same soil, walked through the same passes, and were replaced.

This matters because it is where a lot of bad and dangerous history comes from — people claiming that "we" have been here for five thousand years, when what they really mean is that *the land* has been here for five thousand years, and their own ancestors are one of many groups who arrived at some point along the way.

REMEMBER THIS

"Punjab" means "five waters" in Persian. It is a description, not a name, and it is only about 500 years old.

The five rivers are the **Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej**. All five feed into the Indus.

Today there are two Punjabs, one in India and one in Pakistan. Historically it was much bigger than both.

And when anyone says "Punjab", ask yourself: do they mean the rivers, the language, or the government map? Those are three different places.

CHAPTER TWO

The Earth Before Punjab Existed

To understand why Punjab is flat, rich, watered and constantly invaded, you have to go back to a slow-motion crash between two continents. This chapter explains that crash without using a single word you do not already know.

2.1 — First, how old are we talking?

The Earth is about 4,500 million years old. That is four and a half billion years. That number is useless to your brain. Nobody can feel what a billion years is. So let us shrink it.

IN REAL TERMS

Imagine the whole history of Earth is one single year, from 1 January to 31 December.

- The Earth forms on **1 January**.
- The first tiny life appears around **late February**.
- For the next eight months, almost nothing happens except slime.
- Animals with shells and eyes appear around **19 November**.
- Dinosaurs turn up on **13 December** and are wiped out on **26 December**.
- India crashes into Asia and starts pushing up the Himalayas on about **28 December**.
- The first humans in the Soan Valley of Punjab — the people in Chapter 6 — arrive at roughly **11 p.m. on 31 December**.
- Farming begins at about **11:58 p.m.**
- Everything else in this entire fourteen-part book — Harappa, Alexander, the Gurus, Ranjit Singh, the British, 1947, today — happens in the **last 90 seconds before midnight**.

Hold onto that. It will keep the rest of this book in proportion.

2.2 — The ground under your feet is not fixed

This is the single strangest true fact in this chapter, so read it slowly.

The ground moves.

Not in an earthquake. All the time. Every day. Right now.

Here is how it works.

The Earth is not solid all the way through. It is more like a boiled sweet with a soft centre. On the very outside there is a thin, hard, cold shell of rock. Under that shell the rock is hot — hot enough to be soft and slowly bendable, like very thick treacle or warm tar.

That hard outer shell is not one single piece. It is cracked. It is broken into about a dozen enormous pieces, plus a lot of smaller ones. Think of the shell of a boiled egg after you have rolled it on the table — still holding together, but cracked into big plates.

Each of those pieces sits on the hot soft rock underneath. And because the soft rock underneath slowly churns and moves, the hard pieces on top get carried along with it.

WORD BOX

Tectonic plates: the big cracked pieces of the Earth's hard outer shell. "Tectonic" just comes from a Greek word meaning "to build". They are called that because their movement is what builds mountains.

Plate tectonics: the whole idea that these plates move and that their movement explains mountains, earthquakes and volcanoes. This idea only became widely accepted in the 1960s. Before that, most scientists thought it was nonsense.

How fast do they move? Very slowly. Somewhere between one and ten centimetres a year, depending on the plate.

IN REAL TERMS

Continents move at roughly **the speed your fingernails grow**.

That sounds like nothing. But give it time. Your fingernails would grow about five metres in a normal human lifetime if you never cut them. Now give that speed **fifty million lifetimes**. Suddenly a continent has crossed an ocean.

This is the whole trick of geology: **tiny changes plus enormous time equals gigantic results**. Keep this idea. You will need it again in Chapter 3.

2.3 — India was once an island

Now the part that concerns us directly.

The land we now call India was not always attached to Asia. Once, it was nowhere near Asia at all.

Around 200 million years ago, most of the world's land was joined into one gigantic super-continent. Scientists call the southern half of it **Gondwana**. In Gondwana, India was wedged in beside Africa, Madagascar, Antarctica and Australia. Not next to China. Not next to Iran. Down in the south, near where Antarctica is today.

Then Gondwana began to break apart.

Around 130 million years ago, the piece we now call India tore away from the rest and started moving north, on its own, as a giant island. Nothing above it but open ocean.

And it moved *fast*. Not fast by human standards — but astonishingly fast by continent standards. Around 15 to 20 centimetres a year at its quickest. That is several times faster than most plates move. Geologists still argue about exactly why it was in such a hurry.

2.4 — The slowest crash in history

India kept sailing north for roughly 80 million years.

Ahead of it was the huge landmass of Asia. Between them was an ocean that no longer exists. It had a name: the **Tethys Sea**. It is gone now, closed up and squeezed out of existence, which is a strange thing to say about an entire ocean.

Then, around 50 million years ago, India arrived. It hit Asia.

Now think carefully about what happens when two continents meet.

When a heavy sheet of ocean floor meets a continent, the heavy one slides underneath and gets swallowed. That is normal, and it happens all over the world. But India was not ocean floor. It was a thick, light slab of continent. So was Asia. Neither one would sink under the other. Neither one would stop. Neither one could get out of the way.

So the land between them had nowhere to go but **up**.

IN REAL TERMS

Put a rug on a smooth floor. Push one end of it slowly towards the wall.

The rug does not slide flat forever. It bunches. It rucks up into ridges and folds, and those folds get taller the harder you push.

The Himalayas are those folds. India is the hand pushing. Asia is the wall. And the pushing has not stopped.

The rock that got crushed and folded upwards had, in many places, been sitting on the floor of the Tethys Sea. Sea mud. Sea sand. Sea creatures.

That mud was lifted eight kilometres into the sky.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

This is not a guess. There are four completely separate lines of evidence, and they all point the same way. That agreement is what makes scientists confident.

1. Sea fossils on mountain tops. Near the summit of Mount Everest there is a layer of limestone packed with the fossils of small sea animals — creatures that could only ever have lived on a sea floor. There is only one sensible explanation for a sea floor being at 8,800 metres: it used to be a sea floor, and it got pushed up.

2. Matching rocks on separated continents. Certain distinctive rock layers and fossil plants found in India also turn up in Africa, Madagascar, Antarctica and Australia — and nowhere else. The simplest explanation is that these lands were once joined.

3. Magnetic stripes on the ocean floor. When hot rock cools, tiny magnetic particles in it lock into place pointing at the magnetic north pole of that moment. The Earth's magnetic field flips direction every so often. So the sea floor records a striped pattern of flips, like a tape recording. Read the stripes in the Indian Ocean and you can work out how fast India moved and when.

4. Direct measurement, today. We now have satellite positioning accurate to a few millimetres. Point it at India and Asia and you can watch it happening. India is still pushing north into Asia at roughly 4 to 5 centimetres a year. The Himalayas are still rising by about 5 millimetres a year — though wind and rain wear them down almost as fast.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Everything you just read rests on one assumption that cannot be proved. It has a name: **uniformitarianism**. That is a horrible word for a simple idea.

The idea is: **the rules of nature have always worked the same way they work now.**

Nobody watched India cross the ocean. We measure how fast plates move today, we look at how far India has come, and we divide one by the other to get a date. But that only works if plates moved at broadly similar speeds in the past. If the rules were different back then, every date in this chapter is wrong.

Why do scientists accept it anyway? Two reasons. First, there is no evidence at all that the rules ever changed. Second, and more powerfully: the four kinds of evidence above are completely independent of each other. Fossils know nothing about magnetism. Satellites know nothing about limestone. Yet they all produce the same answer. It is very hard to explain that agreement unless the answer is simply true.

But be honest about what that is. It is not proof. It is a very strong argument from agreement. That is the strongest thing science usually has, and it is worth knowing the difference.

2.5 — Why any of this matters for human history

You might reasonably ask what a 50-million-year-old crash has to do with Guru Nanak or the British.

The answer is: nearly everything. That crash produced four things, and all four run through this entire book.

One: it made a wall. The Himalayas are the highest mountains on Earth. They seal off the north almost completely. For most of history, no army came into India over the Himalayas. That single fact shapes every invasion in the next thirteen parts.

Two: it left doors in the wall. The wall is not complete. In the north-west, where the mountains are lower and broken, there are passes — the Khyber, the Bolan, the Gomai. Almost every invader in Punjab's history walked through one of these. And the land immediately behind those doors, the first place any invader arrives, is Punjab. That is why this region has been fought over more than almost any other on Earth.

Three: it made rain. Explained fully in the next chapter.

Four: it made the soil. Also the next chapter — and it is the most important of the four.

REMEMBER THIS

The Earth's hard outer shell is **cracked into giant moving pieces**. They move about as fast as your fingernails grow.

India was once a **separate island** down near Antarctica. It broke away and floated north for 80 million years.

About **50 million years ago it hit Asia**. Neither side could give way, so the land in between was crushed upwards. Those crumples are the **Himalayas**. They are still rising today.

That crash gave Punjab a wall to its north, doors in the wall to its north-west, rain, and the richest soil in Asia. Everything else in this book grows out of those four things.

CHAPTER THREE

How the Rivers Made the Soil

This is the most important chapter in Part 1. If you understand this one, you will understand why every empire in South Asia wanted Punjab, and why the trouble in Punjab today is still, at bottom, about water and land.

3.1 — Mountains make rain

Start with a simple fact about air. Warm air can hold a lot of water as invisible vapour. Cold air cannot hold nearly as much.

You have seen this yourself. Take a cold bottle out of the fridge on a warm day and it goes wet on the outside. The water was already in the air, invisible. Touching the cold bottle cooled that air down, the air could no longer hold the water, and the water came out as droplets.

Now do that to a whole sky.

Every summer, the land of South Asia bakes. Hot land heats the air above it. Hot air rises. When air rises it leaves a gap, and air rushes in to fill that gap. The air that rushes in comes off the Indian Ocean — and it is carrying an enormous load of water vapour, because it has spent months sitting on a warm sea.

That wet ocean air sweeps north across the land. Then it hits the Himalayas.

It cannot go through a mountain, so it is forced upwards. And as air rises it cools. And cold air cannot hold water.

So the water falls out. All of it. In sheets.

WORD BOX

Monsoon: a wind that reverses direction with the seasons, and the heavy rain it brings. In South Asia it blows in wet off the sea in summer, and blows back out dry off the land in winter. The word comes from an Arabic word for "season".

Water vapour: water in the air as an invisible gas. It is not steam and not cloud — you cannot see it. It is in the air around you right now.

There is a second water supply too, and people often forget it. The Himalayas are so high that snow sits on them permanently. Every spring and summer, some of that snow and ice melts and runs downhill.

So the mountains do two jobs at once. In the wet months they catch rain. In the dry months they release melt-water. That is why Punjab's rivers do not dry up in the hot season the way rivers in most dry countries do.

IN REAL TERMS

Think of the Himalayas as an enormous water tank fitted with two taps.

Tap one is the monsoon. It blasts on for a few months a year.

Tap two is melting snow. It drips steadily through the dry season.

Because of tap two, the rivers keep running when there is no rain. A place with only tap one has floods and then drought. Punjab has water nearly all year round. That is the difference between a hard country and a rich one.

3.2 — Water quietly destroys rock

Water is soft. Rock is hard. Water wins.

Not in a day. Over long enough time, water takes mountains apart completely. It does this in several ways at once:

- **It freezes.** Water seeps into a small crack in a rock. At night it freezes. Water expands when it freezes — which is unusual and very important. The expanding ice pushes the crack wider. Next day it melts, seeps deeper, and freezes again. Do that a few thousand times and the rock splits.
- **It carries grit.** A fast river is not just water. It is water full of sand and stones. Those act like sandpaper on the river bed, grinding it away.
- **It dissolves.** Rainwater is very slightly acidic. Some rocks slowly dissolve in it, the way sugar dissolves in tea, only far slower.
- **It smashes.** In a flood, a river can roll boulders the size of cars. Rocks hitting rocks break both.

WORD BOX

Erosion: the wearing away of rock and soil by water, wind or ice, and the carrying of the pieces somewhere else. It is just "nature grinding things down and moving them".

Silt: rock that has been ground down into particles so fine they feel like flour. Finer than sand. This is the stuff that matters most in this chapter.

3.3 — The rivers carry the mountains away

Here is where it comes together.

The rivers of Punjab start high in the Himalayas. Up there they are steep and violent, ripping rock apart and carrying the pieces downhill.

As the land flattens out, the rivers slow down. And a slow river cannot carry as much. So it starts dropping its load — the big stones first, then the sand, and finally, where it is slowest, the very fine silt.

That silt settles out over the flat land. A thin coating. Then the next flood brings more. Then the next. Then the next.

Now run that for millions of years.

IN REAL TERMS

Imagine a fine layer of dust settling on a table. One day's worth is nothing — you would wipe it off with a finger.

Now imagine nobody wipes that table for **forty million years**.

That is the plain of Punjab. It is not ordinary ground with soil on top. It is a colossal pile of ground-up Himalaya, dumped layer on layer on layer by rivers, until it filled everything in.

How deep is the pile? In places it goes down more than **six kilometres**.

Read that again. If you dug straight down in central Punjab, you would have to dig through six kilometres of river-dumped material before you reached solid bedrock. That is deeper than most of the Himalayas are tall.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

We know because people have drilled down and looked.

Oil and gas companies, and government water departments, have drilled boreholes thousands of metres into the plains of Punjab and Sindh. They pull up cores — long cylinders of the material they drilled through — and examine them. The cores show layer after layer of river sand, gravel and silt, with no bedrock, going down and down.

There is a second method too. Sound waves are fired into the ground and the echoes are timed. Sound bounces differently off loose sediment than off solid rock, so the echoes map out where the bedrock is even without drilling. Both methods agree.

3.4 — Why flat, deep and fine matters so much

Three properties, and each one is worth a lot.

It is flat. The plain of Punjab is one of the flattest large areas on Earth. You can travel two hundred kilometres and barely change height. Flat land is easy to plough. Flat land is easy to irrigate — water will run wherever you dig a channel. Flat land is easy to build roads across, easy to move carts across, easy to move armies across. Every one of those matters later.

It is deep. In most of the world, soil is a thin skin — half a metre, maybe a metre, then rock. Farm it too hard for a few generations and it is finished. Punjab's soil is not a skin. It is kilometres thick. It can absorb enormous farming pressure and keep producing. This is a big part of why Punjab has been continuously farmed for over four thousand years without collapsing.

It is fine and fresh. Silt is not old worn-out dirt. It is freshly ground-up rock, and ground-up rock carries the minerals plants need. Every flood used to lay down a new coat of fertiliser, free of charge. And because the particles are so fine, the soil holds water instead of letting it drain straight through.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

There is an assumption buried in everything I have just told you, and it is a big one. It is this: **that geography explains history.**

The argument goes: good soil, so lots of food, so lots of people, so cities and armies and invaders. The land explains the story.

This idea is called **geographical determinism**, and it is genuinely useful. It is also genuinely dangerous, for two reasons.

First, it flattens people into objects. If the soil explains everything, then human choices explain nothing. But Guru Nanak's ideas did not come out of the silt. Ranjit Singh's decisions were not made by the river. The 1947 border was drawn by particular men in a particular room.

Second, it can be used to excuse anything. "Punjab was always going to be invaded — look at the geography." That sentence quietly removes responsibility from the people who actually did the invading, and from the people who actually failed to defend.

How to hold it properly: geography sets the board. It decides what is easy, what is hard, and what is likely. It does not play the game. Rich flat land next to a mountain pass makes invasion *likely*. It does not make any particular invasion happen. People do that.

Watch for this assumption in the rest of the series. I will use geography a lot. Every time I do, I am setting up the board, not moving the pieces.

3.5 — The one sentence this whole series rests on

If you take a single sentence out of Part 1, take this one:

Punjab is flat, deeply fertile land with year-round water, sitting directly behind the only easy way into India — and that combination is the reason for almost everything that happens in the next thirteen parts.

Unpack it and you get the whole story in advance:

- **Fertile land plus water equals surplus food.** More food than the farmers themselves eat.
- **Surplus food equals people who are not farmers.** If ten farmers can feed fifteen people, then five people are free to do something else: make pots, build walls, keep records, pray, fight.
- **People who are not farmers equals cities, priests, kings and armies.** This is the recipe for civilisation, and Punjab got one of the world's first.
- **Surplus also equals something worth stealing.** Nobody marches an army across a desert to rob people who have nothing.
- **And it sits behind the open door.** Anyone coming into India through the north-western passes arrives in Punjab first — rich, flat, and hard to defend because there is nothing to hide behind.

So Punjab gets both halves of the deal at once. It is one of the wealthiest agricultural regions in the world. It is also one of the most invaded places on Earth. Those two facts are not a coincidence. They are the same fact, seen from two sides.

REMEMBER THIS

Mountains force wet sea air upwards, the air cools, and the water falls out as **monsoon rain**. Melting snow tops the rivers up in the dry season.

Rivers grind the mountains into fine powder called **silt** and dump it on the plains, flood after flood, for millions of years. The pile is up to **six kilometres deep**.

That gives Punjab land that is **flat, endlessly deep, and constantly refreshed** — some of the best farmland on the planet.

Rich food-growing land right behind the main door into India. That is Punjab's blessing and Punjab's curse, and it is the same thing twice.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Five Rivers, One by One

Each river has its own character, its own old name, and its own set of famous events on its banks. Learn these five and large chunks of the rest of the series will suddenly make sense.

4.1 — The parent river: the Indus

Before the five, there is the one. The Indus is the river all the others belong to.

It begins in Tibet, near a mountain called Kailash, runs north-west through the high mountains, then swings around and comes down through Pakistan to the Arabian Sea. It is around 3,180 kilometres long.

Its Sanskrit name is **Sindhu**, which simply means "river" or "big water".

Now follow this chain, because it explains the name of an entire country and one of the world's great religions:

- The people of the land called the river **Sindhu**.
- The Persians next door could not make the "s" sound at the start of a word in that position, and said **Hindu** instead.
- To Persians, "Hindu" meant simply *the people who live beyond that river*. It was a geographical label, not a religion.
- The Greeks took the Persian word and turned it into **Indos**, then **India**.
- Centuries later, the word "Hindu" got attached to the religion of those people, and much later still, the people themselves adopted it for their own faith.

So "India" and "Hindu" are the same word, twice borrowed and twice changed, and both of them started out as the name of a river.

WORD BOX

Tributary: a smaller river that runs into a bigger one. All five Punjab rivers are tributaries of the Indus.

Confluence: the place where two rivers join. In Punjabi and Hindi this is often called a *sangam*. These spots were frequently holy places and frequently battle sites, for the same reason — everybody had to pass through them.

4.2 — The Jhelum (old name: Vitasta)

The most westerly of the five. It rises in Kashmir, runs through the Kashmir valley, and comes down into the plains.

Why it matters: in 326 BCE, Alexander the Great fought King Porus on the bank of this river. The Greeks called it the Hydaspes. It is the deepest Alexander ever got into India by fighting, and the battle is one of the most famous in Punjab's history. Part 4 covers it in full.

4.3 — The Chenab (old name: Asikni)

The biggest of the five by the amount of water it carries. It also rises in the mountains of Himachal Pradesh and flows down through Jammu into the plains of Pakistani Punjab.

The name is Persian again: **Chan-aab**, roughly "moon water". Its Sanskrit name Asikni means "the dark one".

Why it matters: it is the river of Punjabi love-poetry. The story of Sohni and Mahiwal — in which Sohni swims the river each night to meet her lover and drowns when her clay pot is swapped for an unbaked one — is set on the Chenab. When Punjabi folk songs say "the river", they very often mean this one.

4.4 — The Ravi (old names: Parushni, later Iravati)

The smallest of the five. It rises in Himachal Pradesh, runs past Lahore, and joins the Chenab.

Why it matters — enormously, for a small river:

- **Lahore** stands on it. Lahore has been the capital of Punjab, on and off, for a thousand years — under the Ghaznavids, the Mughals, Ranjit Singh, and the British.
- The very old Sanskrit hymns describe a **Battle of the Ten Kings** fought on the Parushni. If that memory is real, it is one of the oldest specific events remembered anywhere in South Asia. We look at it properly in Part 3.
- In 1929 the Indian National Congress declared full independence as its goal on the bank of the Ravi at Lahore.

4.5 — The Beas (old name: Vipasha)

Rises in Himachal Pradesh, runs entirely within India today, and joins the Sutlej.

Why it matters: this is the river where Alexander's story ends. After beating Porus, Alexander wanted to keep going east. On the bank of the Beas his soldiers refused. They had been marching for eight years. They had heard there were far larger armies and far larger elephants ahead. They stopped, and Alexander — who had never turned back from anything — turned back.

The Beas is therefore the eastern edge of the ancient Greek world. Not a border anyone drew. A border set by tired men saying no.

4.6 — The Sutlej (old name: Shatadru)

The longest of the five. Like the Indus, it starts in Tibet, near the same holy lake, then cuts through the Himalayas and comes out onto the plains.

Why it matters:

- Its Sanskrit name **Shatadru** means "flowing in a hundred branches" — a hint that this river has a long history of splitting and changing course. Hold that thought for section 4.8.
- It was the agreed border between Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Sikh Empire and British territory for around forty years. When British troops crossed it in 1845, the Anglo-Sikh Wars began.

- Today it carries some of the most disputed water in South Asia. Who gets Sutlej water — Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan — is a live political fight that has been running for over fifty years.

4.7 — The land between: doabs

Here is a piece of vocabulary that unlocks a lot of old documents.

WORD BOX

Doab: from Persian *do* (two) and *aab* (water). It means the strip of land lying between two rivers. Same *aab* as in Punjab.

Five rivers running roughly parallel create long strips of land between them. Each strip is a doab, and each has a name — usually made by gluing bits of the two river names together.

DOAB	LIES BETWEEN	NAME MADE FROM
Bist Jalandhar	Beas and Sutlej	Bi(as) + S(u)t(lej)
Bari	Beas and Ravi	Ba(as) + Ri(avi)
Rechna	Ravi and Chenab	Re(chna): Ra(vi) + Chna(b)
Chaj	Chenab and Jhelum	Ch(enab) + J(helum)
Sindh Sagar	Jhelum and Indus	Sindh (Indus) + Sagar (sea)

These were not just geography words. They were administrative units — tax districts, army recruiting areas, canal zones. Mughal and British records are full of them. Amritsar and Lahore are both in the Bari Doab. That is why they were natural rivals and natural partners.

4.8 — The river that disappeared

Now something genuinely strange, which I am flagging here and will settle in Part 2.

Look at a satellite photo of the dry country of Haryana, Rajasthan and Cholistan in Pakistan. You can see the ghost of a very large river bed. Wide. Long. Running roughly parallel to the Indus, down to the sea. And bone dry, except for a seasonal trickle called the Ghaggar in India and the Hakra in Pakistan.

A big river ran there once. Then it stopped.

Now add two more facts:

- The oldest Sanskrit texts describe a mighty river called the **Saraswati**, and place it roughly in this area. They call it the greatest of rivers. Later texts describe it as disappearing into the sand.
- A large number of Harappan settlements — hundreds of them — sit along this dry channel, not along the Indus.

That combination has produced one of the biggest arguments in South Asian history. It involves geology, archaeology, satellite imaging, ancient poetry and modern politics all at once. It is far too important to squeeze in here.

Full treatment in Part 2, with both sides laid out properly. For now, just carry this: there may have been a sixth river, and it may have died.

REMEMBER THIS

All five rivers feed the **Indus**. From Sindhu came Hindu, and from Hindu came India — a country and a religion both named after this river.

Jhelum — Alexander's battle. **Chenab** — biggest, river of the love stories. **Ravi** — smallest, but Lahore is on it. **Beas** — where Alexander's army said no. **Sutlej** — longest, and the border that started the Anglo-Sikh Wars.

The strip of land between two rivers is a **doab**, and those strips were the real working units of government for centuries.

And there may once have been a sixth river that dried up and vanished. That is Part 2's problem.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ice, Heat, and Rivers That Move

The map of Punjab has never held still. Rivers wander. The climate swings between wet and dry. People had to move when the water moved — and cities died when it moved too far.

5.1 — What an ice age actually is

An ice age is not a world of permanent blizzards. It is simply a long stretch — tens of thousands of years — when the Earth is a few degrees colder than usual.

A few degrees does not sound like much. Look what it does.

When the world cools, more snow falls in winter than melts in summer. The leftover snow piles up. Year after year the pile deepens, and the weight compresses the bottom into solid ice. Do that for thousands of years and you get an ice sheet kilometres thick, spreading outwards under its own weight.

Now here is the part people miss. **All that water came out of the sea.** Water goes sea → cloud → snow → ice sheet, and it stays locked in the ice sheet. So as the ice grows, the sea drops.

IN REAL TERMS

At the peak of the last cold period, about 20,000 years ago, the sea was around **120 metres lower** than it is now.

That is roughly the height of a 35-storey building — taken off the top of every ocean on Earth.

Land that is now under water was dry. Sri Lanka was joined to India. You could walk to it. The Persian Gulf was largely a river valley with people probably living in it. The coastline of Gujarat and Sindh was far out to sea from where it is now.

This is why early coastal archaeology is so thin. A lot of it is under a hundred metres of seawater.

5.2 — Punjab during the cold periods

Punjab itself was never buried under an ice sheet. It is too far south and too low. But it changed a great deal.

Colder. Not freezing, but noticeably cooler.

Much drier. This is the key one. A cooler ocean puts less water into the air, which means a weaker monsoon. Weaker monsoon means less rain. Some periods were dry enough that grassland turned to near-desert and sand dunes advanced across land that is farmland today.

Bigger glaciers up top, so different river behaviour. More water locked as ice in the mountains, released in sudden melt surges rather than steady flow.

And then it reversed. Warm periods brought a stronger monsoon, heavier rain, rivers running full, forest and grassland spreading back over the sand.

This swinging happened over and over. Cold-dry, warm-wet, cold-dry, warm-wet.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Pollen. Plants shed pollen. Pollen grains have tough shells and survive for tens of thousands of years in the mud at the bottom of lakes. Drill a core out of a lake bed, and each layer holds the pollen of the plants growing when that layer formed. Lots of grass pollen means dry grassland. Lots of tree pollen means wetter forest. You are reading the weather report of 30,000 years ago.

Sand dunes. Old dunes are still there in Rajasthan and southern Punjab, now covered in vegetation and farms. Their shape shows which way the wind blew. Grains of sand can also be dated — a technique called luminescence dating works out how long a grain has been buried away from sunlight. So we can date when the desert was on the move.

Cave stone. Water dripping in a cave leaves stone deposits that grow in rings, like tree rings. Thick ring, wet year. Thin ring, dry year. And the chemistry of each ring records temperature.

Three completely separate methods. They agree with each other. That agreement is why this is treated as solid.

5.3 — Rivers do not stay where you put them

Now something that will matter more than you expect.

A river on flat land is unstable. Here is why.

A river carrying silt drops some of it on its own bed. So the bed slowly rises. As the bed rises, the river builds up its own banks with silt too. Eventually the river is running along the top of a low ridge that it built itself — higher than the land on either side.

That cannot last. One big flood, the bank breaks, and the water pours out sideways into the lower land beside it. The river abandons its old bed and takes a new route, sometimes tens of kilometres away.

IN REAL TERMS

Pour a thin stream of honey onto a flat plate.

It runs a certain way. But as it flows it builds its own little raised channel out of honey. Keep pouring and eventually the channel gives way, and the honey suddenly floods off in a new direction.

Rivers on the Punjab plain do exactly this. It is called **avulsion**. It is normal, not a disaster of nature.

It is a disaster if you happen to live there.

Imagine your town has stood on a river for two hundred years. The wells, the fields, the boats, the trade route, the drinking water — all of it built around a river that is a short walk away. One flood season the river moves fifteen kilometres east.

Your town is still standing. It is simply now in a dry place, and it is finished.

5.4 — Why this is one of the most important ideas in the series

Keep this chapter in your head, because it comes back three separate times:

- **Part 2 — the end of the Harappan cities.** One of the leading explanations for why the great Indus cities declined is a long dry spell combined with rivers changing course. Not an invasion. Not a war. Just the water moving.
- **Part 4 and the "lost river".** If the Saraswati was real, the most likely way it died is that its mountain sources were captured by neighbouring rivers, and it slowly starved.
- **Every part after that — the fight over water.** Punjab's rivers have been diverted, dammed and argued over continuously. Mughal canals. British canal colonies, the biggest engineering scheme in the empire. The Indus Waters Treaty splitting the rivers between India and Pakistan in 1960. The Sutlej-Yamuna Link canal, still unbuilt and still poisoning politics today. The Punjab groundwater crisis right now.

Every one of those is the same story with different clothes on: **the water moves, and people fight about it.**

REMEMBER THIS

An **ice age** is just a long cold stretch. It locks seawater up as ice, so the sea drops — by about 120 metres last time.

Punjab was never under ice, but it swung between **cold-and-dry** and **warm-and-wet**, over and over.

Rivers on flat land **build up their own beds and then jump sideways**. A city can be killed without a single enemy arriving.

Punjab's history is not just about who ruled it. It is about where the water was that year — and that has never stopped being true.

CHAPTER SIX

The First People

Somebody was here long before Punjabi, long before Sanskrit, long before anyone had a name for anything. We have their rubbish but not their bodies — and working out how old their rubbish is has caused one of archaeology's longest arguments.

6.1 — Where the oldest evidence is

If you want the earliest human traces in Punjab, you go to a place called the **Potohar Plateau**. It is in northern Pakistan, between the Indus and the Jhelum, near Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

It is not flat plain. It is rolling, broken country cut through by deep gullies. Running across it is a river called the **Soan**.

Why here, and not in the rich flat farmland to the south? Two reasons, and the second one is important.

One: the plateau is old, high ground. It was not buried under kilometres of new silt.

Two — and this is the crucial one: the gullies have cut down through the old layers and exposed them. Archaeologists can walk along a gully wall and look at ground that formed hundreds of thousands of years ago.

On the flat plain, that same material is sitting under kilometres of mud where nobody will ever reach it.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

This leads straight to a trap that catches almost everybody, so learn it now and use it for the rest of the series.

People look at a map of ancient sites and say: "look, they clustered here." But the map does not show where ancient people lived. **It shows where we have been able to look.**

Sites turn up where the ground has been cut open, where somebody thought to dig, where a road-building crew hit something, where the land was not built over, where the country was peaceful enough to allow an excavation.

So the real statement is not "early humans lived in the Soan valley". It is "**the Soan valley is where we can still see the traces**". Those are very different claims. People may well have been living all over the plains too — but the evidence for that is under six kilometres of silt.

This has a name: **survivorship bias**. Judging what existed by looking only at what survived. It is probably the single most common mistake in reading archaeology, and it turns up again in Part 2 and Part 3.

6.2 — What was found

In the 1930s, two researchers — Hellmut de Terra and Thomas Paterson — surveyed the Soan valley and found large numbers of worked stones. They named the tool style the **Soanian** culture.

These are not the neat, symmetrical hand-axes you see in museum posters. Soanian tools are simpler:

- **Choppers.** A river pebble with several flakes knocked off one edge to make a rough cutting edge. Fits in the palm.
- **Chopping tools.** The same idea, worked from both sides.
- **Flakes.** The sharp pieces knocked off, used as small blades.
- **Scrapers.** Flakes with a blunted edge, for cleaning hides or working wood.

The raw material is almost always quartzite pebbles from the river gravels — hard, and it fractures with a sharp edge.

IN REAL TERMS

A Soanian chopper looks, to an untrained eye, like a rock that has been hit a few times with another rock.

That is because it is a rock that has been hit a few times with another rock.

But do not let that fool you into thinking it is easy. Try it. Hitting a stone so it breaks where you want, at the angle you want, leaving a usable edge, is a real skill. Modern archaeologists train for months to do it properly. And these tools were made, to the same pattern, for hundreds of thousands of years — far longer than any human tradition since. That is not luck. It is knowledge, taught and passed down.

6.3 — How do you tell a tool from a broken rock?

Fair question, and it is the heart of the argument coming up in 6.4. A river bashes rocks together constantly. Rocks split in frost. Rocks fall off cliffs. Any of that can leave a sharp-edged rock.

So how does anyone claim a particular stone was shaped by a person?

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

There are physical signs that a deliberate hard strike leaves and random damage usually does not.

The bulb of percussion. When you strike stone sharply at the right angle, the flake that comes off has a small swelling just below the point of impact, on the inside face. It is a shock wave frozen into the stone. Random tumbling almost never produces it.

Repeated strikes from one platform. A toolmaker picks a flat surface and works along it, taking flake after flake from the same edge. That leaves an orderly row of scars all facing the same way. A river knocks a rock about randomly, so damage is scattered.

The flakes are missing — or present. If a stone was worked by a person on that spot, the little waste chips should be lying nearby, and they should fit back on. Archaeologists literally reassemble them, like a jigsaw. If the flakes fit back together, somebody sat there and made that tool. That is about as close to watching it happen as you can get.

The wrong stone in the wrong place. A quartzite tool lying in a place with no quartzite means somebody carried it there.

Wear on the edge. Under a microscope, an edge that has cut meat, hide or wood shows a different polish and micro-chipping pattern than an edge that has just sat in gravel.

WORD BOX

Artefact: an object made or used by a person.

Geofact: an object that *looks* made by a person but was actually shaped by nature. Telling artefacts from geofacts is one of the hardest problems in early archaeology — and the fight over it is the whole of the next section.

6.4 — The big argument: how old is all this?

Here is where it gets heated.

THE ARGUMENT — HOW OLD ARE THE EARLIEST PUNJAB TOOLS?

At a site called **Riwat** on the Potohar Plateau, researchers reported worked stones from layers dated to around **1.9 million years ago**. If that is right, it is one of the oldest signs of human presence anywhere outside Africa, and it would put the Punjab region at the very front of the human story.

Other Soanian material has been dated across an enormous range — some claims run from around 500,000 years ago down to 100,000 or less. There is no single agreed number for "the Soanian".

The early camp says...

The stones at Riwat show genuine signs of deliberate working — proper flake scars, correct striking angles, not random damage. The geological layers containing them have been dated by more than one method. Early humans are known to have spread out of Africa a long time ago, so finding them in South Asia by two million years ago is not far-fetched. The find should be taken at face value.

The cautious camp says...

Three serious problems.

- 1. The pieces are few and simple.** A handful of crudely worked stones is a very thin base for such a huge claim. Nature does sometimes fake this.
- 2. Water moves things.** These stones come from river gravels. A river can wash a tool out of a young layer and redeposit it in an old one, or bury an old layer's tools with new material. Dating the layer does not automatically date the object in it.
- 3. No bones.** Not one human or near-human skeleton has been found with them. We have the alleged rubbish and none of the alleged people.

Where things stand: Most specialists accept humans were in the Potohar region **very early** — hundreds of thousands of years at least. The specific claim of 1.9 million years at Riwat is treated with real caution and is not settled.

What would end the argument: tools found *sealed* in an undisturbed layer that water clearly has not moved, dated by two independent methods — and ideally with a bone. Until somebody finds that, this stays open.

And notice the honest position here. "We do not yet know" is a legitimate answer. It is not a failure. Beware anybody — on either side — who tells you this is definitely settled.

6.5 — Who were they?

Almost certainly not people like us.

At the time these earliest tools were made, our own species — *Homo sapiens* — did not exist yet. We appear roughly 300,000 years ago, in Africa.

The most likely toolmaker is an earlier human species called **Homo erectus**, which spread out of Africa a very long time ago and reached as far as Java and China. Fossils of *Homo erectus* have been found in Java and in China, and the Punjab region lies on a very plausible route between Africa and both.

Homo erectus stood upright, was roughly our height, had a brain around two-thirds the size of ours, made stone tools, and probably used fire. Not us. But not an ape either. Something in between, and successful — the species lasted well over a million years, which is far longer than ours has managed so far.

6.6 — The missing bodies

Be clear about the size of this gap.

No early human fossil has ever been found in Punjab. Not one skull. Not one thigh bone. Not one tooth.

We have thousands of stone tools and zero people.

Why? Bones are fragile. They need very particular conditions to survive — quick burial, the right chemistry in the soil, no acid, no scavengers, no repeated wetting and drying. In hot, seasonally wet, acidic, river-churned ground, bone dissolves. Stone does not care.

So our picture of these people is built entirely out of what they dropped, not what they were.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Because stone survives and almost nothing else does, we quietly assume these people's lives were mostly about stone.

They were not. Think about everything they must have had that has left no trace at all:

- Wooden spears, digging sticks, clubs — all rotted.
- Baskets, string, netting, carrying bags made of plant fibre — all rotted.
- Animal skins for warmth and shelter — rotted.
- Language. Songs. Names. Stories. Rules about who may marry whom.
- Knowledge of which plants heal and which kill — knowledge that took generations to build and would take a modern person years to learn.

We call this the **Stone Age**. That name is not a description of their lives. It is a description of *what happened to survive*. If wood survived and stone rotted, we would call it the Wood Age and the museums would look completely different.

Whenever you read about early people, keep asking: what is missing from this picture simply because it rotted?

REMEMBER THIS

The oldest human traces in Punjab are stone tools from the **Soan valley** on the Potohar Plateau, in northern Pakistan.

They are found there mainly because **gullies have cut the old ground open** — not necessarily because that is where people lived most. On the plains, that evidence is buried beyond reach.

The tools are simple choppers and flakes made from river pebbles. Making them well is a real, taught skill.

The oldest claimed date is about **1.9 million years** at Riwat, and it is genuinely disputed. Very early is agreed; exactly how early is not.

We have their tools and not one of their bones. Everything we say about them is guessed from their rubbish.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Long Middle

Between the first crude choppers and the first farmers lies an almost unimaginable stretch of time. Tools got better. Our own species arrived. And a volcano on the other side of the world may — or may not — have nearly wiped everyone out.

7.1 — The scale of the gap

Chapter 6 ended with people making simple choppers. Chapter 8 begins with people planting wheat.

Between those two chapters sits somewhere between several hundred thousand and nearly two million years, depending on which date you accept for the Soanian.

IN REAL TERMS

All of recorded history — from the first writing to today — is about **5,000 years**.

The gap covered by this one short chapter is, at minimum, **a hundred times longer than that**. Possibly four hundred times longer.

We can write thirteen more parts about the last 5,000 years and one thin chapter about this. Not because less happened. Because almost nothing survived to tell us about it.

7.2 — Tools slowly get better

Archaeologists divide the Stone Age into three stretches, named for how the tools were made. Ignore the names if you like; the pattern is what matters.

STAGE	ROUGHLY WHEN	WHAT CHANGED
Lower Palaeolithic	Earliest, down to about 300,000 years ago	Choppers and rough flakes. The Soanian sits here. The whole toolkit is a handful of shapes.
Middle Palaeolithic	About 300,000 – 40,000 years ago	Big jump. The stone core is <i>prepared</i> in advance so the flake comes off in a planned shape. Tools become specialised. Points that could be fixed to a spear appear.
Upper Palaeolithic	About 40,000 – 12,000 years ago	Long thin blades, bone and antler worked into tools, needles, fine points. Art and ornament appear. Toolkits become varied and regional.

WORD BOX

Palaeolithic: Greek for "old stone". The long period when people made tools by chipping stone and lived by hunting and gathering. It is split into Lower (oldest), Middle, and Upper (most recent) — confusingly, "lower" means older, because in the ground older layers lie underneath.

The Middle Palaeolithic jump deserves a moment, because it is bigger than it sounds.

Making a chopper means: hit the rock, get an edge. Making a prepared-core tool means: shape the whole block first, carefully, taking off flakes you do not want, purely so that the *final* flake — the one you actually wanted all along — comes off in exactly the right shape.

That requires holding a picture of the finished object in your head through a dozen steps that each make things temporarily worse. That is planning. It is the same mental skill as saving money, or building a house from a design.

Punjab has Middle and Upper Palaeolithic material too — on the Potohar terraces, and at **Sanghao Cave** in the hills to the north-west, where prepared-core tools were found in deep layers inside a cave.

7.3 — Our own species arrives

Homo sapiens — us — appears in Africa around 300,000 years ago. Modern humans spread out of Africa in more than one wave, with the major successful expansion usually placed somewhere between about 70,000 and 50,000 years ago.

Anyone walking from Africa towards Australia or East Asia by a southern coastal route, or by a northern inland route, passes through or near this region. Punjab is not a destination in that story. It is a corridor.

That word — corridor — is worth holding onto. It describes Punjab's position for the next four thousand years just as well as it describes it here.

7.4 — The super-volcano argument

THE ARGUMENT — DID TOBA NEARLY WIPE OUT HUMANITY?

About 74,000 years ago, a volcano called **Toba**, on the island of Sumatra in Indonesia, erupted. It was one of the largest eruptions of the last two million years. It threw out so much ash that a layer of Toba ash can be found across India, in the Bay of Bengal, and in the seabed thousands of kilometres away.

The question is what it did to the people living under that ash cloud — including anyone in South Asia.

The catastrophe camp says...

An eruption that size would fill the upper air with ash and gas, blocking sunlight for years. That means a sudden global cold snap — a "volcanic winter" — killing plants, then the animals that eat plants, then the people who eat both. Some researchers have argued this crashed the human population to a few thousand individuals worldwide, nearly ending our species. They point to genetic evidence suggesting modern humans passed through a period of very low numbers at some point.

The "it was survivable" camp says...

Dig into the ash layer and look. At **Jwalapuram** in southern India, stone tools were found both directly below and directly above the Toba ash — and they look broadly similar. Somebody was living there before the eruption, and somebody was living there after it, making the same kinds of tools. Climate modelling has also been revised downward: several studies suggest the cooling was smaller and shorter than first claimed. And the genetic bottleneck, if real, can be dated to other periods and explained by other causes.

Where things stand: the field has moved noticeably towards the second camp over the last twenty years. Toba was gigantic and certainly caused serious disruption, but the "almost wiped out humanity" version is now a minority position rather than the standard account.

What would settle it: more sites with clear human occupation immediately above and below the ash layer, especially in South Asia, plus better genetic dating of population crashes.

Why I have included this: partly because it directly concerns this region, but mostly because it is a beautiful example of how science actually works. A dramatic claim was made. Evidence was gathered. The claim was largely walked back. Changing your mind when the evidence changes is not weakness — it is the entire point. Keep that in mind for the far more emotional arguments in later parts.

REMEMBER THIS

Between the first choppers and the first farms lies an **enormous** stretch of time — at least a hundred times longer than all recorded history.

Tools improved in stages, and the biggest jump was learning to **prepare a stone in advance** so the final flake came off in a planned shape. That is forward planning, and it is a mental leap.

Modern humans reached this region some tens of thousands of years ago, passing through. **Punjab was a corridor then, and it stayed a corridor.**

The **Toba** eruption of 74,000 years ago was once thought to have nearly ended humanity. Better evidence has largely softened that claim.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Farming: The Biggest Change in Human History

Everything in the remaining thirteen parts of this series — kings, temples, taxes, armies, castes, wars, borders — grows out of one change. People stopped chasing food and started growing it.

8.1 — Life before farming

For almost all of human existence, people got food by finding it. Hunting animals. Catching fish. Digging roots. Picking fruit, seeds and nuts.

That life has certain unavoidable rules built into it:

- **You must move.** Eat everything in one place and you have to walk to the next.
- **You must travel light.** Everything you own, you carry. So you own almost nothing.
- **You cannot store much.** Nothing keeps, and you cannot carry it anyway.
- **Your group must stay small.** A patch of wild land only feeds so many. Groups of twenty to fifty are typical.
- **Nobody can get very rich.** Wealth is stuff, stuff must be carried, so nobody accumulates much more than anyone else.
- **Nobody can boss you very hard.** If you dislike the big man in your group, you walk away and join another. That is a real and constant check on power.

That last point is worth pausing on. In a mobile foraging life, permanent bullying is difficult, because the victim's exit is always available. That changes completely with farming, and not for the better.

8.2 — The change begins nearby: Mehrgarh

The earliest farming village we know of in this whole region is not in Punjab. It is just to the west, at the foot of the Bolan Pass in Balochistan, in Pakistan. It is called **Mehrgarh**.

People were living there from around **7000 BCE** — that is roughly nine thousand years ago — and continued for thousands of years.

What was found there:

- **Mud-brick houses.** Not tents. Not caves. Rectangular buildings with small rooms, some of which look like storage.
- **Wheat and barley** — cultivated, not wild.
- **Goats, sheep and cattle** — kept, not hunted. The bones show it: over the centuries the animals get smaller and the age-at-death pattern changes, both classic signs of herding rather than hunting.
- **Burials with grave goods** — beads, tools, and in some cases animals buried with the dead.
- **Teeth with holes drilled in them.** Yes, really. Several individuals show neat holes drilled into the biting surface of molars, made with a fine stone drill, almost certainly to treat decay. This is dentistry, around nine thousand years ago, in this region. It is one of the earliest examples anywhere in the world.

IN REAL TERMS

Sit with the dentistry for a second.

Nine thousand years ago, in a mud-brick village, somebody had a bad tooth. Somebody else knew that drilling it out would help. They had a tool fine enough to do it, a technique they had presumably learned from someone before them, and enough trust between them for the patient to sit still while it happened.

That is not "primitive people". That is medicine, teaching, tool-making and trust, all in one hole in one tooth.

8.3 — Where did farming come from?

THE ARGUMENT — DID FARMING ARRIVE FROM OUTSIDE, OR START HERE?

Farming also began around the same era in the Fertile Crescent — modern Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Iran. So did South Asian farming get carried in from there, or did people here work it out for themselves?

The "it came from outside" camp says...

Wheat and barley are not native to South Asia. Their wild ancestors grow in the Near East. Sheep and goats also have their wild ancestors there, not here. If your crops and your animals all originate a thousand miles west, the obvious explanation is that the whole farming package travelled east — carried by migrating people, or passed village to village along trade routes.

The "it started here too" camp says...

Look closer and the picture is mixed. **Zebu cattle** — the humped Indian cattle — were domesticated locally from local wild cattle, not imported. That is now well supported by genetics. Some evidence points to local varieties of barley being brought under cultivation independently. And Mehrgarh's early levels show local hunting and gathering shading gradually into farming, rather than a sudden arrival of a complete foreign package.

Where things stand: most researchers now hold a mixed view, and it is probably right. Some elements came from the west — likely wheat, likely sheep and goats. Some were local — certainly zebu cattle, probably some plants. It was not one event. It was a long, messy, two-way process over centuries.

Why this argument gets heated: it is not really about barley. It is a warm-up for the far bigger fight in Part 3 over whether the Aryans migrated in. Any claim that something important came from outside South Asia, or did not, gets pulled into modern politics about who is native and who is foreign. Watch for that. It is worth learning to spot the difference between an argument about evidence and an argument about identity wearing evidence as a costume.

8.4 — What farming actually did to people

Now the important part. Farming did not just change what people ate. It rebuilt human society from the ground up. Follow the chain slowly — each step causes the next.

Step 1. You must stay put. You planted in spring; you must be there in autumn. So people settle. Permanent villages appear.

Step 2. You can own heavy things. Nobody has to carry anything anymore. So: pots, grindstones, furniture, looms, storage jars. Possessions multiply.

Step 3. You produce a surplus, and you store it. A good harvest gives more than you eat. Grain keeps for months in a sealed jar. This is the hinge of the whole thing.

Step 4. More food means more children. Foragers space births widely — you cannot carry two babies. Settled farmers do not have that limit, and grain can be mashed to feed an infant early. Populations grow, slowly at first, then fast.

Step 5. Some people stop farming. If ten farmers grow enough for fifteen, five people are free. Those five become potters, weavers, builders, priests, record-keepers, soldiers. This is where every specialised job in history comes from.

Step 6. Stored grain must be guarded — and guarding turns into ruling. A full granary is worth stealing. So you need protection. The people who protect the store end up controlling the store. Control of the store is control of everybody who needs to eat from it.

Step 7. Inequality becomes permanent. Land can be owned. Land can be inherited. Grain can be lent at interest. Now some families are permanently richer than others, and their children start ahead. And unlike a foraging camp, **you cannot walk away** — your fields are here, and the next valley belongs to someone else.

Step 8. Writing. Somebody has to keep track of who owes what. The earliest writing anywhere in the world is not poetry or prayer. It is accounts — lists of grain, animals and debts.

Step 9. Cities, kings, armies, taxes, empires. All of it grows out of step 3.

IN REAL TERMS

You can hold the whole of civilisation in one sentence: **a jar of grain that lasts longer than a meal.**

That jar is the difference between a group of forty people who all do the same thing, and a city of forty thousand people who each do one thing and depend on everyone else.

8.5 — Was farming actually a good idea?

THE ARGUMENT — WAS FARMING A MISTAKE?

This sounds absurd. Farming led to everything we have. But a serious body of research argues that for the individual person alive at the time, it was a clear downgrade.

The "it made life worse" camp says...

Skeletons show it. After the switch to farming, in region after region, people got **shorter**. Their teeth got **worse** — a grain-heavy diet rots teeth. Signs of **malnutrition** increase, because a foraged diet has dozens of foods while a farming diet leans on two or three. New **diseases** appear, because people now live packed together in filth alongside animals — most human infectious diseases came to us from livestock. **Famine** becomes possible for the first time: if your one crop fails, you starve, whereas a forager just eats something else. And the work is harder — studies of surviving foraging groups suggest they spent fewer hours getting food than early farmers did.

The "it was still worth it" camp says...

Farming won, and it won everywhere, independently, again and again. That is a strong signal. Farming supports far more people per acre — so even if each individual is slightly worse off, ten times as many of them get to exist, and a farming society will simply out-number and out-last a foraging one. It also allows storage against a bad year, permanent shelter, care for the sick and elderly who can no longer travel, and eventually everything from medicine to literature. And once your neighbours farm, you do not really get a choice.

Where things stand: both are right, because they are answering different questions. **For the individual, early farming was probably worse.** Shorter, sicker, harder-working. **For the society, farming was overwhelmingly stronger.** More people, more power, more permanence.

That gap between "good for the group" and "good for the person" is one of the most useful ideas you can carry into the rest of this series. It comes back with empires, with armies, with the British canal colonies, and with the Green Revolution in the 1960s — which raised Punjab's total output enormously while leaving many individual farmers in debt and the water table collapsing.

Same shape, five thousand years apart.

REMEMBER THIS

Farming began in this region around **7000 BCE**, and the best-known early village is **Mehrgarh**, just west of Punjab near the Bolan Pass.

Some of the package came from the west (wheat, sheep, goats) and some was local (zebu cattle). It was **mixed**, not one clean arrival.

Farming's real effect was **stored surplus food**. That produced non-farmers, which produced specialists, rulers, writing, taxes, cities and armies.

For individuals it may well have been a step down — shorter, sicker, harder work. For societies it was unbeatable.

Every king, priest, tax collector and general in the next thirteen parts exists because somebody worked out how to keep grain in a jar.

CHAPTER NINE

At the Door of the First Cities

Part 1 ends just before the curtain goes up. Here is the last stretch of ground, and what is waiting on the other side of it.

9.1 — Farming spreads onto the plains

After Mehrgarh, farming villages begin appearing east and north — down out of the hills and onto the great flat plain we spent Chapter 3 building.

Archaeologists find them by their pottery. Different groups made pots in different styles, and pottery is nearly indestructible, so broken pot fragments are the main way early villages are identified and dated.

One early style found across Punjab, Haryana and Cholistan is called **Hakra ware** — named after the dry Hakra channel it clusters along. Villages using it date to roughly 4000–3000 BCE. Another well-known early site is **Kalibangan** in Rajasthan, where archaeologists found something remarkable: a ploughed field, with the furrow marks still visible in the ground, from around 2800 BCE. It is one of the oldest ploughed fields ever found anywhere.

These villages are small — a few hundred people at most. Mud brick, grain storage, cattle, pottery, some copper. Nothing that looks like a city yet.

And then, over a few centuries, something extraordinary happens.

9.2 — What is waiting in Part 2

Those villages grow into one of the first great civilisations on Earth — larger in area than ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia combined.

Cities appear with straight streets laid out on a grid. Standardised bricks, made to the same proportions across hundreds of kilometres. Covered drains running under the streets, with private bathrooms in ordinary houses connected to them — better

sanitation than most European cities had four thousand years later. A system of weights so precise and so consistent that it must have been enforced by someone. A writing system that, despite a century of effort, **nobody has ever read.**

And no palaces. No royal tombs stuffed with gold. No obvious kings. No temples anyone can be sure about. Very little sign of war.

That is Harappa. And roughly seven hundred years after it rose, it came apart, and nobody is certain why.

REMEMBER THIS

Farming spread from the hills onto the plains, and small mud-brick villages appeared across Punjab and along the dry Hakra channel.

At **Kalibangan**, a ploughed field from about 2800 BCE has survived with its furrows intact.

Out of those villages grew the Indus Valley Civilisation — and that is Part 2.

CHAPTER TEN

An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

Most history books only tell you what is known. That gives a false impression of how solid the picture is. Here is the other half.

Everything in Part 1 sits somewhere on a scale from "certain" to "educated guess". Here is where the gaps are.

Things we genuinely do not know

- **Exactly when people first reached Punjab.** The range of serious estimates spans well over a million years. That is not a small margin of error.
- **Which human species made the earliest tools.** *Homo erectus* is the best guess. We have no bones from Punjab to confirm it.
- **What any of these people looked like, spoke, believed, or called themselves.** Nothing. Total blank.
- **Whether the earliest Riwat "tools" are tools at all.** Still contested.
- **How many people lived here at any point before farming.** Estimates are guesses built on modern comparisons.
- **What happened on the plains themselves.** Buried under kilometres of silt. Probably permanently out of reach.
- **Whether farming reached Punjab by people moving in, by ideas spreading, or both.** Probably both, in proportions unknown.
- **How much of the coastal early human story is simply drowned.** Sea level rose 120 metres. Whatever was on the old coast is under water.

Things that are solid

- The Earth is about 4.5 billion years old, and India collided with Asia around 50 million years ago. Multiple independent methods agree.
- The Himalayas are the product of that collision and are still rising. We measure it directly.
- The Punjab plain is river-deposited sediment, kilometres deep. Confirmed by drilling.
- Humans were in the Potohar region very early — hundreds of thousands of years, at minimum.
- Farming was established at Mehrgarh by around 7000 BCE.
- Zebu cattle were domesticated locally in this region.
- The climate swung repeatedly between wetter and drier. Confirmed by pollen, dunes and cave deposits independently.

ONE LAST HIDDEN ASSUMPTION — ABOUT HISTORY ITSELF

Every history book, including this one, quietly assumes **that a story can be told at all** — that events connect, one thing leads to another, and it adds up to something with a shape.

But that shape is put there by the person writing. The past did not happen as a story. It happened as billions of separate moments, almost all of which left no trace whatsoever.

When I write "the rich soil drew invaders", I am linking two things that are separated by thousands of years and thousands of individual human decisions. The link is my interpretation. It is a reasonable one. It is not a fact in the way that the depth of the sediment is a fact.

So read this series — and every other history — with one question always running: is this the evidence, or is this somebody joining the dots?

I will try to keep those two things clearly separated. When I am joining dots, I will say so.

REFERENCE

Timeline of Part 1

Dates before about 3000 BCE are estimates. The further back, the wider the margin.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
c. 4,500 million years ago	The Earth forms.
c. 200 million years ago	Most land is joined in super-continent. India sits beside Africa, Madagascar, Antarctica and Australia.
c. 130 million years ago	India breaks away and begins moving north as an island.
c. 50 million years ago	India collides with Asia. The Himalayas begin rising. The Tethys Sea starts closing.
c. 50 million years ago → now	Rivers grind the mountains down and dump silt on the plains, building the Punjab plain up to 6 km deep.
c. 2 million – 500,000 years ago	Earliest claimed stone tools in the Soan valley (Riwat). Date strongly disputed. Likely maker: <i>Homo erectus</i> .
c. 300,000 – 40,000 years ago	Middle Palaeolithic. Prepared-core tools. Sanghao Cave and the Potohar terraces.
c. 300,000 years ago	<i>Homo sapiens</i> — us — appears in Africa.
c. 74,000 years ago	The Toba super-eruption in Sumatra. Ash falls across South Asia. Impact on people disputed.
c. 70,000 – 50,000 years ago	Main expansion of modern humans out of Africa. This region lies on the route.
c. 40,000 – 12,000 years ago	Upper Palaeolithic. Blades, bone tools, ornament.
c. 20,000 years ago	Coldest point of the last ice age. Sea level about 120 m lower. Punjab cold and dry, weak monsoon.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
c. 12,000 years ago	The world warms. Monsoon strengthens. Rivers run full.
c. 7000 BCE	Mehrgarh: mud-brick houses, wheat, barley, herded goats and sheep. Farming is established.
c. 5500 BCE	Dentistry at Mehrgarh — drilled molars. Pottery in use.
c. 4000 – 3000 BCE	Hakra ware villages spread across Punjab, Haryana and Cholistan.
c. 2800 BCE	Ploughed field at Kalibangan — furrows still visible today.
c. 2600 BCE	The Indus cities rise. Part 2 begins here.

REFERENCE

Glossary

Every hard word used in Part 1, in plain English.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Artefact	An object made or used by a person.
Assumption	Something believed true and built on, without being checked.
Avulsion	When a river suddenly abandons its channel and takes a new route.
BCE / CE	Before Common Era / Common Era. Same as BC and AD.
Confluence	Where two rivers join. In Hindi and Punjabi, a <i>sangam</i> .
Doab	The land between two rivers. From Persian: <i>do</i> (two) + <i>aab</i> (water).
Domestication	Changing a wild plant or animal, over generations, into one that depends on people and is useful to them.
Erosion	Rock and soil being worn away and carried off by water, wind or ice.
Geofact	An object that looks man-made but was shaped by nature.
Geological determinism	The belief that geography explains history. Useful, but easily overdone.
Gondwana	The ancient southern super-continent that India broke away from.
Hakra ware	An early pottery style found across Punjab and the dry Hakra channel, roughly 4000–3000 BCE.
Homo erectus	An earlier human species, before us. Upright, tool-making, probably fire-using. The likely maker of the Soan tools.
Homo sapiens	Us. Modern humans. Around 300,000 years old as a species.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Ice age	A long cold stretch when ice sheets grow and sea level falls.
Monsoon	A seasonal wind that reverses direction, bringing heavy rain in summer.
Palaeolithic	"Old stone" — the long era of chipped stone tools and hunting and gathering.
Plate tectonics	The idea that Earth's hard shell is cracked into moving pieces, which explains mountains, earthquakes and volcanoes.
Potohar Plateau	The upland area of northern Pakistan where Punjab's oldest tools are found.
Sediment	Material carried by water and dropped somewhere else — gravel, sand, silt.
Silt	Very fine ground-up rock, finer than sand. What makes Punjab's soil rich.
Soanian	The stone tool style of the Soan valley — choppers and flakes made from river pebbles.
Surplus	More food than you need right now. The starting point of civilisation.
Survivorship bias	Judging what existed by looking only at what happened to survive.
Tethys Sea	The ocean that used to lie between India and Asia. Squeezed out of existence by the collision.
Tributary	A smaller river running into a bigger one.
Uniformitarianism	The assumption that nature's rules have always worked as they do now. All geological dating rests on it.
Water vapour	Water in the air as an invisible gas.

WHAT COMES NEXT

Part 2 — Harappa

Part 2 covers the Indus Valley Civilisation: the cities, how they were built, how they worked, the writing nobody can read, and the long argument about why they fell.

Among the questions it takes on:

- How does a society build hundreds of cities to a shared standard with **no evidence of a king**? Who was enforcing the brick sizes and the weights?
- Why is there so little evidence of warfare — no city walls built for defence in the usual way, few weapons, no scenes of battle? Was it genuinely peaceful, or are we misreading the evidence?
- The **Indus script**: around 4,000 inscriptions, mostly very short. A century of attempts. Not one accepted reading. Is it even a language at all? Both sides of that argument, in full.
- Where did the **Saraswati** river go — and why has a dead river become a live political issue?
- Why did it end? Drought, river shifts, disease, trade collapse, invasion — the case for each, and what the evidence actually supports.

ABOUT

About the Author

Lovepreet Singh

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CURRENTLY	Second-year MBA, Panjab University — Business Strategy and Analysis, specialising in Business Intelligence
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Lovepreet Singh is a researcher and writer working toward doctoral research. He writes long-form work on Indian history, society, religion, philosophy, public policy and technology — built from the record, in plain language, with the competing views left in.

His background is not in a history department, and he thinks that is worth saying plainly. He came to this subject the way most people do: from the outside, wanting to understand the place he is from, and finding that the good books were unreadable and the readable books were thin.

What he brought instead was the habit of his own training — the analyst's discipline of asking what the data actually supports, where a claim is really coming from, and which assumptions are doing the quiet work underneath an argument. That discipline runs through every chapter of this series. It is why almost every chapter has a box labelled *The Hidden Assumption*, and it is the part of this work he is most attached to.

The Living Archive

This series belongs to a larger project. The Living Archive is a body of long-form research on history, society, religion, public policy and technology, published openly and free to read at misterlove.in.

It works to three rules, applied to every piece:

- **Plain language.** Hard ideas explained in ordinary words, with nothing left out to make them fit.
- **Evidence first.** Show the thing itself, and be clear about what it can and cannot prove.
- **Competing views.** Where the field disagrees, both sides get their strongest case. Open questions stay open.

On this series

The Complete History of Punjab runs to fourteen parts, from the geological formation of the land to the present day on both sides of the 1947 border. Each part carries its own timeline, glossary, argument boxes and honest list of what remains unknown.

Corrections are genuinely welcome. If you find an error, or think an argument has been given less than its best case, write to the address above — later editions will say what was changed and who caught it.

A word on sources

This is written for general readers, so it carries no footnotes. It is a synthesis of the published scholarly record — archaeology, geology, climate science, epigraphy and history — rather than new primary research, and it does not claim otherwise. Where that record is contested, the contest is shown rather than smoothed over. Where it is thin, Chapter 10 says so.



END OF PART 1 OF 14

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THE LIVING ARCHIVE

PART TWO OF FOURTEEN

The Complete History of Punjab

Part Two — Harappa

The cities that were lost for three thousand years, the writing nobody can read, the civilisation that seems to have had no king, and the long argument about why it ended.

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

Lovepreet Singh

C. 7000 – 1300 BCE

MISTERLOVE.IN

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Where We Left Off

A short recap for anyone starting here, and a reminder of what the coloured boxes mean.

Part 1 built the stage. Two continents crashed slowly into each other and threw up the Himalayas. Rivers ground those mountains into powder and dumped the powder on the plains, flood after flood, until the soil was kilometres deep. The result was flat, endlessly fertile land with water all year round, sitting directly behind the only easy way into India.

Then it followed the first people. Stone tools in the Soan valley of the Potohar Plateau, made by a human species that was not yet us. A long, thin, badly-recorded stretch of hundreds of thousands of years. And finally, around nine thousand years ago, farming — mud-brick houses at Mehrgarh, wheat and barley, herded goats, and grain kept in jars.

Grain in a jar is where civilisation starts. Store food and you can feed people who are not farmers. Feed people who are not farmers and you get potters, builders, priests, soldiers, accountants. That is the recipe, and Part 1 ended with small farming villages spreading out across Punjab, doing exactly that.

This part is what those villages turned into.

What the boxes mean

Same system as Part 1. If you have read it, skip ahead.

WORD BOX

Blue explains a hard word, right where the word appears.

Example — Archaeology: the study of the human past through the physical things people left behind. Buildings, pots, bones, rubbish. An archaeologist digs and interprets. They are not treasure hunters; most of what they find is broken and worthless, and that is the useful part.

IN REAL TERMS

Green turns a number or an idea that is too big or too strange to picture into something ordinary.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Brown shows the evidence itself — the brick, the bone, the seal, the chemical trace — and is honest about what that evidence can and cannot prove.

THE ARGUMENT

Orange means serious people disagree. Both sides get their best case made for them, then a plain statement of where things actually stand and what evidence would settle it.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Purple digs out something everybody has quietly taken for granted without proving. Part 2 has more of these than Part 1, because almost everything about Harappa is interpretation resting on very thin evidence.

REMEMBER THIS

Dark boxes close each chapter with the one thing you must take away, in the plainest words I can find.

Read only the dark boxes and you will still have the whole story.

A warning specific to this part

Part 1 was mostly geology, and geology is comparatively calm. Rocks do not have descendants who mind what you say about them.

Part 2 is different. Harappa sits at the centre of live political arguments in India today — about who was here first, about whether Indian civilisation is home-grown or partly imported, about what to call things. Some of the loudest claims you will meet online about this civilisation are made by people who need a particular answer to be true.

I will show you where the evidence is strong, where it is thin, and where honest researchers disagree for honest reasons. Where a claim is popular but weakly supported, I will say so — in whichever direction that cuts.

What Is In Part 2

Before We Begin — Where We Left Off

Chapter 1 — How a Whole Civilisation Was Lost and Found

Bricks in a railway · The 1921 digs · Argument: what should it be called?

Chapter 2 — The Size of the Thing

A thousand sites · The three phases · Which sites are in Punjab

Chapter 3 — Walking Into a Harappan City

Grid streets · Standard bricks · Drains and wells · The Great Bath · Argument: was the granary a granary?

Chapter 4 — The Civilisation With No King

No palaces, no royal tombs · The weights · Five theories of who ran it · Was it peaceful?

Chapter 5 — The Writing Nobody Can Read

The seals · Why it resists decipherment · Argument: is it writing at all? · Argument: which language?

Chapter 6 — Work, Food and Trade

Cotton and carnelian · Meluhha and Mesopotamia · The missing horse

Chapter 7 — What Did They Believe?

The Pashupati seal · The figurines · Burials · Argument: is there a line to later Hinduism?

Chapter 8 — The Saraswati Question

The dry channel · What the Rigveda says · What the geology says · Why it is political

Chapter 9 — Why Did It End?

Six theories weighed · The massacre that was not · Collapse or transformation?

Chapter 10 — An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

[Timeline](#) · [Glossary](#) · [About the Author](#) · [Coming in Part 3](#)

CHAPTER ONE

How a Whole Civilisation Was Lost and Found

For three thousand years nobody knew it had existed. No Indian text remembered it. No Greek writer mentioned it. Then a railway line was built, and the workers needed something to put under the tracks.

1.1 — Bricks for a railway

In the 1850s the British were laying a railway line from Lahore to Multan, straight across Punjab.

A railway needs ballast — a bed of hard broken material under the sleepers to spread the weight and let water drain. On the flat plain of Punjab there is no stone. There is only soil, kilometres of it. Stone would have to be carried in from far away, at great cost.

Then somebody noticed the mounds.

Near a village called Harappa, on the old bed of the Ravi, stood large low hills of rubble. Local people had been quietly taking bricks from them for generations to build their own houses. The bricks were hard, well-fired, remarkably uniform, and there were millions of them.

So the engineers — the brothers John and William Brunton — used them. Around a hundred and sixty kilometres of railway track was laid on a bed of crushed ancient brick.

IN REAL TERMS

Think about what that means. To get enough ballast for a hundred and sixty kilometres of railway, you need an enormous quantity of brick.

Those bricks came out of a city. A city so large that it could be ground up and spread under a railway for a hundred and sixty kilometres, and there was still enough left in the ground for archaeologists to dig for the next hundred and fifty years.

Nobody at the time understood what was being destroyed. And here is the uncomfortable part: **we will never know what was in those bricks.** Seals, inscriptions, whole buildings. Under a railway.

1.2 — The people who suspected

A few people did notice something was odd.

In 1829 a British deserter and wanderer named **Charles Masson** passed through and wrote a description of the ruins at Harappa. He assumed they were connected to Alexander the Great, because that was the only ancient history of Punjab anyone in Europe knew.

In the 1850s and again in 1873, **Alexander Cunningham**, the first head of the Archaeological Survey of India, visited Harappa. He found a seal — a small square of stone with an animal on it and some marks he could not read. He published it. He assumed it was foreign, because the marks matched no Indian script he knew.

Both men looked directly at the evidence and interpreted it inside the framework they already had. Neither imagined that Indian civilisation might be thousands of years older than anyone thought. That possibility was simply not available to them.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

This is worth stopping on, because it is a permanent danger and not just a nineteenth-century one.

Cunningham held a seal from a lost civilisation in his hand and concluded it must be foreign. Why? Because he had a mental map of Indian history that started with the Vedas, and this did not fit on that map. Rather than question the map, he questioned the object.

The assumption was: what I already believe about the past is roughly the right shape. New evidence gets fitted into that shape, and if it will not fit, it gets explained away as an oddity or an import.

Everyone does this. You do it. I do it. The only defence is to notice when you are working hard to explain a piece of evidence away, and ask whether the map might be wrong instead of the evidence.

1.3 — 1921 and 1922

The real discovery came in two seasons, and it was made by Indian archaeologists.

In 1921, **Daya Ram Sahni** began proper excavation at Harappa in Punjab.

In 1922, **Rakhal Das Banerji** was excavating a Buddhist site far to the south, in Sindh, at a place the locals called **Mohenjo-daro** — which means "mound of the dead".

Digging below the Buddhist layers, he hit something much older. Brick buildings. Streets. Seals like Cunningham's.

The same seals. Six hundred kilometres apart.

That was the moment. One strange mound is a curiosity. Two strange mounds six hundred kilometres apart, with the same script, the same brick sizes and the same seal designs, is a *civilisation*.

In 1924 **John Marshall**, then head of the Archaeological Survey, announced it to the world in the *Illustrated London News*.

IN REAL TERMS

Imagine the shock. Before 1924, the standard account of Indian history began with the Vedas, at perhaps 1500 BCE, and everything before that was a blank.

Overnight, that blank filled with brick cities, plumbing, standardised weights and a writing system — a thousand years *older* than the Vedas, and geographically in the same place.

It is as if you had traced your family back three generations, and then found a locked room in your own house containing forty generations you had never heard of.

India went, in a single announcement, from having a long history to having one of the three oldest urban civilisations on Earth. And every argument in this part flows from the fact that **we still cannot read a word those people wrote.**

1.4 — What do we call it?

This sounds like a trivial question. It is not. The name you use tells people which side you are on, which is exactly why the argument exists.

THE ARGUMENT — WHAT SHOULD THIS CIVILISATION BE CALLED?

Three names are in common use, and each carries a claim.

"Indus Valley Civilisation"

The oldest and most widely used name internationally. It names the civilisation after the river system where the first great sites were found.

Objection: a very large number of sites — arguably the majority — are not in the Indus valley at all. They are along the dry Ghaggar-Hakra channel to the east, and along the coast of Gujarat. The name describes only part of the map.

"Harappan Civilisation"

Names it after the first site properly excavated, following the standard archaeological convention of naming a culture after its type site. **Objection:** Harappa is only the first site because of where the British happened to run a railway. It is not the largest, the oldest, or the most important. The name records an accident of colonial engineering.

"Indus-Saraswati Civilisation"

Adds the name of the river described in the Rigveda, which many identify with the dry Ghaggar-Hakra channel where so many sites cluster. **Argument for:** it fixes the geographical inaccuracy of "Indus Valley" and acknowledges where most sites actually are. **Objection:** it imports a name from a religious text composed centuries later, and quietly assumes both that the Saraswati was this river and that the Harappans were connected to the people who wrote the Rigveda. Both are contested — see Chapter 8. Critics argue the name smuggles in a conclusion before the argument has been had.

Where things stand: international academic writing mostly uses *Indus* or *Harappan*, often interchangeably. *Indus-Saraswati* is common in Indian public discussion and in some Indian scholarship, and is strongly resisted by others.

What I do in this series: I use **Harappan**, because it is the most neutral of the three — it commits me to nothing except that we dug at Harappa first. That is a choice about caution, not a verdict on the Saraswati question, which I take up properly in Chapter 8.

The honest point: the naming argument cannot be settled by evidence, because it is not really about evidence. It is about which claim you want the name to carry. Recognising that is more useful than picking a winner.

REMEMBER THIS

A whole civilisation was **completely forgotten** for three thousand years. No text remembered it.

It was found because British engineers ground up its bricks for **railway ballast**, and somebody eventually asked where the bricks came from.

The real discovery was 1921–22, by **Daya Ram Sahni** at Harappa and **R. D. Banerji** at Mohenjo-daro. Two sites, six hundred kilometres apart, with identical seals — that is what proved it was a civilisation and not a curiosity.

Its name is still argued over, because the name you choose carries a claim about who these people were.

CHAPTER TWO

The Size of the Thing

Most people picture two cities. It was more than a thousand settlements spread across an area larger than Egypt and Mesopotamia put together — and a large share of them were in Punjab.

2.1 — How big?

The Harappan world covered roughly **1.5 million square kilometres**.

IN REAL TERMS

That is bigger than ancient Egypt and ancient Mesopotamia combined — the two civilisations everybody has heard of.

It is roughly the size of modern France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Britain added together.

It stretched from the coast of the Arabian Sea in the south to the foothills of the Himalayas in the north, and from the border of Iran in the west to near Delhi in the east.

And almost nobody outside South Asia has heard of it, because we cannot read what they wrote. **Civilisations that left readable records get remembered. This one did not.**

More than a **thousand** Harappan settlements have been identified, and the number keeps rising as surveys continue. The great majority are villages and small towns. Only a handful were large cities.

2.2 — The three phases

Archaeologists split it into three stretches. The dates are approximate and researchers argue over the edges.

PHASE	ROUGHLY WHEN	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE
Early Harappan	c. 3300 – 2600 BCE	Farming villages and small walled towns. Regional pottery styles. Some planning, some craft specialisation, early trade. No large cities yet, no script.
Mature Harappan	c. 2600 – 1900 BCE	The famous period. Big planned cities, standard bricks, standard weights, the script, seals, long-distance trade, drainage. Roughly seven hundred years.
Late Harappan	c. 1900 – 1300 BCE	Cities decline and empty. Standards break down. The script disappears. People are still there — but living differently, in smaller settlements, spreading east.

Notice the shape of that. It is not a sudden appearance and a sudden death. It is a long build-up, a seven-hundred-year peak, and a long unwinding. Chapter 9 is about that unwinding.

IN REAL TERMS

Seven hundred years at the peak. Put that next to things you know.

The Mughal Empire lasted about three hundred years. The British were in India for roughly two hundred. The United States has existed for around two hundred and fifty.

The mature Harappan period lasted longer than all three of those put together. Somebody born at the start of it and somebody born at the end were separated by more time than separates us from the Delhi Sultanate.

2.3 — The big cities

SITE	WHERE IT IS NOW	WHY IT MATTERS
Mohenjo-daro	Sindh, Pakistan, on the Indus	The best-preserved city. The Great Bath, the grid streets, the "priest-king" statue and the dancing girl all come from here.
Harappa	Sahiwal district, Punjab, Pakistan , on the old Ravi	The type site. Heavily damaged by brick-robbing, but the longest-running excavation and the deepest sequence of layers.
Rakhigarhi	Hisar district, Haryana, India	Possibly the largest site of all — its full extent is disputed. Source of the only Harappan ancient DNA sequenced so far.
Dholavira	Kutch, Gujarat, India	Built of stone rather than brick. Spectacular water-storage system. The famous ten-sign "signboard".
Ganweriwala	Cholistan, Punjab, Pakistan	A very large site on the dry Hakra channel. Barely excavated — it sits in desert with almost no water supply for a dig.
Kalibangan	Rajasthan, India, on the Ghaggar	The ploughed field from before the city was built. Disputed "fire altars".
Lothal	Gujarat, India	The bead workshop and the great brick basin argued over as a dockyard.
Chanhudaro	Sindh, Pakistan	A craft town rather than a city. Bead-making on an industrial scale.

2.4 — The Punjab sites

This is a history of Punjab, so it is worth being precise about which of this belongs to Punjab.

A great deal of it. Both Punjabs, on both sides of the modern border.

- **Harappa** itself is in Pakistani Punjab, in Sahiwal district, on the dried old course of the **Ravi** — one of the five rivers from Part 1.

- **Ganweriwala** is in Cholistan, in southern Pakistani Punjab.
- **Ropar** (Rupnagar) in Indian Punjab, on the **Sutlej**, was the first Harappan site excavated after independence, in 1953.
- **Sanghol** in Fatehgarh Sahib district, Indian Punjab, is an important Late Harappan settlement.
- **Bara**, near Ropar, gives its name to a whole Late Harappan regional style found across Punjab — "Bara ware".
- **Banawali** and **Rakhigarhi** are in Haryana, which was part of Punjab province until 1966.
- **Kalibangan** is in Rajasthan on the Ghaggar, immediately beyond Punjab's edge.

So when this part talks about Harappan cities, it is not describing somebody else's history that happened nearby. The type site of the entire civilisation stands on the bank of one of Punjab's five rivers.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

How do you find a buried city? It is less mysterious than it sounds.

Mounds. When mud-brick buildings collapse and are rebuilt on top, over and over for centuries, the ground level rises. A long-occupied site becomes a low artificial hill — a *tell* or, in this region, a *daro* or *theri*. On a dead-flat plain, a hill is visible from a long way off and is not natural.

Surface scatter. Ploughing and rain bring broken pottery to the surface. An archaeologist walks a field, picks up sherds, and reads the style. Harappan pottery is distinctive.

Satellite and aerial imagery. Buried walls affect how well crops grow above them, so ancient street plans can show up as faint patterns in a field from the air. Old river channels show up the same way.

The limits, honestly: this method finds sites that are still visible. Anything flattened by centuries of ploughing, buried by river silt, or now under a modern town is invisible. Remember survivorship bias from Part 1 — **the map of Harappan sites is a map of what has survived and been looked for**, not a complete census.

REMEMBER THIS

The Harappan world covered about **1.5 million square kilometres** — larger than ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia combined — with more than **a thousand** known settlements.

Three phases: **Early** (3300–2600 BCE), **Mature** (2600–1900 BCE, the famous cities), **Late** (1900–1300 BCE, the unwinding).

The mature period lasted **seven hundred years** — longer than the Mughals, the British Raj and the United States put together.

Harappa itself stands on the old bed of the Ravi, in Punjab. This is Punjab's own history, not a neighbour's.

CHAPTER THREE

Walking Into a Harappan City

Straight streets on a compass grid. Bricks made to one ratio across a thousand kilometres. A covered sewer under the road and a bathroom in an ordinary house. Then imagine the year is 2500 BCE.

3.1 — The streets

Most ancient cities grew the way villages grow. A path here, a house there, another house squeezed beside it, a lane that bends around somebody's wall. Look at the old quarter of almost any city in the world and you will see it — a tangle that made sense to whoever built each piece.

Harappan cities do not look like that.

The main streets run straight, cross at right angles, and are aligned roughly north-south and east-west. Between them are blocks of housing, cut through by narrower lanes. Some main streets are around ten metres wide — wide enough for two carts to pass.

A city like that cannot grow by accident. Somebody decided the layout before the buildings went up.

WORD BOX

Grid plan: a town laid out on straight lines crossing at right angles, like graph paper. Rare in the ancient world and normally a sign of central planning.

Cardinal alignment: lined up with north, south, east and west rather than pointing any old way. Doing this deliberately means somebody was measuring against the sun or the stars.

Most of the larger cities have two parts: a raised western section built on a brick platform, usually called the **citadel**, and a larger lower town to the east where most people lived.

Be careful with the word "citadel". It was chosen by early excavators who were thinking of forts and palaces. What is actually up there is public buildings — the Great Bath, big halls, large structures whose purpose is unknown. Not a palace. Not, as far as anyone can show, a barracks. The name has stuck and it quietly shapes how people picture the place.

3.2 — The bricks

Now the detail that says the most about how this society worked.

Harappan bricks are made to a fixed proportion: **the length is four units, the width two, the thickness one**. A ratio of 1:2:4.

This ratio holds at Harappa in Punjab. It holds at Mohenjo-daro in Sindh, six hundred kilometres away. It holds at Dholavira in Gujarat and at Kalibangan in Rajasthan.

IN REAL TERMS

Imagine every brick made in every town from Amritsar to Karachi, over seven centuries, coming out to the same proportions.

No telephone. No printing. No paper standards office. Just — everyone doing it the same way, for longer than the time between Guru Nanak and today.

And they were right to. A 1:2:4 brick can be laid in an interlocking pattern where the joints never line up between courses, which makes a much stronger wall. This is not decoration. It is engineering knowledge, and somebody was making sure it was followed.

The same is true of the weights, which we come to in Chapter 4. Something was enforcing standards over an enormous area for a very long time. What that something was is the great mystery of this civilisation.

3.3 — The drains

This is the part that startles people most.

An ordinary Harappan house — not a rich house, an ordinary one — commonly had:

- A **bathing platform**: a floor of tightly fitted brick, slightly sloped, often with a raised edge.
- A **drain** from that platform, running through the house wall.
- A connection to a **covered drain running under the street outside**.
- Often a **private well** in the courtyard, or shared access to one nearby.

The street drains were built of brick, covered with brick or stone slabs so they were not open sewers, and fitted at intervals with **inspection openings** — the ancient equivalent of a manhole — so they could be cleaned out. Some had settling pits, where solids collected and could be removed.

Mohenjo-daro alone is estimated to have had around **seven hundred wells**.

IN REAL TERMS

Here is the comparison that should stop you.

In 1858, London had a summer so foul it is remembered as the Great Stink. Human waste went into the Thames, and the Thames was the drinking water. Cholera killed tens of thousands. Parliament had to hang curtains soaked in chemicals over the windows because the smell coming off the river was unbearable. Only then was a proper sewer system built.

The Harappans had covered street sewers with inspection points, connected to bathrooms in ordinary houses, more than four thousand years earlier.

Not "advanced for their time". Better than the capital of the largest empire on Earth, in the age of steam.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Careful here, because the drains tempt everyone into a conclusion that does not follow.

The reasoning usually runs: *good plumbing means an advanced society, and an advanced society means an equal, peaceful, well-governed one.*

That is a leap. Plumbing is engineering. It tells you people understood water, gradient and brick. It does not tell you whether they were kind, whether women had rights, whether anybody was enslaved, or whether the people who dug the drains were treated well.

Rome had superb plumbing and a slave economy. Nineteenth-century Britain built magnificent sewers while running an empire by force.

The assumption is that technical sophistication and moral decency travel together. History gives no support for that whatsoever. The Harappans may well have been a decent society — the absence of weapons and fortifications is a real point in their favour, as Chapter 4 discusses. But that has to be argued from its own evidence, not read off the drains.

3.4 — The Great Bath

On the citadel mound at Mohenjo-daro sits the most famous single structure of the civilisation.

It is a rectangular sunken tank, roughly twelve metres long, seven metres wide and about two and a half metres deep, with brick steps down into it at each end. Around it runs a paved courtyard and a set of small rooms.

The construction is the impressive part. The floor and walls are made of finely cut brick laid in gypsum mortar, and behind the brick there is a thick layer of **bitumen** — natural tar — to waterproof it. There is a drain to empty it and a nearby well to fill it.

WORD BOX

Bitumen: a thick black natural tar that seeps out of the ground in some places. It is waterproof and sticky. The Harappans used it as a sealant — the same basic idea as the tar on a modern flat roof.

What was it for? Nobody knows. It is usually assumed to be for ritual bathing, because that is what a large public tank next to important buildings suggests and because ritual bathing is important in later South Asian religion.

But notice what that reasoning does: it explains a Harappan building using a religious practice recorded thousands of years later. It may be right. It is not evidence. Chapter 7 comes back to this problem properly.

3.5 — The building that may not be a granary

THE ARGUMENT — WAS THE "GREAT GRANARY" A GRANARY?

At both Mohenjo-daro and Harappa there are large brick structures with a distinctive design: a solid platform crossed by narrow channels, with sockets that once held wooden beams. Early excavators — Marshall, and later Mortimer Wheeler — identified them as state granaries, with the channels providing air circulation to keep grain dry, and read them as evidence of a taxing, redistributing central authority.

The identification went into every textbook. It is now seriously doubted.

The granary reading says...

The design makes sense for grain storage: a raised, ventilated wooden floor keeps grain off damp ground, which is exactly what you need in a monsoon climate. The buildings are large, centrally placed and clearly public. Every comparable early civilisation had central storage — Mesopotamia and Egypt both did — and a city of tens of thousands must have had some way of holding a food reserve.

The sceptics say...

No grain has been found in them. Not carbonised grain, not grain impressions, not the storage jars you would expect, not the seed of the weeds that always come with stored grain. Archaeologists have looked hard. In a building used for centuries to store grain, some trace would normally survive — and at other sites in the region, actual grain storage does leave such traces. The identification came from what the excavators expected a great civilisation to have, not from what was in the building.

Where things stand: most specialists now avoid calling them granaries. The neutral term is "the great hall" or simply "the large public building". What they were is unknown — proposals include a market building, a hall for assembly or ceremony, or a warehouse for goods other than grain.

What would settle it: chemical residue analysis of the floors and soil, looking for the specific traces starch and plant matter leave behind. This is now technically possible and is worth doing.

Why this matters beyond the building: the granary reading was used as a main plank of the argument for a strong central state collecting taxes in grain. Remove the granary and one of the better arguments for Harappan central government goes with it. That is the subject of the next chapter.

3.6 — Dholavira and the water

One more site deserves its own moment, because it shows how far the planning went.

Dholavira sits on an island in the Rann of Kutch, in Gujarat. It is a desert. There are two seasonal streams and very little rain.

So the Harappans built a city that harvested and stored water on an extraordinary scale. They dammed the streams, and cut a series of enormous reservoirs into the rock — some more than seventy metres long and several metres deep — connected by channels, with steps down into them. A large part of the walled city area is given over to water storage.

They also built in stone rather than mud brick here, because stone was what the local geology offered.

That last point is important and often missed. **These were not people mechanically following a template.** The plan adapted to the place: brick on the alluvial plains where there is no stone, stone in Kutch where there is, massive water storage where water is scarce. Standardised where standards helped, local where local made sense.

REMEMBER THIS

Harappan cities were laid out on a **grid**, aligned to the compass, and **planned before they were built**.

Bricks were made to a fixed **1:2:4 ratio** across a thousand kilometres and seven hundred years. Something was enforcing that.

Ordinary houses had **bathing floors and drains connected to covered street sewers with inspection points** — better sanitation than London had in 1858.

The famous "granary" was **probably not a granary**. No grain has ever been found in it.

Good plumbing proves good engineering. It does not prove a good society. That has to be argued separately.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Civilisation With No King

Egypt left pyramids full of dead pharaohs. Mesopotamia left king lists and boastful inscriptions. Harappa left a thousand cities and not one ruler anybody can name. This is the deepest puzzle in the whole subject.

4.1 — What is missing

Start with what every other early civilisation has, and Harappa does not.

NORMALLY YOU FIND	AT HARAPPAN SITES
Palaces — a very large residence, far grander than any other building	None identified. Houses vary in size, but there is no building that is obviously a ruler's home.
Royal tombs — a burial loaded with gold, weapons, sacrificed servants	None. Burials are modest and fairly similar to each other. Some have more pots than others. Nothing like the tomb of a king.
Monumental temples	None certainly identified. There are large public buildings; none can be shown to be a temple.
Royal images — statues and carvings of rulers, usually oversized	Almost no large sculpture at all. The few human figures are small — the largest famous one is about 18 cm tall.
Inscriptions boasting of conquests	Nothing readable, and nothing that looks like a monumental public inscription — with the possible exception of the Dholavira signboard.
Heaps of weapons	Very few. Some spearheads and arrowheads, mostly light and often interpreted as hunting gear. No swords worth the name. No armour. No dedicated military architecture that everyone agrees on.

NORMALLY YOU FIND	AT HARAPPAN SITES
Battle scenes in art	Essentially none. No captives, no rows of prisoners, no victory scenes — all of which are standard subjects in Egyptian and Mesopotamian art.

IN REAL TERMS

Compare it directly.

From **Egypt** we have the names, faces, mummified bodies and family trees of dozens of pharaohs, plus the pyramids they built to be remembered by.

From **Mesopotamia** we have king lists going back centuries, law codes with a named king's name on them, and carvings of rulers standing on piles of enemies.

From **Harappa** — a civilisation larger than both, lasting seven hundred years at its height, with a thousand settlements — we have **not one name of one person**.

Not a king. Not a priest. Not a merchant. Nobody.

4.2 — The statue we call a priest-king

There is one object everyone reaches for at this point. A small carved stone figure, about eighteen centimetres tall, found at Mohenjo-daro in 1927. A bearded man with a headband, an armband, and a patterned cloak over one shoulder. His eyes are narrowed, looking down.

It is on the cover of half the books about this civilisation. It is usually called the **"Priest-King"**.

Now, honestly: **there is no evidence he was a priest, and no evidence he was a king.**

The name was given by early excavators who were thinking of Mesopotamia, where priest-kings were a real institution. They saw a dignified male figure with ornaments and reached for the nearest category they knew.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

This is one of the most instructive mistakes in archaeology, because you can watch it happen.

An object is found. It has no label. Somebody names it using a category from a *different* civilisation. The name goes into the literature. Then, decades later, people cite the "Priest-King" as evidence that the Harappans had priest-kings.

The evidence and the interpretation have swapped places. A guess became a name, and then the name became a fact.

The same has happened to the "**citadel**" (which may not be a fortress), the "**granary**" (which probably was not one), the "**Great Bath**" (which may not have been for ritual), and the "**mother goddess**" figurines in Chapter 7.

When you read about Harappa, mentally strip the names off and ask what the object actually is. In this case: **a small carved stone figure of a bearded man wearing ornaments.** That is all we know.

4.3 — The weights

Against all that absence, here is something startlingly present.

Harappan sites produce large numbers of small cubes of stone — usually chert, beautifully finished. They are weights.

The system runs in **doubling steps**: 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64 — and then shifts to larger multiples for heavier weights. The smallest are tiny, under a gram, suitable for weighing gold or gemstones. The largest are heavy enough to need a rope handle.

And they are **accurate**. Weights from sites hundreds of kilometres apart match each other closely.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

This one is refreshingly direct: archaeologists collect the stone cubes and weigh them on modern precision scales.

When you plot the results, they do not scatter randomly. They cluster tightly around a repeating series of values, and the ratios between the clusters are the doubling series above.

Do the same for weights from Harappa in Punjab, Mohenjo-daro in Sindh, Lothal in Gujarat and Kalibangan in Rajasthan, and the clusters land in the same places.

This is about as hard as evidence gets in archaeology. It is a physical measurement, repeatable by anyone, from objects found independently at many sites. There is no interpretation involved.

Sit with what that implies. A merchant in Punjab and a merchant six hundred kilometres away in Sindh could trade by weight and both be confident of the measure. That requires the standard to be made, distributed, checked and trusted — for centuries.

You cannot have that by accident. Somebody was running something.

4.4 — So who ran it?

Here is the central problem stated plainly. The Harappans had enough organisation to enforce brick ratios and weight standards across a subcontinent for seven hundred years. And they left no trace of a ruler.

THE ARGUMENT — WHO GOVERNED THE HARAPPANS?

There is no agreed answer. Five serious proposals are on the table.

1. A single centralised state

One authority ruled the whole area, which is why standards are uniform.

For: the uniformity is very hard to explain otherwise. **Against:** a state that big normally advertises itself — palaces, royal art, propaganda. Harappa has none. It would be the only known empire in history that never bragged.

2. Several independent city-states

Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Dholavira, Rakhigarhi and Ganweriwala each ran their own territory, sharing a common culture the way Greek city-states did.

For: fits the lack of a single capital, and there are real regional differences in pottery and layout. **Against:** independent states usually fight each other, and there is little evidence of that. It also does not explain why the standards match so exactly.

3. Rule by merchants and craft guilds

Power lay with trading families and craft organisations rather than kings. Standards were enforced because traders needed them, not because a ruler demanded them. **For:** explains the obsession with weights, seals and measures, and the absence of royal display — merchants show wealth in goods, not monuments. **Against:** merchant power alone rarely builds and maintains city-wide drains and platforms for centuries.

4. A religious elite without armed force

Authority was held by priests whose power rested on belief rather than violence — which would explain the near-absence of weapons. **For:** would account for compliance without an army. **Against:** no temples have been identified, and no religious texts survive. This is largely an argument from absence.

5. No single top at all (heterarchy)

Different groups held different kinds of authority, none of them supreme — one body over water, another over trade, another over ritual, cooperating without a pyramid of command. **For:** fits the evidence better than any of the others, because it predicts exactly what we see: strong coordination with no visible ruler. **Against:** it is very hard to prove, and risks becoming a way of saying "we do not know" in more impressive language.

Where things stand: genuinely open. Opinion has drifted away from the single-empire model, which dominated in the mid-twentieth century, and towards the last two — but nothing is settled and no one should tell you otherwise.

What would settle it: reading the script would probably do it in an afternoon. Short of that: excavating one of the barely-touched large sites, especially Ganweriwala, or finding a building that is unambiguously a palace or a temple.

The genuinely interesting possibility: that the question itself is badly framed. "Who was in charge?" assumes somebody was. If the Harappans ran a complex urban society without a single ruler, they did something no other early civilisation managed, and our categories are simply the wrong shape for them.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Notice what makes the Harappan case feel so strange: **we assume complexity requires hierarchy.** Big cities need a big boss.

Where does that belief come from? From the other early civilisations we know about. Egypt had pharaohs. Mesopotamia had kings. China had emperors. So: cities need kings.

But that is reasoning from a sample of three or four. It is like meeting four tall people from one country and concluding everyone there is tall.

Harappa may simply be the counter-example. If so, the honest response is not to keep hunting for the palace we have failed to find for a hundred years. It is to consider that our idea of how big societies must work was built on too few cases.

I want to be even-handed here: the opposite error is just as easy. Wanting Harappa to be a peaceful, egalitarian, kingless utopia is a temptation too, and some popular writing gives in to it completely. **Absence of evidence for kings is not evidence of absence.** Wooden palaces rot. Excavation is patchy. Perhaps five per cent of the total area has been dug.

The correct position is uncomfortable and correct: **we do not know, and both stories remain possible.**

4.5 — Was it really peaceful?

The claim that Harappan society was unusually peaceful is popular and it is not baseless. But it needs handling carefully.

What supports it: very few weapons compared with contemporary Egypt or Mesopotamia; no armour; no clearly military buildings; no art showing warfare, captives or victory; no destruction layers at most sites; no mass graves of battle dead.

What complicates it: the cities *do* have walls. Large ones. They are usually explained as flood defences and as boundaries controlling who and what came in — which is plausible on a flood plain — but a wall is a wall. Some skeletons show head injuries. And copper tools can be used on people; the line between an axe and a weapon is about intention, which does not fossilise.

The fair summary: Harappan society looks markedly less militarised than its contemporaries. That is a real and interesting finding. It is not the same as proving it was peaceful, and it says nothing about whether it was internally fair.

REMEMBER THIS

Harappa left **no palaces, no royal tombs, no royal art, no boastful inscriptions and not one person's name.**

The famous "Priest-King" statue is a guess wearing a label. There is no evidence he was either.

Yet the **weights are precisely standardised** across hundreds of kilometres — hard physical proof that something was organising things.

Five theories compete: one empire, many city-states, merchant guilds, priests, or no single top at all. **Nobody knows.**

The most interesting possibility is that "who was in charge?" is the wrong question, and Harappa is the counter-example to our belief that big societies need a boss.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Writing Nobody Can Read

Around four thousand inscriptions survive. A century of effort by linguists, archaeologists, code-breakers and computers has produced not one accepted reading. Some researchers now argue it is not writing at all.

5.1 — What the inscriptions are on

Most Harappan writing appears on **seals**. These are small squares of soapstone, usually two to four centimetres across, carved with a picture and a short line of signs, then fired to harden the surface. On the back is a small pierced knob so the seal could be hung on a cord.

A seal is a stamp. You press it into soft clay and it leaves an impression. Impressions have been found on lumps of clay that were once wrapped around the fastenings of bundles and pots — so the seals were used to mark ownership, to certify a shipment, or to seal a container so tampering would show.

WORD BOX

Steatite (soapstone): a soft stone easy to carve with simple tools, which hardens when heated. Ideal for making small detailed objects.

Script: a system of written signs. **Language:** the speech the signs record. These are different things — the same script can write several languages, and the same language can be written in several scripts. This distinction matters enormously in this chapter.

The pictures on the seals are mostly animals. By far the most common is a single-horned creature facing a small object often called a "standard" or "offering stand" — usually nicknamed the **unicorn**. It appears on more seals than every other motif combined. There are also bulls, elephants, rhinoceroses, tigers, buffalo, and a few complicated scenes with human or part-human figures.

Writing also appears on copper tablets, pottery, ivory rods, and a handful of larger objects — including the famous **Dholavira signboard**, a row of ten large signs made of inlaid material, found fallen near a gateway. It seems to have been mounted above the gate, which would make it something like a public sign — the only one of its kind ever found.

5.2 — Why it has resisted for a century

Codes get broken all the time. Egyptian hieroglyphs were cracked. Linear B, the script of Bronze Age Greece, was cracked. Why not this one?

Three reasons, and together they are close to fatal.

Reason one: the inscriptions are extremely short. The average is about five signs. The longest on a single surface is around seventeen. Compare that with a Mesopotamian clay tablet carrying hundreds of words, or an Egyptian tomb wall covered in continuous text.

IN REAL TERMS

Try to work out an unknown language from a collection of five-word fragments with no context.

Now imagine all you have are the labels off packaging. "Best before." "Made in." "Contains nuts." Thousands of them, in a language you have never heard, with no grammar, no sentences, and nothing telling you what any product is.

That is roughly the situation. The corpus is large in number and tiny in content.

Reason two: there is no bilingual text. Egyptian hieroglyphs were broken because of the Rosetta Stone, which carried the same message in Greek — a language scholars already knew. Nothing of that kind exists for the Harappan script. A few Indus seals turn up in Mesopotamia, but with no translation attached.

Reason three: we do not know the language underneath. This is the worst one. With Linear B, Michael Ventris eventually guessed the language was an early form of Greek, and once he tried that, everything fell into place. For the Harappan script we do not know whether the language was an early Dravidian language, an early Indo-Aryan one, something related to the Munda languages, or a language that has left no descendants at all and is simply gone.

Unknown script plus unknown language plus no long texts plus no bilingual is, as things stand, an unsolvable combination.

5.3 — Is it even writing?

THE ARGUMENT — IS THE INDUS SCRIPT A WRITING SYSTEM AT ALL?

In 2004 a group of researchers published a paper arguing that the "script" does not record language at all — that the signs are non-linguistic symbols, like heraldic badges, ownership marks, religious emblems or trade tokens. Illiterate societies use complex symbol systems all the time.

The "it is not writing" case

The texts are too short. No known writing system has an average text length of five signs. Real writing produces long texts because people write down long things.

The sign count is awkward. Roughly four hundred signs, depending on how you classify them — too many for an alphabet, too few for a Chinese-style system where each sign is a word.

It never got longer. Writing systems grow with use. This one shows no development towards continuous text in seven hundred years.

It vanished completely. Real writing tends to survive its civilisation and get adapted. This disappeared without descendants — easier to explain if literacy was never widespread because there was nothing to be literate in.

The "it is writing" case

Statistical structure. Studies of sign order show the sequences behave like language: certain signs strongly prefer certain positions, some sign pairs are common and others never occur. Measures of predictability place the Indus signs close to known written languages and away from non-linguistic sign sets. The signs are ordered by rules.

Short is explainable. If most surviving inscriptions are on seals — that is, on labels and stamps — short is exactly what you expect. Longer texts might have been written on cloth, palm leaf, bark or wood, none of which survive in this climate.

Direction is consistent. Signs appear to run right to left, shown by cramping at the left end where a carver ran out of room. Consistent direction is a hallmark of writing.

The Dholavira signboard. Ten large signs, publicly displayed above a gate. That is a strange thing to do with random symbols.

Where things stand: most researchers still treat it as writing, and the statistical work is the strongest evidence for that. But the challenge was serious and it has not been dismissed. The honest position is that **it is probably writing, and this is not certain.**

What would settle it: one long text. A single inscription of a hundred signs would end the argument immediately. The best hope is an unexcavated site — or waterlogged ground, where organic material survives.

Why the statistical argument is not conclusive: other rule-governed non-linguistic systems, like heraldry or ritual sequences, could in principle produce similar patterns. The tests show the signs follow rules. They cannot yet show the rules are grammar.

5.4 — And if it is writing, what language?

THE ARGUMENT — WHICH LANGUAGE DOES IT RECORD?

Dravidian

The most widely supported proposal in academic work. Dravidian languages — Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and others — are today spoken mainly in southern India, but **Brahui** is still spoken in Balochistan, within the old Harappan zone, which may be a surviving pocket. Some structural features of the script have been argued to fit Dravidian grammar. **Weakness:** no proposed reading has been independently verified, and Brahui's presence in the north-west can be explained by later migration.

Indo-Aryan (early Sanskrit)

Would make the Harappans the same people who later composed the Vedas, and Indian civilisation continuous from Harappa to the present. **Weakness, and it is severe:** the Rigveda describes a society with horses and spoked-wheel chariots at its centre. Neither is securely attested in mature Harappan remains. Proposed decipherments on this basis have not been accepted, and one high-profile attempt in 2000 was found to rest on a doctored image — see below.

Munda, or a lost language

The Munda languages of eastern India are a third family. Or the language may simply be extinct, with no descendants — which happens often.

Weakness: unfalsifiable in practice. If the language is gone, we can never confirm a reading.

Where things stand: unresolved, with Dravidian the most common academic guess and nothing close to proof.

A necessary caution. In 2000, a book announced a decipherment showing a horse on an Indus seal — which would have been a major result, given the horse's absence. The image turned out to be a computer-altered version of a known seal showing a unicorn, with the horn removed and the outline reshaped. It was exposed publicly and quickly.

I include this not to score a point but as a warning that runs in every direction. **When people badly want the past to be a particular shape, the temptation to help the evidence along is real.** Watch for it in others. Watch for it in yourself. And notice which claims about Harappa you find yourself hoping are true — that is where you are least reliable.

REMEMBER THIS

About **four thousand inscriptions** survive, mostly on stamp seals. The average is around **five signs**. The longest on one surface is about seventeen.

It cannot be read because there is **no bilingual text**, the inscriptions are **far too short**, and **we do not know the underlying language**.

Some researchers argue it is **not writing at all**. Statistical studies suggest it probably is. Not settled.

The language might be early Dravidian, early Indo-Aryan, Munda, or something extinct. **Nobody knows.**

One long inscription would end a century of argument in a single afternoon. It has not been found.

CHAPTER SIX

Work, Food and Trade

Cotton four thousand years before the mills of Manchester. Beads drilled with a precision that modern craftsmen struggle to match. Ships to Mesopotamia. And one animal, conspicuously missing, that will start a war in Part 3.

6.1 — What they grew

The foundation was **wheat and barley**, sown in the cool season and harvested in spring. Alongside them: peas, lentils, chickpeas, sesame, mustard, dates and melons. Millets and rice appear increasingly in the later period, especially in the east and south.

And **cotton**. The Harappans were growing and weaving cotton, and the earliest cotton fibres in the world come from this region. Actual scraps of cotton cloth have survived at Mohenjo-daro, preserved by contact with corroding metal.

IN REAL TERMS

Cotton is the fabric that later built and broke empires. Britain's industrial revolution ran on it. India's weavers were ruined by it. The American slave economy grew it.

It starts here. Four and a half thousand years ago, in and around Punjab, people were spinning and weaving a plant fibre that no other civilisation of that era used. Egypt wore linen. Mesopotamia wore wool. The Harappans wore cotton.

6.2 — What they kept

Bones from rubbish heaps tell us the animals: **zebu cattle** (the humped Indian breed, domesticated locally, as Part 1 covered), water buffalo, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, dogs, cats. Elephants appear on seals and were probably tamed if not fully domesticated. Camels appear late.

Cattle dominate. They pulled carts and ploughs, gave milk, and appear constantly in the art. Whatever the Harappans thought about the world, cattle were near the centre of it.

6.3 — The animal that is not there

Now something that matters far beyond this chapter.

There is no clear evidence of the domestic horse in mature Harappan sites.

Not on a single seal — and the Harappans depicted bulls, buffalo, elephants, rhinos, tigers, crocodiles and antelope in loving detail. Not in the bone assemblages in any way that specialists agree on. No horse gear. No spoked wheels, which are the technology that makes a horse-drawn chariot possible.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS THERE A HARAPPAN HORSE?

The "yes" case

Some excavators have reported horse bones at Harappan sites, most notably at Surkotada in Gujarat, and a specialist in horse anatomy examined those bones and identified them as domestic horse. There are also scattered claims from other sites. If correct, the horse was present, just rare.

The "no" case

Distinguishing horse bones from those of the wild ass, the onager and the half-ass is genuinely difficult, and specialists who re-examined the Surkotada material disagreed with the identification. Beyond the disputed bones there is nothing: no horse in the art, no horse gear, no spoked wheels, no dung, no burials. For an animal that Vedic and later societies celebrated constantly, the silence is total. A handful of contested bones is not much against that.

Where things stand: the mainstream position is that the horse was **absent or extremely rare** in mature Harappan society, and became common only later. A minority disputes this.

Why anyone cares this much. The Rigveda is soaked in horses and chariots. If the Harappans had no horses, then the Harappans and the Vedic people look like different populations at different times — which supports the idea that Indo-Aryan speakers arrived after the cities declined. If the Harappans did have horses, that gap narrows.

So this is not a debate about bones. It is the front line of the biggest argument in Indian history, which is Part 3's subject. I am flagging it here so that when you meet it there, you already know the horse question is load-bearing and you can watch how each side handles it.

6.4 — The craftsmen

Harappan craft work is where this civilisation is at its most impressive, and it is the part that gets the least attention.

Carnelian beads. Carnelian is a hard orange-red stone. The Harappans made long tube-shaped beads from it — some over ten centimetres — with a hole drilled straight down the middle. Drilling a narrow, perfectly straight hole through ten centimetres of a stone harder than steel, with no metal drill bits, is extraordinarily difficult. They did it using specially made drill heads of an unusually hard rock, turned with a bow drill, with abrasive and water, over days of continuous work for a single bead. The main production centre was Chanhudaro.

Shell bangles. Cut from thick conch shell brought from the coast, sawn into rings and polished. Found across the whole region, far inland.

Faience. A glassy ceramic made from crushed quartz, coloured and fired. Used for beads, small figures and tablets.

Copper and bronze. Tools, vessels, mirrors, razors, fish-hooks, and figures cast by the lost-wax method — including the small bronze often called the **Dancing Girl**, about ten centimetres tall, standing with one hand on her hip and an arm stacked with bangles.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

How do you prove how a bead was drilled? You look inside the hole with a microscope. The drilling leaves fine spiral scratch marks whose spacing and depth indicate the drill type and the abrasive used.

Then you do **experimental archaeology** — you make the tools yourself, from the same materials, and try to reproduce the bead. Modern researchers doing this have found that a single long carnelian bead takes many days of continuous drilling. That number is not a guess from the object; it is a measured result from someone actually doing it.

This also tells us something social. A bead that takes over a week of a skilled worker's time is not something everybody owned. **Craft time is a form of wealth**, and it is one of the few ways we can detect inequality in a society that left no palaces.

6.5 — Trade, and a name in a foreign language

Harappan goods travelled a very long way. Indus seals, carnelian beads and weights have been found in Mesopotamia — in the cities of what is now Iraq. Trade went by sea along the coast of the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf, and overland through Iran and Afghanistan.

Coming the other way: lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, turquoise from Iran, gold and silver, copper from Rajasthan and Oman.

And here is one of the most tantalising facts in the whole subject.

Mesopotamian records — which we *can* read — mention trading partners to the east. One is called **Meluhha**. The texts describe Meluhha as a source of carnelian, ivory, exotic woods and animals, and refer to Meluhhan ships, a Meluhhan village in Mesopotamia, and an official who worked as a Meluhhan interpreter.

Almost everyone agrees Meluhha is the Harappan world.

IN REAL TERMS

Think about what that means, and how strange it is.

We know what the neighbours called them. We do not know what they called themselves.

We have foreign records describing their ships, their goods and even a man employed to translate their language — and not one word of the language he translated.

That interpreter could have solved this entire chapter for us. He is four thousand years out of reach.

6.6 — Ordinary life

The small finds are, in some ways, the most human part of the record.

Children's toys: little clay carts with working wheels, whistles shaped like birds, model animals with heads that nod on a string, tiny cooking pots. Gaming pieces and dice — cubical dice with marked faces, essentially identical to modern ones. Combs, mirrors, razors, ear-cleaners, cosmetics.

Skeletal studies suggest a generally reasonable diet with the usual ancient problems — worn teeth from grit in stone-ground flour, arthritis, healed fractures. There is some evidence of differences in health between burial groups, which hints at inequality, but the sample is small and the conclusions are cautious.

REMEMBER THIS

Wheat, barley, pulses, sesame — and **cotton**, the world's earliest, grown in and around Punjab.

No clear evidence of the horse in mature Harappan sites. Remember this. It becomes the front line of the biggest argument in Indian history in Part 3.

Craft work was superb: **carnelian beads** taking over a week each to drill, shell bangles, faience, lost-wax bronze.

They traded with **Mesopotamia**, who called them **Meluhha** and even employed an interpreter for their language.

We know what foreigners called them. We do not know what they called themselves.

CHAPTER SEVEN

What Did They Believe?

No temples. No gods anyone can name. No prayers, because we cannot read. Everything in this chapter is guesswork built on a handful of objects — and this is the chapter where guesswork gets least honest.

7.1 — The size of the problem

For Egypt, religion is easy. There are temples, painted tomb walls, named gods with named jobs, and mountains of readable text explaining exactly what happens after you die.

For Harappa there is: some small clay figures, some seals with strange scenes, some tanks and platforms of unknown purpose, and burials.

That is all. Everything you have ever read about Harappan religion is interpretation of those four things.

7.2 — The seal called Pashupati

One seal from Mohenjo-daro is more famous than all the others put together.

It shows a figure seated in a posture with the legs bent and the heels together. The figure has an elaborate horned headdress. Around it are animals — an elephant, a tiger, a rhinoceros, a buffalo, and deer below.

John Marshall called it a **proto-Shiva**, and it is widely known as the **Pashupati seal** — "lord of animals", a title of Shiva.

The argument for the identification is a set of resemblances to the later god Shiva: seated in something like a yoga posture, surrounded by animals as a lord of beasts, with what some read as three faces and possibly an erect phallus. Shiva is associated with all of these.

THE ARGUMENT — IS THE PASHUPATI SEAL A PROTO-SHIVA?

The case for

The resemblances are several and specific, not one loose similarity. Yogic posture, lordship over animals, possible three faces, possible horns, all matching a later god who has exactly those attributes. Shiva is often argued to be a non-Vedic deity absorbed into the mainstream later, which would fit a pre-Vedic origin. And there is real cultural continuity in this region across long periods.

The case against

The posture may be a sitting position, not yoga. Similar seated figures appear in Mesopotamian and Elamite art with no yogic meaning.

"Lord of animals" is a near-universal motif. Figures flanked by beasts appear across the ancient world from Mesopotamia to Europe. It is one of the commonest images in early art, and its presence proves nothing about a specific god.

The three faces are not clear. On an object this small and worn, what looks like faces may be a headdress or damage. Some scholars see a buffalo mask.

It might not be a god. It could be a person, a chieftain, a mythical hero, a ritual performer in a mask, or a scene from a story we will never know.

Above all: this is reading backwards. We are matching an object from 2500 BCE against a god described in texts written a thousand or more years later, using the later text to interpret the earlier object.

Where things stand: the proto-Shiva reading is widely repeated in popular writing and treated with real caution in specialist work. Most careful scholars now describe it neutrally as the "seated figure seal" or "the horned deity seal".

The fair position: it may show a deity. That deity may have contributed something to what later became Shiva. Neither can be shown, and the confident version you will meet online is not supported by what is actually on the stone.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The whole chapter turns on one habit of mind, so let me name it as clearly as I can.

Reading backwards: using a later, well-documented thing to explain an earlier, undocumented thing, because the later thing is the only guide you have.

It is not stupid. Sometimes it is right — cultures do keep things for a long time. But it has a built-in failure that is very hard to see from the inside: **it can only ever find what you already know to look for.**

If you approach the Harappans holding Hinduism in your hand, you will find bits of Hinduism, because you will recognise those bits and pass over everything else as unidentifiable. The parts of their religion that survived into later times will glow. The parts that died with them — which may have been most of it — will be invisible.

Turn it round and see how strange it is. Suppose someone three thousand years from now finds a cross-shaped ornament in the rubble of a modern Indian city and concludes the whole society was Christian. The object is real. The reasoning is not.

The safest reading of the Harappan evidence is that we are looking at a religion we do not recognise and have no name for. That is unsatisfying. It is also probably true.

7.3 — The figurines

Harappan sites produce large numbers of small clay figures, many of them female, often with elaborate headdresses and jewellery. These are traditionally called "**mother goddesses**" and read as evidence of a fertility cult.

The same caution applies, and here the counter-argument is stronger than most people realise.

Points against the goddess reading: the figures are found in ordinary domestic rubbish, not in special deposits or shrines. They are crudely made. There are male figures, animal figures, and figures that are hard to sex, in the same contexts. And — this is the one that gives people pause — a small clay figure of a person found in a house might simply be a **doll**. Children have always had them.

Points for it: there are a lot of them, some are elaborately decorated, and some have smoke-blackening on the head which has been read as a small lamp or offering. Household religion is real and normally leaves exactly this kind of trace — modest objects in ordinary homes.

Fair summary: some were probably religious. Some were probably toys. Some were probably both, since that distinction may not have existed for them. Calling the whole category "mother goddesses" decides the question by naming it — the same trap as the Priest-King.

7.4 — The burials

Harappan burial is usually a body laid out flat on its back, in a simple grave pit, oriented roughly north-south, with a few pots and occasionally personal ornaments.

What matters is what is **not** there. No spectacular tombs. No mass of grave wealth. No sacrificed servants or animals. No pyramid, no ziggurat, no royal necropolis.

Compare the tomb of Tutankhamun — a minor pharaoh who died young, buried with a solid gold coffin, a gold mask and thousands of objects — with the burials of a civilisation larger than Egypt, which contain some pots.

Two readings are possible, and both are respectable. Either Harappan society was genuinely less unequal in death than its contemporaries. Or its elites were disposed of some other way — cremation, river disposal, exposure — that leaves nothing to dig up. Both are live. Note that later South Asian practice leans heavily towards cremation, which would leave almost no trace at all.

7.5 — Fire altars, and a word about wanting

At Kalibangan, and at a few other sites, excavators found rows of brick-lined pits containing ash, charcoal and small clay objects. These have been described as **fire altars** and connected to later Vedic fire ritual.

If that is right, it is a significant link between Harappan and Vedic practice.

The objection is straightforward: a pit with ash in it is a pit with ash in it. Cooking hearths, industrial hearths, rubbish burning and ritual fire can all leave similar traces, and telling them apart requires evidence — residue analysis, the position of the pits, what is around them — rather than resemblance.

This one is genuinely undecided, and it deserves better excavation rather than louder argument.

REMEMBER THIS

No temples have been identified. No god can be named. Nothing can be read. Everything about Harappan religion is interpretation of a few objects.

The famous **Pashupati seal** may or may not show an early form of Shiva. The evidence is much weaker than popular accounts suggest.

The **"mother goddess" figurines** come from household rubbish. Some may be religious. Some may be dolls.

Burials are **modest and fairly equal** — either a real feature of the society, or a sign that elites were cremated and left nothing behind.

The biggest danger in this chapter is reading backwards: using later Hinduism to explain earlier objects, and so only ever finding what you already knew.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Saraswati Question

In Part 1 I promised to come back to the river that vanished. Here it is: a dry channel, an ancient hymn, hundreds of settlements, some difficult geology, and one of the most politically loaded arguments in Indian history.

8.1 — The facts everyone agrees on

Start with what is not in dispute. There is quite a lot of it.

One. There is a dry riverbed. Running roughly parallel to the Indus, east of it, through Haryana, Rajasthan and Cholistan in Pakistan, there is the visible bed of a large ancient river. It is called the **Ghaggar** in India and the **Hakra** in Pakistan. Today it carries only seasonal water and dies in the desert. Satellite imagery shows the old channel clearly, in places several kilometres wide.

Two. Harappan sites cluster along it — heavily. A very large proportion of known Harappan settlements sit along this dry channel rather than along the Indus. Ganweriwala, one of the largest sites, is on it. Kalibangan and Banawali are on it. Rakhigarhi is in its wider system.

Three. The Rigveda describes a river called the Saraswati. It is praised in the highest terms — as great among rivers, as flowing from the mountain to the sea. It is named alongside other rivers in a sequence that places it between the Yamuna and the Sutlej, which is roughly where the Ghaggar-Hakra is.

Four. Later texts describe the Saraswati as disappearing. The Mahabharata and other later works refer to the river vanishing into the sands at a place called Vinashana.

Those four facts, put side by side, make an obvious story: the Saraswati was the Ghaggar-Hakra, it was mighty, the Harappans lived along it, it dried up, and that is why the cities died.

It is a good story. The trouble is in the timing.

8.2 — What the geology says

WORD BOX

Palaeochannel: the buried or dried-up bed of a river that no longer flows there. From Greek *palaios*, "ancient".

Provenance analysis: working out where sand and sediment originally came from, by examining the tiny mineral grains in it. Different mountains produce different mineral signatures, so a grain of sand carries a fingerprint of its home. This lets geologists tell whether a river was fed by Himalayan glaciers or only by local rain.

Luminescence dating: a method that measures how long a grain of sand has been buried away from sunlight, giving a date for when the sediment was laid down.

Geologists have drilled the Ghaggar-Hakra channel, dated the sediments, and traced where the sand came from. Several major studies over the past fifteen years have converged on a picture, and it does not fit the obvious story.

The findings, in plain terms:

- The channel **was once fed by a large Himalayan river**. That much is confirmed — the mineral fingerprints in the deeper sediments point to Himalayan sources, carried by the ancestral Sutlej and possibly the Yamuna.
- But those connections were **lost long before the Harappan cities**. The dating suggests the Sutlej swung away from this channel thousands of years earlier — estimates of several thousand years before the mature Harappan period.
- During the **mature Harappan period itself**, the evidence suggests the Ghaggar-Hakra was a **monsoon-fed seasonal river**, not a glacier-fed perennial one. Substantial in a good year. Not a giant.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS THE SARASWATI A MIGHTY RIVER IN HARAPPAN TIMES?

The "mighty river" case

The channel is enormously wide in places, which suggests a large flow. The Rigveda's praise is specific and emphatic. The sheer density of large settlements along it implies a reliable water supply capable of supporting cities. Some dating results are contested and the sampling is patchy — a handful of cores cannot fully characterise a river system a thousand kilometres long. And oral tradition can preserve real memory of a landscape over long periods.

The "seasonal river" case

Sediment provenance is a physical measurement, not an interpretation: the mineral grains from the Harappan-period layers do not carry the Himalayan glacial signature. Multiple independent studies using different methods have reached compatible conclusions. A wide channel records the river's *past* size, not its size at any one moment — a large old bed can carry a small modern stream, which is exactly what the Ghaggar does now.

And there is a striking twist: a monsoon-fed river may be **better** for settlement than a glacier-fed one. Himalayan rivers flood violently and change course. A steadier seasonal river is more predictable and safer to build beside — which would explain why so many towns are here rather than on the wild Indus.

Where things stand: the geological consensus has moved firmly towards the seasonal-river picture over the last decade. It is not unanimous and sampling is genuinely limited, so this could shift.

What is agreed by everyone: a substantial river system did run here; large numbers of Harappans lived along it; and it dried up. The dispute is about how big it was *during* the Harappan period and whether it was glacier-fed.

What would settle it: far more dated cores along the whole length of the channel, especially in Pakistan, where far less work has been done.

8.3 — Why this argument is so heated

You may be wondering why a question about sediment dating produces such anger.

It is because of what it is attached to.

If the Saraswati of the Rigveda was a mighty river during the Harappan period, then the people who composed the Rigveda were plausibly there, at that time, watching that river. That would make the Harappans and the Vedic people the same population — and Indian civilisation continuous and home-grown, with no significant arrival from outside.

If the Ghaggar-Hakra was already a modest seasonal river by then, the Rigvedic descriptions either refer to a much older memory, or to a different river, or are poetic praise rather than geography. That leaves room for Indo-Aryan speakers arriving later, from outside — which is the mainstream position and is politically unwelcome to many.

So the name "Indus-Saraswati Civilisation" from Chapter 1 is not a neutral label. It carries this whole argument inside it.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Two assumptions run underneath this debate, and almost nobody states them.

First: that a name in a text must refer to the thing we now attach that name to.

River names move. People carry names with them and reuse them for new places — the world is full of new Yorks, new Delhis and new Amsterdams. A hymn praising a Saraswati is not automatically praising *this* channel.

Second: that praise poetry is geography. The Rigveda is religious poetry, not a survey report. When a hymn calls a river greatest among rivers and says it flows from mountain to sea, that may be description — or it may be the ordinary language of devotion. We do not read "my love is a red rose" as botany.

Neither assumption is necessarily wrong. Both are usually invisible, and both do enormous work in the argument.

And one more, aimed at everyone including me: the question "were the Harappans the ancestors of today's Indians?" often means "are we the same as them?" — and that is not really an archaeological question. Populations mix constantly. Ancient DNA shows that almost everyone in South Asia today carries

ancestry from several ancient sources, including Harappan-related ancestry. **The honest answer to "are they us?" is: partly, along with several other groups, and this is true of nearly every population on Earth.**

REMEMBER THIS

A large river once ran east of the Indus, through what is now Haryana, Rajasthan and Cholistan. Its dry bed is the **Ghaggar-Hakra**, and huge numbers of Harappan sites sit along it.

The **Rigveda** praises a great river called the **Saraswati** in roughly that position, and later texts say it vanished into the sand.

Geology says the **Himalayan feed was cut off long before the Harappan cities**, and that during Harappan times it was a **monsoon-fed seasonal river** — possibly a better neighbour than a violent glacier-fed one.

The argument is fierce because it decides whether the Harappans and the Vedic people were **the same population**.

Everyone agrees a river ran there and dried up. The fight is over how big it was, and when.

CHAPTER NINE

Why Did It End?

Six explanations have been offered. One was believed for decades and turned out to be badly wrong. The current answer is less dramatic than any of them, and it changes what the question should have been.

9.1 — What actually happened

First, be precise about what needs explaining, because most accounts get this wrong from the start.

Between roughly 1900 and 1700 BCE, over several generations:

- The big cities lost population and were gradually abandoned.
- Municipal upkeep stopped — drains blocked, streets were built over, standards of construction fell.
- The weight system stopped being used.
- The script disappeared.
- Long-distance trade with Mesopotamia fell away.
- Seals stopped being made.

But note carefully what did **not** happen:

- The population did not disappear. Settlements continue in large numbers, especially eastward, towards the Yamuna and the upper Ganga plain.
- Farming continued. Crops continued. Pottery traditions continued in modified form.
- There is no layer of burning and destruction across the sites.
- There are no mass graves of war dead.

So this is **the end of cities and of a shared standard system** — not the end of a people. That distinction runs through everything below.

9.2 — The theory that was wrong

For much of the twentieth century the standard explanation was **invasion**.

The archaeologist Mortimer Wheeler found groups of skeletons in the upper levels at Mohenjo-daro, some apparently lying where they fell. He connected them with passages in the Rigveda in which the god Indra destroys fortified places, and concluded that Aryan invaders had stormed the cities. He wrote that Indra stood accused.

It is a vivid image and it went into textbooks worldwide. It is now rejected by essentially all specialists. Here is why.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The skeletons were re-examined in detail by later researchers, and the case fell apart on several independent grounds.

They are not contemporaneous. The bodies come from different levels and different periods. They were not killed together in one event.

Most show no injuries. A massacre leaves cut marks, crushing injuries, arrow damage. Most of these skeletons show none.

Some had been buried properly. Not left where they fell.

The city was largely empty already. The layers show decline before the period the skeletons come from. There was no thriving city to storm.

And there is nothing else. No destruction layer. No weapons in the streets. No burnt gates. No invader settlement built on top. A conquest leaves a great deal of physical evidence, and none of it is there.

This is a model case of how the discipline is supposed to work. A dramatic claim, made by a respected figure, matching the political assumptions of its time, examined properly, and abandoned. Keep it in mind for Part 3, where the descendants of this argument are still being fought over.

9.3 — The theories still standing

THE ARGUMENT — WHAT ENDED THE HARAPPAN CITIES?

1. Climate — a long drying

Records from lake sediments, cave deposits and ocean cores show a significant weakening of the monsoon across a wide region in the centuries around 2200–1900 BCE. Less rain means smaller harvests, and a city depends absolutely on a food surplus from its countryside. **Strength:** the timing lines up well, the evidence is independent of archaeology, and the same climatic event coincides with severe trouble in Egypt and Mesopotamia. This is currently the leading factor. **Weakness:** people adapt to drought; it explains pressure better than it explains the loss of writing and standards.

2. Rivers moving

As Part 1 explained, rivers on flat land shift course. If the water moved away from a city, the city was finished regardless of anything else. The drying of the Ghaggar-Hakra system fits here. **Strength:** mechanically certain to kill individual settlements, and there is direct evidence of channel change. **Weakness:** hard to explain a simultaneous region-wide collapse, since rivers shift at different times in different places.

3. Trade collapse

Mesopotamia went through its own upheavals in this period, and references to Meluhha fade from its records. If a significant part of the urban economy rested on long-distance trade, losing that market would hit the cities hardest and the villages least. **Strength:** would explain why *cities* specifically failed while rural life continued. **Weakness:** probably not big enough on its own to bring down a whole civilisation.

4. Disease

Some skeletal evidence has been read as showing increased infectious disease in the later period. Dense cities with shared water are vulnerable.

Strength: plausible; cities are disease amplifiers. **Weakness:** the evidence is thin and the samples are small. This is a possibility, not a finding.

5. Not a collapse at all — a transformation

The cities ended, but the people did not. Settlement shifted east into better-watered land towards the Ganga-Yamuna region, and society reorganised into smaller units. On this reading nothing was destroyed; a particular *way of living* stopped being worth the effort. **Strength:** matches the archaeology best. Late Harappan settlements are numerous, and the population appears to move rather than vanish.

Where things stand: the field has moved decisively away from single-cause explanations. The current mainstream view combines them: **a long drying climate weakened the agricultural base, rivers shifted, trade contracted, and the elaborate urban system stopped being sustainable.** People adapted by dispersing eastward and living in smaller settlements.

What would sharpen it: more precisely dated local climate records, and more excavation of Late Harappan sites, which have been badly neglected because they are less spectacular.

The reframing that matters: the question should not be "what killed them?" It should be "why did people stop finding it worth living in cities?" Cities are expensive. They need surplus, coordination and maintenance. When the return falls below the cost, people leave — and that is not a catastrophe, it is a decision, made by many people separately over a century or two.

9.4 — What the DNA says

One more strand, because it is recent and it matters.

Ancient DNA is difficult to recover in hot climates, where it degrades fast. Despite that, a genome has been sequenced from a Harappan-period individual buried at **Rakhigarhi** in Haryana.

The results, stated carefully:

- The ancestry is a mixture of an **Iranian-related** component — from a lineage that separated early, before farming began in the Near East — and an **indigenous South Asian** hunter-gatherer component.
- **No Steppe ancestry** was found. Steppe ancestry is associated with Indo-European-speaking populations from Central Asia and is widely present in South Asia today.
- **No Anatolian farmer ancestry** was found, which argues against farming having been brought into the region by a large migration of Near Eastern farmers.

What this supports: the Harappans were largely local in origin, and Steppe-related ancestry entered South Asia mainly *after* the Harappan period. Both of those are relevant to Part 3.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Ancient DNA results get quoted with far more confidence than they deserve, in every direction. Two cautions.

One genome is one person. A single individual cannot represent a civilisation of a million-plus people spread over 1.5 million square kilometres. It would be like sequencing one person from Chandigarh and reporting the genetics of India.

Genes are not language and not culture. This is the big one. People change language without changing ancestry all the time — most of India speaks a language its ancestors did not speak two thousand years ago, and English is now spoken by hundreds of millions with no English ancestry whatsoever. Finding or not finding a genetic signature does not directly answer a question about who spoke what.

The result above is real, careful work and genuinely informative. It is also one skeleton, and it cannot bear the weight that public argument piles onto it.

REMEMBER THIS

Between about **1900 and 1700 BCE** the cities emptied, standards broke down, and the script disappeared — **but the people did not vanish**. They moved east and lived in smaller settlements.

The old **invasion theory is dead**. The "massacre" skeletons at Mohenjo-daro were from different periods, mostly uninjured, some properly buried, in a city that was already emptying.

The current view is a **combination**: a drying climate, shifting rivers, and contracting trade made a costly urban system no longer worth maintaining.

DNA from **Rakhigarhi** shows local ancestry with **no Steppe component** — but it is one individual, and genes are not language.

The better question is not "what killed them?" but "why did cities stop being worth it?"

CHAPTER TEN

An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

This part contains more uncertainty than Part 1 did. Here is exactly where it sits.

Genuinely unknown

- **What they wrote.** Not one sign has an agreed meaning.
- **What language they spoke.** Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, Munda, or something extinct.
- **Whether the script is writing at all.** Probably, not certainly.
- **Who governed, and how.** Five competing models, no decisive evidence.
- **What they believed.** No temple, no god, no readable prayer.
- **What they called themselves.** We only have the Mesopotamian name, Meluhha.
- **Whether the "citadel", the "granary", the "Great Bath" and the "priest-king" are anything like what those names claim.**
- **How unequal the society was.** Modest burials point one way; craft time and house sizes hint another.
- **The exact size and behaviour of the Ghaggar-Hakra during the Harappan period.**
- **Why cities were abandoned** — the combination is agreed, the weighting of each factor is not.
- **What is in the ninety-five per cent of the area that has never been excavated, including nearly all of Ganweriwala.**

Solid

- The civilisation existed, covered roughly 1.5 million square kilometres, and peaked between about 2600 and 1900 BCE.

- Cities were planned on grids and aligned to the compass.
- Bricks followed a 1:2:4 ratio across the whole region.
- Covered street drains connected to bathing floors in ordinary houses.
- Weights were standardised in a doubling series and are consistent across hundreds of kilometres. This is a physical measurement.
- They grew and wove cotton — the earliest known anywhere.
- They traded with Mesopotamia, who called them Meluhha.
- Around four thousand short inscriptions survive, undeciphered.
- No palace, royal tomb, royal inscription or ruler's name has ever been found.
- The cities were not destroyed by invasion.
- Late Harappan settlement continued and shifted eastward.

A CLOSING WORD ON CERTAINTY

Notice how much longer the first list is than the second.

That is the honest state of the subject, and it is worth saying plainly because you will meet a great deal of writing about Harappa — books, videos, social media, sometimes textbooks — that speaks with total confidence about matters in the first list.

When you meet a confident claim about the Harappans, ask one question: **which list is this on?**

If it is about bricks, drains, weights, crops or trade, confidence is reasonable. If it is about gods, kings, language, ethnicity or who the modern descendants are, confidence is not available — and someone offering it is telling you about themselves, not about the Harappans.

REFERENCE

Timeline of Part 2

All dates approximate. Researchers disagree over the boundaries between phases.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
c. 7000 BCE	Farming established at Mehrgarh. <i>Where Part 1 ended.</i>
c. 4000 – 3300 BCE	Hakra ware villages across Punjab, Haryana and Cholistan.
c. 3300 – 2600 BCE	Early Harappan. Walled towns, regional pottery, early trade. No script, no cities yet.
c. 2800 BCE	Ploughed field at Kalibangan, beneath the later town.
c. 2600 BCE	Mature Harappan begins. Cities, grid plans, standard bricks and weights, the script, seals.
c. 2500 – 2000 BCE	Peak. Trade with Mesopotamia; Meluhha appears in Sumerian and Akkadian records.
c. 2200 BCE	A major drying episode affects a wide belt from the Mediterranean to South Asia. Monsoon weakens.
c. 1900 BCE	Mature period ends. Cities begin emptying. Standards, seals and script fall out of use.
c. 1900 – 1300 BCE	Late Harappan. Smaller settlements; population shifts east towards the Yamuna and upper Ganga. Bara ware in Punjab.
c. 1500 BCE onwards	Composition of the Rigveda begins. Part 3 starts here.
1829 CE	Charles Masson describes the ruins at Harappa without understanding them.
1850s CE	Harappan bricks used as ballast for the Lahore–Multan railway.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
1873 CE	Alexander Cunningham publishes an Indus seal and assumes it is foreign.
1921 CE	Daya Ram Sahni begins excavating Harappa.
1922 CE	R. D. Banerji finds the older city beneath Mohenjo-daro.
1924 CE	John Marshall announces the civilisation to the world.
1947 CE	Mortimer Wheeler proposes the invasion theory. Later overturned.
2004 CE	Published challenge to the idea that the Indus signs are writing at all.
2019 CE	First Harappan genome published, from a burial at Rakhigarhi.

REFERENCE

Glossary

Every hard word used in Part 2, in plain English.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Archaeology	Studying the human past through the physical things people left behind.
Bitumen	Natural black tar. Waterproof. Used to seal the Great Bath.
Cardinal alignment	Lined up with north, south, east and west rather than randomly.
Carnelian	A hard orange-red stone, prized for beads. Very difficult to drill.
Citadel	The raised western part of a Harappan city. The name implies a fortress; that is an assumption, not a finding.
Faience	A glassy ceramic made from crushed quartz, coloured and fired.
Ghaggar-Hakra	The dry river channel east of the Indus. Ghaggar in India, Hakra in Pakistan. Identified by many with the Saraswati.
Grid plan	Streets laid out in straight lines crossing at right angles.
Heterarchy	A society where different groups hold different kinds of authority and none is supreme. The opposite of a pyramid of command.
Lost-wax casting	Making a metal figure by modelling it in wax, covering it in clay, melting the wax out and pouring metal into the space.
Luminescence dating	Measuring how long a sand grain has been buried away from sunlight.
Meluhha	The Mesopotamian name for the Harappan region. The only name for them recorded by anyone who could write.
Palaeochannel	The dried-up or buried bed of a river that no longer flows there.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Provenance analysis	Working out where sediment originally came from by examining its mineral grains.
Reading backwards	Using a later, well-documented thing to explain an earlier, undocumented one. Tempting, sometimes right, and structurally unable to find anything you did not already expect.
Script vs language	A script is the set of written signs. A language is the speech recorded. The same script can write many languages.
Seal	A small carved stamp, pressed into wet clay to leave a mark of ownership or authority.
Steatite	Soapstone. Soft to carve, hardens when fired. What most seals are made of.
Steppe ancestry	A genetic component originating in the grasslands of Central Asia, associated with Indo-European-speaking populations.
Tell / mound	An artificial hill formed by centuries of building, collapse and rebuilding on the same spot.
Type site	The first or defining site of an archaeological culture, which gives the culture its name.

ABOUT

About the Author

Lovepreet Singh

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CURRENTLY

Second-year MBA, Panjab University — Business Strategy and Analysis, specialising in Business Intelligence

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Lovepreet Singh is a researcher and writer working toward doctoral research. He writes long-form work on Indian history, society, religion, philosophy, public policy and technology — built from the record, in plain language, with the competing views left in.

His background is not in a history department, and he thinks that is worth saying plainly. He came to this subject the way most people do: from the outside, wanting to understand the place he is from, and finding that the good books were unreadable and the readable books were thin.

What he brought instead was the habit of his own training — the analyst's discipline of asking what the data actually supports, where a claim is really coming from, and which assumptions are doing the quiet work underneath an argument. That discipline runs through every chapter of this series. It is why almost every chapter has a box labelled *The Hidden Assumption*, and it is the part of this work he is most attached to.

The Living Archive

This series belongs to a larger project. The Living Archive is a body of long-form research on history, society, religion, public policy and technology, published openly and free to read at misterlove.in.

- **Plain language.** Hard ideas explained in ordinary words, with nothing left out to make them fit.
- **Evidence first.** Show the thing itself, and be clear about what it can and cannot prove.
- **Competing views.** Where the field disagrees, both sides get their strongest case. Open questions stay open.

A word on sources

This is written for general readers, so it carries no footnotes. It is a synthesis of the published scholarly record — archaeology, geology, genetics, epigraphy and history — rather than new primary research, and it does not claim otherwise. Where that record is contested, the contest is shown rather than smoothed over. Where it is thin, Chapter 10 says so.

Corrections are genuinely welcome. If you find an error, or think an argument has been given less than its best case, write to the address above — later editions will say what was changed and who caught it.

WHAT COMES NEXT

Part 3 — The Vedic Age and the Aryan Question

Part 3 is the hardest and most contested part of this entire series. It covers the composition of the Rigveda in the land of the seven rivers, the society it describes, the emergence of caste, and the Battle of the Ten Kings fought on the Ravi.

And it takes on the Aryan question directly — the argument over whether Indo-Aryan speakers migrated into South Asia, or were always here.

Among the questions it takes on:

- What does "Aryan" actually mean in the Rigveda — a people, a language group, or a way of behaving? And how did a Sanskrit word end up in Nazi Germany?
- The **linguistic evidence**: why almost all linguists think Sanskrit is related to Greek, Latin, Persian and English, what that relationship implies, and what it does not.
- The **genetic evidence**: what Steppe ancestry is, when it appears in South Asia, and the difference between what the data shows and what people claim it shows.
- **Invasion, migration, or nothing at all?** Three positions, each given its strongest case.
- Why the **horse and the spoked wheel** from Chapter 6 decide more than they should.
- How **varna** — the four-fold division — appears, and what the Rigveda actually says about it versus what later texts say.



END OF PART 2 OF 14

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THE LIVING ARCHIVE

PART THREE OF FOURTEEN

The Complete History of Punjab

Part Three — The Vedic Age and the Aryan Question

A book of hymns that was never written down, a battle fought on the Ravi, and the first appearance of the four-fold order that became caste. Plus the longest and angriest argument in Indian history — invasion, migration, or nothing at all — with every side given its strongest case and no side chosen for you.

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

Lovepreet Singh

C. 2000 – 600 BCE

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BEFORE WE BEGIN

Where We Left Off

A short recap for anyone starting here, a reminder of what the coloured boxes mean, and a warning that this part needs more than the others.

Part 2 was about a civilisation that vanished. The Harappans built brick cities across a million square kilometres, laid covered drains under their streets, cut standardised weights accurate to a fraction of a gram, and traded with Mesopotamia. Then, between about 1900 and 1300 BCE, the cities emptied out. Not burned. Not sacked. Just left.

Part 2 also ended on a set of loose threads, and it said so plainly. The script is still unread, so we cannot hear the Harappans in their own words. Nobody has found a king, a palace or a temple anybody can prove is a temple. The horse is missing from the bones. And a nineteenth-century theory that fair-skinned invaders rode in and smashed the cities was examined properly in the twentieth century and thrown away, because the evidence for it was not there.

Every one of those threads leads into this part.

Because roughly at the moment the last Harappan cities were being abandoned, something else appears in Punjab. Not a city. Not a building. A **book** — though it was not a book yet, because nobody wrote it down for a very long time. A collection of 1,028 hymns in an early form of Sanskrit, addressed to gods, composed by priests, memorised word for word and passed mouth to ear for centuries before anyone put ink on anything.

That collection is the **Rigveda**. It was composed in Punjab. It names our rivers. It describes a fight on the Ravi. It is the oldest surviving text in any Indo-European language, and it is the single most argued-over document in Indian history.

Part 3 is about the Rigveda, the world it seems to describe, and the question that hangs over all of it: **where did the people who composed it come from?**

What the boxes mean

Six kinds of coloured box run through this series. Each does one job. If you read nothing else, read the black ones.

- **Word Box** (slate blue) — explains a hard word the moment it first appears. You never have to already know something.
- **In Real Terms** (moss green) — turns a number or an idea you cannot picture into something ordinary.
- **How We Actually Know This** (sepia) — shows the evidence itself. The bone, the brick, the verse, the measurement. And what it can and cannot prove.
- **The Argument** (ochre) — where the experts disagree. Each side gets its strongest case, not a weak version I can knock over. Then a plain statement of where things stand and what would settle it.
- **The Hidden Assumption** (plum) — digs out something everybody takes for granted without proving. This is the part of the series I am most attached to.
- **Remember This** (dark) — closes every chapter with the key points in the plainest words I can find.

A warning specific to this part

This is the hardest part of the fourteen, and not because the material is complicated. It is hard because it is **live**.

The question of where Sanskrit speakers came from is not a quiet academic matter in India today. It sits underneath arguments about who is native and who is foreign, whose ancestors built what, and who has the better claim to the place. People shout about it. Books are written to prove a side. Governments have opinions.

So let me say very clearly what I am doing here, and what I am not.

I am not going to pick a side for you. I am going to lay out three positions — invasion, migration, and indigenous origin — and give each one the best case its own supporters would give. Then I will tell you what the evidence physically is, what it genuinely supports, and where each side is guessing. Where the evidence points somewhere, I will say so. Where it does not reach, I will say that too.

And I will separate two questions that get welded together and should not be.

The first is **evidential**: what happened, when, and how do we know? That question has answers, some firm, many not.

The second is about **identity**: are they us? That question feels like it depends on the first one. It does not. Populations mix constantly, everywhere, always. The honest answer to "are they us?" is: partly, along with several other groups, and this is true of nearly every population on Earth.

One more thing. As you read this part, notice which claims you find yourself **hoping** are true. That is not a criticism. Everybody does it, including me, including every scholar in every footnote I have read. But it is useful information. The place where you are hoping is the place where you are least reliable, and it is worth marking on your own map.



What Is In Part 3

Chapter 1 — The Book That Is Not a History Book

What the Rigveda physically is · How you keep a book without paper · Why praise poetry is the worst kind of evidence · How old is it? · What the layers tell us

Chapter 2 — The Land of Seven Rivers

The river hymn · Mapping the names onto the ground · What is in the world of the hymns · What is missing from it · The mountains and what lies beyond them

Chapter 3 — What "Aryan" Actually Means

The word in the text · The dasa and the dasyu · The verses about colour · The word travels west · How it became a race · Müller's protest

Chapter 4 — The Family of Languages

Jones in Calcutta · Father, pitar, pater · Why the pattern cannot be luck · Building a language nobody spoke · Words as a time machine · Where was the homeland? · What this does not prove

Chapter 5 — The Horse and the Wheel

A book soaked in horses · Why a horse bone is hard to name · Surkotada · The spoked wheel and the chariot · Sintashta · The seal that was doctored

Chapter 6 — What the Genes Say

Reading a four-thousand-year-old bone · The two ancient ingredients · Rakhigarhi · Steppe ancestry and when it arrives · Why it sits on the male line · The objections that have force

Chapter 7 — Invasion, Migration, or Nothing at All

Three positions, not two · The invasion theory and its collapse · What migration actually claims · The indigenous case at full strength · Where things stand · Why people care so much

Chapter 8 — The Battle of the Ten Kings

The only battle we have · Sudas and the Bharatas · Two priests · The river that was turned · Who the ten kings were · How much of this happened · Why a small fight matters

Chapter 9 — How Varna Began

One hymn, late in the book · What varna means · The move east · Iron, and the first kingdoms · The law books harden it · Varna is not jati

Chapter 10 — An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

Genuinely unknown · Solid

Reference — Timeline · Glossary · About the Author · What comes next

CHAPTER ONE

The Book That Is Not a History Book

Everything in this part rests on one source. Before we ask what it tells us, we have to be honest about what kind of thing it is — and what kind of thing it is not.

1.1 — What the Rigveda actually is

Start with the physical facts, because they are not in dispute.

The Rigveda is a collection of 1,028 hymns. Each hymn is a set of verses — usually between three and about fifty. Added together the whole thing comes to a little over ten and a half thousand verses.

The hymns are grouped into ten books. Every hymn is addressed to a god, or to a group of gods, or to a thing treated as a god — fire, the dawn, a river, a plant. They are not stories about the gods. They are things said to the gods, out loud, during a ritual, by a priest who was being paid to say them.

That last sentence is the whole problem, and we will come back to it.

WORD BOX

Veda: a Sanskrit word meaning "knowledge". There are four Vedas. The Rigveda is the oldest by a long way. The other three — Samaveda, Yajurveda, Atharvaveda — came later and borrow heavily from it.

Rigveda: literally "the knowledge of praise verses". A *ric* is a verse of praise.

Mandala: one of the ten books. The word means "circle" or "cycle". When you see "Mandala 7" it just means "Book 7".

Sukta: a single hymn. So "Rigveda 7.18" means Book 7, hymn 18.

Vedic Sanskrit: the language it is in. It is an older form of Sanskrit than the classical language that came later — different enough that classical Sanskrit scholars have to learn it separately, the way an English speaker has to be taught to read Chaucer.

The hymns ask for things. Cattle. Sons. Victory in a fight. Rain. Long life. Safe passage across a river. They flatter the god first, remind him of favours he has done before, and then make the request. If you have ever written a careful email to someone whose help you need, you already know the structure.

They also contain, scattered through the requests, incidental details about the world the composers lived in. Rivers by name. Enemies by name. Animals, plants, metals, weapons, food, weather. Nobody put those details in on purpose. They fell in around the edges of the asking.

Those accidental edges are almost all the evidence we have for four hundred years of Punjab's history.

1.2 — How you keep a book without paper

Here is the thing most people find hardest to believe, and it is true.

For a very long time — centuries, possibly more than a thousand years — the Rigveda was not written down at all. Not on bark, not on palm leaf, not on clay. It existed only inside people's heads, and it moved from one head to the next by being said aloud and repeated back.

The oldest physical copies of the Rigveda that survive are manuscripts from around the eleventh century CE. The hymns are roughly three thousand years older than that.

Your first reaction should be suspicion. Mine was. Anything passed by word of mouth drifts. Play the whispering game with fifteen people and the sentence at the end is not the sentence at the start.

So how do we know the text did not drift?

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Because the people transmitting it knew about drift too, and built machinery to stop it.

They did not just memorise the hymns in order. They memorised them in **several orders at once**, each order a check on the others.

Take a line of four words: *A B C D*. One method has you recite it straight through. A second has you recite each word on its own, stripped of the sound changes that join words together. A third has you recite it in overlapping pairs — *AB, BC, CD*. A fourth has you go forwards and backwards through each pair — *AB, BA, AB, BC, CB, BC*. There is a fifth, harder still, that weaves the words in a fixed braid across the whole line.

A boy learning this started around seven or eight and was at it for years. He was taught the pitch of each syllable as well as the word, because pitch carried meaning and a wrong pitch was a wrong word.

What it proves: that a single slipped word breaks several patterns at once and is instantly audible to anyone else who knows the method. The redundancy is the error-check. It is the same trick a bank card number uses when the last digit is calculated from the others.

What it does not prove: that nothing at all was ever lost or added. It proves the text was locked down hard **from the point the system was in place**. What happened in the earliest generations, before the machinery existed, is not covered by any of this.

There is a second, independent check. Sanskrit grammar was analysed with extraordinary precision by later scholars, most famously Panini, several centuries BCE. Those grammarians could see that the language of the Rigveda was already archaic in their own time. They preserved forms they no longer used and could not have invented. A forger writing later would have written in his own grammar without noticing. The Rigveda's grammar is consistently older than the grammar of everyone who handled it.

IN REAL TERMS

Ten and a half thousand verses is hard to feel. Try this.

If you memorised **ten verses a day** — perfectly, with the pitch right, never missing a day — it would take you a little under **three years** to get through the Rigveda once.

The men who did this were expected to hold the whole thing. Then teach it. Some families did this, generation after generation, for roughly a hundred generations.

In 2008 UNESCO put Vedic chanting on its list of humanity's intangible heritage. It is, as a feat of engineering, on the same shelf as a cathedral. It just happens to be made of people.

1.3 — Why praise poetry is the worst kind of evidence

Now the hard part.

Suppose the only surviving document from twentieth-century Punjab were a book of songs sung at weddings. You would learn a lot from it. What people ate at feasts. What they thought a good marriage looked like. Which relatives mattered. The names of some villages.

You would also get a wildly distorted picture. You would think Punjabis spent most of their lives at weddings. You would have no idea about tractors, or courts, or how much anybody earned, or what the poor thought, because nobody sings about that at a wedding.

The Rigveda is that kind of document. It is liturgy, not reportage. It tells you what a small group of ritual specialists said to gods on important occasions. Everything else you get from it is accidental.

And the group is small. The composers were priests attached to chiefs. They were paid — often the hymn says what they were paid, in cows and horses and gold, and complains if the payment was thin. We are hearing from the professional religious class of the winning side, and from nobody else at all.

No farmer speaks in the Rigveda. No woman speaks in it more than a handful of times. Nobody on the losing side of any fight gets a line. Whole populations who were certainly there — the descendants of the Harappans, for a start — appear only as somebody else's enemy, if they appear at all.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

That a text tells you about the world it was made in.

This one is so automatic that it takes an effort to see it at all. We open an old text, read a description, and treat the description as a window. It is not a window. It is a statement made by somebody, for a purpose, to an audience.

A hymn that asks Indra for a thousand cattle is not evidence that anyone had a thousand cattle. It is evidence that a thousand cattle was a number worth wanting. A hymn that calls the enemy "noseless" and "of dark skin" is not a census. It is an insult, aimed at a god, about people the speaker was fighting.

Ask three questions of every verse in this part:

- **Who is speaking?** Almost always a paid priest.
- **To whom?** A god, in front of a patron who is watching.
- **What do they want?** Something. There is always something.

This does not make the Rigveda useless. It makes it usable in a particular way. The things the composers were **not** trying to tell us are the things we can most safely take — the river names, the grammar, the incidental furniture of the world. The things they **were** trying to tell us are the things to be most careful with.

And this cuts against every side in this part's argument. Both the people who want the Rigveda to record a migration and the people who want it to record an unbroken native tradition are reading a wish list as a record.

1.4 — How old is it?

There is no date in the Rigveda. Nobody in it says what year it is, because nobody in it had a calendar that would mean anything to us.

So the date is worked out sideways, from four directions.

Language. Vedic Sanskrit is very close to the language of the Avesta, the oldest Iranian sacred text — close enough that whole lines can be converted from one to the other by regular sound swaps. Two languages that similar were one language not very long before. That anchors the Rigveda to the Avesta, and the Avesta has its own rough dating.

A treaty in Syria. Around 1380 BCE, a kingdom called Mitanni in what is now northern Syria signed a treaty. The treaty calls on four gods to witness it: Mitra, Varuna, Indra and the Nasatyas. Those are Rigvedic gods, with Rigvedic names, in the right forms. Mitanni horse-training texts from the same region use Indo-Aryan number words. So a language extremely close to Rigvedic Sanskrit existed, far to the west of Punjab, by roughly 1400 BCE.

What the hymns contain. They know horses, spoked-wheel chariots, copper and bronze. They do not know iron. Iron becomes common in north India after about 1200 BCE. That gives a ceiling.

What the hymns do not contain. No cities. No writing. No mention of anything that reads like a functioning Harappan town. That points away from the mature Harappan period, which ended about 1900 BCE.

Put those together and most specialists land on roughly **1500 to 1200 BCE** for the bulk of the collection, with the oldest material possibly older and the last book clearly later. Some serious scholars push the start back towards 1700 or 1800 BCE. A smaller group argues for dates a thousand years earlier or more, on grounds we will meet in Chapter 7.

I will use "roughly 1500 to 1200 BCE" through this part, and I want you to hold it loosely. It is a reasoned estimate built from four indirect arguments, not a reading off a stone.

1.5 — What the layers tell us

One more thing, and it turns out to matter enormously.

The Rigveda is not all from one moment. Scholars have been able to sort it into rough layers, and the sorting is agreed across people who agree on almost nothing else.

Books 2 to 7 are the oldest core. They are called the family books, because each one is credited to a single priestly family and each is arranged by the same internal rules. Book 9 is a specialist collection about the ritual drink and sits slightly apart. Book 8 is mixed. **Books 1 and 10 are the latest** — their language is later, their arrangement is looser, and Book 10 in particular is where several famous hymns sit that sound nothing like the rest.

Why does this matter? Because if a hymn appears only in Book 10, it is late. And several of the things people most want to argue about — the four-fold division of society, the elaborate creation stories — appear only in Book 10.

Keep that in your pocket. We open it in Chapter 9.

REMEMBER THIS

The **Rigveda** is 1,028 hymns in ten books, a little over ten thousand verses, in an old form of Sanskrit. Every hymn is addressed to a god and asks for something.

It was **not written down for centuries**. It was memorised, using a system of overlapping recitation orders that acted as an error-check. That system is why the text we have is very close to the text they had — from the point the system existed.

It is **liturgy, not history**. It comes from paid priests on the winning side, speaking to gods, in front of patrons. Everything historical in it is accidental, and the accidental bits are the safest bits.

It dates to roughly **1500–1200 BCE**, worked out from four indirect arguments and not from any date in the text.

The oldest thing we have from Punjab is not a record of what happened. It is a record of what a few men wanted, and history has to be scraped off the edges of it.

CHAPTER TWO

The Land of Seven Rivers

The hymns keep naming rivers. Those names are the closest thing we have to a map — and the closest thing we have to proof that this book belongs to Punjab.

2.1 — The river hymn

In the tenth book there is a hymn that does nothing but praise rivers. It calls them by name, in order, and asks them to listen.

It is a strange little document. Most hymns want cattle or victory. This one just wants the rivers to know they are appreciated. And because the composer was showing off his geography rather than making a request, it is one of the most useful things in the entire collection.

The order runs from east to west. It starts with the Ganga and the Yamuna, moves through the Sarasvati and the Sutlej and the Ravi, and carries on west across the Indus and out the other side into rivers that are now in Afghanistan.

Elsewhere the hymns use a standing phrase for the region: *sapta sindhavah*, the **seven rivers**. That phrase is the composers' name for where they were.

WORD BOX

Sindhu: means both "river" in general and the Indus in particular. The Persians turned the *s* into an *h* and got *Hindu*. The Greeks dropped the *h* and got *Indos*. Every one of the words *Indus*, *India*, *Hindu* and *Hindi* is a foreigner's pronunciation of the Sanskrit word for that river.

Sapta Sindhavah: "the seven rivers". The same phrase turns up in the Iranian Avesta as *Hapta Hendu* — same words, Iranian sound rules — where it is listed as one of the lands. Two closely related peoples, both using the same name for this place.

2.2 — Putting the names on the ground

The names in the hymns are not the names on your phone's map. They were replaced, twice — once by later Sanskrit, once by Persian. But the chain of replacement is traceable, and most of the identifications are secure.

IN THE RIGVEDA	TODAY	HOW SURE
Sindhu	Indus	Certain
Vitasta	Jhelum	Certain
Asikni	Chenab	Certain
Parushni	Ravi	Very strong
Vipas	Beas	Certain — the modern name is the old one worn down
Shutudri	Sutlej	Certain
Sarasvati	Disputed — see Part 2, chapter 8	Contested
Kubha	Kabul river, Afghanistan	Strong
Suvastu	Swat river, Pakistan	Strong
Krumu	Kurram river	Strong
Gomati	Gomal river	Reasonable

Read the table as a shape rather than a list. The world of the Rigveda has its centre in Punjab, reaches west across the Indus into the valleys of eastern Afghanistan, touches the Ganga and Yamuna at its far eastern edge, and does not go south to the sea in any way that is clear.

That is a real result, and it is the one thing in this part that almost nobody disputes. **The Rigveda was composed here.** In the land Part 1 described — the alluvial plain between the mountains and the desert, watered by five rivers, with the passes at its back.

Note also how thin the eastern end is. The Ganga is named twice in the whole collection. The Yamuna a handful of times. Compare that with the Indus and the Sarasvati, which get whole hymns. The composers were westerners. The Ganga was a rumour at the edge of the world they knew — and in Chapter 9 we watch that change completely.

2.3 — What is in the world of the hymns

Now empty out the pockets of the text and see what falls out.

Animals. Cattle everywhere — cattle are wealth, cattle are the unit of value, cattle are what raids are for. Horses constantly. Sheep and goats. Dogs. Lions. The elephant appears, but the composers had no word ready for it: they call it "the beast with a hand". That is somebody describing a new animal to people who have not seen one.

Plants and food. Barley is the grain. Milk, curds, clarified butter. The ritual drink pressed from a plant nobody can now identify with certainty. Honey.

Metal. One word, *ayas*, meaning copper or bronze. Used for vessels, blades, armour.

Life. Herding, moving, raiding, racing chariots, gambling with dice, feasting, fighting over water and pasture, and giving very large gifts to priests in public.

IN REAL TERMS

Try to picture the difference between the Rigvedic world and the Harappan world of Part 2. It is not a difference of one step. It is a change of category.

A Harappan city was fired brick, laid out on a grid, with covered sewers, standardised weights and a script, holding perhaps thirty or forty thousand people in one place.

The Rigvedic world, as far as the hymns show it, is **mobile cattle-herding people organised around chiefs and priests**. Wealth is on the hoof. Politics is a chief and his relatives. The biggest building mentioned is a stronghold, and the composers are usually on the outside of it, asking a god to smash it.

If Harappa was a city, the Rigveda is a camp — a well-organised, wealthy, confident camp, with an extraordinary poetic tradition and no interest whatsoever in drains.

2.4 — What is missing

Now the harder list. Some of these absences are famous, and every one of them gets used as ammunition by somebody.

No iron. The single word *ayas* covers copper and bronze. When iron does arrive in Indian texts it gets a qualifier — "dark metal" — and that qualifier appears only in later works. This is the firmest dating handle we have.

No rice. Barley, yes. Rice does not appear in the Rigveda and turns up in the later Vedic texts, once the centre of gravity moves east into wetter country.

No cotton. The Harappans grew and wove cotton — it is one of their signature achievements. The Rigveda knows wool.

No writing. There is no word for writing, no scribe, no letter, no document. For a culture that had built the memorisation machinery of Chapter 1, this is not surprising. But it is worth noticing that they were sitting on top of the ruins of a society that had a script, and they say nothing about it.

No cities. There are strongholds — the word is *pur* — and Indra's favourite title is "fort-breaker". But what a *pur* physically was is genuinely unclear. Some are described as made of stone, some of metal, some as having a hundred walls, some as belonging to demons. It reads more like the language of a raider talking about defended places than a description of urban planning.

No tiger. Small thing, but a real one. The Rigveda knows lions and not tigers. Tigers appear in the later texts. Lions lived in the west and north-west; tigers in the wetter forests to the east. It is one more small arrow pointing at where these people were.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

That what a text does not mention did not exist.

This is called the argument from silence, and it is the most heavily used and least reliable tool in this entire part. Both sides swing it, constantly, and usually only notice the problem when the other side swings it back.

Look at how unstable it is. The Rigveda does not mention iron — and we treat that as solid evidence for a date before iron. The Rigveda does not mention cities — and we treat that as evidence these were not city people. But the Rigveda also does not mention cotton, which certainly existed in this region, and does not mention the sea in any clear way, and does not mention several things we know were there.

So which silences count?

A silence is meaningful only when you can show the text **would have had reason to speak**. Iron is a good case: these hymns care about weapons and metal constantly, so a metal they had and did not name is odd. Drains are a bad case: nothing in a hymn to Indra would ever require a drain.

That test is the whole of it. Before you accept any argument in this part built on something not being mentioned — and you will meet several, including the biggest one, about a horse — ask: **would this text have said so, if it were true?** If you cannot answer that, the silence tells you nothing.

And notice which way you want each particular silence to cut. That is the tell.

2.5 — Beyond the mountains

One last piece of geography, and it is the piece that opens the door to the rest of this part.

The Rigvedic world does not stop at the Indus. Four of the rivers in the river hymn are west of it, in the valleys of what is now eastern Afghanistan and the Pakistani north-west. The composers knew that country. Some hymns seem to be looking at Punjab from out there.

And the Avesta — the Iranian sacred book, in a language so close to Vedic Sanskrit that it is barely a different language — knows the same region and calls it by the same name.

The Vedic and Iranian traditions share gods, share ritual, share a sacred drink with the same name, share whole poetic phrases. They also share a curious inversion: one tradition's word for "god" is the other's word for "demon", and the other's word for "god" is this one's word for "demon". That is what a family quarrel leaves behind in a language.

Two branches of one thing, then, sitting on either side of the mountains. That fact will not let us alone for the rest of this part.

REMEMBER THIS

The Rigveda names its **rivers**, and most of the names can be matched to rivers on a modern map. Sindhu is the Indus, Vitasta the Jhelum, Asikni the Chenab, **Parushni the Ravi**, Vipas the Beas, Shutudri the Sutlej.

That fixes the world of the hymns to **Punjab and the country immediately west of it**. The Ganga is a rumour at the far edge. This book belongs to this land, and that much is not in dispute.

The world it shows is **herders, chiefs and priests** — cattle as wealth, horses, chariots, barley, bronze. No iron, no rice, no cotton, no writing, no cities.

Those absences are used as evidence by everybody. Be careful with them. **A silence only counts if the text had a reason to speak.**

The Rigveda is a Punjabi book. What is argued about is not where it was made, but who made it and how they got here.

CHAPTER THREE

What "Aryan" Actually Means

One Sanskrit word, used a few dozen times in a book of hymns, ended up on the banners of the worst regime in modern history. This chapter follows it the whole way.

3.1 — The word in the text

The word is *arya*. It appears in the Rigveda about three dozen times. That is not many, in ten thousand verses.

It is always a word the composers use about **themselves**. Never about someone else. It marks the in-group.

What it does not do, anywhere in the text, is describe a body. There is no verse that defines an *arya* by the shape of a skull, or the colour of hair, or descent from a particular ancestor. Nobody in the Rigveda measures anybody.

What the word attaches to instead is behaviour and speech. The *arya* are the people who make the right offerings, keep their word, speak the language properly and honour the gods by name. In later Sanskrit the word simply softens into "noble" or "honourable" — the polite way to address a respected man, the way English once used "gentleman".

WORD BOX

Arya: the self-description of the people who composed the Rigveda. Marks the in-group. Later softens to "noble, respectable".

Dasa and dasyu: the words for the enemies and outsiders. Over the following centuries *dasa* drifts in meaning until it simply means "slave" or "servant" — which is how it survives in modern Indian languages.

Anarya: not-arya. The opposite term. Also rare.

Indo-Aryan: a modern language label, invented by scholars. It means the branch of the language family that includes Sanskrit, Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Sindhi and about two hundred others. When linguists write "Indo-Aryan" they are talking about grammar, not about people, and certainly not about race.

3.2 — The dasa and the dasyu

If *arya* is "us", then *dasa* and *dasyu* are "them", and this is where the reading gets difficult.

The hymns ask Indra to break the strongholds of the *dasa*, to scatter them, to take their cattle. It is hostile, repetitive and violent, in the ordinary way of war poetry everywhere.

But four things complicate the obvious reading, and all four are in the text.

First, some dasas are rich, and some pay priests. One hymn thanks two patrons by name for a generous gift of cattle and camels, and calls them *dasa*. A priest is taking money from the other side and putting the receipt in the hymn. That is very hard to square with an absolute racial line.

Second, aryas fight aryas. Several hymns ask the gods for help against enemies of both kinds in the same breath — deliver us from the *dasa* foe and from the *arya* foe. The world is not divided in two. It is divided into many quarrelling groups, some of whom are "us" and are still trying to kill us.

Third, the names go the wrong way. One of the great *arya* kings in the hymns is called Divodasa — which contains the word *dasa*. Sanskrit-speaking families were happily naming their sons with the enemy word.

Fourth, the word has a cousin in Iran. In the Iranian material, the closely related word *daha* is a tribal name — a group of people, not a category of subhuman. It looks very much as though *dasa* started as somebody's actual name, became a general word for enemy, and only much later slid down into "servant".

3.3 — The verses about colour

Two passages do most of the work in the racial reading, and they deserve to be looked at directly rather than summarised by either side.

The first uses the word *varna*, which literally means colour or covering, and sets an "arya varna" against a "dasa varna". The second describes enemies as dark and as *anasa*.

The trouble is that both are ambiguous in the original, not because modern scholars are being slippery, but because the Sanskrit genuinely permits more than one reading.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The word *anasa*. Split it one way and it is *a-nasa*, "without a nose" — flat-nosed, which is how a fourteenth-century commentator took it and how nineteenth-century race scholars gleefully repeated it. Split it the other way and it is *an-asa*, "without a mouth" — meaning without proper speech, people who cannot say the words correctly.

Sanskrit is written without spaces between words in exactly the place that matters. Both splits are grammatically legal. The word occurs **once** in the entire Rigveda. There is no second occurrence to check it against.

The word *varna*. It does mean colour. It also means outward appearance, covering, class, kind, and — later — the letters of the alphabet. "Our colour and their colour" can be skin. It can equally be the sort of contrast we make when we say two groups are "of a different stripe".

What this proves: that the racial reading is **possible**. It is not invented out of nothing. Someone reading these verses in 1860 and seeing colour prejudice was reading real words on a real page.

What it does not prove: that the racial reading is **required**. Every one of these passages has a straightforward non-racial reading, and the surrounding evidence — dasa patrons, arya enemies, dasa names on arya kings — fits the non-racial reading considerably better.

Notice what nobody can do here. Nobody can settle it. One ambiguous word, one flexible word, and a hostile poem. That is the entire evidence base for the most consequential misreading in modern history.

So the text will not decide it. What people have actually done, for two centuries, is decide first and then read. Here are the three readings, laid out properly.

THE ARGUMENT — WHAT DOES "ARYA" MEAN?

Three readings are on the table. All three have serious people behind them.

A people

A group defined by descent, who thought of themselves as a distinct stock and distinguished themselves from others by origin. In favour: the word is inherited, not invented, and its Iranian twin is used by Darius the Great of Persia in a royal inscription to state his lineage — "an Aryan, of Aryan descent". People do use ancestry words about ancestry. The name of the country Iran comes from this word and means, straightforwardly, "of the Aryans".

A language and ritual community

Those who speak our tongue and sacrifice our way. In favour: the enemies are repeatedly marked out by speech and by not sacrificing, not by looks; the word attaches to correct performance; and the Vedic-Iranian pair share the term precisely because they shared a religion and a language before they split. This is where most specialists now sit.

A way of behaving

Simply "noble" — a moral term about conduct, which is unambiguously what it means a few centuries later, where *arya* becomes a term of respect used across Indian traditions, including in Buddhism, which is not much interested in anyone's ancestry.

Where things stand: the three readings are not really rivals so much as a word changing over time, and the change runs in a clear direction — from a group name, through a marker of who worships correctly, to a compliment about character. What no reading supports is race. Nothing in the Rigveda defines *arya* by body.

What would settle it: nothing available. We would need a second independent source from the same period and place. There is none, and there is unlikely ever to be one.

Why it matters: because the entire nineteenth-century racial theory was built by taking reading one, hardening "descent" into "biological race", and then attaching that race to physical features the text never mentions. Each of those steps was a choice, and each was made by people who wanted a particular answer.

3.4 — How a word became a race

Here is the sequence. It took about a century and it was largely accidental, which does not make it less catastrophic.

Step one. In the late eighteenth century European scholars work out that Sanskrit is related to Greek, Latin, Persian and the languages of Europe. That is Chapter 4, and it is a genuine and correct discovery.

Step two. They need a name for the family. They reach into the oldest texts of the family and pull out the word the speakers used for themselves. *Arya*. It becomes "Aryan", and for a while it is simply what the family of languages is called.

Step three. The slide. A label for a group of languages starts being used for a group of people. This is not stupid — languages do belong to people — but it is a step that requires proof and got none.

Step four. The race theorists arrive. In the 1850s a French aristocrat writes a long book arguing that human history is the story of racial quality and decline, and that the finest stock was the Aryan. He is not a linguist and does not much care what the Rigveda says. In 1899 an Englishman living in Germany writes an even more successful book making the Aryan a specifically Germanic possession. Neither book contains evidence in any sense a historian would recognise.

Step five. The theory is picked up by German nationalism, made law, and used to justify the murder of millions. The swastika they used was an Indian symbol. The word they used was a Sanskrit word. Neither had anything to do with the meaning either originally carried.

It is worth being exact about what the harm was here. The linguistics was right. Sanskrit really is related to Greek. What went wrong was a chain of unproven leaps: from a language family, to a people, to a biological race, to a ranking of races. Every link in that chain was assumed rather than shown.

3.5 — Müller's protest, and India's own use of the word

The scholar most associated with popularising "Aryan" in English was Friedrich Max Müller, a German philologist at Oxford who produced the first full printed edition of the Rigveda. He saw what was being done with his terminology and he objected — publicly, repeatedly and furiously.

"An ethnologist who speaks of Aryan race, Aryan blood, Aryan eyes and hair, is as great a sinner as a linguist who speaks of a dolichocephalic dictionary or a brachycephalic grammar."

Strip the long words and he is saying: **you cannot measure a language with callipers**. A skull is not a grammar. He said it in 1888. It made no difference at all. Once a word is useful to a political movement, the scholar who coined it has no further say.

India used the word too, and in more than one direction, which is a part of the story that usually gets left out.

A reform movement founded in 1875 took the name Arya Samaj — the Aryan society — and used it to argue for a return to Vedic purity and against caste as it then stood. A nationalist leader wrote a book arguing the Aryan homeland had been at the North Pole. And in Maharashtra, a low-caste reformer took the racial theory and turned it upside down: if the Aryans came from outside and conquered, he wrote, then the upper castes are the invaders and the oppressed are the original people of this land. That inversion became a real and lasting political force in western and southern India.

Then in 1946 B. R. Ambedkar — who had every political reason to keep the invasion theory, since it made his own community the rightful natives — read the texts and rejected it anyway. He argued the Aryan race theory had no basis in the Vedas at all, that the Rigveda does not distinguish arya and dasa by race, and that the whole apparatus was European fantasy imported into India.

That is worth sitting with. The man with the strongest political motive to accept the racial reading looked at the evidence and threw it out.

REMEMBER THIS

Arya appears about three dozen times in the Rigveda. It is always the composers' word for themselves. It is never defined by body, blood or skull anywhere in the text.

The **dasa** and **dasyu** are the enemies — but some dasas are rich, some pay priests, arya kings carry *dasa* in their names, and aryas fight aryas. It is not a clean line between two peoples.

The two famous "colour" passages are **genuinely ambiguous in Sanskrit**. The racial reading is possible. It is not required, and the rest of the evidence fits it badly.

"Aryan" became a race through five steps, only the first of which was sound: a real language family, given a name from the oldest text, then treated as a people, then as a race, then as a ranking. **Max Müller**, who did most to spread the word, spent his last years trying to stop exactly this.

"Aryan" is not a race and never was. It is a word for a language family, borrowed from a word a group of poets used to mean "people like us who do things properly".

CHAPTER FOUR

The Family of Languages

The strongest evidence in this whole argument is not a bone or a brick. It is a pattern inside words — and it is far harder to wriggle out of than most people realise.

4.1 — Jones in Calcutta

In February 1786, a British judge in Calcutta gave a lecture to a small learned society he had helped found. His name was William Jones. He had learned Sanskrit in order to read Hindu law in the original, because he did not trust the translations his court was using.

In the middle of that lecture he said something that changed the study of human history.

Sanskrit, he said, is more perfect than Greek, more copious than Latin, and yet bears to both a resemblance — in verb roots and in the shape of grammar — stronger than could possibly have been produced by accident. So strong, he said, that no scholar could examine all three without believing they had sprung from some common source, which perhaps no longer exists.

He was not quite first. A Florentine merchant in Goa had noticed the number words two centuries earlier. A French Jesuit had made the case in a letter twenty years before. But Jones said it in the right room, in the right decade, and it stuck.

And notice the last clause, because it is the clever part. **A common source, which perhaps no longer exists.** He is proposing a language nobody had ever recorded, that had died before writing, and that could only be reached by working backwards from its children.

4.2 — Father, pitar, pater

Look at the evidence yourself. You do not need Sanskrit to see it.

ENGLISH	SANSKRIT	GREEK	LATIN	PERSIAN
father	pitar	pater	pater	pedar
mother	matar	meter	mater	madar
brother	bhratar	phrater	frater	baradar
two	dva	duo	duo	do
three	trayas	treis	tres	se
seven	sapta	hepta	septem	haft
new	nava	neos	novus	nau
name	naman	onoma	nomen	nam

Punjabi is in this table too, of course. *Pita, mata, bhra, do, tinn, satt, nawaan, naam*. Punjabi is a member of this family in exactly the way Sanskrit is.

Now, an obvious objection: languages borrow words all the time. Punjabi has taken thousands of words from Persian and Arabic and English. Could this be borrowing?

No, and for a specific reason. Languages borrow words for **new things** — technology, trade goods, food, administration, religion. They do not borrow the words for mother, father, two, three, seven, or the endings that mark a verb's tense. Those are the last things to change and the first things a child learns. When the deep plumbing matches, it is not borrowing. It is descent.

4.3 — Why the pattern cannot be luck

The table above is impressive but it is not the proof. The proof is that the differences are **regular**.

Look at the *p* in *pitar* and *pater*, and the *f* in *father*. That is not a one-off. It happens every time.

IN REAL TERMS

Where Latin has **p**, English has **f**:

pater → father · *pes/pedis* → foot · *piscis* → fish · *plenus* → full · *pellis* → fell (skin)

Where Latin has **t**, English has **th**:

tres → three · *tenuis* → thin · *tu* → thou

Where Latin has **k** (written *c*), English has **h**:

cornu → horn · *canis* → hound · *centum* → hundred · *cord-* → heart

This is not a handful of lucky matches. It is a **machine**. Every single one of a whole class of sounds shifted the same way, in the same branch, at the same period — and it happened to the entire vocabulary at once, including words nobody was thinking about.

Coincidence cannot do this. Borrowing cannot do this either, because borrowing is haphazard and this is total. A sound law is the closest thing the study of languages has to a law of physics.

The particular set of shifts that separates the Germanic languages from the rest was worked out by Jacob Grimm — the same Grimm who collected fairy tales. Once you have a rule like that, you can run it backwards. You can take an English word, undo the law, and predict what the Latin or Sanskrit form ought to be. Then go and look. It is there.

That predictive power is why linguists trust this method more than almost anything else in the historical toolkit.

4.4 — Building a language nobody spoke

If you can run the rules backwards for one language, you can run them backwards for all of them at once, and land on the forms they all came from.

The result is called **Proto-Indo-European**. Nobody ever wrote it down. Nobody has heard it for at least five thousand years. But several thousand of its words and a great deal of its grammar have been reconstructed, and the reconstruction is stable

enough that when a genuinely new Indo-European language turns up — as happened when Hittite tablets were deciphered in the twentieth century — the predictions largely hold.

WORD BOX

Cognate: two words in different languages that are descended from the same ancestor word. *Father* and *pitar* are cognates. Not to be confused with a loanword.

Proto-language: a language reconstructed by working backwards from its descendants. It is a hypothesis with a lot of evidence behind it, not a document.

Proto-Indo-European (usually shortened to PIE): the reconstructed ancestor of a family that now includes Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali, Sanskrit, Persian, Kurdish, Greek, Latin and all its children, the Slavic languages, the Celtic languages, German, English, Armenian and more. About half the world speaks a descendant of it.

Substrate: the traces an older, displaced language leaves behind in the language that replaced it — usually in place names, in words for local plants and animals, and sometimes in pronunciation.

4.5 — Words as a time machine

Here is where the reconstruction stops being a curiosity and starts being evidence about the world.

If a word can be reconstructed for the parent language — meaning the daughter languages all have matching forms that obey the sound laws — then the speakers of the parent language **had the thing**. You cannot inherit a word for something you have never met.

So what did they have?

They had **wheels**. The word survives as Sanskrit *cakra*, Greek *kuklos*, English *wheel*. They had an **axle** and a **yoke** and a word for going in a vehicle. They had **horses** — Sanskrit *ashva*, Latin *equus*, Greek *hippos*. They had **wool**, **cattle**, **sheep**, **pigs**, **honey**, and a fermented honey drink. They had **snow** and a word for cold. They had **wolves** and **bears** and **birch trees**.

And what do they not have? There is no reconstructable word for **tiger, elephant, monkey, bamboo, rice, or lotus**. The Indo-European languages of India have words for all of these, but each language made or borrowed its own; they do not match up across the family.

The wheel matters most of all. Wheeled vehicles do not appear anywhere in the archaeological record before roughly 3500 BCE. If the parent language already had a full wheel vocabulary that all its children inherited, then the parent language cannot have broken up much before then. That single argument puts a floor under the whole chronology, and it is the reason most linguists will not accept dates for PIE much earlier than about 4500 BCE.

4.6 — Where was the homeland?

THE ARGUMENT — WHERE DID PROTO-INDO-EUROPEAN COME FROM?

Everyone in this argument agrees the family is real. The question is where the parent language was spoken and how its children spread. There are three serious answers.

The Steppe

The grasslands north of the Black and Caspian Seas, roughly 4500–3000 BCE. In favour: it fits the reconstructed vocabulary almost item for item — horses, wheels, wool, cattle, cold, birch, no tigers. Horses were first domesticated in that region. The archaeology shows a distinctive burial-mound culture spreading out of it in several directions at about the right time. And, since 2015, ancient DNA shows large-scale movement of people out of exactly that region into Europe — which is not proof for South Asia, but it does show the mechanism was real. This is where most specialists sit.

Anatolia and the lands south of the Caucasus

Modern Turkey and the highlands south of it, considerably earlier — spreading not by conquest but with farming itself, as farmers slowly outbred foragers. In favour: the earliest-splitting branch of the whole family, Hittite, was spoken in Anatolia; farming is a far better engine for spreading a language than raiding is; and several recent attempts to date the family tree by statistical methods borrowed from biology have produced dates far older than the Steppe model allows, pointing south of the Caucasus. A 2023 study of this kind put the split at roughly eight thousand years ago and proposed a hybrid: an older southern origin, with a later Steppe phase carrying the branch that reached both Europe and India.

India

That the homeland was in north-west India, and the family spread outward from here — so no one came in, and Sanskrit's ancestors were always here. In favour: Sanskrit preserves some strikingly archaic features; the Rigveda contains no memory whatever of a migration from outside, which is odd for a people who supposedly arrived recently and remembered everything else; the whole homeland question is an inference from word lists, with no physical object anywhere labelled "Proto-Indo-European"; and if the Sarasvati of the hymns is a great flowing river that dried before 1900 BCE, the Rigveda has to be older than any proposed migration.

Where things stand: the great majority of historical linguists hold the Steppe model, with the Anatolian and hybrid models as live minority positions inside the field. The Indian homeland has very few supporters among specialists in Indo-European linguistics anywhere in the world, and the reasons are technical rather than political: the reconstructed vocabulary contains a northern, cold-country ecology and no Indian one; the wheel vocabulary caps the date; the earliest-splitting branches are all in the west; and no one has produced a linguistic trail running the other way. Its defenders answer that the vocabulary argument is circular, since the reconstruction was built by scholars who already assumed a northern homeland.

What would settle it: nothing in linguistics alone. What has actually moved the field is ancient DNA — Chapter 6 — and what would settle it further is more of the same, from the right places and the right centuries. Specifically: genomes from Punjab and the north-west between 2500 and 1000 BCE. We have almost none.

Why people care so much: because the homeland has been treated, by everybody, as a deed of ownership. It is not one. See Chapter 7.

4.7 — What this does not prove

Now the part that gets skipped, and it is the most important paragraph in the chapter.

Everything above is about **languages**. Languages are not people. They are not genes. They are not culture. They travel by being learned, and human beings learn languages from whoever is useful, whoever is powerful, and whoever is nearby.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

That a language moving means a people moving.

Every version of the Aryan argument leans on this, and it is false as a general rule. Look at the cases we can actually check, because they happened in recorded history.

Egypt speaks Arabic. Egyptians today are overwhelmingly descended from ancient Egyptians. The Arab conquest brought in a small ruling group. The language changed completely; the population did not.

Anatolia speaks Turkish. Modern Turks are largely descended from the peoples who were there before, with a modest genetic contribution from Central Asia. A language crossed a continent on the backs of a minority.

Ireland speaks English. Nobody replaced the Irish.

France, Spain, Portugal and Romania speak Latin's children. Rome did not resettle western Europe with Italians. It ran it.

In every one of these, a language spread through prestige, administration, trade and religion, carried by a group far too small to show up as a population replacement.

So what does this do to the argument? It cuts hard in both directions, which is why almost nobody states it plainly.

It undercuts the invasion story: you do not need an army, a conquest or a massacre to explain Sanskrit in Punjab. A small group with prestige is enough.

It equally undercuts the indigenous story: showing that the population of Punjab is mostly descended from the people who were already here proves nothing about where the language came from. Those are two different questions and the answer to one does not give you the answer to the other.

Hold on to this. It is the single most useful idea in this part of the book.

Keep the language question and the ancestry question in separate hands, then. Chapter 6 is about the second one, and it is a different kind of evidence entirely.

REMEMBER THIS

Sanskrit, Punjabi, Persian, Greek, Latin, English and about four hundred other languages are **descended from one ancestor language** that nobody wrote down. This is not a guess. It rests on regular sound correspondences that work like a machine.

The ancestor language can be partly reconstructed. Its speakers had **wheels, horses, wool, snow and birch trees**. They had no word for tiger, elephant or rice. The wheel puts a floor under the date at roughly 4000–3500 BCE.

Most specialists place the homeland on the **Steppe** north of the Black Sea. A minority argue for Anatolia or the lands south of the Caucasus. A much smaller group argues for India. The reasons the third position has few takers among linguists are technical, not political.

And the thing everyone forgets: **languages move without people moving**. Egypt speaks Arabic. Turkey speaks Turkish. Ireland speaks English. None of those needed a population replacement.

The language family is the strongest evidence here. It is also evidence about words, not about blood — and those two questions have to be kept apart.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Horse and the Wheel

Part 2 promised you that a missing animal would become the front line of the biggest argument in Indian history. Here it is.

5.1 — A book soaked in horses

You cannot read the Rigveda for ten minutes without meeting a horse.

Horses pull the chariots of the gods. Horses are the top gift a patron can give a priest, worth more than cattle. Two of the gods are themselves called the Horsemen. There are hymns to individual named horses, treated as divine. There are chariot races, and the poetry about them is some of the most excited in the collection. There is a whole ritual built around the sacrifice of a single stallion, described in loving detail down to the parts of its body.

Now put that beside Part 2.

The Harappans left behind more than four thousand inscribed seals. On them are bulls, buffaloes, elephants, rhinos, tigers, crocodiles, goats and an animal with one horn that nobody can identify. **There is not one horse.** Not a single agreed horse image from the entire mature Harappan civilisation.

The bones tell the same story. Harappan sites yield cattle bones by the tonne. Horse bones are, at best, a handful of disputed fragments.

Two societies in the same land, a few centuries apart. One is obsessed with an animal. The other appears not to have known it existed.

5.2 — Why a horse bone is hard to name

Before we get to what that means, we have to deal with a technical problem, because it is where most of the actual fighting happens.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

India has its own wild member of the horse family: the **khur**, or Indian wild ass, which still lives in the salt flats of Gujarat. It is not a horse. It was never domesticated. It has been in India for a very long time.

Here is the difficulty. The leg bones, foot bones and vertebrae of a khur are very close to those of a true horse. Close enough that even an experienced specialist, handed a broken shin fragment, often cannot say which animal it came from.

What can be told apart reliably: the teeth and parts of the skull. Horse cheek teeth have a distinctive enamel pattern.

What usually turns up on a dig: broken bits of leg and foot, because those are what survive being cooked, chewed, trampled and buried for four thousand years.

Why this matters: almost every claimed horse find at a Harappan site is a fragment of exactly the ambiguous kind. This is not a case of one side being dishonest. It is a case of the evidence being physically incapable of answering the question on its own.

Modern DNA analysis of bone can settle individual cases, and where it has been applied the results have generally not supported the horse claims. But it has been applied to very few of the disputed pieces.

The best-known case is a set of bones from a Harappan site in Gujarat. In the early 1990s a Hungarian specialist in ancient animal bones examined them and concluded, with confidence, that some were true horse. He was a serious scholar and he was not making a political point. A few years later two American specialists re-examined the same material and concluded they were khur.

Neither side ever conceded. The first scholar died before the exchange finished. The bones are still there and the disagreement is still open.

5.3 — The spoked wheel

The horse argument has a partner that gets far less attention and is, in my view, stronger.

The Rigveda's chariot is not a cart. A cart is heavy, has solid wooden wheels, and is pulled by oxen at walking pace. The Rigvedic *ratha* is a light two-horse vehicle built for speed, and its wheels have **spokes**.

A spoked wheel is a serious piece of engineering. It has to be light enough to be worth building and strong enough not to fly apart under a galloping horse. Getting there took a long time and specific skills — steam-bending wood, precise joinery, a proper axle.

IN REAL TERMS

The difference between a solid wheel and a spoked wheel is roughly the difference between a bullock cart and a motorcycle.

A solid disc of wood is easy to make and enormously heavy. Fine for hauling grain at four kilometres an hour. Useless for anything else.

A spoked wheel might weigh a fifth as much. That is what lets two horses pull a vehicle at thirty or forty kilometres an hour with a man standing in it shooting a bow.

It is a weapons technology, and when it appears it changes warfare across half a continent within a few hundred years — the way gunpowder did later.

The earliest actual spoked-wheel chariots ever found are in burials in the southern Urals, on the edge of the Steppe, dating to around 2000 BCE. Whole vehicles, buried with horses and drivers, wheels set into slots cut in the grave floor. The impressions of the spokes are still in the soil.

The Harappans had wheels. Their toy carts show solid wheels. Nobody has found a spoked wheel, a chariot fitting, a horse bit or a chariot burial anywhere in the Harappan world.

So the chariot has a known birthplace, a known date, and an apparently clean absence in the civilisation that occupied Punjab before the Rigveda. That is a harder set of facts than the bones.

THE ARGUMENT — DOES THE HORSE SETTLE ANYTHING?

This is the argument that gets the most heat and, I think, deserves the least.

The horse proves the Rigveda is later, and its people came from outside

The domestic horse's origin has been traced by ancient DNA to the grasslands of the western Steppe, and the lineage that became every domestic horse in the world today expanded out of there from about 2000 BCE. The chariot appears in the same place at the same time. The Rigveda is full of both. The Harappans, occupying the same land earlier, show neither. The simplest reading is that horse and chariot arrived, from the north-west, with the people who brought the hymns.

The horse proves nothing of the kind

Three answers, all reasonable. Horses do badly in hot, wet climates and have always been hard to breed in the plains of India — so even a society that used them heavily would leave few bones, because a valuable imported animal is not everyday meat. Several claimed horse finds at Harappan sites exist and have not been disproved, only disputed. And the absence of horses on Harappan seals is worth exactly as much as the absence of cows on Harappan seals, which is to say we do not know what the seal animals were for.

The whole question is a trap

Both sides are running an argument from silence, and Chapter 2 showed how unstable that is. Even at its strongest, the horse tells you when a technology arrived. It does not tell you how many people came with it, whether they conquered anybody, or who anyone's ancestors were. Trade moves technology all the time without moving populations.

Where things stand: the evidence for the domestic horse and the light chariot arriving in South Asia around or after 2000 BCE, from the north-west, is reasonably strong and has been strengthened by recent genetic work on horses themselves. The evidence that this arrival involved a large movement of people is a separate question, and the horse does not answer it.

What would settle it: DNA testing of every disputed bone fragment from every Harappan site that has claimed one. This is technically possible now and comparatively cheap. It has not been done systematically, which is itself worth noticing.

Why it is fought over so hard: because both sides have decided the horse is a proxy for the whole argument, and it is not. It is one animal. It carries far more weight in this debate than it can bear.

5.4 — The seal that was doctored

Part 2 told this story briefly. It belongs here in full, because it is the clearest warning in the whole subject.

In 2000, a book was published claiming to have deciphered the Indus script. Among its illustrations was a seal impression showing what the authors said was a horse — which, if real, would have punched a hole in one of the main arguments against an indigenous origin for the Vedic people.

Two scholars checked it. The image turned out to be a computer-altered version of a known, published, broken seal. The original showed the usual one-horned animal. The break had been tidied, the horn removed, and the result presented as a horse.

It collapsed within weeks and did real damage to the credibility of the position it was meant to support.

I want to be careful about what lesson you take. The lesson is **not** "that side cheats". Every side of every historical argument has produced bad work, and the history of the invasion theory in Chapter 7 contains errors just as bad, made by people just as respectable, in the opposite direction.

The lesson is about **wanting**. The people who circulated that image were not, most of them, frauds. They were people who wanted something to be true, saw an image that showed it, and did not check — because checking is what you do to claims you dislike.

Which brings us back to the request I made at the start of this part. Notice what you are hoping for as you read. Everybody has a hope in this argument. The danger is not having one. The danger is not knowing you have one.

REMEMBER THIS

The Rigveda is **full of horses** — gods, gifts, races, sacrifices. The Harappan record has **no agreed horse image on four thousand seals** and only a handful of disputed bone fragments.

Horse bones are genuinely **hard to tell apart** from the bones of the Indian wild ass, unless you have teeth. Almost every disputed find is exactly the ambiguous kind. This is a limit of the evidence, not a failure of honesty.

The **spoked-wheel chariot** is the stronger case. It has a known birthplace on the edge of the Steppe around 2000 BCE, and no trace at all in the Harappan world.

The **doctored seal of 2000** is a warning that cuts in every direction. People do not usually check things they want to be true.

The horse can tell you roughly when a technology arrived. It cannot tell you who anybody's ancestors were, and it is asked to do far more work than it can carry.

CHAPTER SIX

What the Genes Say

In the last ten years a new kind of evidence arrived, and it has moved this argument more than anything since Jones. It is also the evidence most routinely misreported, in both directions.

6.1 — Reading a four-thousand-year-old bone

When a person dies, their DNA starts breaking into shorter and shorter pieces. Heat speeds it up. Damp speeds it up. After a few thousand years in a hot country there is usually nothing usable left.

Two things changed that. First, machines got good enough to read DNA in fragments a few dozen letters long and stitch the fragments back together by computer. Second, somebody worked out that one particular bone — the dense lump around the inner ear — protects DNA far better than the rest of the skeleton.

The result is a field that barely existed twenty years ago and now has thousands of ancient genomes in it. But South Asia is the hardest place on Earth to do it. The climate is exactly wrong. Attempts fail far more often than they succeed.

WORD BOX

Ancient DNA: genetic material recovered from human remains rather than from living people. It tells you about a specific person on a specific date, which is why it is so much more powerful than working backwards from the living.

Ancestry component: when geneticists say a population "has 20% X ancestry", they mean that a fifth of that population's genome looks most like a reference group they have labelled X. It is a statistical statement about resemblance, not a passport.

Steppe ancestry: the genetic profile typical of Bronze Age herders of the grasslands north of the Black and Caspian Seas, and their eastward descendants in Central Asia.

Haplogroup: a branch on the family tree of either the Y chromosome (passed father to son) or mitochondrial DNA (passed mother to child). Because each is inherited down one line only, they let you track men and women separately.

6.2 — The two ancient ingredients

Start with what was here before any of this argument begins.

The population of South Asia, going far back, is built out of two very old ingredients.

The first is a deeply ancient lineage descended from the people who reached India tens of thousands of years ago, in the first spread of modern humans out of Africa. Their closest surviving relatives, distantly, are the indigenous people of the Andaman Islands. Everyone in South Asia carries a substantial share of this.

The second is a lineage related to the ancient populations of the Iranian plateau. Here is a detail that matters and is usually skipped: this lineage split off **before farming was invented**. So its presence does not mean farmers walked in from Iran. It means a related hunting population was in this region very early, long before any of the events in this book.

Mix those two in different proportions and you have the underlying population of the subcontinent. That mixture was in place, in various ratios, well before the Harappan cities.

6.3 — Rakhigarhi

Rakhigarhi in Haryana is one of the largest Harappan sites. In 2019, after years of failed attempts, a team published a genome from a woman buried there — the first and, so far, effectively the only genome we have from anyone inside the Harappan civilisation.

Her ancestry was the two ingredients above. Iranian-plateau-related and the deep indigenous lineage.

She had no Steppe ancestry at all.

That single result was reported around the world, by both sides, as proving the opposite things. One camp said: see, the Harappans were not Steppe people, so the Vedic people must have come later from outside. The other camp said: see, no foreign ancestry in the Harappans, so nobody came in.

Both readings run past what the data can support, and the reason is embarrassingly simple.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

It is one woman. One individual, from one site, at the eastern edge of the Harappan zone, in one century.

Ask what a single genome from one person in Delhi in 1950 would tell you about India in 1950. It would tell you about that person. It would tell you a certain kind of person existed. It would tell you nothing about proportions, nothing about the rest of the country, and nothing about who arrived twenty years later.

The wider study that framed the Rakhigarhi result compared her with eleven individuals found at sites in Iran and Turkmenistan whose ancestry matched hers — people who appear to have been travellers or migrants from the Indus world, buried far from home. Those eleven, plus her, are the entire sample for the genetics of the Harappan civilisation.

Twelve people. For a civilisation of perhaps a million.

And here is the sentence that should be in every report of this and almost never is: we have no ancient DNA at all from Punjab itself in the relevant period. None from Harappa. None from the Ravi or the Beas or the Chenab. The land this entire book is about is a hole in the map.

6.4 — When Steppe ancestry arrives

Now the finding that actually carries weight, because it rests on hundreds of individuals rather than one.

A large study published in 2019 sequenced over five hundred ancient people from Central and South Asia across several thousand years. The pattern it found is this.

Before roughly 2000 BCE, in every sample that can be linked to the Indus world, there is **no Steppe ancestry**.

After roughly 1500 BCE, in samples from the Swat valley in northern Pakistan, Steppe ancestry **is present**. It goes on being present, and it is present in the living populations of South Asia today.

The particular Steppe profile that shows up is not the earliest Steppe population but their descendants who had moved east into Central Asia — the same broad group associated with the chariot burials of Chapter 5.

So: an ancestry component that is absent before about 2000 BCE and present after about 1500 BCE, in the north-west, arriving from the direction of Central Asia, at the same period as the horse and the chariot and the composition of the Rigveda.

That is a real result and it should be stated plainly rather than softened.

6.5 — Why it sits on the male line

There is a further detail, and it is the one that tells you most about what actually happened.

The Steppe contribution is much stronger on the **Y chromosome** — which passes from father to son — than in the genome overall. Mitochondrial DNA, which passes from mother to child, is overwhelmingly local and ancient in South Asia.

Translated out of genetics: **the incoming group was heavily male**. The women in the resulting population were, overwhelmingly, already here.

That is the genetic signature of a relatively small number of men moving in, marrying local women, and their sons doing better than average — which is what happens when a group has some kind of advantage, whether military, ritual, economic or just organisational.

It is emphatically **not** the signature of a population being replaced. In modern South Asians the Steppe share is a minority component — broadly in the range of a tenth to a fifth, higher in the north-west and in some communities, lower in the south, and never anywhere close to a majority.

IN REAL TERMS

Think of the ancestry of a Punjabi today as a jar with three things in it.

The **largest share by far** is the ancient population of this subcontinent — the deep indigenous lineage plus the early Iranian-plateau-related lineage. These are the people of Mehrgarh in Part 1 and the people of Harappa in Part 2. They are the bulk of you.

The **smaller share**, arriving around three and a half thousand years ago, is Steppe.

If you want a rough picture: for most people in Punjab, something like **four parts in five is the ancient population of this land**, and something like one part in five is the later arrival — and even that fifth is on the high side compared with most of India.

Whatever happened here, it was not a replacement. The overwhelming majority of your ancestry has been in this region since long before anybody composed a hymn.

All of which brings us to the fight over what any of this means.

THE ARGUMENT — WHAT DOES THE GENETIC EVIDENCE PROVE?

The data above is not much disputed as data. What it means is disputed hard.

It settles the migration question

An ancestry component absent before 2000 BCE and present after 1500 BCE has to have arrived. It arrived from the direction the linguistics predicted, in the period the linguistics predicted, alongside the technology the linguistics predicted. Three independent lines of evidence — words, wheels, genomes — converging on the same window is about as good as ancient history gets.

The sampling is far too thin to bear this

The Harappan genetic record is twelve individuals, eleven of them found outside the Indus region. There is no ancient DNA from Punjab in the relevant centuries at all. The post-1500 BCE samples come from one mountain valley in the far north-west, which is exactly the sort of corridor you would expect outside influence in, and is not the plains. Dates of mixing calculated from living populations carry error bars of centuries. Change the reference populations and the numbers move. A pattern from thin sampling in the wrong places is a hypothesis, not a finding.

It is the right answer to the wrong question

Grant everything. Some men came in around 1800–1500 BCE and their descendants did well. That is a demographic fact about a minority ancestry component. It does not tell you which language they spoke, whether they composed the Rigveda, whether they arrived peacefully or violently, or whether the culture that resulted was theirs or a fusion. Genes travel with bodies. Hymns travel with teachers.

Where things stand: the arrival of Steppe-related ancestry in South Asia in the second millennium BCE is now accepted by most working geneticists, including several who expected otherwise. The sampling criticism is legitimate and is made by careful people, not only by partisans. What is genuinely unsettled is the size, speed and nature of the movement — and, above all, the link between the genes and the hymns, which is an inference rather than an observation.

What would settle it: ancient DNA from Punjab and Sindh, from between 2500 and 1000 BCE, in numbers. That is the missing piece, everybody knows it is the missing piece, and the difficulty is partly climate and partly that excavation permissions in the relevant countries are not simple.

What no version of this settles: who belongs here. See the box below.

And now the thing that is really being argued about, which is not in any of the papers.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

That ancestry is identity.

This assumption is why people shout about the previous three pages. Everyone in the argument behaves as though a percentage in a genetics paper is a verdict on who they are.

It is not, and the reason is worth stating carefully.

Go back far enough and everybody's ancestry is a mixture, because populations have always mixed. Every European carries ancestry from at least three separate ancient groups. Every East Asian population is a compound. The people the Steppe herders themselves descended from were a mixture. There is no pure population anywhere on Earth and there never was. Purity is not a thing that got lost. It is a thing that was never there.

So when someone asks "are they us?", the honest answer is the one I gave at the start of this part: **partly, along with several other groups, and this is true of nearly every population on the planet.**

And notice what the assumption does to both sides of this argument. It makes one side need the migration to be a conquest, so that some Indians can be cast as foreign. It makes the other side need the migration not to have happened at all, so that nobody can be. Both are treating a fact about the second millennium BCE as a claim about the twenty-first century CE.

It is not one. A person born in Punjab is from Punjab. That was true of the child of an incoming herder in 1500 BCE and it is true now. Nothing a laboratory finds in a four-thousand-year-old ear bone changes it in either direction.

With that said, here is what the genetics has actually established.

REMEMBER THIS

The population of South Asia is built from two **very old ingredients** — a deep indigenous lineage and an Iranian-plateau-related lineage that split off before farming. Both were here long before this argument starts.

The **Rakhigarhi** Harappan genome has no Steppe ancestry. It is **one woman**. The entire Harappan genetic sample is twelve people, and there is **no ancient DNA from Punjab** in the relevant period at all.

Across a much larger sample, **Steppe ancestry is absent before about 2000 BCE and present after about 1500 BCE** in the north-west. That is a real result.

It arrives **mostly through men**. The maternal line stays local. That is the signature of a small incoming group marrying in, not of a population being replaced. For most Punjabis, roughly four parts in five of your ancestry has been in this land since before the hymns.

Ancestry is not identity. Everyone alive is a mixture, and a percentage in a genetics paper has never yet told anybody where they belong.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Invasion, Migration, or Nothing at All

This is the chapter the whole part has been building towards. Three positions. Each gets its strongest case, and I do not choose between them for you.

7.1 — Three positions, not two

Most public arguments about this are between two sides shouting at each other. There are three positions, and confusing the first two is the single biggest reason the argument goes nowhere.

Invasion. A large body of Aryans came in as conquerors, destroyed the Harappan cities and subjugated the population. This is the nineteenth-century version.

Migration. Groups speaking an Indo-Aryan language moved in gradually over several centuries, in modest numbers, mixing with a much larger existing population, and their language and religion became dominant without their numbers ever doing so. This is what most specialists now hold.

Indigenous origin. Nobody came in. Indo-Aryan speakers had been in this region all along, and if anyone moved, they moved outwards from here.

These are not three points on one line. Invasion and migration differ about violence and scale. Migration and indigenous origin differ about whether anything arrived at all. When you see the three collapsed into two — usually as "invasion versus indigenous" — somebody is attacking a position almost no living scholar defends.

7.2 — The invasion theory and how it collapsed

Part 2 told this story as a case study in the discipline working properly. Here is the full version.

In 1947, Mortimer Wheeler was excavating Mohenjo-daro. In the upper levels of the city he found a number of human skeletons — a few dozen — some lying in what looked like sprawled positions rather than proper burials. He put that beside the Rigveda's Indra, the fort-breaker, smasher of the strongholds of the dasa. And he wrote the sentence that fixed the theory in the public mind for two generations: on the evidence, Indra stands accused.

It was vivid, it was quotable, and it was wrong.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The case was dismantled over the following decades, piece by piece, by archaeologists who went back to the material.

The skeletons are not one event. They come from different levels and different periods, separated by a long time. They are not a massacre lying where it fell. Several are in proper burials. Several show no injury at all.

There is no destruction layer. A sacked city leaves a burnt horizon — a band of ash and collapse running across the site. Mohenjo-daro does not have one. Neither does Harappa. Neither does any major Harappan city.

There are no weapons. No caches of arms, no arrowheads embedded in walls, no siege works, no defensive scramble.

There is no new population. Study of the skeletal material found no sign of an incoming physical type replacing the old one.

And the timing does not work. The Harappan decline had been under way for centuries before the earliest date anyone proposes for an arrival. The cities were emptying before there was anybody to blame.

What this proves: that the Harappan civilisation was not destroyed by an invasion. This is now agreed by essentially everyone, on all three sides.

One more thing about the invasion theory, and it is uncomfortable but true. It was proposed and popularised in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by scholars living inside an empire whose own story was that civilisation arrived in India from the north-west, carried by fair-skinned people who ruled the natives. The theory matched that story exactly.

That does not automatically make it false — theories are not wrong because of who thinks of them. But it should have made people check harder, and it did not, for about eighty years.

7.3 — What migration actually claims

The word "invasion" still gets attached to the mainstream position by its opponents, and the mainstream position is not that.

What it claims is undramatic. Over several centuries, roughly between 2000 and 1200 BCE, groups of herders speaking an early Indo-Aryan language moved through the passes into the north-west in small numbers. There was no single event and no date. They found a large, long-settled population whose cities had already come apart into villages. They mixed with it. Their language spread — the way languages spread, by prestige, by ritual authority, by intermarriage, and by the young learning it because it was useful.

The resulting culture was not theirs. It was a fusion, and the Rigveda itself shows the fusion happening: gods who are not Indo-European, ritual practices with no Iranian parallel, and — this is the technical bit — sounds in Sanskrit that no other Indo-European language has and that look very much like the fingerprint of an older local language underneath.

WORD BOX

Elite dominance: a model of language change in which a small group with prestige, power or ritual authority causes a much larger population to adopt their language, without replacing them. It is how Latin took over Gaul and how Arabic took over Egypt.

Retroflex consonants: sounds made by curling the tongue back — the *t*, *d* and *n* of Punjabi in words like *ṭar* or *ṇar*. Every language of India has them and no other branch of Indo-European does. One reading is that Sanskrit picked them up from the languages already spoken here. Another is that they developed on their own. It is argued about, but the first reading is the standard one, and if it is right it is direct linguistic evidence of a fusion.

7.4 — The indigenous case at full strength

I said in Chapter 1 that if you cannot make a position sound reasonable, you have not understood it. So here is the indigenous case made as well as I can make it, without the political noise that usually surrounds it.

Where is the archaeology? This is the strongest point and it is not a small one. Migrations of the size being proposed usually leave traces — a new pottery style, a new burial custom, new house forms, new tools, a frontier that moves. In the plains of Punjab there is no clean archaeological signature of an Indo-Aryan arrival. The pottery sequence runs continuously. The settlement pattern shifts eastwards, but it shifts the way you would expect if rivers were changing and people were following the water. If a distinct people came in and their language took over completely, the silence in the dirt is remarkable.

The Rigveda does not remember coming from anywhere. Peoples who migrate usually remember it and put it in their sacred texts. There is no exodus in the Rigveda, no crossing, no lost homeland, no origin beyond the mountains. The composers write about Punjab as home and appear to know nowhere else as home. For a group supposedly arrived within living memory, that is strange.

The dating was never solid. The conventional date for the Rigveda goes back to a nineteenth-century estimate built by counting backwards from the Buddha at a guessed number of years per literary layer. The scholar who made that estimate later said in print that no power on earth could fix a date for the Vedic hymns. That guess hardened into a fact through repetition, and much of the chronology in this part still leans on it.

The Sarasvati. If the river the hymns describe as great and flowing to the sea is the Ghaggar-Hakra, and if that system had ceased to be a major river by around 1900 BCE, then the hymns describing it must be older than 1900 BCE — which is older than any proposed migration. Part 2 laid out why the geological consensus has moved away from a mighty glacier-fed Sarasvati, and also why the sampling behind that consensus is thinner than it is usually presented as being.

The elite left no trace. The migration model needs incomers with enough standing to impose a language on millions. Such groups normally leave something — a palace, a distinctive grave, a fortress, an art style. This one is invisible in the ground and visible only in words.

Those are real arguments. Anyone who tells you the indigenous position is nothing but nationalism has not read it.

7.5 — Where things stand

THE ARGUMENT — DID INDO-ARYAN SPEAKERS COME FROM OUTSIDE?

Everything in this part comes down to this. Here are the three, and then the plainest statement I can make of the state of play.

Invasion

Now abandoned by essentially all specialists. No destruction layer, no massacre, no weapons, no replaced population, and the Harappan decline starts too early. Its historical interest is as a lesson: a dramatic theory that fitted the politics of its moment, was examined properly, and was dropped.

Migration

Held by the large majority of linguists, archaeologists and geneticists working on the period. Four independent lines converge: the language family's reconstructed vocabulary is northern and its earliest branches are western; the domestic horse and spoked chariot appear in the north-west after 2000 BCE and have a known origin outside India; Steppe-related ancestry is absent from the Indus samples and present in the north-west after about 1500 BCE, chiefly through men; and a language extremely close to Vedic Sanskrit is attested in Syria by 1400 BCE, which is very hard to explain if Sanskrit's family began in Punjab. It claims a slow, small-scale movement and a language shift, not a conquest.

Indigenous origin

Held by a small minority of specialists and a large number of people outside the field. Its strongest cards are the near-total absence of an archaeological signature for any arrival, the Rigveda's complete lack of a migration memory, the shaky foundations of the conventional dating, and the thinness of the ancient DNA sampling from the region that matters most. Its hardest problems are the reconstructed vocabulary of the parent language, which describes a cold northern ecology with no Indian animals in it; the westernmost branches of the family, which would have to have crossed all of Asia from India leaving no linguistic trail; and the horse.

Where things stand: the evidence currently points towards migration — gradual, small-scale, male-biased, in the second millennium BCE — and the convergence of linguistics, horse archaeology and ancient DNA on the same window is the reason. That is not a majority opinion poll; it is four different kinds of evidence, gathered by people who were not co-ordinating, landing in the same place.

What it does not show: that anyone was conquered. That the Harappans were destroyed or driven out. That the incomers were numerous. That they were racially distinct, whatever that would mean. That the culture which followed was theirs rather than a fusion. And it does not show that the indigenous position has been refuted — it has been outweighed, which is a different thing, and its best objection, the empty archaeology, has never been properly answered.

What would settle it: ancient DNA from Punjab and Sindh between 2500 and 1000 BCE. An unambiguous chariot or horse burial, either found or definitively ruled out. A decipherment of the Indus script — which would end this argument in an afternoon. All three are possible. None is close.

What you should do with this: hold it as most specialists do — as the best current reading of incomplete evidence, not as a settled fact, and certainly not as a statement about anybody alive.

7.6 — Why people care so much

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

That being first confers ownership.

Every participant in this argument, on every side, is operating on it. It is never stated, because stating it would expose how odd it is.

The reasoning goes: if the Vedic people came from outside, then the culture built on their texts is foreign, and its inheritors are guests here. If they did not, that culture is native, and its inheritors are the rightful owners. Either way, a question about the second millennium BCE is being used to hand out standing in the twenty-first century CE.

Look at what that assumption commits you to if you apply it consistently.

It means the English have no claim to England, since the Anglo-Saxons arrived. It means almost nobody in Europe belongs there, since nearly every European population has Steppe ancestry from the same broad movement. It means the Turks should leave Anatolia and the Arabs should leave Egypt. Applied evenly, the principle empties the world.

And it has a second failure, which is worse. Go back one more layer and the "original" people turn out to have arrived too, from somewhere else, displacing or absorbing someone earlier. There is no bottom to it. Every population everywhere is descended from people who came from somewhere else, if you go back far enough — and in this case "far enough" is not even very far.

The people of Punjab today are overwhelmingly descended from the people who farmed at Mehrgarh and built the cities at Harappa, with a later minority component from the north-west, and speak a language descended from the hymns. All three of those things are true at once. None of them is in tension with any other. And not one of them is a deed.

Belonging is not a genetics result. It never was, in either direction.

That is the end of the argument, and I have kept my promise not to settle it for you. What follows is the one event in this whole period we can actually name people in.

REMEMBER THIS

There are **three** positions, not two. **Invasion** is dead — no destruction layer, no massacre, no replaced population, wrong dates. Essentially nobody defends it.

Migration is what most specialists hold: small groups over centuries, mixing into a much larger existing population, language spreading by prestige rather than by force.

Indigenous origin has real arguments, and its best one — that a migration of this significance left almost no mark in the archaeology — has never been properly answered.

The evidence currently **points towards migration**, because four different kinds of evidence converge on the same window. It has not proved it, and the sampling in the place that matters most is close to nothing.

Whatever the answer turns out to be, it settles nothing about who belongs here. Being first is not a deed, and if it were, it would empty the world.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Battle of the Ten Kings

Part 1 promised you a fight on the Ravi. It is the only event in this entire period that we can point to, name people in, and put on a specific river.

8.1 — The only battle we have

Four hundred years of Punjab's history, and we have one story. Not a chronicle. Not an inscription. A hymn, and a few supporting verses scattered elsewhere.

It is called the Battle of the Ten Kings, and it is in the seventh book — the family book of the Vasishthas, and one of the older layers.

The bones of it are these. A king called Sudas, of a people called the Bharatas, is attacked by an alliance of ten other kings. The fight takes place on the Parushni, which is the Ravi. Sudas wins. The alliance is broken. Many of the attackers drown in the river.

That is the whole of it, told in perhaps twenty verses. Everything else is inference.

8.2 — Sudas and the Bharatas

Sudas is a chief of the Bharata people, a group based somewhere in the eastern part of the Punjab plain, around the Ravi and towards the Sarasvati. His family is named. His father and grandfather appear. He is a real political figure in a real landscape, which puts him ahead of almost everyone else in the Rigveda.

The Bharatas are not the biggest group in the hymns. They are one people among many in a crowded, quarrelsome plain, and this hymn catches them at the moment they stop being one among many.

WORD BOX

Jana: the word for one of these groups. Usually translated "tribe" or "people". It is a body of related families under a chief, not a state — no bureaucracy, no capital, no fixed borders.

Rajan: the chief. Usually translated "king", which is misleading. He led in war, held things together by agreement, and could be removed. A rajan of this period commands something closer to a large extended clan than a kingdom.

Purohita: the chief's own priest, and the second most powerful man in a jana. He performed the rituals that were believed to secure victory. When you read this chapter, remember that the man who wrote it held this job.

8.3 — Two priests

Behind the battle is a quarrel between two men, and it is the most human thing in the Rigveda.

Sudas had a priest called Vishvamitra. Vishvamitra's family composed the third book of the Rigveda, which contains the single most recited verse in Hinduism to this day. He served Sudas, and there are hymns in which he leads Sudas's people successfully across rivers.

Then Sudas changed priests. He took on Vasishtha instead.

We are never told why. But the seventh book, composed by Vasishtha's family, is where the victory hymn sits — and it makes very sure you understand who was performing the ritual when Indra came through. Later tradition turned the two men into bitter enemies and built a large body of story on it.

So the one battle report we have from Bronze Age Punjab was written by a priest who had just taken his rival's job and had an interest in the outcome looking miraculous.

8.4 — The river that was turned

The core of the hymn is the crossing.

Sudas and the Bharatas are on one side of the Parushni. The alliance is on the other, or coming across. In the hymn, Indra makes the river fordable for Sudas, and the waters take his enemies. They are described as being swept away, as not knowing the crossing, as drowning in numbers.

Read plainly, without the god, it describes an army caught by water at a crossing.

Many scholars have gone one step further and read the verses as describing a **deliberate breach** — Sudas or his people cutting an embankment and putting the river across the enemy at the right moment. The hymn does not say so in as many words. It says Indra did it. But the language of the water being made to go where it did not go before has struck a lot of readers as more than weather.

I flag it as a reading, not a fact. If it is right, it is the earliest description of an army using a river as a weapon anywhere in South Asia, and it happened on the Ravi.

IN REAL TERMS

The hymn says the slain numbered sixty-six thousand, six hundred and sixty.

Do not believe it. Look at the shape of the number — six, six, six. It is a poetic figure, the way "a thousand thanks" is a poetic figure, and Vedic poets liked stacking digits.

Think about what would be needed for it to be real. Sixty-six thousand fighting men means a population behind them of perhaps a quarter of a million in one alliance, in a landscape of villages and herding camps, all fed and moved and kept together without carts of any scale, roads, or writing to organise it.

A realistic guess for a fight of this kind is **a few hundred to a few thousand men on each side**. That is not a criticism of the poem. It is a reminder that a number in a hymn is doing the job an adjective does.

8.5 — Who the ten kings were

The hymn names the alliance. Some of the names are the great peoples who appear throughout the Rigveda — the Purus, the Yadus, the Turvashas, the Anus and the Druhyus, who together make up a standing phrase, "the five peoples". Others are smaller and appear only here: the Alinas, the Pakthas, the Bhalanas, the Shivas, the Vishanins.

Two things about that list are worth your attention.

First — this is a war among insiders. The Purus, Yadus, Anus and Druhyus are not dasas. They are arya peoples, in the sense Chapter 3 described. They speak the same language, worship the same gods, and are the ancestors, in later tradition, of famous lineages. The one battle we have from this period is not Aryans against natives. It is **Aryans against Aryans**, ten of them against one.

Hold that against everything in Chapter 7. The world of the hymns is not two blocs. It is a crowded plain of quarrelling relatives.

Second — some of the smaller names look like places. Several scholars have suggested that a few of the minor tribal names in the list resemble names known later from the mountain country to the west and north-west. The resemblances are suggestive and are used, in both directions, as evidence about where people came from. They are also exactly the kind of resemblance that is easy to see and hard to prove, and I would not build anything on them.

8.6 — How much of this happened, and why it matters

Take the hymn at the discount Chapter 1 recommended and see what survives.

Probably solid: that a chief called Sudas existed, that the Bharatas existed, that the other peoples existed under those names, that there was a serious fight involving several of them, and that it happened on the Ravi. Praise poetry lies about scale and about causes. It does not usually invent the names of its patron's enemies, because its audience knew them.

Probably not solid: the numbers, the miracle, the completeness of the victory, and Vasishtha's indispensable role in it.

Unknowable: what the fight was about. Water and pasture are the obvious candidates, since that is what these societies fought over. The hymn does not say.

Now the reason a small river fight in about 1400 BCE is in this book at all.

After this battle the Bharatas are ascendant. Within a few generations they and the Purus — their enemies here — appear to have merged, and out of that merger comes the Kuru people, who dominate the next phase of North Indian history from the country east of the Sutlej. The Kurus are where the later Vedic texts are compiled, where ritual is systematised, and where, much later, the Mahabharata is set.

And the name of the winning side, **Bharata**, travelled. It became the name of the land in Sanskrit tradition — Bharatavarsha. It is the constitutional name of India today.

The Republic of India is named after the winners of a fight on the Ravi, recorded by a priest who had just been promoted.

REMEMBER THIS

The **Battle of the Ten Kings** is the only event in this whole period we can name people in. It was fought on the **Parushni — the Ravi**. **Sudas** of the **Bharatas** was attacked by an alliance of ten and won, with many of the attackers drowned at the crossing.

The hymn was written by **Vasishtha**, Sudas's newly appointed priest, who had just replaced **Vishvamitra** and had every reason to make the victory look like a miracle he arranged.

The number of dead — sixty-six thousand, six hundred and sixty — is **poetry, not counting**. A few thousand is realistic.

It was a war **among insiders**. The ten kings were arya peoples, not outsiders. The world of the Rigveda is quarrelling relatives, not two blocs.

The winners were the Bharatas. India's name in its own constitution is theirs.

CHAPTER NINE

How Varna Began

The four-fold order appears exactly once in the Rigveda, in the latest layer of the book. What happens to it over the next thousand years is one of the most consequential things in Indian history.

9.1 — One hymn, late in the book

In the tenth book there is a hymn about a cosmic man. The gods sacrifice him, and from his body they make the world — the moon from his mind, the sun from his eye, the sky from his head.

And from four parts of him they make four kinds of people. From his mouth, the priest. From his arms, the warrior. From his thighs, the ordinary producer. From his feet, the servant.

That is the four-fold division. It is the founding statement of one of the most durable social systems ever built, and it is **the only place in the entire Rigveda where it appears**.

Chapter 1 asked you to keep the layering in your pocket. Open it now. The tenth book is the latest part of the collection, by common agreement among scholars who agree on very little else. Its language is later. Its arrangement is looser. The word used here for the fourth group appears nowhere else in the Rigveda at all.

So the four-fold order is not the foundation of the Vedic world. It is a late arrival within the Vedic world's own oldest text.

9.2 — What the earlier books show instead

Go back into the older books and the picture is quite different.

There are priests, and priests are important and well paid. There are chiefs and fighters. There are people who herd and farm. Nobody would call that a surprise; almost every society has those roles.

What is missing is the **fixing**. There is no statement that these roles are inherited, sealed, ranked by birth, or divinely allocated. There is no rule against marrying across them, no rule against eating together, no penalty structure.

And there is one verse — a strange, funny, throwaway thing in a hymn about the ritual drink — where the speaker says plainly that he is a poet, his father is a healer, and his mother grinds corn. Three jobs in one household, in one generation.

You cannot build much on a single verse. But it is very hard to write that line in a society where occupation is sealed at birth.

WORD BOX

Varna: literally "colour" or "covering". Used in the Rigveda for the contrast between groups, and later for the four-fold order. It is a **category** — there are four, and they are the same four everywhere.

Jati: literally "birth". A specific, local, marrying-within-itself group, usually tied to an occupation. There are **thousands** of them, and which ones exist depends on where you are.

Caste: a Portuguese word, *casta*, applied by Europeans to both varna and jati at once. The confusion this caused has never been fully cleaned up, in Indian or in English writing. When someone says "caste" they usually mean jati. When a Sanskrit text says varna, it means the four.

Janapada: "the place where the people set their foot". The word that replaces *jana* as groups stop moving and start holding territory. It is the beginning of the state in India.

9.3 — The move east

To see how the loose thing became the fixed thing, you have to follow the people out of Punjab.

Chapter 2 showed the Rigvedic world centred on the five rivers with the Ganga as a rumour at the edge. In the texts that come after the Rigveda — the ritual manuals and commentaries composed over the following centuries — the centre has moved. It sits around Kurukshetra and the land between the Yamuna and the Ganga.

One of those later texts even tells the story of the move, in mythological dress: a fire carried eastwards across the land, drying the marsh as it goes, and settlement following behind it. Strip the god out and it describes clearing wet forest for farming, which is exactly what would have had to happen.

Why east? Because the land east is wetter and, once you can clear it, far more productive. And clearing it required a tool.

9.4 — Iron, and the first kingdoms

Chapter 2 noted that the Rigveda has no iron. From about 1200 to 1000 BCE, iron appears in North India, and it changes what land is worth.

IN REAL TERMS

A bronze axe is soft. It will take down a small tree and then need reworking. Bronze also needs tin, and tin has to be traded from far away, which makes it expensive and keeps it in the hands of the few.

Iron ore is **everywhere**. Once you know how to smelt it, an ordinary farmer can own an axe and a ploughshare, and both will cut things bronze cannot.

Put an iron axe into the forest of the Ganga plain and you can clear it. Put an iron ploughshare into the heavy wet soil underneath and you can plant rice in it. Rice on that land yields far more per field than barley on dry land.

More food per field means more people who do not have to farm. More people who do not have to farm means specialists, soldiers, officials and priests — and somebody to collect from everyone else to pay for them.

That is how you get from a chief with a herd to a king with a treasury. It took roughly five hundred years.

The archaeological signature of this period in the doab is a distinctive grey pottery, and it maps closely onto the region the later Vedic texts talk about. Villages get bigger. Some become towns. The *jana*, a people who move, becomes the *janapada*, a people who hold a place.

And a settled kingdom needs something a herding camp does not: a permanent, justified, unarguable order of ranks.

9.5 — The law books harden it

Over the next several centuries the four-fold division is elaborated relentlessly. The ritual texts assign duties. The law books that follow assign penalties — and the penalties are graded, so that the same act carries different consequences depending on the varna of the person who did it and the varna of the person it was done to.

Birth replaces function. Marriage between groups is restricted, then prohibited. Eating together is regulated. A fifth position appears below the four, of people placed outside the system altogether, with the harshest treatment of all.

By the time of the most famous of these law books, the system on the page is rigid, hereditary, hierarchical and enforced.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

That a text describes the society, rather than the society its authors wanted.

This is Chapter 1's assumption again, and it does more damage here than anywhere else in the series.

The law books were written by members of the group placed at the top of the system they describe. They state, in detail, that this group should receive deference, gifts, exemption from certain punishments and control of ritual. Read as a description, this is sociology. Read as what it actually is — a set of claims made by an interested party — it is a **demand**.

And there is hard evidence that the demand was not the reality for a long time. Studies of the genomes of living Indian communities show widespread mixing between groups continuing until roughly **two thousand years ago**, after which marrying strictly within the group becomes the pattern and stays that way.

Sit with that number. The texts prescribing rigid separation are considerably older than the point at which people actually started obeying them. For centuries, the rules existed on the page and were not the world.

Which cuts against two popular claims at once.

It cuts against the claim that caste as lived today is three and a half thousand years old and Vedic. It is not. The Rigveda has one late hymn.

It equally cuts against the claim that caste is a British invention and was fluid before colonialism. Two thousand years of genetic endogamy is not a colonial artefact, whatever the British later did to codify and freeze it.

The honest answer is the uncomfortable middle one: **an old idea, hardened slowly, locked in far later than the texts claim, and locked harder still under later regimes.**

That leaves the question of where the idea itself came from, which is a separate matter from when it bit.

THE ARGUMENT — WHERE DID VARNA COME FROM?

Three explanations, and they are not fully exclusive.

It came in with the incomers

A ranked division into priests, warriors and producers appears in several Indo-European societies — in ancient Iran, and arguably in Rome and among the Celts. If those societies inherited a three-way scheme from a common ancestor, then the Indian version is that scheme with a fourth level added underneath for the people already here. The word *varna* meaning "colour" is then read as marking that addition.

It grew here, out of what states need

Every complex agrarian society invents a hierarchy, because states need one — someone to collect, someone to fight, someone to produce, someone to do the work nobody wants. The four-fold scheme appears in the Rigveda only in the latest layer and hardens exactly as agriculture intensifies and kingdoms form. That correlation is very tight, and it does not require anyone to have imported anything.

Both, and the second matters more

An inherited three-way idea about priests and fighters and producers may well have supplied the vocabulary. But an idea does not become a system that governs marriage for two thousand years unless something in the material world is holding it in place. What did the holding was land, surplus, kingship and the interests of the people who wrote the rules.

Where things stand: the three-function parallel across Indo-European societies is real and hard to dismiss as coincidence, but the timing inside the Rigveda points strongly at development on Indian soil, late, alongside state formation. Most historians of early India now emphasise the second and third readings.

What would settle it: better dating of the later Vedic texts, and more genetic work on when endogamy began in different regions and communities. The second is being done now and is one of the few parts of this whole subject where evidence is arriving quickly.

What is not in dispute: that the Rigveda contains one late hymn on the subject and nothing else, and that the rigid system of the law books is many centuries younger than the hymns.

9.6 — Varna is not jati

One last distinction, because almost every public argument about caste runs the two together and becomes unusable.

Varna is the four-part scheme in the texts. It is neat, it is the same everywhere, and it is largely theoretical.

Jati is the thing people actually live in. Thousands of local birth-groups, each marrying within itself, usually tied to an occupation, ranked differently in different regions, and constantly arguing about their own position. A jati that ranks high in one district may rank differently a hundred kilometres away.

The relationship between the two is that the four-part scheme provides the **justification** and the thousands of local groups provide the **reality**. The texts explain why there should be a hierarchy. The jatis are what the hierarchy is made of.

Punjab's own history with this is distinctive, and we will come to it. The region has had, for centuries, a comparatively weak Brahmin presence, a strong land-holding peasantry, and religious traditions — Sufi, Sant and Sikh — that rejected the whole apparatus explicitly. The Gurus of Parts 7 and 8 attacked it directly, and the common kitchen where everyone sits in one line and eats the same food was designed to make a point about exactly this. Whether the point was fully carried is a question Part 13 has to face honestly.

REMEMBER THIS

The four-fold division appears in the Rigveda **once**, in the **latest** book, in a hymn about a cosmic man. The word for the fourth group appears nowhere else in the collection.

The older books show priests, fighters and producers, but **no rule fixing them by birth** — and one verse of three jobs in one family.

The system hardened as the centre of gravity moved **east**, as **iron** made the Ganga forest farmable, and as chiefs became **kings** who needed a permanent order of ranks. That took roughly five hundred years, and the law books that followed made it rigid.

Genetic evidence says strict marrying-within-the-group becomes the rule only about **two thousand years ago** — long after the texts demanded it. The rules were written before they were obeyed.

Varna is the four in the books. Jati is the thousands people actually live in. The books supplied the excuse; land, surplus and kingship supplied the force.

CHAPTER TEN

An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

Every part of this series ends here. Two lists, in plain words: what is genuinely open, and what is firm enough to build on. This one has the longest first list in the series so far.

Genuinely unknown

These are open. Not "probably this but let us be careful" — open. Anyone who tells you otherwise is telling you what they hope.

- **Whether Indo-Aryan speakers came from outside, and if so how many.** The evidence points to migration. It has not proved it, and the number of people involved is a guess in every version.
- **Why there is no archaeology of an arrival.** This is the strongest objection to the mainstream position and it has never been answered properly. Either the incomers were so few and so similar in material culture that they are invisible, or something is wrong with the model. Nobody knows which.
- **When the Rigveda was composed.** Roughly 1500–1200 BCE is a reasoned estimate from four indirect arguments. It is not a measurement. The oldest material could be considerably older.
- **What the composers of the Rigveda called their own history.** They left no origin story, no migration memory, no account of where they had been. We do not know whether that is because there was nothing to remember or because they did not think it worth saying.
- **Who the dasa and dasyu actually were.** Rival groups, earlier inhabitants, both, neither. The text supports several readings and settles none.
- **Whether the "colour" verses refer to skin at all.** One ambiguous word, occurring once, and one word with half a dozen meanings.

- **What a *pur* was.** The stronghold Indra keeps breaking. Made of stone, of metal, with a hundred walls — the descriptions are not consistent and no one has securely identified one on the ground.
- **Whether any Harappan spoke an Indo-Aryan language.** Until the script is read, this cannot be answered, and it is the hinge the whole argument turns on.
- **What language the Harappans spoke.** Still the same wall as Part 2. Dravidian is the most argued-for candidate. Nobody knows.
- **Whether the disputed horse bones are horse.** Testable with current technology. Largely untested.
- **Whether the Parushni was deliberately breached at the Battle of the Ten Kings.** A widely held reading of verses that do not quite say it.
- **What happened to the Harappan population.** Genetically they are largely still here. Culturally, almost nothing of theirs is visible in the Vedic material. How a population survives and its culture does not is not understood.
- **How the four-fold order actually spread.** We have texts demanding it and genetic evidence for when it was obeyed. The centuries in between are dark.
- **Almost everything about ordinary life.** What most people ate, how they were governed, what women's lives were like, what anyone who was not a priest or a chief thought about any of it. The Rigveda does not say and there is nothing else to ask.

Solid

Now the other list. These are not certainties in a mathematical sense — nothing in ancient history is — but they are firm enough that a new discovery would have to be extraordinary to move them.

- **The Rigveda was composed in and around Punjab.** Its rivers are our rivers, named in order, and its ecology is this region's ecology. This is not seriously disputed by anybody.
- **It was transmitted orally with extraordinary accuracy for a very long time before being written, and the mechanism that made that possible is understood.**

- **Sanskrit is related to Greek, Latin, Persian, English and Punjabi**, by descent from a common ancestor. The sound correspondences are regular and predictive. This is as firm as anything in the humanities.
- **That ancestor language had wheels, horses, wool, snow and birch, and had no word for tiger, elephant or rice.**
- **"Aryan" is not a race.** The Rigveda never defines *arya* by body. The racial theory was a nineteenth-century European construction laid on top of a linguistic term.
- **The Harappan cities were not destroyed by invaders.** No destruction layer, no massacre, no weapons, no replaced population, and the decline starts too early.
- **Steppe-related ancestry is absent from the Indus-related genetic samples and present in the north-west after roughly 1500 BCE**, arriving disproportionately through men.
- **Most of the ancestry of people in Punjab today has been in this region since long before the hymns.** The later component is a minority everywhere and never close to a majority.
- **The domestic horse and the light spoked-wheel chariot originate outside South Asia** and appear here in the second millennium BCE.
- **A language extremely close to Vedic Sanskrit was in use in northern Syria by about 1400 BCE.** Whatever explains that, it has to be explained.
- **Books 2 to 7 of the Rigveda are older than Books 1 and 10.** Agreed across scholars who disagree about everything else.
- **The four-fold division appears once, in the latest layer.** The rigid, birth-based system is many centuries younger than the hymns.
- **The Battle of the Ten Kings was fought between arya peoples**, not between Aryans and natives.

One more thing, and then we move on

I want to end this part by saying something about the shape of the argument rather than its content.

You have just read seventy-odd pages in which the honest answer to the biggest question was "the evidence points this way, and it is not settled". That is not a failure of the writing. It is what the record actually supports, and I would rather hand you an open question than a confident answer I cannot back.

But notice what happens when a question stays open for a long time in public. It fills up. People need an answer, so the gap gets filled with whatever the person filling it already believed. That is true of the nineteenth-century scholars who filled it with race, and it is true of every partisan since, in every direction.

The discipline of leaving a gap empty is unnatural and it is the whole of the method. If there is one thing I would like you to take out of this part and use somewhere else entirely, it is that.

REMEMBER THIS

The biggest question in this part is open. The evidence points towards a gradual, small-scale migration in the second millennium BCE, because four independent kinds of evidence converge there. It has not been proved, and the ancient DNA from the one region that matters most does not exist.

What is firm: the Rigveda is a Punjabi book, orally transmitted with great accuracy; Sanskrit is related to Greek, Latin and English; "Aryan" is not a race; the Harappan cities were not sacked; most Punjabi ancestry is ancient and local; and the caste system in the texts is much younger than the hymns.

The one who tells you this is all settled, in **either** direction, is telling you about themselves.

An open question left open is a result. Filling it in is how the last two centuries of this argument went wrong.

REFERENCE

Timeline of Part 3

Dates before about 600 BCE are estimates, some of them contested. Where a date is argued over, the table says so.

WHEN	WHAT
c. 4500–3000 BCE	Proto-Indo-European spoken. Most specialists place it on the Steppe north of the Black and Caspian Seas; a minority argue for Anatolia or the lands south of the Caucasus. <i>Disputed.</i>
c. 3500 BCE	First wheeled vehicles anywhere. Solid wheels, ox-drawn. This puts a floor under the date of the parent language.
c. 3300–1900 BCE	The mature Harappan civilisation. Part 2.
c. 2200–2000 BCE	The lineage that became every modern domestic horse expands out of the western Steppe.
c. 2000 BCE	Earliest known spoked-wheel chariots, buried with horses, in the southern Urals.
c. 1900 BCE	Harappan cities in serious decline. The Ghaggar-Hakra system weakening. Population shifting east.
c. 2000–1500 BCE	Steppe-related ancestry appears across Central Asia and reaches the South Asian north-west. Absent from all Indus-related samples before this.
c. 1700–1500 BCE	On the migration model, Indo-Aryan speakers present in the north-west in small numbers. <i>Disputed — the indigenous position holds that no arrival occurred.</i>
c. 1500–1200 BCE	The bulk of the Rigveda composed , in the land of seven rivers. Books 2–7 are the older core. <i>Date is a reasoned estimate, not a measurement.</i>
c. 1400 BCE	The Battle of the Ten Kings , fought on the Parushni — the Ravi. Sudas of the Bharatas defeats an alliance of ten. <i>Date approximate.</i>

WHEN	WHAT
c. 1380 BCE	A treaty in Mitanni, northern Syria, calls Mitra, Varuna, Indra and the Nasatyas to witness. Indo-Aryan horse-training vocabulary in use in the same region.
c. 1200 BCE	Books 1 and 10 of the Rigveda composed, including the hymn of the cosmic man — the only appearance of the four-fold order in the collection.
c. 1200–1000 BCE	Iron appears in North India. The Ganga forest becomes clearable and its heavy soil becomes farmable.
c. 1200–600 BCE	The later Vedic period. Painted Grey Ware in the Ganga-Yamuna doab. The centre of gravity leaves Punjab and does not return for a thousand years.
c. 1100–900 BCE	The Bharatas and Purus merge. The Kuru people emerge around Kurukshetra and dominate the north.
c. 900–500 BCE	The Brahmanas and early Upanishads. Ritual systematised. The four-fold order elaborated and hardened.
c. 700–600 BCE	Kingdoms proper. The <i>jana</i> becomes the <i>janapada</i> . In the north-west, Gandhara becomes a substantial power with its centre at Taxila.
c. 550–518 BCE	The Achaemenid Persian empire expands east and reaches the Indus. Punjab enters written history — somebody else's.
c. 518 BCE	Part 4 starts here.

REFERENCE

Glossary

Every hard word used in Part 3, in plain English.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
AASI	Short for a deeply ancient lineage in South Asia, descended from the first modern humans to reach the subcontinent. Everyone here carries a share of it.
Ancient DNA	Genetic material recovered from old human remains rather than from living people. Tells you about one specific person on one specific date.
Arya	The word the composers of the Rigveda use for themselves. Marks the in-group. Later softens to "noble". Never defined by body anywhere in the text.
Ashva	Horse. Cognate with Latin <i>equus</i> and Greek <i>hippos</i> .
Avesta	The oldest Iranian sacred text. Its language is so close to Vedic Sanskrit that lines convert between the two by regular sound swaps.
Ayas	The Rigveda's one metal word. Copper or bronze. Not iron.
Bharatas	The people of Sudas, who won the Battle of the Ten Kings. India's name in its own constitution comes from them.
Brahmana	Two different things, confusingly. A priest; and a class of later prose texts explaining ritual.
Cognate	Two words in different languages descended from the same ancestor word. <i>Father</i> and <i>pitar</i> .
Dasa / Dasyu	The Rigveda's words for enemies and outsiders. <i>Dasa</i> later drifts down to mean "servant".
Elite dominance	A small group with prestige causing a much larger population to adopt its language, without replacing it. How Latin took Gaul and Arabic took Egypt.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Haplogroup	A branch on the family tree of the Y chromosome (father to son) or mitochondrial DNA (mother to child). Lets men and women be tracked separately.
Indo-Aryan	A modern label for the branch of the language family containing Sanskrit, Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali and about two hundred others. A statement about grammar, not about people.
Indo-European	The whole family — from Punjabi and Persian to Greek, Latin, Russian and English.
Jana	A people or tribe. A body of related families under a chief. Not a state.
Janapada	"Where the people set their foot." The territory a settled jana holds. The beginning of the state in India.
Jati	"Birth." A specific local group that marries within itself, usually tied to an occupation. There are thousands. This is what people usually mean by "caste".
Khur	The Indian wild ass. Never domesticated. Its bones are hard to tell from a horse's unless you have teeth.
Mandala	One of the ten books of the Rigveda. Literally "circle".
Mitanni	A Bronze Age kingdom in northern Syria whose rulers used Indo-Aryan god names and horse vocabulary around 1400 BCE.
Painted Grey Ware	A distinctive pottery of the Ganga-Yamuna doab, roughly 1200–600 BCE. The archaeological marker of the later Vedic period.
Parushni	The Rigvedic name for the Ravi.
Proto-Indo-European	The reconstructed ancestor of the whole family. Nobody wrote it down. It is reached by working backwards from its children.
Pur	A stronghold. Indra's title is "fort-breaker". What a <i>pur</i> physically was is not known.
Purohita	A chief's own priest. The second most powerful man in a jana.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Rajan	A chief. Usually translated "king", which oversells it.
Ratha	A light two-horse chariot with spoked wheels. A weapons technology, not a cart.
Retroflex	Sounds made by curling the tongue back. Every Indian language has them; no other branch of Indo-European does.
Rigveda	"The knowledge of praise verses." 1,028 hymns in ten books, a little over ten thousand verses. The oldest surviving text in any Indo-European language.
Sapta Sindhavah	"The seven rivers." The Rigveda's own name for this region.
Sindhu	River, and the Indus. The source of the words <i>Indus</i> , <i>India</i> , <i>Hindu</i> and <i>Hindi</i> .
Steppe ancestry	The genetic profile of the Bronze Age herders of the grasslands north of the Black and Caspian Seas, and their eastward descendants.
Substrate	What an older, displaced language leaves behind in the one that replaced it — usually place names, local words and pronunciation.
Sudas	Chief of the Bharatas. Won the Battle of the Ten Kings on the Ravi.
Sukta	A single hymn. "Rigveda 7.18" means Book 7, hymn 18.
Varna	Literally "colour" or "covering". The four-part scheme of the texts: priest, warrior, producer, servant. There are four, and they are the same four everywhere.
Vasishtha	Sudas's priest, whose family composed Book 7 — including the hymn about the battle they had a stake in.
Veda	"Knowledge." There are four Vedas. The Rigveda is much the oldest.
Vedic Sanskrit	The language of the Rigveda. Older than classical Sanskrit, and different enough to need learning separately.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Vishvamitra	Sudas's earlier priest, replaced by Vasishtha. His family composed Book 3.

ABOUT

About the Author

Lovepreet Singh

THE LIVING ARCHIVE · MISTERLOVE.IN

CURRENTLY	Second-year MBA, Panjab University — Business Strategy and Analysis, specialising in Business Intelligence
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WORKING TOWARD	Doctoral research

Lovepreet Singh is a researcher and writer working toward doctoral research. He writes long-form work on Indian history, society, religion, philosophy, public policy and technology — built from the record, in plain language, with the competing views left in.

His background is not in a history department, and he thinks that is worth saying plainly. He came to this subject the way most people do: from the outside, wanting to understand the place he is from, and finding that the good books were unreadable and the readable books were thin.

What he brought instead was the habit of his own training — the analyst's discipline of asking what the data actually supports, where a claim is really coming from, and which assumptions are doing the quiet work underneath an argument. That discipline runs through every chapter of this series. It is why almost every chapter has a box labelled *The Hidden Assumption*, and it is the part of this work he is most attached to.

The Living Archive

The Living Archive is where this work is published. It runs on three rules, and they are the rules this book was written under:

- **Plain language.** Hard ideas explained in ordinary words, with nothing left out to make them fit.
- **Evidence first.** Show the thing itself, and be clear about what it can and cannot prove.
- **Competing views.** Where the field disagrees, both sides get their strongest case. Open questions stay open.

A word on sources

This is written for general readers, so it carries no footnotes. It is a synthesis of the published scholarly record — archaeology, geology, genetics, epigraphy and history — rather than new primary research, and it does not claim otherwise. Where that record is contested, the contest is shown rather than smoothed over. Where it is thin, Chapter 10 says so.

Corrections are genuinely welcome. If you find an error, or think an argument has been given less than its best case, write to the address above — later editions will say what was changed and who caught it.

Lovepreet Singh

THE LIVING ARCHIVE · MISTERLOVE.IN

WHAT COMES NEXT

Part 4 — Persians, Alexander, Mauryas

Part 3 ended with Punjab about to be written about by somebody else. For everything in this part we have had one source, composed by people who were not trying to record history. That is about to change completely.

Around 518 BCE the Persian empire reaches the Indus and makes Punjab a province. Persian records name it, tax it and count it. Then in 326 BCE a Macedonian army crosses the Indus, fights the hardest battle of its campaign against a Punjabi king on the Jhelum, and is stopped — not by an enemy, but by its own soldiers refusing to go any further, on the banks of the Beas.

Out of the wreckage of that comes the first empire based in India, and one of the strangest rulers in world history.

Among the questions Part 4 takes on:

- What did it actually mean to be a **province of Persia**? What did Punjab pay, and what did it get?
- **Alexander and Porus at the Jhelum** — promised in Part 1, and covered properly here. Who was Porus, how close did the battle run, and how much of what we are told is Greek public relations?
- Why did the army **refuse to cross the Beas**, and what does the refusal tell us about what they had heard was on the other side?
- **Chandragupta Maurya** — a man of uncertain origin who took the whole north within a generation, and the adviser who may or may not have written the most ruthless political manual in world literature.
- **Ashoka**: a king who conquered, was appalled at what he had done, said so in public on rocks, and put those rocks in Punjab among other places. What the inscriptions actually say, as opposed to what we like to think they say.

- **Taxila** — a city in Punjab that was, for several centuries, one of the great meeting points of the ancient world.

And one thread from this part carries straight over. The Persians called the land beyond their river *Hindush*. That is the Sindhu of Chapter 2, in a Persian mouth. Everything the world would later call this place starts with a foreigner mispronouncing the name of our river.



End of Part 3 of 14

THE LIVING ARCHIVE

PART FOUR OF FOURTEEN

The Complete History of Punjab

Part Four — Persians, Alexander, Mauryas

The first time anybody wrote our name down. A Persian province paying the heaviest tribute in the empire, a Macedonian army that won on the Jhelum and then refused to go on at the Beas, and the boy from nowhere who took the whole north — ending with an emperor who carved his regrets into rock.

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

Lovepreet Singh

C. 550 – 185 BCE

MISTERLOVE.IN

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Where We Left Off

A short recap for anyone starting here, a reminder of what the coloured boxes mean, and a note on what changes in this part — because the evidence problem turns completely around.

Part 3 was built on one source. The Rigveda — 1,028 hymns, memorised for centuries before anyone wrote them down, composed by paid priests speaking to gods in front of the patrons who employed them. Not one line of it was meant to record history. Everything historical in it fell in around the edges of the asking.

From those edges we got a great deal. The rivers of Punjab under their older names. A world of herders, chiefs and priests, with cattle for wealth and horses for glory. A fight on the Ravi between a chief called Sudas and an alliance of ten. The first appearance, in the latest layer of the book, of the four-fold order that hardened over the next thousand years into caste.

And an argument. Part 3 laid out three positions on where the Sanskrit speakers came from — invasion, migration, indigenous origin — and gave each its strongest case. It ended where the evidence ends: pointing towards a gradual, small-scale, male-biased movement in the second millennium BCE, without proving it, and with the ancient DNA missing from the one region that matters most.

Part 3 also ended with the centre of gravity leaving Punjab. Iron made the wet forest of the Ganga plain worth clearing. Kingdoms formed out there. The land of the seven rivers, which had been the whole world of the hymns, became the north-western edge of somebody else's map.

And then, around 518 BCE, an empire arrived from the other direction and wrote our name in stone.

What changes in this part

Everything about the evidence.

For three parts you have been reading history assembled from things that were not trying to tell you anything — rock strata, brick foundations, broken pots, tooth enamel, hymns about cattle. The problem was silence.

From here the problem is the opposite. Suddenly there are documents. Persian kings carve lists of their provinces into cliffs. A Greek writer four thousand kilometres away describes what Indians eat and how they die. Officers in a Macedonian army keep journals. An ambassador lives at an Indian court for years and writes a book about it. And at the end of this part an Indian emperor covers his own empire in inscriptions written in the ordinary language of the people, telling them what he thinks and what he regrets.

This looks like an enormous improvement, and in most ways it is. But it brings a new problem, and it is the one to hold on to through this whole part.

All of these documents were written by somebody with a purpose. The Persian inscriptions are royal propaganda carved forty metres up a cliff where nobody could read them. The Greek accounts of Alexander were written centuries after he died, from lost memoirs by men who had served under him and had reputations to protect. The Indian emperor's rocks are the emperor's own account of himself.

Silence made us guess. Documents make us trust. Guessing at least feels like guessing.

What the boxes mean

Six kinds of coloured box run through this series. Each does one job. If you read nothing else, read the black ones.

- **Word Box** (slate blue) — explains a hard word the moment it first appears. You never have to already know something.
- **In Real Terms** (moss green) — turns a number or an idea you cannot picture into something ordinary.
- **How We Actually Know This** (sepia) — shows the evidence itself. The inscription, the coin, the excavated wall. And what it can and cannot prove.

- **The Argument** (ochre) — where the experts disagree. Each side gets its strongest case, not a weak version I can knock over. Then a plain statement of where things stand and what would settle it.
- **The Hidden Assumption** (plum) — digs out something everybody takes for granted without proving. This is the part of the series I am most attached to.
- **Remember This** (dark) — closes every chapter with the key points in the plainest words I can find.

A note on the famous bit

Most people come to this period for one thing: Alexander. He is in every school textbook, every list of great commanders, every documentary about the ancient world.

He gets two chapters here, and they are honest ones. The battle on the Jhelum was real, it was hard, and the man who fought him was a Punjabi king who came out of it with his kingdom enlarged.

But I am going to keep asking a question that the textbooks do not ask, and it will be uncomfortable in both directions. **Why do we know so much about Alexander in India, when no Indian source from any period so much as mentions him?**

The answer is not that Indians were careless. It is that importance is not a property of events. It is assigned, afterwards, by whoever kept the records — and for two thousand years the people keeping the records about this were Greeks, Romans, and then Europeans reading Greeks and Romans.

Meanwhile the man who actually mattered most to Punjab in this period — who took the whole north, threw the Macedonians out of it, and built the first empire that ran from Afghanistan to Bengal — is a footnote in the same textbooks, under a name most people cannot place.



What Is In Part 4

Chapter 1 — The First Time Anyone Wrote Us Down

From silence to documents · What an inscription is for · Herodotus, and the trouble with him · The name they gave us

Chapter 2 — A Province of Persia

Cyrus and Darius · Gandhara and Hindush · The heaviest tribute in the empire · The voyage down the Indus · Soldiers sent west · What Persia left behind

Chapter 3 — Taxila

Where the roads met · What has actually been dug up · The university question · Panini, and the most extraordinary book nobody reads

Chapter 4 — Alexander Arrives

Who he was · The sources, and why they are a problem · Over the mountains · The rock of Aornos · Taxila changes sides

Chapter 5 — Porus at the Jhelum

The river in flood · The night crossing · Elephants in the rain · How close it ran · "As a king" · What the numbers are worth

Chapter 6 — The Refusal at the Beas

What they had heard was on the other side · Coenus speaks · The twelve altars · The road home and what it cost · Why India does not remember him

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The garrisons collapse · The hole in the middle of Punjab · What did survive · The trap of the turning point

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A man of uncertain birth · Chanakya, and a book that may not be his · Taking Magadha · Five hundred elephants · Megasthenes at Pataliputra · The end at the rock

Chapter 9 — Ashoka's Rocks

Kalinga · What the edicts actually say · The one edict he left out · The rocks in Punjab · Forgotten for two thousand years · Prinsep

Chapter 10 — An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

Genuinely unknown · Solid

Reference — Timeline · Glossary · About the Author · What comes next

CHAPTER ONE

The First Time Anyone Wrote Us Down

Around 518 BCE, Punjab appears in a written record for the first time. It is not our record, it is not in our language, and it was not put there for us to read.

1.1 — From silence to documents

Here is the position at the end of Part 3. We have hymns that were composed here and were not written down for a thousand years. We have pottery. We have some bones and a very small number of ancient genomes. We do not have a single sentence written by anyone living in Punjab, about anything, ever.

Then a Persian king carves a list of his provinces into a cliff, and one of the names on the list is ours.

That is the moment this part starts. Not because anything changed on the ground — the villages and the herds and the fields carried on exactly as before — but because from here we can read about it.

It is worth being precise about how thin the improvement is at first. What we get from Persia is a name on a list, a tribute figure, and a few passing mentions in a Greek book written by a man who never came here. That is the whole documentary record of Punjab for the first two centuries of this part.

Compared with nothing, it is enormous. Compared with what we would want, it is almost nothing.

1.2 — What an inscription is for

The list is on a cliff face at Behistun, in western Iran, carved on the order of Darius the Great around 520 BCE. It runs to over a thousand lines in three languages, tells the story of how Darius took the throne, and names the lands he ruled.

Now here is the detail that tells you what kind of document this is.

IN REAL TERMS

The Behistun inscription is carved about a **hundred metres up a sheer rock face**. That is roughly the height of a thirty-storey building.

You cannot read it from the ground. You could not read it from the ground in 520 BCE either. When Darius's stonemasons finished, they cut away the ledge they had been standing on, so that nobody could climb up to it.

The first European to copy it properly, in the 1830s and 40s, had to be lowered down the cliff on ropes and at one point hired a local boy to swing across a gap.

So ask the obvious question. **Who was it for?**

Not readers. Almost nobody in the empire could read at all, and the ones who could were not going to be dangling on a rope. It was for the gods, for posterity, and for the fact of it — a permanent statement that this was true, placed somewhere it could never be altered or removed.

A royal inscription is not a report. It is a monument that happens to have words on it.

Two words in that paragraph need explaining before we go on.

WORD BOX

Achaemenid: the family name of the Persian dynasty founded by Cyrus the Great. Their empire — the first of the really enormous ones — ran from the Aegean to the Indus for about two hundred years.

Satrapy: a province of that empire. **Satrap:** the governor of one. The word passed into many languages and still carries a whiff of "somebody else's man in charge of your place".

Inscription: writing cut into a hard surface — rock, stone, metal. The study of them is called epigraphy. Inscriptions are the backbone of ancient history for a simple reason: they survive. Everything written on leaf, bark, cloth or paper in this climate is gone.

Cuneiform: the wedge-shaped writing of Mesopotamia and Persia, made by pressing a cut reed into wet clay or chiselling the same shapes into stone.

1.3 — Herodotus, and the trouble with him

The other source for this period is a Greek writer named Herodotus, working around 430 BCE. He is usually called the father of history. He has also been called the father of lies, and both titles are deserved.

What he did was genuinely new. He set out to find out why the Greeks and Persians had fought, travelled widely, asked people questions, wrote down what they said, and — crucially — often told you where he got it and whether he believed it.

He also reports, with a straight face, that in the deserts of India there are ants bigger than foxes that dig gold out of the sand, and that Indians collect the gold by riding in on camels while the ants are asleep.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Herodotus never came to India. He is at least two or three people away from anything he says about it — a Greek who talked to Persians who had talked to somebody in the east.

So how do you use a source like that?

What is probably reliable: administrative facts he could have got from Persian records or officials. Which provinces existed. What they paid. That Indian troops served in the Persian army. These are dull, checkable, and there is no obvious reason to invent them.

What is probably not: anything colourful. Customs, monsters, marvels. These are exactly the things that improve with each retelling, and they are what a traveller's audience wants.

And the giant ants? There is a real suggestion that they are marmots — burrowing animals of the high plateaus north of Kashmir that throw up soil which does, in some places, carry gold dust. A traveller's tale about a large digging animal and gold-bearing earth needs only a few retellings to become an ant the size of a fox.

That is the honest position on Herodotus. Not a liar. A man faithfully writing down what he was told, by people who were often telling him rubbish.

1.4 — The name they gave us

Chapter 2 of Part 3 followed a word. Here it is again, one step further along.

The river the hymns called *Sindhu* reached Persian mouths and became **Hindush**, because Old Persian regularly turns an initial *s* into an *h*. That is the name on Darius's lists — the land at and beyond that river.

The Greeks took the Persian word, dropped the *h* as their language required, and got *Indos* for the river and *India* for the country beyond it.

Everything follows from those two mispronunciations. India. Indus. Indian. Later, through Persian and Arabic, Hindustan, and eventually Hindu and Hindi. A whole vocabulary of identity for a fifth of humanity, descended from foreigners struggling with the name of a Punjabi river.

And notice the shape of it. **We did not name ourselves.** The oldest surviving name for this country as a whole is a foreign administrator's label for the far edge of somebody else's empire.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

That being written about is the same as being known.

The moment documents appear, historians relax. The dark ages end. We say a region "enters history" — as though it had been waiting outside.

But look at what actually entered history here. A place-name on a tribute list. A figure in gold dust. A note that soldiers from there fought in somebody's army. Some nonsense about ants.

Nothing about who lived here, how they were governed, what they grew, what they believed, what they called themselves, or what they thought about being a province. On all of that, the arrival of writing has told us precisely nothing, because the people doing the writing had no interest in it.

What we have gained is not knowledge of Punjab. It is knowledge of **what Punjab looked like from Persepolis**. Those are very different things, and the difference gets forgotten the moment a document exists, because a document feels like an answer.

This runs through the whole part, and it gets worse before it gets better. The Greek accounts of Alexander tell you a great deal about what the Macedonian officer corps thought was worth recording. The Persian lists tell you what an imperial accountant needed. Only at the very end of this part — with Ashoka's rocks — does anybody standing in this land write something down and leave it where ordinary people could see it.

A region does not enter history. It enters somebody else's filing system.

REMEMBER THIS

Around **518 BCE** Punjab appears in writing for the first time — as a province name on a Persian king's list. Not our writing, not our language, not for us.

A royal inscription is a **monument, not a report**. The great Behistun text is carved a hundred metres up a cliff and the masons cut away the ledge behind them. It was never meant to be read.

Herodotus is the other source. He never came here. Use his dull administrative facts and discount his marvels — the giant gold-digging ants are probably marmots, three retellings later.

The Persians turned *Sindhu* into **Hindush**. The Greeks turned that into **India**. We did not name ourselves; the oldest name for this country is a foreign clerk's label for the far edge of an empire.

Entering history is not the same as being understood. It means somebody else started keeping a file.

CHAPTER TWO

A Province of Persia

For roughly two centuries, part of this land was the far eastern corner of the largest empire the world had yet seen. What that actually meant on the ground is much less clear than the maps suggest.

2.1 — Cyrus and Darius

The Persian empire was built in about thirty years, which is very fast for something that size.

Cyrus the Great took Media, then Lydia in Anatolia, then Babylon. By the time he died around 530 BCE the empire ran from the Aegean coast to somewhere in Central Asia. Greek writers say he campaigned in the east and came off badly in the deserts of what is now Balochistan. Whether he ever reached the Indus is not settled.

What is reasonably firm is that by the time of Darius, a generation later, the mountain country west of the Indus was Persian. The great inscription at Behistun, carved around 519 BCE, lists **Gandara** — Gandhara, the region around Peshawar and Taxila — among the lands Darius rules.

It does not list Hindush.

But the later inscriptions do — the ones at Persepolis and at Darius's tomb, cut in the years after. So somewhere between roughly 518 and 513 BCE, Darius added a province called **Hindush** to the empire, and that province is on our side of the river.

We have no account of the campaign. No battle, no general, no date, no resistance recorded. A name appears on a later list that was not on the earlier one. That is the entire evidence for the conquest of Punjab by the largest empire on earth.

2.2 — What Hindush was

Here is the first serious problem, and it runs through this chapter.

We do not know where Hindush was.

The name means, roughly, "the Indus land". That could be the lower Indus — modern Sindh. It could be the west bank. It could be the whole Punjab plain. Persian inscriptions list provinces; they do not draw boundaries, because a Persian king thought in terms of peoples who paid him, not lines on a map.

Most historians put Hindush somewhere in the Indus valley and the western Punjab, with Gandhara separately to the north-west. Beyond that the honest answer is that the map in your textbook, with a neat shaded province and a firm eastern edge, is a modern invention. Nobody in 500 BCE had that map or wanted one.

2.3 — The heaviest tribute in the empire

Herodotus gives a list of what each province paid. The Indian province is at the end, and it is the largest figure on the list: three hundred and sixty talents of **gold dust**, when everyone else paid in silver.

IN REAL TERMS

A talent was a weight, roughly **26 kilograms**. So three hundred and sixty talents of gold is somewhere around **nine thousand kilograms** — nine tonnes of gold, every year.

Gold was worth about thirteen times its weight in silver. Convert it and the Indian province's tribute comes out at roughly **a third of the entire empire's income**, from one province out of twenty.

To picture nine tonnes: it is about the weight of two full-grown male elephants, in gold, handed over annually.

And now the caution, which matters more than the number. **We have no way to check this.** Herodotus is a Greek writing a century later. The Persian administrative archives that survive — thousands of clay tablets from Persepolis — do not record it. Ancient tribute figures are routinely inflated, by the writers who report them and often by the kings who claimed them.

What the figure reliably tells us is not how much gold moved. It is that **Greeks in the fifth century BCE believed India was fabulously rich**. That belief is itself a historical fact, and it has consequences later in this part.

2.4 — The voyage down the Indus

One episode from this period is oddly vivid, and it is the clearest sign that Persian interest here was serious.

Darius, according to Herodotus, wanted to know where the Indus went. So he sent a Greek captain called Scylax with a fleet to sail down it, find the sea, and then come home the long way — west along the coast of Iran and Arabia and up to Egypt.

They did it. The voyage took thirty months.

Think about what that means as a piece of state behaviour. This is not raiding. This is an empire commissioning a survey of a river system at the far end of its territory, and then mapping the sea route back to its own centre. It is the act of a government that intends to stay.

It also matters for what comes next. Two centuries later Alexander sent his own fleet down the Indus and along that same coast, and he knew it could be done — because a Persian king had already had it done.

2.5 — Punjabi soldiers in Greece

The other firm thing is that men from here went west to fight.

When Xerxes invaded Greece in 480 BCE, Herodotus lists the contingents in his army, and there are Indians in it. He describes them wearing clothes made of "wool that grows on trees" — which is a Greek seeing cotton for the first time and doing his best. They carried cane bows and arrows tipped with iron.

Indian troops were still there the following year at the battle of Plataea, on the losing side.

WORD BOX

Tribute: a regular payment from a subject region to an imperial centre. Not quite tax — tax implies you get government in return. Tribute is closer to protection money with a ceremonial name.

Aramaic: a Semitic language, unrelated to Persian, which the Persian empire used for its everyday administration across all its provinces — because it was already the common written language of the Near East and it used an alphabet rather than several hundred cuneiform signs.

Kharoshthi: a script used in Gandhara and north-west India from roughly the fourth century BCE. It is written right to left, and it is descended from the Aramaic alphabet the Persians brought. This is the single most durable thing Persia left here.

2.6 — What Persia left behind

So what did two centuries of being a Persian province actually do to Punjab?

The honest answer is: less than you would expect, with one large exception.

There is no Persian architecture here. No palace, no fire temple, no provincial capital in the Persian style, no garrison that anyone has excavated. There are no Persian administrative documents from this region — and the Persians were prolific record-keepers who left tens of thousands of tablets elsewhere. Compare that with what Rome left in Britain, which was a smaller province held for a shorter time, and the difference is stark.

The exception is **writing**.

The Persian empire ran on Aramaic, and Aramaic used an alphabet. Somewhere in the north-west, in the centuries after the Persians arrived, that alphabet was adapted to write Indian languages. The result is Kharoshthi — written right to left, like its parent, and used across Gandhara and Punjab for the next five hundred years.

Hold that against Part 3. The Rigveda has no word for writing at all. By the end of this part an emperor is having his personal opinions carved into rock in Kharoshthi, in the north-west, for ordinary people to read. Some of the machinery that made that possible came in through a Persian filing system.

THE ARGUMENT — HOW MUCH OF PUNJAB DID PERSIA ACTUALLY CONTROL?

Every map of the Achaemenid empire shades in a chunk of north-west India. What does that shading mean?

A real province, really governed

The name is on royal inscriptions in three languages, repeatedly, over decades. A tribute figure exists and is the largest on the list. Troops from here served in imperial armies as far away as Greece. Darius commissioned a naval survey of the Indus. Persepolis reliefs show a delegation identified as Indian bringing goods. And the administrative language left a permanent mark in the form of a script. Empires do not casually do those things to territory they do not hold.

A name on a list, and not much more

Not one Persian building, garrison, coin hoard or administrative tablet has been excavated in this region. For an empire that left mountains of paperwork in Iran and Babylonia, that silence is deafening. The tribute figure comes from a Greek who never came here and cannot be checked. "Hindush" may mean only the lower Indus, not Punjab at all. And by the time Alexander arrived, whatever Persian authority existed had evaporated so completely that he had to negotiate with local kings one at a time, as if the empire had never been here.

Where things stand: most historians accept that Gandhara was genuinely held and that some territory east of the Indus was at least tributary for a time, while agreeing that the depth of control was shallow and probably declined sharply after Darius. The two positions are less far apart than they look — the real disagreement is about what "control" should mean.

What would settle it: Persian administrative material from the region. A single archive of tablets or Aramaic documents from Taxila or the Indus valley would change this overnight. Excavation in the relevant areas has been limited, and the levels of the right date at Taxila are thin.

Why it matters beyond this chapter: because the same question comes back for every empire in this series. The Mauryas, the Mughals, the British and the modern Indian state have all shaded Punjab in on their maps. Shading is cheap.

Underneath that whole disagreement sits something neither side usually states.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION**That an empire's map is its control.**

Look at any historical atlas. Empires are solid blocks of colour with hard edges. Persia is purple, the Mauryas are orange, and the line between them is a line.

No ancient empire worked like that, and most modern ones did not either.

What an ancient empire actually consisted of was a set of **relationships**, of wildly varying strength, radiating out from a centre. Near the capital: real administration, garrisons, tax collectors, courts. Further out: a governor who mattered and a road that worked. Further out still: a local king who sent something every year and was otherwise left alone. At the edge: a name on a list because somebody's grandfather had once agreed to send something.

Punjab, for Persia, was at the far end of that scale. The purple on the map and the purple around Persepolis are the same colour and mean completely different things.

This is not pedantry. It changes the story. If you think Punjab was **ruled** by Persia for two centuries, then Alexander's arrival is a transfer of power between two foreign empires and the locals are furniture. If you think Punjab was a patchwork of local kingdoms that sometimes sent tribute west, then what Alexander walked into was a crowded, functioning political landscape of its own — which is exactly what the Greek sources then describe, without ever noticing that it contradicts the map.

Watch for this every time a map appears in the rest of this series. **Ask what the colour is doing.**

REMEMBER THIS

Between about **518 and 513 BCE** Darius added a province called **Hindush** to the Persian empire. We have no account of the conquest — only a name that appears on later lists and not on earlier ones.

Herodotus says it paid the **heaviest tribute in the empire**, in gold dust. The figure cannot be checked and is probably inflated. What it reliably proves is that Greeks believed India was rich — which matters later.

Darius had the Indus **surveyed by sea**, a thirty-month voyage. Punjabi troops fought in the Persian army in **Greece**.

Persia left almost nothing physical here — no buildings, no garrisons, no archives. It left one enormous thing: the Aramaic alphabet, which became **Kharoshthi**, the first script used to write the languages of this region.

The purple block on the map is not control. It is a relationship, and at this distance from Persepolis it was a thin one.

CHAPTER THREE

Taxila

One city in northern Punjab sat where three worlds met. It is also the site of the most repeated claim in Indian educational history — and that claim needs handling carefully.

3.1 — Where the roads met

Look at where Taxila is. About thirty kilometres north-west of modern Rawalpindi, on the Potohar plateau, just east of the Indus.

That position is the entire explanation for the city.

Three routes converge there. The road west through the Khyber and on to Kabul, Balkh and eventually Persia. The road north into Kashmir and over towards Central Asia. And the great road east and south-east, down through Punjab, across the rivers, and on to the Ganga plain — the route that later Indian texts call the *Uttarapatha*, the northern road, and that the Mauryas and the Mughals and the British all rebuilt in turn under different names.

A city at a junction like that does not need to produce anything. It gets rich on other people's traffic, and it collects other people's ideas as a side effect.

3.2 — What has actually been dug up

Taxila is not one city. It is three, in a row, built over about eight hundred years.

The earliest is a low mound now called Bhir Mound, occupied from roughly the sixth century BCE. This is the Taxila of this chapter — the city the Persians taxed, that Panini may have known, and that Alexander walked into.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Taxila was excavated over twenty years, from 1913, by John Marshall — the same archaeologist who was in charge when Harappa and Mohenjo-daro were identified.

What Bhir Mound looks like. Winding, irregular lanes. Houses of rough rubble stone, built up against each other with no shared plan. Soak pits for waste rather than street drains. Rooms added on as families needed them.

Now put that next to Part 2. Fifteen hundred years earlier, at Harappa, three hundred kilometres away, streets ran on a grid, bricks were made to standard proportions, and sewage ran under the road in covered channels.

What this proves: that Harappan city planning did not carry forward. It was not passed down and improved on. It was lost, and the cities that came afterwards in the same region were, by that measure, considerably less sophisticated.

What it does not prove: that Taxila was poor or backward. It was rich and it was important. It simply organised itself the way most ancient cities organised themselves — by accretion, not by plan. Harappa is the outlier in this story, not Taxila.

The two later cities on the site, Sirkap and Sirsukh, do have grid plans. Those come with the Greeks and the Kushans, in Part 5.

3.3 — The university question

You will have heard that Taxila was the world's oldest university. It is on tourist boards, in textbooks and in a great many speeches.

The claim needs unpicking, and unpicking it is not an attack on Taxila.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS TAXILA A UNIVERSITY?

Everyone agrees Taxila was a famous centre of learning. The disagreement is about what kind of thing it was.

Yes, in substance if not in name

Buddhist story collections repeatedly describe young men travelling long distances — from Magadha, from Kosala, from Kashi — specifically to study at Takkasila. They name subjects: the Vedas, medicine, archery, law, accountancy, elephant lore. Tradition places several famous figures there, including a celebrated physician and, later, Chandragupta's adviser. Students paid fees or worked for their teachers. There was a recognised reputation that pulled people across a subcontinent. If a place attracts students from a thousand kilometres away for advanced instruction across many subjects, calling it a university describes what it did.

No, and the word does real damage

A university is an institution — it has a corporate existence apart from any individual, buildings held in common, admissions, a syllabus, examinations and qualifications that outlive its teachers. None of that has been found at Taxila, in the ground or in the texts. What the sources describe is many individual teachers, each taking private pupils in his own house, in a city that happened to be famous for having a lot of them. That is a scholarly quarter, not a university. And the comparison matters, because India does have an unambiguous ancient university — Nalanda, from around the fifth century CE, with excavated lecture halls, dormitories, a library, royal endowment and a formal admissions process. Calling Taxila a university flattens the difference and, oddly, sells Nalanda short.

Where things stand: most specialists take the second position on the institutional question while fully accepting the first on the substance. Taxila was a genuine and internationally famous centre of higher learning. It was not an organised institution, and the sources that describe it never suggest it was.

What would settle it: excavation of a building complex at Bhir Mound identifiable as shared teaching space, or a text describing corporate governance. Neither exists.

Why the claim is so sticky: because "world's oldest university" is a much better sentence than "internationally renowned concentration of private teachers". It is not a lie. It is a translation of an ancient thing into a modern category it does not fit — which is the commonest way ancient history goes wrong, and it happens in every country's version of its own past.

3.4 — Panini

Somewhere in this region, probably in the fifth or fourth century BCE, a man from a village in Gandhara wrote a book. It is one of the most remarkable things ever produced by a human mind, and almost nobody outside a specialist field has read a page of it.

His name was Panini. The book describes the grammar of Sanskrit.

That sounds dull. It is not, and here is why.

IN REAL TERMS

Imagine trying to write down the complete rules of a language — not a phrasebook, but every rule by which any correct sentence can be built, with no exceptions left unexplained.

Panini did that for Sanskrit in **under four thousand short rules**, across eight chapters. The whole thing is roughly the length of a long magazine article.

He managed it by inventing techniques that nobody in the world used again until the twentieth century. He built an artificial notation — a set of technical symbols and abbreviations that mean nothing in ordinary Sanskrit — purely to compress the rules. He wrote rules that operate on other rules. He established a fixed order of application, so that when two rules conflict you know which one wins, without having to state the exception separately.

That is, in structure, how a computer language is specified. Panini was doing it around two and a half thousand years before there was anything to run it on.

The cost of that compression is that the text is **unreadable** without training. A rule can be two words long. Whole verbs are implied from a rule three chapters earlier. It has needed commentaries for over two thousand years, and the commentaries have needed commentaries.

Two things follow from Panini that matter for this book.

First, he is evidence of what was happening intellectually in the north-west in exactly this period. Not a court, not a temple, not an army — a man in a village near the Indus performing an act of abstract analysis at a level nobody would match for millennia.

Second, he tells you something about Sanskrit itself. By Panini's time Sanskrit had stopped being anybody's ordinary spoken language and was becoming a learned one, which is precisely why it needed fixing in place. The languages people actually spoke in Punjab by now were the Prakrits — the everyday descendants of the older speech. And it is the Prakrits, not Sanskrit, that Ashoka's inscriptions will be written in at the end of this part.

WORD BOX

Uttarapatha: "the northern road". The great trunk route from the north-west across Punjab to the Ganga plain. Every empire in this series rebuilds it; the Grand Trunk Road is its descendant.

Sutra: literally "thread". A rule or statement compressed to the absolute minimum number of words, designed to be memorised. Indian technical works of this period are written as strings of them.

Prakrit: the ordinary spoken languages of northern India in this period, descended from the same ancestor as Sanskrit but changed by everyday use. Punjabi's ancestors are among them. Sanskrit was the fixed, learned form; Prakrit was what people actually said.

REMEMBER THIS

Taxila sat where the roads from Persia, Central Asia and the Ganga plain met. That junction is the whole explanation for the city.

The earliest city there, **Bhir Mound**, has winding lanes, rubble houses and soak pits — noticeably **less planned than Harappa fifteen hundred years earlier**. Harappan city planning was lost, not inherited.

It was a famous centre of learning, drawing students across the subcontinent. It was **not a university** — no institution, no buildings held in common, no syllabus. Nalanda, much later, is the real thing.

Panini, from a village in this region, wrote the complete grammar of Sanskrit in under four thousand rules, using formal techniques nobody matched for two thousand years.

By Panini's time Sanskrit already needed preserving. What people around him actually spoke were the Prakrits — and those are the ancestors of Punjabi.

CHAPTER FOUR

Alexander Arrives

In the spring of 326 BCE a Macedonian army crossed the Indus on a bridge of boats. Before we follow it, we have to be clear about who was writing all this down, and when.

4.1 — Who he was

Alexander became king of Macedon in 336 BCE, at twenty, when his father was murdered. Macedon was a hard, mountainous kingdom on the northern edge of the Greek world, which the southern Greeks regarded as half-barbarian and which had recently conquered them.

Two years later he crossed into Asia and attacked the Persian empire — the same empire that had held Gandhara and Hindush in Chapter 2. He beat it three times in pitched battle, burned Persepolis in 330 BCE, and by the time the last Persian king was murdered by his own men, Alexander was the ruler of everything from Greece to Afghanistan.

Then he kept going. Three brutal years in Bactria and Sogdiana — modern northern Afghanistan and Uzbekistan — fighting an insurgency rather than an army. And in 327 BCE, having inherited the Persian claim to Gandhara and Hindush, he came over the mountains to collect it.

He was twenty-nine.

4.2 — The sources, and why they are a problem

Everything that follows in the next three chapters comes from Greek and Roman writers. It is worth stopping to see how that chain works, because it is the weakest link in this part and almost nobody mentions it.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Not one eyewitness account of Alexander's campaign survives. Not one.

Several were written. His fleet commander wrote one. His official historian wrote one, until Alexander had him arrested and he died in custody. His engineer wrote one. And one of his generals wrote a memoir after becoming king of Egypt.

All of them are lost. We know they existed because later writers quote them.

The five accounts we actually have were written **between three hundred and five hundred years after the events**, by men who had never been to India, working from those lost books plus a great deal of accumulated story.

To feel the gap: it is like reconstructing the Anglo-Sikh Wars of the 1840s from books written today, when every first-hand account has been destroyed and all you have are quotations from them inside later works.

What follows from this. The best of the five is generally reckoned to be the one that leans hardest on the two eyewitness sources. But one of those eyewitnesses was a general who later became a king and had every reason to make his own role look good, and the other served in Alexander's court. The official historian was executed for insufficient enthusiasm, which tells you what kind of writing was expected.

What can still be trusted: the broad sequence — where the army went, in what order, roughly when. Multiple independent chains agree, and the geography checks out.

What cannot: numbers of any kind, speeches, motives, and above all casualty figures. Every one of those is a place where a writer had freedom and a reason to use it.

4.3 — Over the mountains

Alexander crossed the Hindu Kush and split his army in two.

Half went straight down the direct route towards the Indus — through the Khyber country — with orders to secure the road and build a bridge over the river.

Alexander took the other half north, into the hill country of Bajaur and Swat, and spent a winter reducing it. This was not a march. It was a series of sieges against hill peoples who had no intention of submitting to anybody, and the sources describe it as vicious on both sides.

One episode from it should be stated plainly rather than skipped, because the popular version of Alexander does not include it.

At a hill fort called Massaga, the defenders included several thousand Indian mercenary soldiers. After a hard siege they agreed terms and came out. According to more than one of our sources, Alexander then had them surrounded and killed — because he judged that if released they would simply fight him again further on. The figure given is around seven thousand.

Our sources are, remember, sympathetic to him. This is what got through a friendly filter.

4.4 — The rock

The set piece of the hill campaign is a mountain stronghold the Greeks called Aornos.

It was a flat-topped height above the Indus with steep sides, water on top and enough ground to grow food — meaning it could not be starved out and could not easily be climbed. Local tradition, the Greeks were told, held that a god had once tried to take it and failed.

That last detail is the point. Alexander built his whole public image on descent from Herakles and Achilles. Being told that Herakles had failed here made the place irresistible, and the sources say so openly.

He took it by engineering. His men filled a ravine with earth and timber to build a causeway across to the rock face, under fire, over several days, until his catapults were in range. The defenders slipped away at night.

It was a genuinely impressive operation and it had almost no strategic value. He wanted it because of the story attached to it.

WORD BOX

Phalanx: the Macedonian infantry block. Men packed shoulder to shoulder in deep ranks, each carrying a pike about six metres long, so that five ranks of pike-points projected ahead of the front man. Almost unstoppable from the front on flat, firm ground. Clumsy and vulnerable everywhere else — which matters a great deal in the next chapter.

Companion cavalry: Alexander's heavy horse, and his own personal command. This was the weapon he actually won battles with: hold the enemy in place with the phalanx, then drive the cavalry into a gap.

Siege train: the catapults, towers and engineers that travelled with the army. This was the real Macedonian advantage over most opponents, and it is why hill forts that had never fallen before started falling.

4.5 — Taxila changes sides

In the spring of 326 BCE the army crossed the Indus on a bridge of boats and came down into the Punjab plain.

And there Alexander was met not by resistance but by an ally.

The king of Taxila — the Greeks called him Taxiles, from the city; his Indian name appears as Ambhi — came out to meet him, submitted, and supplied the army with grain, silver, cattle, elephants and several thousand troops.

This is usually written up as cowardice or treachery. It was neither. It was a local political calculation, and to see it you have to forget the map from Chapter 2 and look at the actual landscape.

Punjab in 326 BCE was not a country. It was a set of adjacent kingdoms and republics along and between the five rivers, most of them small, all of them wary of each other. Taxila's principal enemy was the kingdom across the Jhelum, ruled by the man the Greeks would call Porus.

From Ambhi's chair, a Macedonian army arriving from the west was not an invasion of India. India was not a thing anybody was defending. It was an enormous, well-equipped, temporary force that could be pointed at his neighbour.

He was not wrong about the immediate result, and he was not the last ruler in this series to make that calculation. Watch for it again in Part 6, and again in Part 10, and most consequentially of all in Part 11.

REMEMBER THIS

Alexander came to India in 327 BCE as the conqueror of Persia, collecting what had been Persian provinces. He was twenty-nine.

Not one eyewitness account survives. Everything we have was written three to five hundred years later, from lost memoirs by men with reputations to protect. Trust the sequence and the geography. Do not trust the numbers, the speeches or the casualty figures.

The hill campaign in Swat was brutal, and included the killing of **several thousand Indian mercenaries after they had surrendered** — reported by sources friendly to him.

He took the rock of **Aornos** by building a causeway across a ravine, for a place of almost no strategic value, because he had been told a god once failed to take it.

Taxila joined him without a fight. Not out of cowardice — because Punjab was a set of rival kingdoms, and a foreign army was a weapon you could aim at your neighbour.

CHAPTER FIVE

Porus at the Jhelum

Part 1 promised you this battle in full. It was fought in the monsoon on the Vitasta, it was the hardest fight of Alexander's career, and the man who lost it kept his kingdom.

5.1 — The river in flood

The Greeks called it the Hydaspes. The Rigveda called it the Vitasta. We call it the Jhelum.

In May 326 BCE, Alexander's army came up to its western bank and stopped, because on the other side there was an army waiting and the river was rising.

The timing was the worst possible. The monsoon was arriving. A Punjab river in flood is not the river you see in the dry season — it widens, the current strengthens, and the banks turn to deep mud. Every crossing point was watched.

And the man watching was the king of the country between the Jhelum and the Chenab. The Greeks wrote his name as Poros. It is very likely a rendering of Paurava — a man of the Puru lineage.

If that is right, and most scholars think it is, then this is a thread running straight out of Part 3. The Purus were one of the peoples who fought *against* Sudas at the Battle of the Ten Kings, on the Ravi, eleven centuries earlier. Their descendants were still here, still holding land between two of the same rivers, when a Macedonian army walked into it.

5.2 — The night crossing

Alexander could not force a crossing in front of Porus's army. Elephants terrify horses, and men climbing wet out of a river into a waiting line do not last.

So he cheated, and the way he did it is the most impressive thing he did in India.

For several weeks he made his army noisy and unpredictable. Cavalry rode up and down the bank at night. Camps were struck and rebuilt. Boats moved about. Grain was stockpiled openly, as though he intended to sit there until the monsoon passed. Porus shadowed each movement from the other side, and then — as the pattern repeated and nothing happened — stopped shadowing every one of them.

Then, on a night of heavy rain and thunder, Alexander took a picked force some twenty-five kilometres upstream, to a wooded bend where an island screened the far bank, and crossed. The storm covered the noise.

The rest of the army stayed in the main camp, in full view, and made a great deal of noise as if preparing to cross where they were.

By the time Porus understood what had happened, there was a Macedonian force on his side of the river and behind his flank, and he had to decide in minutes whether to face it or hold his position against the main camp.

5.3 — Elephants in the rain

Porus sent a detachment under his son to deal with the crossing. It was too small and it was destroyed. His son was killed in it.

Then he turned his main force to face Alexander, and put his elephants in the front line at intervals, with infantry between and behind them.

What happened next is the only part of this battle everybody agrees was hard.

IN REAL TERMS

To understand the fight you need to understand what an elephant does to a Macedonian phalanx.

The phalanx works because a wall of six-metre pikes is impossible to reach past. It requires two things: **flat firm ground**, and **an enemy that comes at you from the front**.

An elephant is four tonnes of animal that walks into the pikes and keeps walking. The points do not stop it. Worse, horses will not go near one — they panic at the smell — so the cavalry that normally wins the battle cannot be used against them.

Now add the weather. The bank was churned mud after weeks of rain. Porus's chariots bogged down and were useless. But so did the phalanx's footing, and a pike block that cannot hold its line is just a crowd of men holding long sticks.

The Macedonians eventually broke the elephants by going round them — axes and heavy curved swords at the legs and trunks, javelins at the drivers. It worked, and it produced the worst part of the day for the Indian side: **wounded elephants panicked and turned back into their own infantry**, which was packed in behind them.

More Indians were probably killed by their own elephants than by Macedonians.

The fight went on for hours. Porus stayed on the field, on an elephant, and was wounded in the shoulder. He was among the last to leave. Even the sources written to flatter Alexander say so, and they did not have to.

5.4 — How close it ran

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The written casualty figures are worthless and it is easy to show why. One account gives the Indian dead as twenty-three thousand and the Macedonian dead as about three hundred and ten. That is not a battle. That is a massacre, and it does not fit a fight the same source describes as lasting eight hours against a general who held his position to the end.

But there is a second kind of evidence, and it is much better, because it was not written by a historian.

Alexander struck coins about it. Large silver pieces have survived showing, on one side, a horseman charging a retreating elephant carrying two figures, and on the other a standing figure with a thunderbolt. Numismatists connect them directly to this campaign.

What that proves: the battle mattered enough to be commemorated in metal, and the thing worth commemorating was **beating an elephant**. Nobody issues a coin about an easy win.

There are two further pieces of physical logic. Alexander founded two cities on the spot, one of them named for the horse that died there — you do not do that for a routine engagement. And within a few weeks his army refused to go any further east. Armies that have just won cheaply do not usually stop.

What it does not prove: that the result was in doubt. Alexander won, clearly, and captured Porus. "Harder than expected" is not the same as "nearly lost".

5.5 — "As a king"

Porus was brought before Alexander wounded, and — the sources make a point of it — still an enormous man, taller than anyone around him.

Alexander asked how he wished to be treated.

"As a king."

Alexander then did something that had nothing to do with generosity and everything to do with strategy. He gave Porus his kingdom back, and added territory to it.

He had no choice worth the name. He had one army, thousands of kilometres from home, and no administration. A hostile province behind him was a knife at his supply line. A local king who owed him his throne was the cheapest possible garrison. Every empire in this series works out the same thing eventually.

But it also happens to have made a very good story, and the story is why Porus is the one Indian name most people can produce from this whole period. He is remembered because he lost well to somebody famous — which is a thin kind of immortality, and it is worth noticing who hands it out.

The horse died here too. Alexander had ridden Bucephalus since he was a boy, and named a city for him on the bank of the Jhelum. Nobody has ever found it.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

That the enemy in a victory story is a real portrait.

Everything you know about Porus comes from people writing to make Alexander look good. Everything. There is no Indian source about him at all — not a text, not an inscription, not a coin of his own.

Now notice which Porus those writers produced. Huge. Brave. Dignified in defeat. Answers a conqueror with one perfect line. Fights to the last and is admired for it.

Ask what that portrait is doing. **A hero is only as good as the man he beat.** If Porus is a coward, Alexander has beaten a coward. If Porus is a magnificent warrior-king with a noble reply ready, then Alexander has defeated a worthy enemy and then been generous to him — which makes Alexander twice the man.

The noble defeated enemy is one of the oldest devices in war writing, in every literature that has one. It is a compliment paid to the winner in the currency of the loser.

So what does that leave? Not nothing. Two things survive the discount, because they are not the kind of detail a flatterer needs to invent: that the battle was long and difficult, and that Alexander put Porus back on his throne. The second is administrative and can be checked against what happens afterwards.

The rest — the height, the dignity, the line — may be true. We have no way of knowing, and we never will. What we are actually reading is **what Greeks needed an Indian king to be like**.

This applies far beyond Porus. Every noble savage, every worthy adversary, every honourable enemy in any conquest narrative anywhere is doing the same job. When you meet one, ask whose reputation is being built.

REMEMBER THIS

The battle was fought on the **Jhelum** — the Vitasta of Part 3 — in **May 326 BCE**, in the monsoon. "Porus" is almost certainly **Paurava**, a man of the Puru lineage, whose people fought against Sudas on the Ravi eleven centuries earlier.

Alexander won by **deception**: weeks of false alarms until Porus stopped reacting, then a night crossing twenty-five kilometres upstream under cover of a thunderstorm.

Elephants nearly did the job. Horses will not face them and pikes do not stop them. What broke the Indian line was wounded elephants turning back into their own packed infantry.

The written casualty figures are **worthless**. The coins Alexander struck about beating an elephant are better evidence, and so is the fact that his army refused to go any further a few weeks later.

Porus got his kingdom back — because a grateful local king is the cheapest garrison there is. Everything else you know about him was written by people who needed Alexander to have beaten someone worth beating.

CHAPTER SIX

The Refusal at the Beas

Three rivers further east, the army that had not lost a battle in eight years stopped walking. What turned Alexander back was not an enemy. It was a rumour, and his own men.

6.1 — Three more rivers

After the Jhelum, Alexander went on east. He crossed the Chenab. He crossed the Ravi — the Parushni of Chapter 8 of Part 3, in the same country as the Battle of the Ten Kings.

It was not a triumphal procession. At a place the Greeks called Sangala, somewhere in central Punjab, a people they name as the Cathaeans fought a hard defensive battle from behind a barricade of wagons and had to be taken by siege. Our sources — friendly ones — record heavy Macedonian losses.

Then the army reached the Beas, the Vipas, and stopped.

6.2 — What they had heard was on the other side

The reason they stopped was information, and it came from the local kings.

Beyond the Beas, they were told, the country ran on across the Ganga plain to a kingdom called Magadha, ruled by the Nanda dynasty from a capital far to the east. And the Nandas could put an army into the field that made anything in Punjab look small.

IN REAL TERMS

The figures the Macedonians were given vary by source, but the smallest version is roughly: **two hundred thousand infantry, twenty thousand cavalry, two thousand chariots, and between three and four thousand elephants.** The largest version is more than double that.

Discount them as heavily as you like. Cut them by three quarters and they are still catastrophic.

The elephants are the part that matters. At the Jhelum, **two hundred** elephants had come close to breaking the Macedonian line and had left the army badly shaken. Now they were being told about numbers ten or twenty times greater.

And consider what these men had already done. They had crossed from Europe into Asia **eight years earlier.** They had walked something over seventeen thousand kilometres. Many had married, had children in garrison towns, and had not seen home since their twenties.

The monsoon had been falling on them for weeks. Their leather was rotting, their iron was rusting, and there were snakes in the camp.

They were not cowards. They were finished.

6.3 — Coenus speaks

Alexander called an assembly of his officers and made the case for going on. The speech we have is a later writer's composition, but the situation is not in doubt.

One man answered him: Coenus, a senior commander who had led a decisive wing at the Jhelum and could not be accused of shirking.

The reply attributed to him is, in substance, that the men had done everything asked of them, that most of those who set out were dead or scattered in garrisons, that those left were worn out, and that a good commander knows when to stop. Then he said the thing that actually ends arguments: he asked Alexander to go home and, if he wished, to come back later with a fresh army.

The assembly was silent. Alexander went into his tent for two days, in the hope that the mood would turn.

It did not. He came out, announced that the omens for crossing were bad, and gave the order to turn back — which allowed everybody to pretend the gods had decided rather than the infantry.

Coenus died of illness within weeks. Alexander gave him a grand funeral. Some of the sources note the coincidence and let the reader draw the conclusion.

Before leaving, Alexander had twelve enormous altars built on the bank of the Beas, one for each of the Olympian gods, to mark the limit of his advance. They were described for centuries afterwards.

Nobody has ever found them.

6.4 — The road home and what it cost

The return was worse than anything in the advance.

The army went south down the Jhelum and the Chenab into the Indus, with a fleet built in Punjab carrying part of it. On the way they fought their way through the peoples of the lower Punjab — and at one town of the Malli, almost certainly on the site of Multan, Alexander went over the wall ahead of his men, was cut off inside with a handful of companions, and took an arrow through the chest that went into his lung.

He nearly died. The reprisal against the Malli afterwards was, even in our friendly sources, a slaughter.

At the mouth of the Indus the force split. The fleet felt its way west along the Makran coast — a genuine feat of navigation. Alexander marched the rest of the army through the Gedrosian desert behind it, and that march killed more of his people than every battle of the entire campaign put together. Most of the dead were the camp followers: the wives, children, servants and traders who moved with an ancient army and are almost never counted.

He reached Babylon and died there in June 323 BCE, at thirty-two, of a fever, or of drink, or of poison, depending on which of our late sources you prefer.

He had been in India for about two years.

6.5 — Why India does not remember him

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

That importance is a property of events.

Here is a fact that should be much better known than it is.

No Indian source of any kind mentions Alexander. Not a Sanskrit text, not a Prakrit one, not a Buddhist or Jain chronicle, not a Puranic king-list, not an inscription, not a coin. Nothing. For two thousand years, the single most famous event in this period of Indian history left no trace whatsoever in Indian memory.

Everything you know about it, including this chapter, comes from Greek and Roman writers and from Europeans reading them.

The near-miss is almost funny. Ashoka's inscriptions, at the end of this part, do name five Greek kings — he was writing to them. One of the names looks like Alexander. It is a different Alexander, a minor contemporary king in north-western Greece. The great one is not there.

So which is right? Was Alexander's invasion a turning point in Indian history, or a two-year raid that nobody bothered to write down?

The answer is that **"important" is not a fact about an event. It is a decision made later, by whoever is keeping the records.**

From a Greek desk, this is the moment the known world reached its eastern limit — the climax of the greatest story in their history. From an Indian desk, it is a foreign army that came over the mountains, fought a hard battle with one Punjabi king, was stopped by its own men at the fourth river, went home the long way and lost most of its people in a desert. Neither desk is lying. They are ranking.

And notice the machinery that made one ranking win. The Greeks wrote it down; Rome inherited it; Europe inherited Rome; and Europe wrote the history textbooks that were then used in Indian schools. That is a chain of custody, not a verdict.

Then ask the question the other way round, because it is the useful one. **What has been left out of your education by the same process?** The next three chapters are about a man who built an empire from Afghanistan to Bengal, and an emperor who covered a subcontinent in writing. Both are better documented than Alexander in India. Neither is as famous.

REMEMBER THIS

At the **Beas** in 326 BCE, Alexander's army refused to go further east. Not defeated — **finished**. Eight years, seventeen thousand kilometres, and weeks of monsoon.

What stopped them was a **report**: the Nanda empire of Magadha, with elephants numbered in the thousands. Two hundred had nearly broken them on the Jhelum.

Coenus spoke for the men and Alexander gave way, announcing that the omens were bad so that the gods could take the blame. Coenus died within weeks.

The retreat cost far more than the advance. Alexander took an arrow through the lung at **Multan**, and the march through the Gedrosian desert killed more of his people than all his battles combined. He died at **Babylon** in 323 BCE, aged thirty-two.

No Indian source mentions him. Not one, ever. His fame here is entirely inherited from the people who wrote it down — which is what fame usually is.

CHAPTER SEVEN

What He Actually Left

Within about ten years of Alexander's death there was no Macedonian authority left east of the Indus at all. But something was left, and it was not what he intended.

7.1 — The garrisons collapse

Alexander did what conquerors do. He appointed governors, left garrisons of Greek and Macedonian troops, founded cities named after himself, and marched away.

It came apart almost immediately, and the sequence is worth following because it tells you how thin the conquest was.

The governor he left in charge of the country between the Indus and the Jhelum was murdered by his own mercenaries while Alexander was still alive. Another senior officer was killed in fighting shortly after. The Greek troops settled far to the north, in Bactria, mutinied twice and tried to walk home.

Then, around 318 BCE, the Greek commander left in India murdered Porus — the king Alexander had personally restored — seized his war elephants, and marched them west to sell his services in the wars between Alexander's generals.

That is the end of the Macedonian presence in Punjab. Not a defeat. A commander stripping the province for assets and leaving.

Of the cities Alexander founded here, not one has been securely identified on the ground. The city named for his horse, on the Jhelum, is lost. The altars on the Beas are lost. Two years of campaigning, and the physical trace in Punjab is effectively zero.

7.2 — What did survive

Four things outlasted him, and only one of them was on purpose.

A word. Indian languages acquired *yavana* as the term for Greeks, and then for westerners generally. It comes, through Persian, from "Ionian" — the Greeks of the Anatolian coast the Persians had dealt with. Panini already knew a form of it before Alexander arrived, so the word came the same way the alphabet did, through the Persian empire. It is still there in modern Indian languages.

A sea route. Nearchus's fleet proved that the coast from the Indus to the Persian Gulf could be navigated by a large force. That knowledge fed, over the following centuries, into a serious maritime trade between India and the Mediterranean world.

Elephants. The Macedonians had been badly frightened by them on the Jhelum, and the lesson took. For the next century every Hellenistic king wanted elephants, and the only reliable supply was India. That has a direct consequence in the next chapter.

A Greek population in the north. The settlers Alexander planted in Bactria did not go home. Their descendants set up their own kingdom, and a century later some of them came back over the mountains into Punjab as rulers in their own right. That is Part 5, and it is where the genuine Greek influence on this region actually happens — long after Alexander, and nothing to do with him.

THE ARGUMENT — DID ALEXANDER MAKE THE MAURYAN EMPIRE POSSIBLE?

Within a decade of Alexander's death, a man from Magadha had taken the whole of north India including Punjab. Historians have argued about the connection for two hundred years.

Yes — he broke the board

Alexander removed, killed or destabilised the local powers of Punjab one by one, then left a vacuum garrisoned by demoralised foreign troops who murdered their own officers. The region's kings had been beaten, its confederations broken and its manpower drained. A conqueror coming from the east a few years later walked into something far softer than the crowded, well-armed landscape of 327 BCE. Greek sources also say the future emperor met Alexander as a young man and drew a lesson from it.

No — the engine was in Magadha and it was already running

The Nanda kingdom was the largest state in India before Alexander arrived and was exactly what stopped him at the Beas. Its wealth, its standing army and its elephants were built on the iron and rice agriculture of the Ganga plain that Part 3 described — a process that had been under way for four hundred years and owed nothing to anybody Greek. Chandragupta's real achievement was taking Magadha itself, in the east, which Alexander never came within eight hundred kilometres of. Punjab was a mopping-up operation afterwards.

Where things stand: most historians take the second position on the main question and allow the first as a minor contributing factor. The Mauryan empire is a Ganga-plain phenomenon with Ganga-plain causes. But Punjab specifically was easier to take in 317 BCE than it would have been in 327, and Alexander is the reason.

What would settle it: almost nothing, because it is a question about what would have happened otherwise, and there is no evidence for things that did not happen. Be suspicious of confident answers in either direction.

Why the question keeps being asked: because European historiography needed Alexander to have mattered, and Indian nationalist historiography needed him not to have. Both had an answer before they had a method.

7.3 — The trap of the turning point

Let me be plain about the shape of these two chapters, because I have been hard on a man most readers admire.

Alexander was an extraordinary soldier. The Jhelum crossing was brilliant. The Aornos causeway was brilliant. He asked things of an army that almost no commander has ever got, and got them for eight years.

None of that is the same as mattering here.

The habit this period should break you of is the **turning point** — the idea that history proceeds by dramatic moments in which a famous person changes everything. It is the shape stories have, so it is the shape we impose.

The things that actually changed Punjab in this part were slower and duller and had no author. An alphabet arriving through an imperial filing system. Iron and rice building a state in a river plain eight hundred kilometres east until it was strong enough to reach back. A road across the passes that made one city rich. A grammar written in a village. None of those has a battle in it, and all of them outlasted every army in this chapter.

REMEMBER THIS

Macedonian authority in Punjab lasted about **ten years** and ended not in battle but in a commander **murdering Porus, seizing his elephants and marching them west to sell.**

Not one of the cities Alexander founded here has been securely identified. The altars on the Beas are gone. The physical trace in Punjab is effectively nothing.

Four things survived: the word **yavana**, the **sea route** to the Gulf, a Hellenistic appetite for **elephants**, and a Greek population in Bactria whose descendants return in Part 5. Only the last is a real inheritance, and it happened a century later.

Whether he made the Mauryan empire possible is **disputed**. Most historians say the engine was in Magadha and had been running for centuries — but Punjab was certainly easier to take in 317 BCE than in 327.

Beware the turning point. What actually changed this land was an alphabet, a road, a grammar and a crop — none of which has a hero in it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Chandragupta

A man whose birth nobody can agree on took the largest kingdom in India, threw the Macedonians out of Punjab, and built the first empire that ran from Afghanistan to Bengal. He did it in about twenty years.

8.1 — A man of uncertain birth

We do not know where Chandragupta came from, and the disagreement is instructive.

Buddhist tradition makes him a member of a recognised warrior clan called the Moriyas. Jain tradition makes him the son of a village headman whose people kept peacocks. The Brahmanical texts and a much later Sanskrit play make him low-born and say so with some contempt. A Roman writer, summarising a Greek one, says simply that he was of humble origin.

Notice the pattern. Each tradition gives him the origin that suits its own view of who ought to be allowed to rule. The Buddhists and Jains, who did not accept birth as the basis of authority, are relaxed about a modest start. The Brahmanical sources, which did, treat it as a scandal.

Nobody in any of these sources is reporting. Everybody is arguing.

What survives the discount is thin but useful: he was not from an established royal house, and everybody agrees on that even while disagreeing about what it means.

8.2 — Chanakya, and a book that may not be his

Attached to Chandragupta in every version of the story is an adviser: a Brahmin from Taxila, variously called Chanakya, Kautilya and Vishnugupta.

The tale is a good one. He is humiliated at the Nanda court, swears revenge, finds a promising boy, trains him, and engineers the destruction of a dynasty through patience and manipulation. It has been told in India for two thousand years and is still being told.

Attached to that adviser, in turn, is a book: the **Arthashastra**, a manual of statecraft. And here we need to be careful.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The Arthashastra was lost. For centuries it was known only as a title mentioned in other works. Then in 1905 a manuscript on palm leaf was handed to a librarian in Mysore, who identified it and published it. That is how recently this text re-entered the world.

What it contains. A staggeringly detailed system of government. How to set tax rates by crop and by district. How to run an intelligence service, including the use of merchants, ascetics and prostitutes as informants. How to manage irrigation, mines, forests and brothels. How to test the loyalty of a minister by having an agent try to corrupt him. How to poison a rival and how to avoid being poisoned. It is unsentimental to the point of coldness and there is nothing else like it from the ancient world.

What the dating actually shows. The text names its author as Kautilya. It does not name Chandragupta. A statistical study of its language in 1971 concluded it was the work of more than one hand, and most specialists now hold that the version we have was compiled and finalised several centuries after the Mauryas — possibly around the second century CE.

What that means: the Arthashastra cannot be used as a description of how Chandragupta actually governed. It is not a memoir and it is not a record. Some of its material may go back to Mauryan practice; there is no way to tell which parts.

And what it does prove: that somebody in ancient India worked out, in extraordinary detail, how a bureaucratic state should function. That is a real fact about Indian political thought, and it does not need to be tied to a famous name to be impressive.

Which raises a problem far bigger than one book.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

That a text named after a person was written by that person.

This is one of the great quiet distorters of ancient history, and it is not remotely confined to India.

In the ancient world, attaching a famous name to a work was normal, respectable behaviour. It was how you signalled a tradition. A pupil writing within a master's school might sign the master's name. Later editors compiling generations of accumulated material would credit the founder. This is why we have medical works "by Hippocrates" written centuries after he died, and legal texts "of Manu" assembled over hundreds of years.

The assumption does two kinds of damage.

It compresses time. A body of thought developed over four hundred years by many people gets collapsed into one genius in one lifetime — which flatters the individual and erases everyone else.

And it lends borrowed authority. "This is how the Mauryan empire was run" is a much stronger claim than "this is how some later thinkers believed a state ought to be run". The name does that upgrade for free, and nobody notices it happening.

Apply the test as we go. When you meet a text tied to a famous name in this series — and you will, repeatedly, in Parts 6 through 9 — ask two questions. **Does the text itself claim that authorship, or did somebody else attach it later? And how much of the argument depends on the name being right?**

In this case: Chanakya may well have existed. The Arthashastra is a genuine masterpiece. The link between them is tradition, not evidence, and almost every popular account of the Mauryan empire treats it as fact.

8.3 — Taking Magadha, and taking Punjab

Around 321 BCE Chandragupta overthrew the Nanda dynasty and took Magadha — the kingdom whose reported army had turned Alexander's men back at the Beas five years earlier.

That was the hard part, and it is the part Greek sources know least about. He was taking on the strongest state in India with its own standing army, and he won.

Then he turned north-west. By about 317 BCE the Macedonian governors were dead or gone and Punjab was his. Taxila became the seat of a viceroy — a post held, in the following generation, by royal princes. For the next century and a half Punjab was not an independent set of kingdoms and not a distant province of a foreign empire. It was the north-western wing of an Indian one, governed from a city inside it.

8.4 — Five hundred elephants

Around 305 BCE the man who had inherited the eastern half of Alexander's empire — Seleucus — came east to take India back.

We have no account of the fighting, which usually means it did not go well for the side whose historians we are reading. What we have is the settlement, and the settlement is unambiguous.

Seleucus gave up the eastern provinces: Kandahar, the Kabul valley, Balochistan. In return he received **five hundred war elephants** and, apparently, a marriage alliance.

IN REAL TERMS

Look at the shape of that deal.

Seleucus handed over **territory** — several provinces of what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan, permanently — and received **animals**.

In any negotiation, the side that gives up land and takes movable goods is the side that lost. This was not a partnership of equals. Chandragupta pushed the Indian frontier several hundred kilometres west of where any Indian ruler had held it, and it stayed there.

And Seleucus knew exactly what he was buying. Four years later, at a battle in Anatolia against a rival for Alexander's inheritance, those Indian elephants were used to cut the enemy cavalry off from its own infantry. Seleucus won, and with it he won the largest share of Alexander's empire.

So: **Punjab's elephants decided who inherited Alexander**. That is a far more concrete Indian contribution to Greek history than anything Alexander contributed to ours.

8.5 — Megasthenes at Pataliputra

Seleucus then sent an ambassador, Megasthenes, who lived at the Mauryan capital for years and wrote a book about India.

That book is lost too. What survives are quotations of it inside later Greek and Roman authors — and, as with everything in this part, the quoters had their own purposes.

But some of it can be checked, which is rare and worth savouring.

Megasthenes describes the capital, Pataliputra, on the Ganga: a very long, narrow city defended by a **wooden** palisade with hundreds of towers and dozens of gates, behind a wide moat. For a long time this was treated as traveller's exaggeration.

Then excavation at Patna found **massive wooden posts** in the ground, in a line, of the right period.

He is right about other things too — the road network with distance markers, the scale of the administration, the emperor's personal security. He is wrong or garbled about plenty: he divides Indian society into seven rigid classes, which matches nothing in any Indian source, and he states flatly that there is no slavery in India, which is contradicted by Indian texts.

A foreign observer at a court, then: excellent on what he could see, unreliable on what had to be explained to him. Which is what foreign observers usually are, in every century of this series.

8.6 — The end at the rock

Chandragupta's death is the strangest thing about him.

Jain tradition holds that towards the end of his life he gave up the throne to his son, became a Jain monk, travelled south with his teacher, and died at Shravanabelagola in Karnataka by *sallekhana* — the Jain practice of fasting to death when the body's usefulness is over.

There are inscriptions at that site associating the place with his teacher and with a disciple named Chandragupta, though they were cut many centuries later. No non-Jain source mentions any of it.

So: unconfirmed, not impossible, and told by the tradition that would most want it to be true. I include it because it is part of how he is remembered, and I flag it because it is not evidence.

What is firm is that he ruled for roughly twenty-four years, that his son succeeded him without the empire falling apart, and that his grandson inherited something that ran from Kandahar to Bengal.

REMEMBER THIS

Nobody agrees on **Chandragupta's birth**, and each tradition gives him the origin that suits its own view of who may rule. All agree he was not from an established royal house.

The **Arthashastra** is a genuine masterpiece of political thought, lost until 1905. It is **not** a description of Mauryan government — the surviving version is composite and centuries later. Its link to Chanakya, and Chanakya's to Chandragupta, is tradition rather than evidence.

Around **321 BCE** he took Magadha — the kingdom that had frightened Alexander's army off at the Beas. By **317 BCE** Punjab was his, governed from Taxila.

Around **303 BCE** Seleucus gave up Kandahar, Kabul and Balochistan in exchange for **five hundred elephants**. Land for animals is what losing looks like. Those elephants then won Seleucus the largest share of Alexander's empire.

The most consequential figure in this part is the one you were taught least about.

CHAPTER NINE

Ashoka's Rocks

For the first time in this series, somebody standing in this land writes something down and leaves it where ordinary people can read it. He is the emperor, and what he writes about is his own remorse.

9.1 — Kalinga

Chandragupta's grandson came to the throne around 268 BCE. His personal name was Ashoka. In his own inscriptions he almost never uses it; he calls himself *Devanampiya Piyadasi*, "Beloved of the Gods, of gracious mien".

About eight years in, he attacked Kalinga — roughly modern Odisha, on the east coast — which was the last substantial region of the subcontinent outside Mauryan control.

He won. And then he did something no ruler in the ancient world had done before or, as far as I know, has done since in quite this way.

He had the casualty figures carved in stone, across his empire, along with a statement that he was ashamed.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

This is the best-evidenced thing in this entire part, and it is worth being clear about why.

Everything else in Part 4 is second-hand: Greeks quoting lost Greeks, chronicles written centuries later, traditions with an interest. Ashoka's edicts are **the thing itself**. Carved in his lifetime, on his order, in his own voice, in dozens of places from Afghanistan to Karnataka, and still legible.

The thirteenth Major Rock Edict gives the Kalinga figures directly: **a hundred and fifty thousand deported, a hundred thousand killed, and many times that number dead by other causes**. Then it says the Beloved of the Gods felt remorse, that the slaughter and deportation weigh heavily on his mind, and that he now considers the only true conquest to be conquest by *dhamma*.

What this proves: that a Mauryan emperor caused these words to be cut into rock in multiple provinces. That is a fact about the eleventh year of his reign, and it is unusually secure.

What it does not prove: that the figures are accurate — they are the state's own numbers about its own war — or that the feeling behind them was what the words say. An inscription is evidence of what was said, not of what was meant.

The edicts also give us something rarer: a **date anchor**. One of them names five Greek kings Ashoka says he sent messengers to. All five can be independently dated from Mediterranean sources, and all five were on their thrones at the same time in the 250s BCE. That single sentence fixes the whole of early Indian chronology to within a few years — the only such anchor we have for the period.

9.2 — What the edicts actually say

Most people know the story of the conversion and almost nobody has read the edicts. They are short, plain and not at all what you would expect.

The first surprise: **they are mostly not about Buddhism.**

Ashoka's own Buddhist commitment is stated — one of the minor edicts says plainly that he became a lay follower and then drew closer to the monastic order. But the great public edicts, the ones cut into rock faces on roads, are addressed to everybody, and the thing they preach is called *dhamma*, which in these texts means something closer to decency than to doctrine.

What he actually asks for:

- Obedience to parents and respect for elders and teachers.
- Generosity to friends, to Brahmins and to wandering ascetics — named separately and equally.
- Restraint towards living beings; less killing of animals.
- Truthfulness, and restraint in speech.
- Decent treatment of servants and slaves.
- Moderation in spending, and scepticism about expensive ceremonies — he says bluntly that women's rituals of this kind are of little value.
- And, repeatedly, **tolerance between religious sects**.

That last one deserves quoting, because it is the most remarkable sentence any ancient ruler wrote about religion. The twelfth edict says, in substance: honour other sects as well as your own; whoever praises his own sect and disparages another's, out of devotion to his own, damages his own sect more than anyone else's.

Written in the third century BCE, by an emperor, about his own religion, and put on public display.

The edicts also record practical works. Wells dug at intervals along the roads. Shade trees and mango groves planted. Rest houses built. Medical treatment provided — and he specifies, twice, **for animals as well as people**. Officials appointed with a specific brief to look after the welfare of the population and to check on the treatment of prisoners.

IN REAL TERMS

One edict is about his own kitchen, and it is the most human thing he wrote.

It says that formerly, in the royal kitchen, **many hundreds of thousands of animals** were killed every day for curry. Now, it says, only three are killed: **two peacocks and a deer** — and the deer not always.

Then, as though he has just heard himself, he adds: **even these three will not be killed in future.**

Discount the number at the top; state kitchens exaggerate. What is interesting is the shape of the sentence. It is a man setting a rule, noticing it is not good enough, and tightening it in the same breath — in a text he knows is going to be carved into rock and be there for ever.

Set beside the hundred thousand dead at Kalinga, the two peacocks are almost unbearable. Both are in his own words, on his own orders, within a few years of each other.

9.3 — The one edict he left out

Now the detail that stops this chapter from becoming a hagiography, and it is a good one.

The great Kalinga remorse edict — the one with the figures and the shame — was inscribed at sites across the empire.

It was not inscribed in Kalinga.

At the two edict sites in Kalinga itself, that text is missing. In its place are two separate edicts found nowhere else, addressed to his officials, instructing them to treat the people fairly, to avoid arbitrary imprisonment, and to make the population understand that the king regards them as his children.

So the conquered province got reassurance and administrative instruction. The rest of the empire got the confession.

There is a second detail in the same direction. The remorse edict also contains a warning: the forest peoples of the empire are told that although the Beloved of the Gods feels regret, he still has power, and that they should repent, lest they be killed.

He did not disband the army. He did not release Kalinga. He did not abolish the death penalty, though he granted condemned prisoners three days' grace.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS ASHOKA'S REMORSE REAL?

This has been argued about since the edicts were first read, and it will not be settled.

It was genuine

Nothing compelled him to publish it. No ancient ruler admits to a hundred thousand dead by his own act; every other king in the ancient world carved his victories. The reversal is total and expensive: the state stops sacrificing animals, funds medical care and public works, appoints welfare officials, and the emperor writes about his own regret in the first person. And it lasted for the remaining twenty-five years of his reign, which is a very long time to sustain a pose.

It was statecraft, and rather good statecraft

Kalinga was the last conquest available; there was nothing left to conquer that was worth the cost. A doctrine of non-aggression is convenient for a ruler who has finished aggressing. *Dhamma* as he defines it — obey your parents, respect your betters, do not quarrel between sects, be generous to holy men — is an ideology of social order, and an empire of that size held by a small administration needs one badly. Note also what he did not give up: the throne, the army, the death penalty, or the province he had just taken. And the remorse edict was carefully not shown to the people he was remorseful about.

The question is badly framed

Rulers are not sincere or insincere in the way individuals are. A policy can be a real change of heart and a shrewd move at once, and the second does not cancel the first. Asking whether he "meant it" imports a modern notion of private feeling into a public document that was never about private feeling.

Where things stand: most historians accept that the shift in policy was real and sustained, and disagree about how to weight the motives. The Kalinga omission is the single strongest piece of evidence for the sceptical reading and is not much discussed outside specialist work.

What would settle it: nothing. There is no evidence for what a man felt, and there never will be. Everything we have is what he chose to publish.

What is not in dispute: that the policies existed, that they were expensive, and that they ran for twenty-five years.

9.4 — The rocks near Punjab

Two of the fourteen great rock edicts sit in the north-west, at Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra in what is now Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, on the roads leading down from the passes towards Taxila and Punjab.

They are cut in **Kharoshthi** — the script that came out of the Persian filing system in Chapter 2. Everywhere else in the empire the edicts are in Brahmi, and at Kandahar there is a version in Greek and Aramaic together.

Stop and look at what that means. An Indian emperor, wanting to be understood in the north-west, had his words cut in the local script; wanting to be understood in Afghanistan, had them cut in Greek and Aramaic. He was not publishing in a sacred language. He was publishing in **whatever the reader used** — and the language throughout is Prakrit, the ordinary spoken speech, not Sanskrit.

Then there are the pillars: polished sandstone columns, some over twelve metres and weighing dozens of tonnes, quarried in one place and moved hundreds of kilometres. One of them stood at Topra, in what is now Haryana and was long part of greater Punjab.

It is not there now. In 1356 a Delhi sultan admired it so much that he had it dug out, wrapped in silk cotton, floated down the Yamuna on a barge and re-erected in his new capital. He could not read a word of it. Nobody could, by then. It stands in Delhi today.

That story belongs to Part 6, and I mention it here because it is the neatest illustration of the next section.

9.5 — Forgotten, and found

Ashoka was lost.

Not the rocks — the rocks were always there, in plain sight, all over India, covered in writing. What was lost was the ability to read them, and with it the man.

Buddhist chronicles kept in Sri Lanka remembered a great emperor called Piyadassi. Indian tradition remembered a Mauryan king called Ashoka. Nobody connected them to each other or to the inscriptions, because for something like fifteen hundred years **nobody in the world could read the script**.

In 1837 an official of the East India Company's mint in Calcutta, James Prinsep, worked out Brahmi. He got there partly by comparing short donor inscriptions at Sanchi, where the same two-word ending kept repeating and turned out to mean "the gift of".

Suddenly the rocks spoke. They spoke in the voice of a king called Beloved of the Gods, and the Sri Lankan chronicles used the same title for Ashoka. The identification was made almost at once — but it was not **proved** until 1915, when an edict was found at Maski that names him outright.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

That a ruler's own inscriptions describe his reign.

This chapter has better evidence than any other in this part, and that is exactly why the assumption is dangerous here.

The edicts are genuine, contemporary and in his own voice. All true. Now notice what follows from that and what does not.

They tell us what he wanted publicly known. They do not tell us what the empire was like. Not one edict mentions a tax rate, a harvest, a famine, a rebellion, an official removed, a war after Kalinga, or a single thing that went wrong. That is not because nothing went wrong in a twenty-five-year reign over most of a subcontinent. It is because rulers do not carve their failures.

There is a second layer, subtler and more interesting. The edicts **repeatedly complain that they are not being obeyed**. Ashoka keeps ordering that they be read aloud on fixed days. He keeps appointing new officials to check on dhamma. He keeps saying people are not doing enough.

Read that as a historian rather than as an admirer and it inverts the picture. **A ruler who has to keep repeating an instruction is a ruler whose instruction is not being followed**. The edicts are usually read as a portrait of a moral empire. They can just as well be read as the frustrated correspondence of a man whose subjects were carrying on exactly as before.

And here is the sting. Everything you have ever read about Ashoka's greatness comes, in the end, from Ashoka. The Buddhist chronicles that fill in the rest were written by an institution he had endowed. There is no independent account of his reign by anybody. He is the best-documented figure in ancient India and almost the entire documentation is his own press.

The most reliable source in this part is also the most interested one.

REMEMBER THIS

After conquering **Kalinga** around 261 BCE, Ashoka had the casualty figures — a **hundred thousand killed, a hundred and fifty thousand deported** — carved into rock across his empire, along with a statement of his own remorse. No other ancient ruler did anything like it.

The edicts are **mostly not about Buddhism**. They ask for respect for parents, generosity to holy men of every kind, restraint towards animals, honest speech, and above all **tolerance between sects**.

The remorse edict was **not inscribed in Kalinga itself**. He kept the army, the province and the death penalty, and warned the forest peoples that he still had power.

He wrote in **Prakrit**, the ordinary spoken language, in **Kharoshthi** in the north-west and in Greek and Aramaic in Afghanistan — always in whatever the reader could actually use.

He was then **forgotten for fifteen hundred years**, until James Prinsep deciphered Brahmi in 1837. His lions are on India's state emblem and his wheel is on its flag — recovered by an accountant in Calcutta reading a script nobody had read since the Guptas.

CHAPTER TEN

An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

Two lists, as always. This part had more documents than any before it, and the first list is still long — because documents answer the questions their authors cared about.

Genuinely unknown

These are open. Where a document exists but cannot be trusted, that counts as open too.

- **Where Hindush was.** The Persian province is a name on a list. Whether it covered Punjab, or only the lower Indus, or something in between, is not established.
- **How Persia took it, and how deeply it held it.** No campaign account, no garrison, no archive, no building. A name appears on a later inscription that was absent from an earlier one. That is all.
- **Whether the tribute figure is real.** Nine tonnes of gold a year, on the word of a Greek who never came here, uncorroborated by the Persian records that survive.
- **Almost every number in the Alexander campaign.** Army sizes, casualties, elephants, dead at Massaga, dead at the Jhelum. All from sources three to five centuries later, all with reasons to inflate or deflate.
- **Where the battle on the Jhelum was fought.** Several sites are proposed. The river has moved. Nothing has been excavated that settles it.
- **Where Alexander's cities in Punjab were.** Bucephala, Nicaea, the twelve altars on the Beas. All described, none found.
- **Anything about Porus that is not Greek.** No Indian text, inscription or coin. Everything we have was written to make his conqueror look good.

- **Chandragupta's origins.** Four traditions, four different answers, each shaped by that tradition's view of who ought to rule.
- **Whether Chanakya existed, and what he wrote.** The Arthashastra names Kautilya and never names Chandragupta. The surviving version is composite and centuries later. The link is tradition.
- **How the Mauryan empire was actually administered.** We have a manual that may not describe it, an ambassador's account that survives only in quotation, and an emperor's edicts that never mention a tax rate.
- **What Chandragupta's treaty with Seleucus actually contained.** Whether the marriage was dynastic, what the exact territorial terms were, whether there was a battle first.
- **How Chandragupta died.** The Jain account is plausible and uncorroborated by anyone outside that tradition.
- **Whether Ashoka's remorse was what it says it was.** No evidence exists for what any human being felt, and none ever will.
- **Whether the edicts were obeyed.** Ashoka's own repeated complaints suggest not much, but that is an inference from tone.
- **Why the Mauryan empire fell apart within fifty years of his death.** Overextension, succession disputes, cost, provincial breakaway — all proposed, none established.
- **What ordinary life in Punjab was like through any of this.** Two hundred years of documents, and we still cannot say what a farmer near the Ravi paid, ate, believed or feared.

Solid

These are firm enough to build on.

- **Punjab was written about for the first time around 518 BCE,** as a Persian province name. The word *Hindush* comes from *Sindhu*, and *India* comes from *Hindush*.
- **Indian troops served in the Persian army in Greece in 480 and 479 BCE.**

- **The Aramaic alphabet came in through Persian administration and became Kharoshthi, the first script used to write the languages of this region.**
- **Taxila was a major city and a famous centre of learning.** Its earliest level is less planned than Harappa, fifteen hundred years earlier.
- **Panini wrote a complete formal grammar of Sanskrit in this region and period, using techniques not matched for two millennia.**
- **Alexander crossed the Indus in 326 BCE, defeated a king on the Jhelum, restored him to his throne, was refused by his own army at the Beas, and left. He was here about two years.**
- **Not one eyewitness account of that campaign survives.**
- **No Indian source of any period mentions Alexander.**
- **Macedonian authority east of the Indus lasted roughly ten years and ended with a Greek commander murdering Porus and taking his elephants west.**
- **Chandragupta took Magadha around 321 BCE and Punjab by about 317 BCE, and Punjab was thereafter governed from Taxila as part of an Indian empire.**
- **Around 303 BCE Seleucus ceded Kandahar, Kabul and Balochistan for five hundred war elephants, and those elephants won him his share of Alexander's empire four years later.**
- **Megasthenes lived at the Mauryan capital as an ambassador, and his description of a wooden palisade at Pataliputra has been confirmed by excavation.**
- **Ashoka conquered Kalinga around 261 BCE and published the casualty figures and his own remorse, in his own name, across his empire.**
- **The edicts exist, in Prakrit, in Brahmi, Kharoshthi, Greek and Aramaic, and they are the earliest surviving Indian writing that can be read.**
- **The five Greek kings named in the thirteenth edict fix early Indian chronology to within a few years. It is the only anchor of its kind for the period.**
- **The remorse edict was omitted at the two sites in Kalinga.**
- **Brahmi was deciphered by James Prinsep in 1837, and Ashoka's identity was confirmed by the Maski edict in 1915.**

A note on how this part felt different

Parts 1, 2 and 3 were about not having enough. This part is the first where the problem is having the wrong things.

We have thousands of words about a two-year foreign campaign and almost nothing about the two centuries either side of it. We have a detailed manual of ideal government and no idea whether any of it was practised. We have an emperor's inner life, published by the emperor, and no independent word about his empire.

That imbalance is not an accident and it is not really about India. It is what happens whenever the surviving record was produced by particular people for particular purposes — which is to say, always.

The correction is not to distrust everything. It is to keep asking, of every document in the rest of this series, the three questions from Part 3: **who is speaking, to whom, and what do they want?**

REMEMBER THIS

This part has **far more evidence** than the three before it, and the list of unknowns is just as long — because documents answer only the questions their authors cared about.

What is firm: the Persian province and the name it gave this country, Kharoshthi, Taxila, Panini, Alexander's two years, Chandragupta's empire, the elephant treaty, and Ashoka's rocks.

What is not: almost every number, almost everything about Porus, the origins of Chandragupta, the authorship of the Arthashastra, and what any of it was like to live through.

Having documents is not the same as having answers. It means somebody else has chosen the questions.

REFERENCE

Timeline of Part 4

Dates in this part are firmer than in any before it, because of the five Greek kings named in Ashoka's thirteenth edict. Where a date is still argued over, the table says so.

WHEN	WHAT
c. 559–530 BCE	Cyrus the Great builds the Persian empire. Greek writers say he campaigned in the east and came off badly. <i>Whether he reached the Indus is unsettled.</i>
c. 519 BCE	The Behistun inscription is cut. It lists Gandara among Darius's lands. It does not list Hindush.
c. 518–513 BCE	Hindush appears on Darius's later inscriptions. Punjab enters the written record. No account of the conquest survives.
c. 515 BCE	Scylax sails down the Indus for Darius and back to Egypt by sea. Thirty months.
480–479 BCE	Indian troops serve in Xerxes' army in Greece, and are at Plataea on the losing side.
c. 500–400 BCE	Bhir Mound, the earliest city at Taxila, at its height. Aramaic in administrative use; Kharoshthi begins to take shape from it.
c. 500–350 BCE	Panini composes the Ashtadhyayi in Gandhara. <i>Dating debated across roughly two centuries.</i>
c. 430 BCE	Herodotus writes. India is the twentieth satrapy, pays the heaviest tribute, and has gold-digging ants.
336 BCE	Alexander becomes king of Macedon at twenty.
330 BCE	Persepolis burned. The Achaemenid empire ends.

WHEN	WHAT
327 BCE	Alexander crosses the Hindu Kush. The Swat campaign: Massaga, and the killing of surrendered Indian mercenaries. The rock of Aornos taken by causeway.
Spring 326 BCE	The army crosses the Indus on a bridge of boats. Taxila submits and supplies it.
May 326 BCE	The battle on the Jhelum. Night crossing in a thunderstorm; elephants; Porus defeated, wounded, and restored to his kingdom. Bucephalus dies.
Summer 326 BCE	Sangala taken with heavy losses. At the Beas the army refuses to go on. Twelve altars raised; the retreat begins.
326–325 BCE	Down the Jhelum and the Indus. Alexander takes an arrow through the lung at a Malli town, almost certainly Multan.
325 BCE	Nearchus takes the fleet along the Makran coast. Alexander marches through the Gedrosian desert and loses more people than in all his battles combined.
323 BCE	Alexander dies at Babylon, aged thirty-two.
c. 321 BCE	Chandragupta overthrows the Nandas and takes Magadha.
c. 318 BCE	The Greek commander in India murders Porus , seizes his elephants and marches them west.
c. 317 BCE	Macedonian authority east of the Indus ends. Punjab becomes Mauryan , governed from Taxila.
c. 303 BCE	Treaty with Seleucus : Kandahar, Kabul and Balochistan for five hundred war elephants , and a marriage alliance.
301 BCE	At Ipsus in Anatolia, those elephants win Seleucus the largest share of Alexander's empire.
c. 302–288 BCE	Megasthenes serves as ambassador at Pataliputra and writes the Indika.
c. 297 BCE	Chandragupta dies. Jain tradition says by fasting, in Karnataka. Bindusara succeeds.

WHEN	WHAT
c. 268 BCE	Ashoka is consecrated.
c. 261 BCE	Kalinga. A hundred thousand killed, a hundred and fifty thousand deported, by the state's own count.
c. 258–232 BCE	The edicts , on rocks and pillars from Kandahar to Karnataka, in Prakrit, in four scripts. Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra serve the north-west.
232 BCE	Ashoka dies. The empire begins to come apart within a generation.
185 BCE	The last Mauryan king is killed by his own commander-in-chief, Pushyamitra Shunga.
c. 185 BCE	Part 5 starts here.
1837 CE	James Prinsep deciphers Brahmi. Ashoka can be read again after fifteen hundred years.

REFERENCE

Glossary

Every hard word used in Part 4, in plain English.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Achaemenid	The Persian dynasty founded by Cyrus the Great. Their empire ran from the Aegean to the Indus for about two hundred years.
Aornos	The Greek name for a mountain stronghold above the Indus, taken by Alexander by building a causeway across a ravine. Its exact site is disputed.
Aramaic	The everyday written language of the Persian empire. Unrelated to Persian, but it used an alphabet, which made it useful. Kharoshthi descends from its script.
Arthashastra	A manual of statecraft attributed to Kautilya. Lost for centuries and rediscovered in 1905. The surviving version is composite and centuries later than the Mauryas.
Bhir Mound	The earliest of the three cities at Taxila, occupied from about the sixth century BCE. Winding lanes, rubble houses, soak pits.
Brahmi	The script most of Ashoka's edicts are cut in, and the ancestor of almost every Indian script including Gurmukhi and Devanagari. Deciphered in 1837.
Companion cavalry	Alexander's heavy horse and personal command. The weapon he actually won battles with.
Cuneiform	The wedge-shaped writing of Mesopotamia and Persia, pressed into clay or chiselled into stone.
Devanampiya Piyadasi	"Beloved of the Gods, of gracious mien." The title Ashoka uses for himself in almost all his inscriptions. It is why nobody could identify him for so long.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Dhamma	In Ashoka's edicts, a public ethic rather than a doctrine: respect for parents and elders, generosity to holy men of all kinds, restraint towards living beings, honesty, and tolerance between sects.
Edict	A public order or announcement from a ruler. Ashoka's were cut into rock faces and stone pillars across the empire.
Epigraphy	The study of inscriptions. The backbone of ancient Indian history, because inscriptions survive and manuscripts in this climate do not.
Gandhara	The region around Peshawar and Taxila, on the routes from the passes into Punjab. A Persian province, then Mauryan, and later the centre of a famous school of sculpture.
Hindush	The Old Persian name for the province at and beyond the Indus, from Sanskrit <i>Sindhu</i> . The Greeks turned it into <i>India</i> .
Hydaspes	The Greek name for the Jhelum — the Vitasta of the Rigveda. Site of the battle with Porus.
Kalinga	Roughly modern Odisha. Ashoka's last conquest, and the war he published his remorse about.
Kharoshthi	The script of the north-west, descended from the Aramaic alphabet, written right to left. Used for the edicts at Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra.
Magadha	The kingdom on the Ganga plain, with its capital at Pataliputra, that became the base of the Mauryan empire. The reported size of its army is what turned Alexander's men back.
Maurya	Chandragupta's dynasty, c. 321–185 BCE. The first empire to run from Afghanistan to Bengal.
Megasthenes	Seleucus's ambassador at Pataliputra. His book on India is lost and survives only in quotations by later writers.
Nanda	The dynasty that ruled Magadha before the Mauryas, and that Chandragupta overthrew.
Pataliputra	The Mauryan capital, on the Ganga at modern Patna. Megasthenes described its wooden palisade; excavation has found the posts.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Paurava	The likely Indian form behind the Greek "Poros" — a man of the Puru lineage. The Purus appear in the Rigveda in Part 3.
Phalanx	The Macedonian infantry block: deep ranks of men with six-metre pikes. Unstoppable from the front on firm flat ground, and vulnerable everywhere else.
Prakrit	The ordinary spoken languages of northern India in this period, as opposed to the fixed learned Sanskrit. Ashoka's edicts are in Prakrit. Punjabi's ancestors are among them.
Sallekhana	The Jain practice of fasting to death at the end of life. Jain tradition says Chandragupta died this way.
Satrapy	A province of the Persian empire. A satrap was its governor.
Sutra	"Thread." A rule compressed to the smallest possible number of words, designed to be memorised. Panini's grammar is written entirely in them.
Talent	An ancient unit of weight, roughly twenty-six kilograms. Herodotus's tribute figures are given in talents.
Tribute	A regular payment from a subject region to an imperial centre. Closer to protection money than to tax.
Uttarapatha	"The northern road." The trunk route from the north-west across Punjab to the Ganga plain. The Grand Trunk Road is its descendant.
Yavana	The Indian word for Greeks, and later for westerners generally. From "Ionian", by way of Persian. Panini already knew a form of it.

ABOUT

About the Author

Lovepreet Singh

THE LIVING ARCHIVE · MISTERLOVE.IN

CURRENTLY	Second-year MBA, Panjab University — Business Strategy and Analysis, specialising in Business Intelligence
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WORKING TOWARD	Doctoral research

Lovepreet Singh is a researcher and writer working toward doctoral research. He writes long-form work on Indian history, society, religion, philosophy, public policy and technology — built from the record, in plain language, with the competing views left in.

His background is not in a history department, and he thinks that is worth saying plainly. He came to this subject the way most people do: from the outside, wanting to understand the place he is from, and finding that the good books were unreadable and the readable books were thin.

What he brought instead was the habit of his own training — the analyst's discipline of asking what the data actually supports, where a claim is really coming from, and which assumptions are doing the quiet work underneath an argument. That discipline runs through every chapter of this series. It is why almost every chapter has a box labelled *The Hidden Assumption*, and it is the part of this work he is most attached to.

The Living Archive

The Living Archive is where this work is published. It runs on three rules, and they are the rules this book was written under:

- **Plain language.** Hard ideas explained in ordinary words, with nothing left out to make them fit.
- **Evidence first.** Show the thing itself, and be clear about what it can and cannot prove.
- **Competing views.** Where the field disagrees, both sides get their strongest case. Open questions stay open.

A word on sources

This is written for general readers, so it carries no footnotes. It is a synthesis of the published scholarly record — archaeology, geology, genetics, epigraphy and history — rather than new primary research, and it does not claim otherwise. Where that record is contested, the contest is shown rather than smoothed over. Where it is thin, Chapter 10 says so.

Corrections are genuinely welcome. If you find an error, or think an argument has been given less than its best case, write to the address above — later editions will say what was changed and who caught it.

Lovepreet Singh

THE LIVING ARCHIVE · MISTERLOVE.IN

WHAT COMES NEXT

Part 5 — Indo-Greeks to Hunas

Part 4 ended with the Mauryan empire coming apart and the last of its kings killed by his own commander-in-chief. What follows is the least tidy seven hundred years in this whole series, and Punjab is at the centre of all of it.

The passes open again. Greeks come back over the mountains — not Alexander's army but the descendants of the settlers he left in Bactria, and this time they stay for a century and a half. Then Central Asian peoples come through in wave after wave: Sakas, Parthians, Kushans, and finally the Hunas.

Every one of them ends up ruling Punjab. Every one of them changes it.

Among the questions Part 5 takes on:

- Who was **Menander**, the Greek king of Punjab whose conversations with a Buddhist monk were written down and are still read — and was he actually a Buddhist?
- Why do **faces** suddenly appear on coins in this period, and what does a portrait on money tell you that a chronicle cannot?
- **Gandhara**. The Buddha had never been shown in human form. Then, in the north-west, he was — draped like a Greek statue. How did that happen, and what does it mean that the most recognisable image in Asian art was invented here?
- **Kanishka** and the Kushans: a dynasty from Central Asia running an empire from Punjab, minting coins with Greek, Iranian and Indian gods on them, and sponsoring a Buddhist council.
- Why the **Gupta "golden age"** was mostly somebody else's golden age, and what was actually happening here while it was going on.
- The **Hunas** — Toramana and Mihirakula — and how a period that had lasted seven centuries ended.

And a thread from this part carries straight over. Ashoka published in whatever script his readers could use. In Part 5 the rulers of Punjab put three pantheons on their coinage at once and do not appear to see a problem. This region's habit of holding several traditions in one hand at the same time starts here, and it does not stop.



End of Part 4 of 14

THE LIVING ARCHIVE

PART FIVE OF FOURTEEN

The Complete History of Punjab

Part Five — Greeks, Kushans and the Face of the Buddha

Seven hundred years in which Punjab was ruled by Greeks, Scythians, Parthians and Central Asian herders — and produced, out of that mixture, the image of the Buddha that half the world still uses.

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

Lovepreet Singh

C. 185 BCE – 550 CE

MISTERLOVE.IN

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Where We Left Off

A short recap for anyone starting here, and a reminder of what the coloured boxes mean.

Four parts have brought us here.

Part 1 built the land. Two continents crashed slowly, the Himalayas went up, rivers ground them into soil kilometres deep. Flat, fertile, watered all year — and sitting directly behind the only easy way into India. Then the first stone tools, and the arrival of farming.

Part 2 was Harappa. Over a thousand settlements, grid-planned cities, standardised bricks and weights, covered sewers. And four things missing: no king anyone can name, no temple anyone can identify, no writing anyone can read, and no horse. The cities emptied around 1900 BCE as the climate dried and the rivers moved.

Part 3 was the Vedic age. The Rigveda composed on this land, in the land of the seven rivers — a cattle-herding, horse-and-chariot, tribal, oral world with no cities at all. The Battle of the Ten Kings fought on the Ravi. And the long argument about where those people came from, which the evidence answers imperfectly and the politics answers loudly. Part 3 ended with the centre of Indian civilisation moving east, away from Punjab, pulled by iron and rice into the Ganga plain.

Part 4 brought Punjab back into recorded history. Persian rule on the eastern edge of an empire run from Iran. Alexander crossing the Indus, fighting Porus on the Jhelum, and turning back at the Beas when his army refused. Then Chandragupta Maurya assembling the largest empire India had yet seen, and his grandson Ashoka carving instructions to his people into rock — the first Indian writing anybody has been able to read since the Harappan seals went silent.

This part begins with that empire falling apart.

What the boxes mean

Same system throughout the series. Skip this if you know it.

WORD BOX

Blue explains a hard word, right where it appears.

Example — Dynasty: a line of rulers from one family, passing power down through it. When historians say "the Kushan dynasty" they mean one family and its descendants holding power over a period.

IN REAL TERMS

Green turns something too big or too strange to picture into something ordinary.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Brown shows the evidence itself, and is honest about what it can and cannot prove. This part leans on it heavily, because much of what follows is reconstructed from coins.

THE ARGUMENT

Orange means serious people disagree. Both sides get their strongest case, then a plain statement of where things stand.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Purple digs out something everyone takes for granted without proving.

REMEMBER THIS

Dark boxes close each chapter with the key points in the plainest words I can find.

What makes this part different

Part 3 was an argument. Part 4 was a story with named people in it. This part is something else again.

For the next seven hundred years, **almost every ruler of Punjab came from somewhere else**. Greeks from Afghanistan. Scythian herders from the steppe. Parthians from Iran. A Central Asian people called the Yuezhi, who became the Kushans. Then, at the end, the Hunas.

That sounds like a grim story of a land repeatedly conquered. It is not what happened, and the difference is the most interesting thing in this part.

What actually happened is that Punjab absorbed them. Within two or three generations, a Greek king is asking a Buddhist monk about the nature of the self and the conversation is written down as a Buddhist scripture. A Central Asian emperor is putting Greek, Iranian and Indian gods on the same coin. And out of that mixture comes the single most influential piece of art ever made in this region — the first image of the Buddha with a human face, which travelled from Punjab to China, Korea and Japan and is still what a billion people picture when they think of him.

This is the part where Punjab is a crossroads rather than a battlefield. Chapter 9 asks what that actually did to the place.

What Is In Part 5

Before We Begin — Where We Left Off

Chapter 1 — When a Big Empire Falls Apart

Why empires fracture · The Shunga coup · Why "dark age" is a loaded phrase

Chapter 2 — The Greeks Who Stayed

Bactria · Menander of Sialkot · The king in a Buddhist scripture · Reading history off coins

Chapter 3 — The Long Domino Chain

A war on the Chinese frontier · Sakas and Parthians · The Kharosthi script · A calendar still in use

Chapter 4 — The Kushans

Kanishka · The Silk Road · Every god on one coin · How Buddhism reached China

Chapter 5 — Gandhara: The Face of the Buddha

The centuries with no Buddha image · Where the face came from · Argument: Gandhara or Mathura?

Chapter 6 — How People Actually Lived

Taxila · Trade to Rome and China · The oldest Buddhist books in the world

Chapter 7 — The Guptas, and Why Punjab Was Barely In Them

The empire in the east · Punjab's republics · Argument: was it a golden age?

Chapter 8 — The Hunas

Toramana and Mihirakula · Sialkot again · Argument: did they destroy Buddhism here?

Chapter 9 — What Seven Centuries of Outsiders Did to Punjab

Absorption, not conquest · What "foreign" actually means · What was permanently lost

Chapter 10 — An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

[Timeline](#) · [Glossary](#) · [About the Author](#) · [Coming in Part 6](#)

CHAPTER ONE

When a Big Empire Falls Apart

Ashoka's empire was the largest thing India had ever built. Fifty years after he died it was gone. Understanding why is more useful than memorising the dates, because the same thing happens again in Parts 6, 9 and 10.

1.1 — What happened

Ashoka died around 232 BCE. Within about fifty years the Mauryan empire had shrunk to a fraction of itself. Around 185 BCE, the last Mauryan ruler was killed by his own army commander, a man called **Pushyamitra Shunga**, who took the throne himself.

The Shungas ruled a much smaller territory in the Ganges plain. The north-west — Punjab, Gandhara, the Indus valley — was no longer theirs.

That is the bare fact. The interesting question is why.

1.2 — Why big empires come apart

This is worth spending a page on, because it is a pattern rather than an accident.

An ancient empire is not held together by nationality or by shared identity. Nobody in Punjab in 250 BCE thought of themselves as Mauryan. It is held together by four things, and if any of them fails the whole structure is in trouble.

One: the ability to move an army. If a province rebels, the centre must be able to get soldiers there before the rebellion sets. With no railways and no telegraph, that means weeks or months. The further away the province, the weaker this gets.

Two: the ability to collect tax. Armies eat. Officials must be paid. Tax collection needs officials who are loyal, literate and supervised, in every district. This is enormously difficult and expensive.

Three: local elites deciding it is worth going along with. No empire has enough soldiers to force every village. It rules through local men who calculate that cooperating pays better than resisting. Change that calculation and the empire evaporates without a battle.

Four: a clear rule about who rules next. This is the one that kills most empires. If the succession is disputed, the army splits, the provinces pick sides, and the empire spends its strength on itself.

IN REAL TERMS

Think of an empire as a business with branches across a continent, no phones, no email, and a three-month round trip to the furthest office.

It works only while the branch managers believe head office is strong, is watching, and will reward them. The moment they suspect otherwise — a weak new owner, a succession row, an army that lost a battle — they start behaving as owners of their own branch.

Nobody needs to rebel. They just stop sending the money and see what happens. When nothing happens, everyone else notices.

Ashoka's empire was probably too big for the technology of the time in the first place. And Punjab and the north-west were both the furthest from the capital at Pataliputra and the closest to the passes through which outsiders arrived. When head office weakened, this was always going to be the first region to go.

1.3 — What "the dark age" is really describing

You will sometimes see the period after the Mauryas described as a dark age or a period of decline and chaos. Be careful with that phrase.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Here is one that shapes how the whole of Indian history is usually taught.

The assumption is that a large unified empire is the normal, healthy state of affairs, and everything else is decline.

Watch how the standard story is arranged. Mauryas — *good, big empire*. Then a gap — *dark age, foreign invasions, fragmentation*. Then Guptas — *golden age, big empire again*. Then another gap. Then Delhi Sultanate, Mughals, British.

The high points are always the biggest empires. But **who does a big empire benefit?** Chiefly the people at the centre — the court, the capital, the tax-collecting class, and the historians they employ.

For an ordinary farmer in Punjab, a large distant empire mostly means **somebody further away is taking your grain**. There is little evidence that people in the so-called dark ages were poorer, sicker or less happy. Some of the periods labelled as decline were extremely productive — this one produced the finest art the region ever made.

Why the bias exists is simple: big empires generate records. Courts keep archives, kings put up inscriptions, capitals leave monuments. Fragmented periods generate far fewer written sources, so historians see less, and "we can see less" quietly becomes "less was happening".

That is Part 1's survivorship bias again — this time not in what survived, but in what was written down at all.

Test to carry through the rest of this series: when you meet the phrase "golden age", ask *golden for whom?* Chapter 7 applies exactly this test to the Guptas.

1.4 — What Punjab looked like in the gap

Not chaos. Something more interesting.

When the Mauryan structure withdrew, what was left was not emptiness. It was the older layer that had always been underneath — **cities with their own governments, and tribal republics**.

Punjab and its surroundings had a long tradition of these. Groups such as the **Yaudheyas**, the **Malavas**, the **Arjunayanas** and the **Madras** were not kingdoms in the usual sense. They were confederations, run by assemblies of leading men rather than by a single hereditary king. Several of them issued their own coins, which is how we know they existed and roughly where they were.

They survive a very long time. They are still there, and still being mentioned, seven hundred years later in the Gupta period — which is Chapter 7.

WORD BOX

Gana-sangha: a Sanskrit term for a state run by an assembly rather than a single king. Often translated "republic", though that word carries modern baggage — these were not democracies. The assembly was made up of heads of leading families, not of everyone.

Numismatics: the study of coins. For long stretches of this part it is the main evidence we have, so the word is worth knowing.

REMEMBER THIS

Ashoka died around 232 BCE. By about 185 BCE the Mauryan empire was gone, ended by a coup.

Empires need four things: **the ability to move an army, to collect tax, to keep local elites willing, and a clear rule for who rules next.** Lose one and the rest unravel.

Punjab was the **furthest from the capital and the nearest to the passes**, so it went first.

What replaced the empire was not chaos but **self-governing cities and tribal republics** — the Yaudheyas, Malavas and others — who issued their own coins and lasted centuries.

And be suspicious of "dark age". Periods without big empires produce fewer records, not necessarily less life. Always ask: golden for whom?

CHAPTER TWO

The Greeks Who Stayed

Alexander left and his army went home. But not all of them. Two centuries later a Greek king was ruling Punjab from Sialkot, and a Buddhist scripture records him asking a monk whether the self exists.

2.1 — Where they came from

When Alexander died in 323 BCE his generals carved up his conquests. The eastern share went to **Seleucus**, whose empire ran from Turkey to Central Asia. Part 4 covered what happened next: Chandragupta Maurya pushed him out of India, and Seleucus settled for a treaty, some territory and, reportedly, five hundred war elephants.

But north of the Hindu Kush, in what is now northern Afghanistan and southern Uzbekistan, there was a province called **Bactria** — settled with Greek soldiers and colonists, with Greek cities, Greek gymnasia and Greek coinage, sitting on very rich farmland.

Around 250 BCE its governor, **Diodotus**, stopped taking orders from the Seleucids and declared himself king. Bactria became an independent Greek kingdom, two thousand kilometres from Greece, with a Central Asian population and a Greek ruling class.

And when the Mauryan empire weakened, that kingdom looked south.

2.2 — Into India

Around 180 BCE a Bactrian Greek king named **Demetrius** crossed the mountains into the Indus valley. Over the following decades Greek rulers held territory across Gandhara, Punjab and at times further east.

Historians call them the **Indo-Greeks**, to distinguish them from the Bactrian Greeks north of the mountains. They are, on any measure, one of the strangest political entities in world history — a Greek-speaking dynasty ruling Indian territory, with Greek gods on one side of their coins and Indian writing on the other.

2.3 — Menander

The greatest of them, and the one who matters most for Punjab, was **Menander I**, who ruled roughly 165 to 130 BCE.

His capital was **Sagala**. Sagala is modern **Sialkot**, in Punjab, Pakistan — about a hundred kilometres north of Lahore.

His coins are found over an enormous area, which suggests a long reign and a wide territory. Greek and Roman writers knew of him. And then there is the extraordinary thing.

2.4 — The king in a Buddhist scripture

There is a Buddhist text, preserved in Pali, called the **Milindapanha** — "The Questions of Milinda". Milinda is Menander.

It is a long dialogue between the king and a Buddhist monk named **Nagasena**. The king asks hard questions; the monk answers with arguments and analogies. They discuss what a person actually is, whether there is a permanent self, how rebirth can happen without a soul that carries over, and what makes an action good.

The most famous passage is about a chariot. Nagasena asks the king what a chariot is. Is it the wheels? The axle? The frame? The pole? None of these alone is the chariot, and yet remove them all and nothing is left. So "chariot" is a word applied to an arrangement of parts, not a thing existing on its own — and, the monk argues, a person is the same.

IN REAL TERMS

Stop and look at what this is.

A Greek-descended king, ruling from a city in Punjab, sitting down with an Indian Buddhist monk and arguing philosophy — and the argument being thought valuable enough that Buddhists preserved it as scripture and are still reading it two thousand years later.

This is not a conqueror imposing a culture. It is not a conquered people submitting to one. **It is a conversation.**

And notice the chariot. Part 3 spent a chapter on the chariot as the weapon that changed warfare. Here, three hundred years later, the same object turns up as a tool for thinking about the nature of the self.

The text says at the end that Menander was persuaded and became a Buddhist. That may be devotional framing rather than fact — texts like this often end with the important person converting. But something in it is real: **Buddhists chose a Greek king as the questioner**, which means his interest was plausible to their audience.

And there is a hint from another direction. Some of Menander's coins carry the eight-spoked wheel, a Buddhist symbol. A Greek and Roman source reports that when he died, his ashes were divided between cities that each built a monument over their share — which is precisely what Buddhist tradition describes being done with the Buddha's own remains.

2.5 — Reading history off coins

Now the awkward part, and it applies to the next two centuries of this story.

We know about the Indo-Greeks almost entirely from their coins. Something like thirty or forty kings are known. For most of them, the coins are all there is. No chronicle. No inscription. No tomb. Just money.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Coins are far better historical evidence than they sound, and it is worth understanding why.

They carry a name and a portrait. Indo-Greek coins name the king and often show his face — sometimes as a young man, sometimes older, which lets you order the issues of a single reign.

They carry titles and claims. "Saviour", "the Just", "the Victorious". A king who suddenly starts calling himself "the Invincible" has probably just won something.

They are bilingual. This is the crucial feature. Indo-Greek coins typically have Greek on one face and a Prakrit translation in the **Kharosthi** script on the other. That means the same name and title appear in two scripts — which is exactly how Kharosthi was deciphered in the nineteenth century, and it is why we can read these coins at all.

Where they are found tells you where power reached. Plot the find-spots of a king's coins and you get a rough map of his territory and trade.

The metal and weight tell you about the economy. A ruler debasing his silver is usually a ruler under financial strain.

And the style tells you who they were talking to. A Greek deity on the coin speaks to one audience; an Indian one, or a Buddhist wheel, speaks to another. A king who changes the images is changing who he needs to persuade.

THE ARGUMENT — HOW MUCH CAN COINS ACTUALLY TELL US?**A great deal**

Coins are official, dated in relative sequence, produced in large numbers, and hard to fake. They are contemporary — struck by the ruler himself, not written about him a century later by someone with an agenda. For a period with no surviving chronicle, they are as close to a primary state document as we get, and careful analysis of styles, monograms and overstrikes has reconstructed a workable sequence of kings.

Far less than we pretend

A coin tells you a man claimed to be king and had a mint. It tells you nothing about whether he ruled for one year or thirty, whether he controlled a province or a single city, whether he was loved or hated, or what he actually did. The sequence of Indo-Greek kings is repeatedly revised because it rests on stylistic judgement, and different specialists produce different orderings. And coins are **propaganda** — the ruler chose every element. Reading them as neutral fact is like writing a country's history from its banknotes.

Where things stand: both are right, and the honest working position is that the Indo-Greek king-list is a **framework, not a chronicle**. The names are solid. The order is provisional. The dates are estimates. The reigns are guesses.

What would improve it: inscriptions and datable excavated layers. Every properly stratified dig at Taxila or in Gandhara that puts a coin in a datable context tightens the whole sequence.

The general lesson, which is worth more than the specific case: when a period is known from only one kind of evidence, the shape of that evidence quietly shapes the history. Known from coins, the Indo-Greeks come out as a list of kings, because that is what coins record. **The farmers, weavers and traders who made up almost everyone leave no coins with their names on.**

2.6 — Greeks becoming Indian

One piece of evidence deserves its own moment, because it shows the direction of travel.

At Besnagar in central India there is a stone pillar. Its inscription records that it was set up by a man named **Heliodorus**, who describes himself as a Greek, an ambassador sent from a Greek king to an Indian court.

The pillar is dedicated to **Vasudeva** — a form of Vishnu — and Heliodorus describes himself as a devotee.

IN REAL TERMS

A Greek diplomat, sent by a Greek king, put up a stone pillar in India to honour an Indian god, and had it inscribed in an Indian language.

Not as diplomacy. Not as politeness. He calls himself a follower.

Within roughly a century and a half of Alexander's army going home, the Greeks who stayed were worshipping Indian gods and writing in Indian script.

Hold onto this. It is the pattern for everything in this part — and Chapter 9 is about what it means.

REMEMBER THIS

A Greek kingdom survived in **Bactria** (northern Afghanistan) after Alexander, broke away around 250 BCE, and pushed into India around 180 BCE as the Mauryas weakened.

Menander was the greatest of these Indo-Greek kings, ruling from **Sagala** — modern **Sialkot**, in **Punjab**.

A Buddhist scripture, the **Milindapanha**, records him debating philosophy with the monk Nagasena — including the famous argument that a person, like a chariot, is a name for an arrangement of parts.

We know these kings **almost entirely from coins**. That gives us names and a rough map, and almost nothing about ordinary life.

And a Greek ambassador called Heliodorus put up a pillar in India to an Indian god and called himself a devotee. The absorption had already begun.

CHAPTER THREE

The Long Domino Chain

A war on the Chinese frontier pushed one people west. They pushed the next. That one pushed the next. Four dominoes later, Punjab had new rulers — and the chain is one of the clearest demonstrations in history that this region was never isolated.

3.1 — The chain

In the second century BCE, on the northern frontier of China, a confederation of nomadic peoples called the **Xiongnu** became powerful. They fought their neighbours and won.

Among the losers were a people called the **Yuezhi**, who were driven west out of their pastures in what is now western China.

The Yuezhi, needing somewhere to go, moved into the lands of the **Sakas** — the people Greek writers called Scythians, herders of the Central Asian steppe.

The Sakas, displaced in turn, moved south and west. Some went into Iran. Some came down through Afghanistan and into the Indus valley and Punjab.

And the Yuezhi followed them, eventually settling in Bactria — where they ended the Greek kingdom there — and later moving into India themselves as the **Kushans**, who are Chapter 4.

IN REAL TERMS

Line the chain up and look at the distance.

A war on the border of China set off a chain of displacements that changed who ruled Punjab. Four peoples, roughly four thousand kilometres, across perhaps a century.

Nobody involved planned it. No one in the Chinese frontier wars had any idea that Punjab existed, let alone that they were about to change its rulers. Each group simply moved because the group behind them had arrived and there was nowhere else to go.

Part 1 said Punjab sits behind the doors into India. This is what that means in practice. **Push hard enough anywhere on the Eurasian steppe, and eventually somebody comes through the Khyber.**

3.2 — The Sakas in Punjab

The first Saka ruler we can name in the north-west is **Maues**, around the early first century BCE, based around Taxila. After him the most prominent is **Azes**, whose coins are found in enormous numbers across Punjab and Gandhara.

Historians call them **Indo-Scythians**. Their coinage keeps the Indo-Greek pattern — Greek on one side, Kharosthi on the other — which tells you they inherited a working administration and did not smash it.

Alongside and after them came the **Indo-Parthians**, from Iran. Their best-known king is **Gondophares**, ruling around the middle of the first century CE from the Taxila region.

IN REAL TERMS

Gondophares has an odd afterlife. In early Christian tradition, the apostle **Thomas** is said to have travelled to India and worked at the court of a king whose name appears in those texts in a form matching Gondophares.

Whether Thomas came to India is genuinely disputed and is not settled by this. But the detail is telling in another way: **a king ruling from Taxila was known by name in the eastern Mediterranean.**

That is not an isolated corner of the world. That is somewhere people had heard of.

3.3 — A script from the west

One thing these rulers used, and Punjab used for centuries, deserves a section of its own.

The **Kharosthi** script was the writing system of the north-west — Gandhara, Punjab and the Indus valley — from roughly the fourth century BCE to the third or fourth century CE.

It descends from **Aramaic**, the administrative script of the Persian empire, which arrived when Persia ruled this region in the period Part 4 covered. And it kept an Aramaic habit that no other Indian script has: **it is written from right to left.**

WORD BOX

Kharosthi: the script of ancient Gandhara and Punjab. Derived from Aramaic, written right to left. Used for Gandhari, a Prakrit language.

Brahmi: the other ancient Indian script, written left to right, used by Ashoka across most of his empire. Almost every modern Indian script — Devanagari, Gurmukhi, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu — descends from Brahmi.

Prakrit: the everyday spoken languages of ancient India, as opposed to formal Sanskrit. Gandhari was the Prakrit of the north-west.

Ashoka, in Part 4, used both: Brahmi across most of his empire, Kharosthi in the north-west, because that is what people there read.

And then Kharosthi died. It went out of use in India by around the fourth century CE, survived a while longer along the Silk Road in Central Asia, and then vanished completely. It has no descendants. Every modern Indian script comes from Brahmi instead.

Punjab had its own writing system for seven hundred years, and it left no children. That is worth sitting with — it is the second writing system this land has lost, after the Harappan one.

3.4 — A calendar that never stopped

One thing from this period is still running.

An era of year-counting began in 78 CE and became known as the **Saka era**. Its origin is disputed — it is traditionally attributed to Kanishka, though the dating of his reign now sits somewhat later, and other explanations are offered.

What is not disputed is what happened to it. The Saka era spread across India, was used for dating inscriptions and manuscripts for the next two thousand years, and in 1957 was adopted as the official national calendar of the Republic of India.

IN REAL TERMS

The Government of India Gazette is dated in an era that started in 78 CE, in the north-west, in a period when Punjab was ruled by people whose ancestors had been pushed off the steppe by a war on the Chinese border.

Almost nobody using that date knows this. It is one of the longest unbroken threads in this entire series — a number that started counting during the events of this chapter and has not stopped since.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Here is one that quietly distorts how this whole period is taught.

The assumption is that peoples move because they want to conquer. The standard phrasing gives it away — waves of invaders, successive conquests, foreign incursions. It makes movement sound like ambition.

Look at the actual chain in this chapter. The Yuezhi did not set out to conquer anything. **They lost a war and were driven out.** The Sakas moved because the Yuezhi arrived in their pastures. Each group was pushed, not pulled.

Pastoral herders move because their grazing fails, because the climate turns, or because somebody stronger takes their land. Conquest is often the **consequence** of migration, not its purpose — you arrive somewhere with your family and your animals, and you fight because you now need this land and somebody else is on it.

Why this matters: "invader" implies a choice and a motive. It builds a story with villains. "Displaced people who arrived armed" describes the same event and produces a very different feeling about it.

Both descriptions can be accurate about the violence that resulted. But one of them tells you what caused it.

REMEMBER THIS

A war on the **Chinese frontier** pushed the **Yuezhi** west. They pushed the **Sakas**. The Sakas came down into Punjab. The Yuezhi followed and became the **Kushans**.

Four peoples, four thousand kilometres, and nobody planned any of it.

The Sakas and Parthians **kept the existing system running** — same bilingual coinage, same administration. This was not destruction.

Punjab's script was **Kharosthi** — descended from Aramaic, written right to left. It died out completely and left no descendants. Every modern Indian script comes from Brahmi instead.

And the calendar that started in 78 CE is still the official national calendar of India today.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Kushans

A herding people driven off the Chinese frontier built an empire that stretched from Central Asia to the Ganges, sat astride the Silk Road, put every god they had ever met on the same coinage, and sent Buddhism to China.

4.1 — From refugees to emperors

The Yuezhi arrived in Bactria as a displaced people in five separate groups. In the first century CE, a leader of one of those groups — **Kujula Kadphises** — brought the five under one authority and started expanding south.

His successors pushed into Gandhara, Punjab and down into the Ganges plain. By the early second century CE the **Kushan** empire ran from the edge of Central Asia to Mathura and beyond.

Their principal cities were **Purushapura** — modern **Peshawar** — and **Mathura**, with Bactrian centres to the north. Punjab sat squarely in the middle of it, on the main road between the two.

4.2 — Kanishka

The most famous Kushan ruler is **Kanishka**, whose reign began around 127 CE.

Under him the empire reached its greatest extent and its greatest wealth. He is remembered in Buddhist tradition as a great patron — the ruler who called a major council, built enormous monuments, and helped Buddhism spread outwards.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

For a long time the Kushan king-list was a mess, assembled from coins and later legends, with dates argued over by a century or more.

Then in 1993, at a site in northern Afghanistan called **Rabatak**, an inscribed stone slab was found. It is written in the **Bactrian** language — an Iranian language — using the **Greek alphabet**, which itself tells you a great deal about this world.

The text names Kanishka, lists the kings before him in order, and describes the extent of his territory.

Why this mattered so much: it settled the royal genealogy, which coins alone could not do. Coins tell you a man was king; they do not tell you whose son he was or who came before. One inscription did in a paragraph what a century of numismatics had struggled with.

And it is a reminder about this whole part. The evidence is thin enough that a single new find can rearrange the chapter. Some of what is written here rests on material discovered within living memory, and more may yet turn up.

4.3 — The Silk Road

The Kushan empire's real significance is where it sat.

The **Silk Road** is not a road. It is a name for the network of routes carrying goods between China, Central Asia, India, Iran and the Mediterranean. Nobody travelled the whole length; goods were handed on from trader to trader, changing hands and gaining price at every stage.

The Kushans controlled the junction where the routes from China, the routes from Iran and the routes into India all met. Everything moving between those worlds passed through their territory, and they taxed it.

IN REAL TERMS

Imagine owning the only bridge on a road that everybody has to use.

You do not need to produce anything. You do not need to conquer anybody further. You simply sit on the crossing and take a share of everything that passes.

That is what the Kushans had, and it is why they were rich enough to issue large quantities of **gold coinage** — the first Indian dynasty to do so on a serious scale.

And Punjab is on that route. Goods coming through the passes from Central Asia went down through Gandhara and across Punjab towards the Ganges plain and the ports. Every caravan crossed the five rivers.

What moved: silk and lacquer from China. Spices, cotton, ivory and gemstones from India. Horses from Central Asia. Glass, wine and coin-silver from the Roman world. And travelling with the goods, as always, ideas.

4.4 — Every god on one coinage

The single most revealing thing the Kushans left is their coins, and specifically **which gods are on them.**

Across Kushan coinage you find deities from at least four traditions:

- **Greek** — the sun and moon, Herakles, and others inherited from the Bactrian Greek tradition.
- **Iranian** — a large group, including a sun god and a widely worshipped goddess of the region.
- **Indian** — a figure usually identified with an early form of Shiva, shown with attributes that later become standard.
- **Buddhist** — and this is the famous one. Some of Kanishka's coins show a standing Buddha, with his name written beside him **in Greek letters.**

IN REAL TERMS

Picture that coin. An emperor descended from Central Asian herders, ruling from Peshawar, issues money showing **the Buddha**, labelled **in the Greek alphabet**, in an empire where the administrative language is Iranian.

Four civilisations on one small disc of metal.

This is what a genuine crossroads looks like. Not a place where cultures politely coexist in separate boxes, but a place where they are melted together on the currency people used to buy bread.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS KANISHKA A BUDDHIST?

Yes — he converted

Buddhist tradition is emphatic. He is remembered as a great patron who convened a major council, built a huge relic monument at Peshawar that later Chinese pilgrims described with awe, and supported monasteries across his empire. He put the Buddha on his coinage — a serious public statement. Buddhism expanded dramatically during and after his reign, and it is hard to explain that without royal backing.

He was a pluralist, not a convert

The Buddha coins are a small minority of Kushan issues. The great majority show Iranian deities, and the Rabatak inscription itself opens by invoking Iranian gods. If Kanishka had converted in the sense the tradition implies, the coinage would look very different. And the accounts of his patronage come from Buddhist sources written centuries later, which had every reason to claim a great emperor as one of their own — exactly the pattern seen with Menander in Chapter 2.

Where things stand: most historians now read Kanishka as a **patron of many traditions** rather than a convert. He supported Buddhism substantially — that part is not in doubt, and its effects were enormous. But he supported other cults too, and there is no sign he saw a contradiction.

Why this is worth understanding: the question assumes a person belongs to exactly one religion, which is a much later way of thinking. For a Kushan emperor ruling Greeks, Iranians, Buddhists and Hindus, honouring all of their gods was not confusion or hedging. **It was policy — and probably also sincere.**

Watch for this assumption elsewhere in the series. It causes constant misreadings of pre-modern rulers.

4.5 — How Buddhism reached China

This is the Kushans' largest effect on world history, and it happened through Punjab and Gandhara.

The mechanism was simple and slow. Traders moved along the Silk Road. Monks travelled with the caravans, because caravans were the only safe way to travel. Monasteries were built along the routes, partly as religious institutions and partly as the ancient equivalent of roadside inns, offering shelter to travellers.

Each monastery was a node. Monks taught, texts were copied, local people converted, and the next monastery was founded further along the road.

Following that chain out of Gandhara and across Central Asia, Buddhism reached China in the first centuries CE. From China it went to Korea, and from Korea to Japan.

IN REAL TERMS

There are today hundreds of millions of Buddhists in East Asia.

The road their religion travelled to get there ran out of the Ganges plain, across **Punjab**, through **Gandhara**, over the passes, and along the caravan routes of Central Asia.

And it travelled with merchants, in the space between one trading post and the next, because that was the only way anything moved.

This region was not a backwater that outsiders occasionally invaded. For several centuries it was one of the most consequential places on Earth.

REMEMBER THIS

The **Kushans** were the Yuezhi from Chapter 3, settled and organised. Their empire ran from Central Asia to the Ganges, with capitals at **Peshawar** and **Mathura** and Punjab in the middle.

Kanishka, from around 127 CE, was the greatest of them. The **Rabatak inscription**, found in 1993, settled the royal line that coins alone could not.

They controlled the junction of the **Silk Road** and grew rich taxing it — rich enough to strike large amounts of **gold**.

Their coins carry **Greek, Iranian, Indian and Buddhist gods** — including the Buddha, labelled in Greek letters. Kanishka was probably a **patron of everything** rather than a convert to one thing.

And Buddhism travelled from here, with merchants, up the Silk Road to **China, Korea and Japan**.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gandhara: The Face of the Buddha

For five hundred years after his death, nobody made an image of the Buddha as a man. Then, in this region, somebody did — and gave him wavy hair, a heavy robe with deep folds, and the features of a Mediterranean god. That image conquered half the world.

5.1 — The centuries with no Buddha

The Buddha died around the fifth or fourth century BCE. For roughly the next five hundred years, Buddhist art did not show him.

This is not a gap in the record. There is plenty of early Buddhist art — carved railings and gateways at great monuments, crowded with figures, animals, trees and scenes from the Buddha's life.

He is in those scenes. But he is not shown.

Instead, artists marked his presence with a symbol:

- **A pair of footprints**, where he stood.
- **An empty throne**, where he sat.
- **A wheel**, for his teaching.
- **A tree**, for the moment of his awakening.
- **A parasol** held over an empty space, marking where an important person was.

You can see scenes where a crowd kneels, gestures and looks — at nothing. The figure they are worshipping is simply absent.

WORD BOX

Aniconic: not showing a figure in human form. From Greek — *an* (not) plus *eikon* (image). Early Buddhist art is aniconic in this sense. Several other religious traditions have gone through similar phases.

Why? Nobody is certain. Proposals include: that a being who had escaped rebirth could not properly be shown in a body; that his absence was itself the point; or simply that it was not the custom and nobody had thought to break it.

5.2 — And then a face

Around the first century CE, in the region of **Gandhara** — roughly the Peshawar valley, the Swat valley and the Taxila region, sitting immediately north-west of Punjab — sculptors began making the Buddha as a man.

And the man they made looks, to anybody familiar with classical sculpture, startlingly Mediterranean.

- **Wavy hair**, gathered into a topknot, carved in the manner of Greek and Roman statuary — quite unlike the tight curls of later Indian images.
- **A heavy robe with deep, naturalistic folds**, draped over one shoulder and falling in the way a Greek or Roman garment falls.
- **Facial features** — the straight nose, the modelled brow, the calm proportion — following classical conventions.
- **Standing poses** with the weight resting on one leg, a classical device for making a figure look relaxed rather than rigid.

The material is usually a grey-blue stone called **schist**, quarried locally, and later stucco.

IN REAL TERMS

Put a Gandharan Buddha next to a Roman statue and the family resemblance is unmistakable. Put it next to earlier Indian sculpture and it looks like a different tradition.

Now consider how it got there. Alexander came and went, three hundred years earlier. Greek settlers stayed in Bactria. Greek kings ruled Punjab. Greek craft traditions carried on being taught. Roman trade brought more objects and more images along the sea and land routes.

Three centuries of accumulated contact, and then somebody in Gandhara — a Buddhist, working for Buddhist patrons — reached for those tools when a new job came up.

Nobody decided this. It happened the way most cultural change happens: a craftsman with a particular training was asked to make something nobody had made before, and used the skills he had.

5.3 — But there was a second workshop

At the same time, roughly, images of the Buddha also began appearing at **Mathura**, far to the south-east, on the Yamuna — also inside the Kushan empire.

The Mathura Buddha looks quite different. Carved in a distinctive mottled red sandstone. Broader, heavier, more powerfully built. The robe thin and clinging rather than heavily draped. The face rounder, the expression more direct. It grows visibly out of earlier Indian traditions of carving nature-spirit figures.

Two schools. Two very different-looking Buddhas. Both under the same empire, both starting at around the same time.

THE ARGUMENT — WHO MADE THE FIRST BUDDHA IMAGE?

This has been argued for over a century, and the argument has never been purely about art.

Gandhara first — the Greek-influence case

The Gandharan images are unmistakably classical in technique. Contact with Greek and Roman art in this region was continuous for three centuries. Making a god look like a man was completely normal in the Greek tradition and unprecedented in the Buddhist one. The obvious explanation is that the classical tradition supplied both the idea and the skill, and Gandhara — where that tradition actually lived — did it first.

Mathura first — the indigenous case

Indian sculpture already had a long tradition of carving powerful human and semi-divine figures. The step to depicting the Buddha is smaller than it looks and did not need an outside push. The Mathura images grow visibly and traceably out of local predecessors, whereas the Gandharan ones appear with less local ancestry. And the classical resemblance may be **style** rather than **origin** — a Gandharan sculptor would carve a Buddha in the manner he was trained in, whoever had the idea first.

Where things stand: genuinely unresolved, and increasingly regarded as the wrong question. The dating of individual pieces is not precise enough to establish priority by decades, and both schools plainly developed rapidly and knew of each other. The current mainstream view is that the two emerged at roughly the same time, in the same empire, in constant contact.

Why it was fought over so bitterly: the argument ran hot in the colonial period, when "Greek influence explains Indian art" was a claim with obvious political weight, and the response to it had equal weight. The scholarship on both sides was real; so were the stakes outside it.

What is certain: both schools existed under the Kushans, both were producing Buddha images by the early centuries CE, and **the Gandharan version is the one that travelled.**

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The whole Gandhara-versus-Mathura argument rests on a picture of how culture works that does not survive contact with the evidence.

The assumption is that influence flows one way, from a source to a receiver. One culture "influences"; the other is "influenced". One gives; the other takes.

Look at what a Gandharan Buddha actually is. **An Indian religious idea, given a Greek-derived body, carved in local stone by a local craftsman, paid for by a Central Asian empire, for worshippers in a Buddhist monastery.**

Who influenced whom? The question has no answer, because that is not what happened. Nothing flowed one way. A new thing was made out of everything that was available in that place at that time.

And notice why the one-way picture is so attractive: it lets you assign credit. If influence flows, someone is the source and gets to be the origin. That is exactly why this argument became political — both sides wanted the arrow pointing their way.

The honest description is less satisfying and more accurate: **Gandharan art has no single parent. It is what happened when several traditions were in the same room for three hundred years.**

This is Part 3's warning in another form. There, peoples were not billiard balls. Here, cultures are not either.

5.4 — Why this is Punjab's largest export

The Gandharan Buddha did not stay in Gandhara.

It travelled the route Chapter 4 described — out through the passes, along the Silk Road, into Central Asia, on to China, then Korea, then Japan. At each stage local artists adapted it. The features changed. The proportions changed. The robe changed.

But the fundamental decision — **that the Buddha is shown as a seated or standing human figure, calm, robed, with a topknot and elongated earlobes** — held all the way.

IN REAL TERMS

Picture a Buddha statue. Any Buddha statue — in a temple in Thailand, a garden in California, a museum in Tokyo, a shop in Delhi.

The basic form you are picturing was worked out in and around the north-west of this region, in the first centuries CE, by sculptors using Greek techniques for an Indian religion under a Central Asian empire.

It is, by an enormous margin, the most widely reproduced image ever created in this part of the world. More people have seen a descendant of the Gandharan Buddha than have seen almost any other image in human history.

REMEMBER THIS

For about **five hundred years** after the Buddha's death, Buddhist art **did not show him**. It used footprints, an empty throne, a wheel or a tree instead.

Around the **first century CE**, sculptors in **Gandhara** — next door to Punjab — began carving him as a man, using **Greek techniques**: wavy hair, deep robe folds, classical features.

At the same time, **Mathura** produced a different, more Indian-looking Buddha. Which came first is unresolved and is probably the wrong question.

Influence does not flow one way. A Gandharan Buddha is an Indian idea in a Greek-derived body, carved in local stone, paid for by a Central Asian empire.

And that image travelled to China, Korea and Japan. It is the most reproduced image this region has ever produced.

CHAPTER SIX

How People Actually Lived

Kings and coins are the easy part. Here is what can be reconstructed about ordinary life — the cities, the trade, the languages, and the oldest Buddhist books that survive anywhere in the world, written on bark.

6.1 — Taxila

The best-excavated site of this whole period sits at the north-western edge of Punjab: **Taxila**, near modern Rawalpindi.

Taxila was not one city but a sequence of them, built near each other over centuries as rulers changed. Excavation has exposed successive settlements, each with its own layout.

One of them, usually called **Sirkap**, was laid out on a grid — a main street running the length of the city with side streets crossing it — in the manner of Greek town planning. Within it, archaeologists found houses, workshops, shrines and a Buddhist monastery, along with jewellery, coins, tools and imported objects.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Stratigraphy is the reason Taxila matters so much. It is a simple idea with enormous power.

When people live in one place for a long time, rubbish, collapsed buildings and new floors pile up. **Deeper is older.** Dig down carefully, recording exactly which layer each object comes from, and you get a sequence.

Now add coins. A coin names a king. Find a coin of a known king sealed in a layer, and everything in that layer is roughly of his time or later, and everything below it is earlier.

This is how the loose coin-based king-lists of Chapter 2 get anchored to real time. Coins alone give you a floating sequence. Coins *in datable layers* give you a calendar.

The honest limitation: much of the early excavation at Taxila was done to standards that would not be accepted today, and a great deal of contextual information was lost in the process. Some of what we would most want to know was dug away before anyone thought to record it.

6.2 — Trade

Two directions, and both left evidence.

Westward, to Rome. A Greek merchant's handbook from the first century CE, written for traders working the Indian Ocean, describes ports, routes, sailing seasons and — usefully for us — what to buy and sell at each place. It names a port at the mouth of the Indus, and lists goods coming down from the interior: turquoise, lapis lazuli, cotton cloth, silk and indigo.

That is a description of the Punjab and Gandhara trade reaching the sea.

Northward and eastward, along the Silk Road. Chinese silk moving west, horses moving south, and the whole exchange described in Chapter 4.

IN REAL TERMS

A merchant in Alexandria could buy cloth that had been woven in Punjab. A monastery in western China could hold a text copied in Gandhara. A Kushan noble could drink from Roman glass.

None of these people travelled the whole distance. The goods did, hand to hand, over months and years, each trader taking a cut.

Punjab was not on the edge of this system. It was a section of the main line.

6.3 — What language did people speak?

Several at once, depending on who you were and what you were doing.

- **Gandhari**, a Prakrit — the everyday spoken and written language of the north-west, written in the Kharosthi script.
- **Greek**, in administration and on coinage, for centuries after any Greek ruler had gone. It survived as a script and an official language long after it stopped being anybody's mother tongue.
- **Bactrian**, an Iranian language written in Greek letters, used by the Kushans — the language of the Rabatak inscription.
- **Sanskrit**, increasingly, as a formal and religious language, gaining ground through this period.

A merchant in Taxila might well deal in three of these in a working day.

Multilingualism was not remarkable; it was the ordinary condition of a trading crossroads.

6.4 — The oldest Buddhist books in the world

This is the most extraordinary survival of the whole period.

In the 1990s, a collection of ancient manuscripts came to light — scrolls of **birch bark**, written in **Gandhari** in the **Kharosthi** script, dating to around the first century CE. Further finds followed.

They are Buddhist texts: sermons, commentaries, verse collections, monastic material.

They are the oldest surviving Buddhist manuscripts anywhere in the world. Older than any surviving manuscript from Sri Lanka, Tibet, China or Southeast Asia.

IN REAL TERMS

Buddhism is a world religion with a vast literature. The physically oldest copies of any of it are birch-bark scrolls from the north-west of this region, written in the local language of Punjab and Gandhara, in a script derived from Aramaic, that no longer exists.

They survived because they were placed in clay pots and buried — probably as a reverent way of disposing of worn-out sacred texts, the way a damaged book might be respectfully retired rather than thrown away.

Somebody, roughly two thousand years ago, decided a worn-out scroll deserved better than a rubbish heap. That decision is why we can read it.

They are also extremely fragile — dry, brittle bark that can crumble when unrolled — and the work of conserving and reading them has taken decades.

6.5 — Religion on the ground

Buddhism was strong in the north-west in this period — the monasteries, the art, the manuscripts all say so, and it clearly had elite and royal support.

But it was never the only thing. Shiva-like figures on Kushan coins, the Heliodorus pillar from Chapter 2, Iranian deities in the Kushan pantheon, and continuing local worship all point to a landscape of overlapping practice rather than a single official religion.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

We instinctively ask "what religion were the people of Punjab in 150 CE?" and expect one answer.

The assumption is that religion is exclusive — that belonging to one means not belonging to another.

That is a real way of thinking about religion, but it is not the only one, and it was not obviously how this world worked. A merchant might give to a Buddhist monastery because the monks sheltered his caravan, honour a local deity because that is what his family had always done, and use coins showing Iranian gods without giving it a thought.

Asking which one he "really" was may be importing a question he never asked.

Be careful in both directions, though. The opposite error — imagining a serene pluralism with no conflict — is also unsupported. Chapter 8 covers a period when things went badly wrong. Religious groups in this period competed for patronage, argued sharply in their texts, and sometimes did each other real harm.

The accurate picture is neither harmony nor exclusivity, but something messier: overlapping practice, real competition for royal money, and boundaries that were much softer than the categories we use today.

REMEMBER THIS

Taxila, at Punjab's north-western edge, is the best-excavated site of the period. One of its cities was laid out on a **Greek-style grid**.

Stratigraphy plus coins is what turns a floating list of kings into a real chronology — deeper is older, and a datable coin in a layer dates the layer.

Trade ran **west to Rome** by sea and **north along the Silk Road**. Punjab was on the main line, not the edge.

People used **Gandhari, Greek, Bactrian and Sanskrit** — often several at once.

The oldest Buddhist manuscripts in the world are birch-bark scrolls from this region, written in Gandhari in a script that no longer exists.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Guptas, and Why Punjab Was Barely In Them

The Gupta period is taught as India's golden age. It was centred six hundred kilometres east of Punjab, and Punjab was never really part of it. Both of those facts are worth examining.

7.1 — The empire in the east

Around 320 CE, a ruler called **Chandragupta I** established a kingdom in Magadha, in the eastern Ganges plain — the same region the Mauryas had ruled from.

His son **Samudragupta** expanded it enormously. His grandson **Chandragupta II** presided over its height. The empire lasted, in strength, until the middle of the fifth century.

This is the period associated with a great deal of what is now considered classical Indian civilisation — Sanskrit literature and drama, mathematics and astronomy, temple architecture, and sculpture of extraordinary quality.

7.2 — Punjab's actual relationship to it

Here is the part usually skipped.

Our best single source for the extent of Gupta power is a long inscription carved onto a stone pillar — a pillar that Ashoka had already used, six hundred years earlier, for his own edicts. Samudragupta's court poet added a record of his conquests to it.

What matters is **how** the inscription describes different territories, because it does not treat them all the same.

- Some kingdoms are described as **conquered and absorbed** — mostly in the Ganges plain, the empire's core.

- Some southern kingdoms are described as **defeated and then restored** to their rulers, who acknowledged Gupta supremacy.
- And then there is a third category: **frontier kingdoms and tribal republics** who are described as submitting, paying tribute and obeying commands — but who are plainly not being annexed.

Punjab and its neighbours are in that third category. The peoples named include the **Yaudheyas**, the **Malavas**, the **Arjunayanas** and the **Madrakas** — the same self-governing confederations from Chapter 1, still there six hundred years later.

IN REAL TERMS

Read what that inscription is actually admitting, underneath the boasting.

The greatest Gupta emperor, at the height of his power, describes Punjab's peoples as having **submitted and paid tribute**. He does not describe them as having been conquered and governed.

In the language of empire, that is a polite way of saying: **they agreed to be left alone in exchange for a payment and a form of words.**

So when a textbook shows a map with the Gupta empire covering northern India in one solid colour, and Punjab inside it — be careful. That colour is doing an enormous amount of work.

Meanwhile the far north-west — Gandhara and beyond — was under the control of successor rulers of the Kushans and their overlords, and was not Gupta territory at all.

7.3 — Golden for whom?

THE ARGUMENT — WAS THE GUPTA PERIOD A GOLDEN AGE?

Yes, and the achievements are real

The intellectual output is not a nationalist invention. Mathematical and astronomical work from this period includes a decimal place-value system with a symbol for zero — arguably the single most consequential idea India has given the world. Sanskrit literature and drama reach a peak that later ages treated as the standard. Temple architecture and sculpture set forms used for the next thousand years. A Chinese Buddhist pilgrim who travelled through around 400 CE described a prosperous, orderly and well-governed land. Long stretches of peace in the core allowed all of it.

Golden for a small number of people

Every item on that list is a **court and elite** achievement. Sanskrit drama was written for and performed before an educated elite; most people did not speak Sanskrit. The mathematics was produced by a tiny scholarly class. The temples were built with the labour of people whose lives we know nothing about.

Meanwhile several historians argue the period saw the **hardening of caste**, a decline in the legal and social position of women compared with earlier centuries, and the beginning of large-scale land grants to religious institutions and officials — a process that tied cultivators more firmly to the land and shifted power to local landholders.

And the visiting pilgrim, whose account is often quoted as proof of prosperity, also described a group of people forced to live outside settlements and to strike a piece of wood to announce their approach so that others could avoid contact with them.

Where things stand: the achievements are genuine and should not be minimised. The phrase "golden age" is what is disputed, and the critique of it is now mainstream in serious scholarship.

The fair summary: it was a period of extraordinary elite cultural production, resting on a society that was becoming more rigidly stratified. Both halves are true. Most popular accounts keep only the first.

And for Punjab specifically, the question is largely academic — whatever the Gupta age was, Punjab was mostly outside it.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Chapter 1 introduced this and here is where it pays off.

The assumption is that the history of a region is the history of the largest state that claimed it.

It follows almost automatically from where the evidence comes from. Big states produce inscriptions, court poetry, coins and monuments. So the history gets written from their point of view, and everyone inside the borders on the map gets treated as part of the story.

But for most of the seven centuries in this part, **Punjab was governed by people who left far fewer records** — republics with assemblies, cities running their own affairs, local rulers, tribal confederations. They issued coins, which is nearly all we have of them. They wrote no court poetry and built no monuments to themselves.

So they are nearly invisible, and the visible thing — the big eastern empire — gets to be the period's name.

The Yaudheyas appear in the record as a people the Mauryas dealt with, and are still there when Samudragupta lists his tributaries six hundred years later. Six centuries of continuous existence, and they get a line in somebody else's victory inscription.

That is not because they did not matter. It is because they did not employ a poet.

REMEMBER THIS

The Gupta empire, from about **320 CE**, was centred in the **eastern Ganges plain** — six hundred kilometres from Punjab.

Samudragupta's own inscription puts Punjab's peoples — the **Yaudheyas, Malavas, Arjunayanas and Madrakas** — in the category of **tributary frontier peoples**, not conquered provinces. Be sceptical of maps showing Punjab in solid Gupta colour.

The achievements were real: **the decimal system with zero**, Sanskrit literature, temple architecture. The phrase "**golden age**" is **disputed**, because the period also saw caste harden and land grants tie cultivators down.

Always ask: golden for whom? And remember that the history of a region usually gets written by whoever employed a poet.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Hunas

The last arrivals of this part came through the passes in the fifth century, ruled from Sialkot, and are remembered in Indian and Chinese sources as destroyers. Whether they deserve that reputation is genuinely unclear — and the reason it is unclear is instructive.

8.1 — Who they were

In the fifth century CE a new group came down through Afghanistan into Gandhara and Punjab. Indian sources call them **Hunas**. In European and Chinese sources related groups appear under other names, often translated as White Huns or Hephthalites.

Their relationship to the Huns who attacked the Roman empire at roughly the same time is debated — they may be connected, or the name may simply have been applied broadly to steppe peoples. What is agreed is that they came from Central Asia, they were mounted and militarily formidable, and they arrived in force.

8.2 — What happened

Around the middle of the fifth century they pressed on the Gupta frontier. The emperor **Skandagupta** claims in an inscription to have defeated them, and for a time the frontier held.

But the effort was costly, and Gupta strength declined afterwards. By around 490 CE a Huna ruler named **Toramana** was in control of a substantial territory in north-western and central India.

His son **Mihirakula** followed him, from around 515 CE.

And **Mihirakula's capital was Sagala — Sialkot**. The same city that had been Menander's capital seven hundred years earlier, at the start of this part.

IN REAL TERMS

Seven centuries apart, two rulers from entirely different worlds — a Greek from Bactria and a Huna from Central Asia — chose the same Punjab city as their seat.

That is not a coincidence. It reflects geography. Sialkot sits in the upper Punjab plain, near the routes coming down from the north-west, in well-watered country between the Chenab and the Ravi.

Rulers keep choosing the same places because the land keeps offering the same advantages. Part 1 said geography sets the board. This is the board being set the same way twice, seven hundred years apart.

Around 528 CE, a ruler from Malwa named **Yashodharman** defeated Mihirakula, and recorded the victory on stone pillars. Huna power in India broke soon after.

But the Guptas did not recover. The empire fragmented over the following decades, and northern India entered a long period of regional kingdoms.

8.3 — The reputation

THE ARGUMENT — DID THE HUNAS DESTROY BUDDHISM IN THE NORTH-WEST?

Mihirakula has an exceptionally bad reputation. Later Indian texts describe him as cruel. A Chinese Buddhist pilgrim who travelled through a century afterwards recorded that he had persecuted Buddhists, destroyed monasteries and killed monks. Another Chinese envoy who passed through earlier also reported destruction.

By the seventh century, Gandhara's monasteries were largely ruined and its Buddhist civilisation was finished.

Yes — they destroyed it

Multiple independent sources, Indian and Chinese, describe Huna destruction and specifically Mihirakula's hostility to Buddhism. The archaeological record does show destruction and abandonment at monastic sites in the north-west in roughly this period. The Gandharan tradition, which had flourished for five hundred years, ends. Something ended it, and the sources name a culprit.

The case is weaker than it looks

The sources are late and partisan. The Chinese pilgrim accounts were written a century or more after the events, by devout Buddhists collecting local stories, in a landscape already in ruins. Ruins invite an explanation, and a remembered villain supplies one.

Attributing archaeological destruction to a named person is very hard. A burnt layer tells you a building burned. It does not tell you who lit it or why.

And there were other causes at work. Gandharan Buddhism depended heavily on royal and merchant patronage. When the Kushan and Gupta orders came apart and Silk Road trade was disrupted, that funding dried up. A monastery with no donors empties whether or not anyone attacks it.

Some Huna coins carry Shaiva imagery, which has been read as showing Mihirakula favoured Shiva — but favouring one cult is not the same as a campaign of destruction, and rulers across this period routinely patronised several traditions at once.

Where things stand: most historians accept that the Huna period involved real disruption and violence in the north-west, and that Mihirakula was probably hostile to Buddhist institutions in some way. But the picture of a single fanatic destroying a civilisation is regarded as too simple.

The likely fuller answer: Gandharan Buddhism died of **several causes at once** — the collapse of the patronage networks that funded it, the disruption of the trade that enriched them, political fragmentation, and violence. The Hunas were part of it, not the whole of it.

What would help: more carefully dated excavation at Gandharan monastic sites, establishing when each was abandoned and whether destruction layers are actually present.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

This argument is a good example of a habit that runs through a great deal of history writing.

The assumption is that large outcomes need a single cause, and preferably a person.

An entire civilisation ends. Why? Because a bad king destroyed it. That is a satisfying answer. It has an agent, a motive and a moral.

The alternative — **that a complex institution collapsed because the money stopped, the trade routes shifted, the political order fragmented and violence happened, over several decades, with no one deciding it** — is harder to hold in the mind and impossible to put in a sentence.

So the villain wins, in the record and in the retelling.

Notice this is the same shape as the invasion theory in Part 2. Cities emptied; the explanation offered was a conqueror. Careful work showed a slower answer: climate, water, trade, cost. Both times, a person was blamed for a process.

That does not mean villains never exist or that Mihirakula was harmless. It means: **when you meet an explanation that is one bad man, check whether anyone has looked for the slower answer underneath.**

REMEMBER THIS

The **Hunas** came through the passes in the fifth century CE. **Skandagupta** held them off, at a cost the Guptas never recovered from.

Toramana ruled from around 490 CE, then his son **Mihirakula** — from **Sialkot**, the same city **Menander** had ruled from seven hundred years earlier.

Yashodharman defeated **Mihirakula** around **528 CE**. **Huna** power broke, but the Gupta empire fragmented anyway.

Mihirakula is blamed for destroying Buddhism in the north-west. The sources are **late, partisan and written among ruins**. Real disruption, probably; sole cause, probably not.

Gandharan Buddhism most likely died of several things at once — lost patronage, disrupted trade, political collapse and violence. Be suspicious when a whole civilisation's end is pinned on one man.

CHAPTER NINE

What Seven Centuries of Outsiders Did to Punjab

Greeks, Scythians, Parthians, Kushans, Hunas. On paper, seven hundred years of foreign rule. In practice, something much stranger and more interesting happened — and it says something about what Punjab is.

9.1 — The pattern

Line up what happened to each group after they arrived.

The Greeks. Within a century and a half, a Greek ambassador is putting up a pillar to an Indian god and calling himself a devotee. A Greek king is the questioner in a Buddhist scripture. Their coins carry Indian script, Indian titles and Buddhist symbols.

The Sakas and Parthians. They keep the existing bilingual coinage and administration. They take Indian titles. They patronise Buddhist institutions. Within generations they are indistinguishable in the record from local rulers except by name.

The Kushans. They put Indian gods on their money alongside Iranian and Greek ones. They fund Buddhist monasteries on an enormous scale. They adopt Indian royal titles. The art made under them becomes the defining art of Indian Buddhism.

The Hunas. Even here — Huna coins follow the existing regional coin types, and Huna rulers appear as patrons of local cults. Later Indian genealogies absorb Huna groups into existing social categories rather than treating them as permanently outside.

IN REAL TERMS

The pattern is the same every time, and it takes about two or three generations.

A group arrives armed. It takes power. It discovers that ruling requires the existing officials, the existing tax system, the existing scribes and the existing coinage, because building new ones from nothing is impossible. It keeps them.

Its rulers marry locally, because that is who is there. Their children grow up speaking the local language alongside their parents'. Their grandchildren fund the local temples and monasteries, because that is how a ruler here demonstrates legitimacy.

Nobody surrenders. Nobody decides to assimilate. It simply happens, through the ordinary business of governing a place and living in it.

9.2 — Why this happens

Three reasons, and none of them is about anybody's virtue.

One: numbers. Every arriving group was vastly outnumbered by the people already here. A ruling class of some thousands over a population of millions cannot impose its language and customs even if it wants to.

Two: the machinery of government is inherited. Tax registers, weights, scribes, local headmen, courts — these take generations to build. A conqueror who destroys them destroys his own income. So he keeps them, and with them he keeps the language and the categories they run on.

Three: legitimacy is local. To be accepted as a ruler you have to look like one to the people you rule. That means funding their institutions, honouring their gods, using their titles. A king who refuses is a permanent occupier, which is expensive; a king who complies becomes, in time, simply the king.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Underneath the whole way this period is usually described sits a word that does far more work than it can support: **foreign**.

Ask when a Kushan family stopped being foreign. After one generation in Punjab? Three? Ten? When they started speaking the local language? When they funded a local monastery? When they married in?

There is no answer, because "foreign" is not a property of people. It is a judgement made by somebody, at some moment, for some purpose.

And notice the double standard that runs through nearly every account of this period. The Kushans are described as foreign rulers. The Mauryas are not — though Chandragupta's origins are obscure and his empire was assembled by force. The Vedic people of Part 3 are argued over endlessly. The Guptas are simply Indian.

The label attaches to some groups and not others, and the deciding factor is usually **whether their descendants stayed and were absorbed into the categories used later** — not anything about the arrival itself.

This is Part 3's assumption in a different costume. There it was: ancestry decides belonging. Here it is: arrival decides foreignness. Both treat a permanent identity as something you can read off an origin. Neither survives contact with what actually happens to people over three generations.

9.3 — What Punjab actually gained

Not nothing, and not simply "foreign influence".

- **A permanent position on the world's main trade route**, and the wealth, cities and cosmopolitanism that came with it.
- **Gandharan art**, and through it the image of the Buddha that half the world uses.
- **A role in transmitting Buddhism** to China, Korea and Japan.
- **A gold coinage and a monetised economy** at a scale not seen here before.
- **A calendar** that is still India's official national era.
- **A tradition of religious plurality** visible on the coins themselves.

9.4 — And what it permanently lost

This needs saying too, because the losses were real and final.

The Kharosthi script. Punjab's own writing system for seven hundred years, gone completely by around the fourth century CE, with no descendants. This is the second writing system this land has lost.

Gandhari. The regional language in which the oldest Buddhist books in the world were written. Extinct.

Gandharan Buddhism. An entire religious civilisation — hundreds of monasteries, a great artistic tradition, a distinct scriptural language — reduced to ruins by the seventh century and never rebuilt.

IN REAL TERMS

Stand at Taxila or Takht-i-Bahi today and you are looking at the physical remains of something that was, for five hundred years, one of the great religious and artistic centres of the world.

Almost nobody who lives in the region now is Buddhist. The script the monks wrote in cannot be read without specialist training. The language is dead.

Punjab has lost more than most places, and it has lost it more than once. The Harappan script went silent. Kharosthi went silent. Both times, an entire way of writing the world simply stopped, and what replaced it had no memory of it.

Part 13 will describe a third such rupture, within living memory.

REMEMBER THIS

Five groups arrived and ruled: **Greeks, Sakas, Parthians, Kushans, Hunas.** Every single one was **absorbed within two or three generations.**

Not because anyone was noble about it, but because they were **outnumbered**, because they had to **inherit the machinery of government**, and because **legitimacy had to be earned locally.**

"Foreign" is not a property of people. It is a judgement, applied unevenly, usually decided by whether the descendants stayed.

Punjab gained a place on the Silk Road, the Buddha's face, a role in sending Buddhism to East Asia, a gold economy, and a calendar still in use.

And it permanently lost the Kharosthi script, the Gandhari language, and the entire Buddhist civilisation of the north-west. This land has now lost two complete writing systems.

CHAPTER TEN

An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

This part rests on coins, a handful of inscriptions, some excavated cities, and religious texts written by people with a case to make. Here is where that leaves us.

Genuinely unknown

- **The order and dates of most Indo-Greek kings.** The list comes from coins and stylistic judgement, and different specialists produce different sequences.
- **How long any of them ruled, or how much territory they actually held.** Coin distribution is a rough guide, not a map.
- **Whether Menander became a Buddhist,** or whether the text simply ends the way such texts usually end.
- **Whether Kanishka converted,** or patronised everything.
- **Which came first, the Gandharan or the Mathuran Buddha image —** and whether the question is even well-formed.
- **Why Buddhist art was aniconic for five centuries,** and what changed.
- **Almost everything about ordinary people.** No personal letters, no household records, no accounts of a normal life. We have kings' coins and monks' books.
- **How much of the destruction in the north-west the Hunas actually caused,** as against patronage collapse and trade disruption.
- **What the tribal republics were actually like inside —** how their assemblies worked, who could speak, how decisions were made.
- **The origin of the Saka era of 78 CE.**
- **What the population of this region was,** at any point in these seven centuries.

Solid

- The Mauryan empire ended around 185 BCE and the north-west separated from eastern control.
- Greek kings from Bactria ruled parts of Punjab and Gandhara from around 180 BCE, and Menander's capital was Sagala — modern Sialkot.
- The Milindapanha exists, is a Buddhist text, and takes a Greek king as its questioner.
- Indo-Greek coinage is bilingual, Greek and Kharosthi, and that bilingualism is how Kharosthi was deciphered.
- Sakas, then Parthians, then Kushans ruled successively in the north-west, and each kept the existing administrative and monetary system.
- Kanishka's reign began around 127 CE. The Rabatak inscription gives the Kushan royal genealogy.
- Kushan coinage carries Greek, Iranian, Indian and Buddhist deities, including a Buddha labelled in Greek letters.
- Gandharan sculpture used classical techniques and produced the human Buddha image that spread across Asia.
- The oldest surviving Buddhist manuscripts in the world are Gandhari birch-bark scrolls from this region.
- Samudragupta's inscription lists Punjab's peoples as tributary frontier groups, not annexed provinces.
- The Hunas ruled in the north-west from around 490 CE, with Mihirakula seated at Sialkot, until Yashodharman's victory around 528 CE.
- Kharosthi and Gandhari both went extinct, leaving no descendants.

A CLOSING WORD ON EVIDENCE

Look at the shape of what we have for this period and notice what it excludes.

Coins — made by rulers, about rulers. **Inscriptions** — commissioned by rulers and rich donors. **Religious texts** — written by monks, about religion, often centuries later. **Excavated buildings** — the ones sturdy enough to leave remains, which means temples, monasteries and city walls, not houses of mud and thatch.

Every one of those sources comes from someone with money, power or an institution behind them.

So the history of these seven centuries is a history of kings, monks and merchants — because those are the people who could afford to leave a trace.

The farmers who grew the grain that fed the monasteries, the women who wove the cloth that went to Rome, the labourers who carved the Buddhas — all of them are in this part only as an inference. We know they existed because the buildings stand and the coins were spent. We know nothing else about them at all.

That is not a failure of research. It is the nature of the evidence, and it is worth naming rather than quietly working around.

REFERENCE

Timeline of Part 5

Dates in this part are unusually uncertain. Where a date is disputed, the dispute is in the chapter.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
c. 232 BCE	Ashoka dies. <i>Where Part 4 ended.</i>
c. 250 BCE	Diodotus breaks Bactria away from the Seleucids. An independent Greek kingdom in Central Asia.
c. 185 BCE	Pushyamitra Shunga kills the last Mauryan ruler. The empire ends. The north-west separates.
c. 180 BCE	Demetrius leads the Bactrian Greeks across the mountains into the Indus valley.
c. 165 – 130 BCE	Menander rules from Sagala (Sialkot), in Punjab . The <i>Milindapanha</i> records him debating a Buddhist monk.
c. 176 – 160 BCE	The Xiongnu drive the Yuezhi west. The domino chain begins.
c. 110 BCE	Heliodorus, a Greek ambassador, erects a pillar in central India to an Indian god and calls himself a devotee.
c. 80 BCE onwards	Maues, then Azes: Saka (Indo-Scythian) rule around Taxila and Punjab.
c. 20 – 50 CE	Gondophares and the Indo-Parthians rule from the Taxila region.
1st century CE	Kujula Kadphises unites the five Yuezhi groups. The Kushan empire begins. Gandhari birch-bark Buddhist scrolls are written.
c. 78 CE	The Saka era begins. Still India's official national calendar today.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
1st century CE	First human images of the Buddha appear, in Gandhara and at Mathura .
c. 127 CE	Kanishka accedes. The Kushan empire at its height, from Central Asia to the Ganges. Gold coinage; Buddha coins labelled in Greek letters.
1st – 3rd centuries CE	Silk Road trade at its peak. Buddhism travels from Gandhara through Central Asia to China .
c. 320 CE	The Gupta empire begins in the eastern Ganges plain. Punjab remains outside it.
c. 350 CE	Samudragupta's inscription lists the Yaudheyas, Malavas, Arjunayanas and Madrakas of the Punjab region as tributary frontier peoples.
c. 3rd – 4th century CE	The Kharosthi script falls out of use in India. It leaves no descendants.
c. 399 – 414 CE	The Chinese pilgrim Fa-Xian travels through India and writes an account of it.
c. 455 – 467 CE	Skandagupta holds off the first Huna pressure, at heavy cost.
c. 490 – 515 CE	Toramana rules a large territory in north-western and central India.
c. 515 – 540 CE	Mihirakula rules from Sialkot — the same city as Menander, seven centuries earlier.
c. 528 CE	Yashodharman defeats Mihirakula. Huna power breaks.
c. 550 CE	The Gupta empire fragments. Northern India enters an age of regional kingdoms. Part 6 starts here .
1993 CE	The Rabatak inscription is found, settling the Kushan royal genealogy.
1990s CE	Gandhari birch-bark scrolls come to light — the oldest Buddhist manuscripts in the world.

REFERENCE

Glossary

Every hard word used in Part 5, in plain English.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Aniconic	Not showing a figure in human form. Early Buddhist art marked the Buddha with footprints, an empty throne, a wheel or a tree instead of a body.
Bactria	The region of northern Afghanistan and southern Uzbekistan. A Greek kingdom after Alexander; later the Kushan heartland.
Bactrian	An Iranian language written in the Greek alphabet. The Kushan administrative language.
Brahmi	The ancient Indian script written left to right. Ancestor of almost every modern Indian script, including Gurmukhi and Devanagari.
Dynasty	A line of rulers from one family, passing power down through it.
Gana-sangha	A state run by an assembly of leading men rather than a single king. Often translated "republic". Not a democracy.
Gandhara	The region around Peshawar, Swat and Taxila, immediately north-west of Punjab. Home of the Buddha image.
Gandhari	The Prakrit language of Gandhara and the north-west, written in Kharosthi. Extinct.
Indo-Greek	The Greek-descended kings who ruled parts of Punjab and Gandhara from around 180 BCE.
Kharosthi	Punjab's ancient script. Derived from Aramaic, written right to left. Died out around the fourth century CE with no descendants.
Kushans	The Yuezhi after they settled and organised. Rulers of an empire from Central Asia to the Ganges, first to third centuries CE.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Milindapanha	"The Questions of Milinda". A Buddhist text recording a dialogue between King Menander and the monk Nagasena.
Numismatics	The study of coins. The main evidence for much of this period.
Prakrit	The everyday spoken languages of ancient India, as distinct from formal Sanskrit.
Sagala	Ancient name of Sialkot , in Punjab. Capital of Menander and, seven centuries later, of Mihirakula.
Saka	The people Greek writers called Scythians — steppe herders who moved into the Indus valley and Punjab. Also called Indo-Scythians.
Saka era	A year-count beginning in 78 CE. Adopted as India's official national calendar in 1957.
Schist	The grey-blue stone most Gandharan sculpture is carved from.
Silk Road	Not a road but a network of trade routes linking China, Central Asia, India, Iran and the Mediterranean. Goods passed hand to hand.
Stratigraphy	Reading a site by its layers. Deeper is older. Combined with datable coins, it turns a floating king-list into a chronology.
Stucco	A plaster used for sculpture in later Gandharan work, cheaper and quicker than carving stone.
Xiongnu	A nomadic confederation on China's northern frontier whose wars set the domino chain of Chapter 3 in motion.
Yuezhi	The people driven west by the Xiongnu, who became the Kushans.

ABOUT

About the Author

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Second-year MBA, Panjab University — Business Strategy and Analysis, specialising in Business Intelligence

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Lovepreet Singh is a researcher and writer working toward doctoral research. He writes long-form work on Indian history, society, religion, philosophy, public policy and technology — built from the record, in plain language, with the competing views left in.

His background is not in a history department, and he thinks that is worth saying plainly. He came to this subject the way most people do: from the outside, wanting to understand the place he is from, and finding that the good books were unreadable and the readable books were thin.

What he brought instead was the habit of his own training — the analyst's discipline of asking what the data actually supports, where a claim is really coming from, and which assumptions are doing the quiet work underneath an argument. That discipline runs through every chapter of this series. It is why almost every chapter has a box labelled *The Hidden Assumption*, and it is the part of this work he is most attached to.

The Living Archive

This series belongs to a larger project. The Living Archive is a body of long-form research on history, society, religion, public policy and technology, published openly and free to read at misterlove.in.

- **Plain language.** Hard ideas explained in ordinary words, with nothing left out to make them fit.
- **Evidence first.** Show the thing itself, and be clear about what it can and cannot prove.
- **Competing views.** Where the field disagrees, both sides get their strongest case. Open questions stay open.

A word on sources

This is written for general readers, so it carries no footnotes. It is a synthesis of the published scholarly record — archaeology, numismatics, art history, epigraphy and history — rather than new primary research, and it does not claim otherwise. Where that record is contested, the contest is shown rather than smoothed over. Where it is thin, Chapter 10 says so.

This part rests more heavily than most on coins and on a small number of inscriptions. The dates for the Indo-Greek and Saka rulers in particular should be read as working estimates, not fixed points.

Corrections are genuinely welcome. If you find an error, or think an argument has been given less than its best case, write to the address above — later editions will say what was changed and who caught it.

WHAT COMES NEXT

Part 6 — Sultans and Sufis

Part 6 covers eight centuries, from the fragmentation after the Guptas to the eve of Guru Nanak's birth. It is the part in which Punjab's religious and linguistic character changes permanently.

It runs from the Hindu Shahi kings of the north-west, through the raids of Mahmud of Ghazni and the conquest by Muhammad Ghori, into the Delhi Sultanate — with Lahore and Multan as major centres — and ends with Timur's sack of Delhi in 1398 and the disorder that followed.

Among the questions it takes on:

- Who were the **Hindu Shahis**, and why did the defence of the north-west fall to them alone?
- **Mahmud of Ghazni**: seventeen raids, the sack of Somnath, and the very different ways he is remembered on each side of the modern border.
- Why did **Muhammad Ghori** succeed at Tarain where he had failed the year before, and what actually changed?
- How did **Lahore** become a capital, and what was it like?
- The **Sufis** — and **Baba Farid**, whose verses are the first Punjabi literature anyone can read, and whose words are in the Guru Granth Sahib.
- How did large numbers of people in Punjab come to be Muslim? Force, patronage, Sufi preaching, or something slower and less dramatic than any of those?



END OF PART 5 OF 14

THE LIVING ARCHIVE · LOVEPREET SINGH · MISTERLOVE.IN

THE LIVING ARCHIVE

PART SIX OF FOURTEEN

The Complete History of Punjab

Part Six — Sultans and Sufis

Nine hundred years in which Lahore became a capital, a language began to be written down, and Punjab acquired the religious shape it still has — ending on the eve of Guru Nanak's birth.

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

Lovepreet Singh

C. 550 – 1469 CE

MISTERLOVE.IN

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Where We Left Off, and a Second Warning

A recap, a reminder of the boxes, and a note about the most argued-over stretch of Indian history after the one in Part 3.

Five parts have brought us here.

Part 1 built the land — the collision that raised the Himalayas, the rivers that ground them into soil kilometres deep, and the first people. **Part 2** was Harappa: a thousand settlements, planned cities, standardised bricks and weights, and a script nobody can read. **Part 3** was the Vedic age — the Rigveda composed on this land, the Battle of the Ten Kings on the Ravi, and the long argument about where those people came from. It ended with the centre of Indian civilisation moving **east**, away from Punjab.

Part 4 brought Punjab back into recorded history: Persian rule, Alexander and Porus on the Jhelum, the refusal at the Beas, then Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka's inscriptions in stone.

Part 5 was seven centuries of arrivals — Greeks, Sakas, Parthians, Kushans, Hunas — every one of them absorbed within two or three generations. It produced the Gandharan Buddha, sent Buddhism up the Silk Road to China, and ended with the Gupta empire fragmenting around 550 CE and the Buddhist civilisation of the north-west in ruins.

This part covers what came next, and it is the longest stretch in the series: **nine hundred years**.

What the boxes mean

Same system throughout. Skip if you know it.

WORD BOX

Blue explains a hard word, right where it appears.

Example — Sultan: an Arabic word meaning "authority" or "power". Used as a ruler's title across the Islamic world. A sultanate is the territory a sultan rules.

IN REAL TERMS

Green turns something too big or too strange to picture into something ordinary.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Brown shows the evidence itself, and is honest about what it can and cannot prove.

THE ARGUMENT

Orange means serious people disagree. Both sides get their strongest case, then a plain statement of where things stand.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Purple digs out something everyone takes for granted without proving.

REMEMBER THIS

Dark boxes close each chapter with the key points in the plainest words I can find.

The second warning

Part 3 came with a warning about the Aryan question. This part needs one too, for a different reason.

These nine centuries are when large numbers of people in Punjab became Muslim, and when Muslim dynasties came to rule northern India. **That history is argued about today with as much heat as anything in Part 3, and often with far less care.**

You will meet two ready-made stories.

One says: this was a period of conquest and forced conversion, temples destroyed and a population terrorised into changing religion.

The other says: this was a period of harmony and syncretism in which everyone got along and religion was barely an issue.

Neither is supported by the evidence. The first cannot explain why Islam ended up strongest in the places furthest from Muslim political power, and weakest in the places that power held longest and hardest. The second cannot explain the temples that really were destroyed, the taxes that really were levied on non-Muslims, or the slaughter that really did happen when Timur came through.

What actually happened is slower, more local and less satisfying than either story. Chapters 7 and 8 take it head on, and Chapter 8 in particular sets out the four competing explanations and tests each against the geography.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION — READ THIS BEFORE CHAPTER 1

Underneath most modern argument about this period sits an assumption that would have baffled everyone involved:

That "Hindu" and "Muslim" were the two main teams, and that everybody knew which one they were on.

Consider what the period actually contains. Turkish sultans fighting other Turkish sultans. Hindu Rajput contingents in sultanate armies. Muslim rulers granting land to temples. Hindu officials running Muslim states' revenue. Mongols — neither Hindu nor Muslim for much of this period — attacking everybody. Sufi teachers with Hindu disciples and Hindu teachers with Muslim ones.

The word "**Hindu**" itself, as Part 4 noted, began as a Persian geographical term meaning *people from beyond the Indus*. It becomes a religious label slowly, and partly **because** of this period — you need a word for "not Muslim" before "Hindu" starts doing that job.

So the two-team picture is not just an oversimplification. It is, in part, a product of the very history it claims to describe.

The loyalties that actually organised people's lives were caste, clan, region, language, occupation, guild and the household of a particular ruler. Religion mattered — sometimes enormously. It was one line among many, and rarely the one that decided who fought whom.

What Is In Part 6

Before We Begin — Where We Left Off, and a Second Warning

Chapter 1 — The Long Middle

550 to 1000 CE · Harsha · Kashmir · Why we know so little · The problem of missing sources

Chapter 2 — The Hindu Shahis: The Last Defence

Kabul to the Salt Range · Jayapala and Anandapala · Argument: why did nobody help?

Chapter 3 — Mahmud of Ghazni

Seventeen raids · Somnath · Argument: gold or God? · The scholar who came with him

Chapter 4 — Lahore Becomes a Capital

A frontier town becomes a court · Persian arrives · The first Sufi book · Data Ganj Bakhsh

Chapter 5 — Tarain, and the Conquest

Muhammad Ghori · Two battles, one year apart, opposite results · Argument: what changed?

Chapter 6 — Punjab as the Frontier

The Delhi Sultanate · Eighty years of Mongols · Timur, 1398 · What a frontier province pays

Chapter 7 — The Sufis

What Sufism actually is · Multan and Pakpattan · Baba Farid · The free kitchen

Chapter 8 — How Punjab Became Partly Muslim

Four explanations tested against the map · Why the sword theory fails its own test

Chapter 9 — The World Nanak Was Born Into

How Punjabi came to be written · The Naths · Kabir and the Bhakti poets · 1469

Chapter 10 — An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

Timeline · Glossary · About the Author · Coming in Part 7

CHAPTER ONE

The Long Middle

Four and a half centuries in which almost nothing about Punjab was written down. This chapter is short — and the reason it is short is more interesting than most of what is in it.

1.1 — What we can say

After the Gupta empire fragmented around 550 CE, northern India broke into regional kingdoms that fought each other for the next several centuries.

A ruler called **Harsha**, based at Kanauj in the Ganges plain, put together a large kingdom in the early seventh century and held it until his death around 647 CE. It fell apart immediately afterwards, because he left no heir. Punjab was on its edge and not securely part of it.

To the north, **Kashmir** became a serious power. In the eighth century its ruler **Lalitaditya** campaigned widely and dominated much of the Punjab plain for a time.

Further east and south, three large kingdoms spent roughly two hundred years fighting over Kanauj — the Palas from Bengal, the Pratiharas from Rajasthan and the Ganges plain, and the Rashtrakutas from the Deccan. Historians call it the tripartite struggle. Punjab was not one of the three and was mostly outside it.

And in the north-west, from the ninth century, a dynasty appears that Chapter 2 is about: the **Hindu Shahis**.

That is close to all we can say with confidence about four and a half centuries.

1.2 — The traveller who saw the ruins

One outside observer gives us a glimpse, and it is a bleak one.

A Chinese Buddhist monk named **Xuanzang** travelled overland from China to India and back between roughly 630 and 645 CE, studying Buddhism and collecting texts. He wrote a detailed account of everywhere he went.

When he passed through Gandhara and the north-west, he described what Part 5 left standing: monasteries. Except most of them were no longer standing. He recorded monastery after monastery deserted, buildings collapsed, communities gone, and only a small number still functioning.

IN REAL TERMS

Part 5 ended with Gandharan Buddhism in trouble. Xuanzang is the confirmation, on the ground, roughly a century later.

He is not a hostile witness. He was a devout Buddhist who had walked across a continent specifically to see these places. **He describes them the way a pilgrim describes a holy site he has found abandoned.**

What he saw was the end of something that had lasted five hundred years — and he was one of the last people to see even the ruins while anyone still remembered what they had been.

1.3 — Why this chapter is short

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Part 5 warned about the phrase "dark age". Here is the mechanism, laid out fully, because this chapter is the clearest example in the whole series.

The assumption is that how much we know about a period reflects how much happened in it.

It never does. What we know depends on **who was writing things down and whether what they wrote survived**. Both of those depend on institutions, not on events.

Consider what generates a written record in this period: a royal court employing poets and keeping archives; a religious institution copying and storing manuscripts; a state carving inscriptions to record grants and victories; a foreign visitor writing a travel account.

Now consider Punjab between 550 and 1000 CE. **No large stable court.** The Buddhist monasteries — which had been the main copying institutions of the north-west — were collapsing or gone. The script those monasteries wrote in, Kharosthi, was already extinct. No foreign pilgrim after Xuanzang left a comparable account for centuries.

So the record thins to almost nothing. And we call the result a dark age, as though the darkness were in the period rather than in our sight of it.

Meanwhile, during those same four and a half centuries: farmers farmed, villages traded, families were born and buried, a language was slowly changing from something like Prakrit into something like early Punjabi, and religious practice was shifting in ways that shaped everything after. **All of it invisible.**

This is Part 1's survivorship bias in its purest form — not what survived, but what was recorded at all.

1.4 — What was quietly happening

Two changes, both invisible in the record and both decisive.

Buddhism was declining across northern India. Not through a single event. The monasteries depended on royal and merchant patronage; when the political order fragmented and long-distance trade contracted, that money thinned. Meanwhile devotional Hindu traditions grew, and temples became the institution that attracted the grants monasteries had once received. By the end of this period, Buddhism in the north-west was essentially finished.

And the language was changing. The Prakrits of Part 5 were evolving into the stage linguists call **Apabhramsha**, and from that stage the modern languages of northern India — Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi — would emerge. Nobody wrote this down as it happened. We can see it only by comparing what came before with what came after.

WORD BOX

Apabhramsha: the late stage of the Prakrit languages, roughly 600–1200 CE, out of which the modern North Indian languages developed. The word literally means something like "falling away" — a term coined by Sanskrit grammarians who regarded ordinary speech as a corruption of the proper language.

Note what that name reveals about who was doing the naming. The everyday language of millions of people was labelled by scholars as a degraded version of the language those scholars themselves wrote in.

REMEMBER THIS

After the Guptas fragmented around 550 CE, northern India broke into competing regional kingdoms. Punjab was on the edge of all of them.

Xuanzang, travelling from China around 630–645 CE, found the Buddhist monasteries of the north-west **already largely in ruins**.

We know almost nothing about Punjab in these four and a half centuries — **because the institutions that write things down had collapsed**, not because nothing happened.

Two invisible changes were decisive: Buddhism faded out of northern India, and the local language changed from Prakrit into something on the way to Punjabi.

CHAPTER TWO

The Hindu Shahis: The Last Defence

For about a hundred and fifty years one dynasty held the passes into India. They lost, retreating from Kabul to the Indus to the Salt Range and finally out of history. The interesting question is not why they lost. It is why they were alone.

2.1 — Who they were

In the ninth century, a dynasty took power in the region around Kabul and the north-west frontier. Historians call them the **Hindu Shahis**, to distinguish them from an earlier Turkish dynasty in the same place.

Their territory covered eastern Afghanistan, Gandhara, and stretched into the Punjab plain. Their job, whether they thought of it that way or not, was to hold the passes.

Their capitals moved as they were pushed back, and the sequence tells the whole story:

- **Kabul** — the original seat, west of the mountains.
- **Udabhandapura** (Hund), on the Indus — after Kabul was lost.
- **Nandana**, in the **Salt Range** of Punjab — after the Indus line broke.

Each move is a defeat. By the last one they are inside Punjab, defending a mountain fort rather than a frontier.

2.2 — The kings

Three names matter.

Jayapala ruled from around 964. He fought the rising Ghaznavid power to his west, lost badly at Peshawar in 1001, and — according to the sources — killed himself afterwards rather than live with the defeat.

Anandapala, his son, assembled the largest coalition anyone managed in this period and was defeated around 1008.

Trilochanapala, his son, was pushed out of Punjab by 1021. The dynasty ended within a few years after that.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

An unusual amount of what we know about the Hindu Shahis comes from a man who arrived with the army that destroyed them.

Al-Biruni was a Central Asian scholar — a mathematician, astronomer and geographer — who came to India in the entourage of Mahmud of Ghazni. He stayed for years, learned Sanskrit, read Indian scientific and religious texts in the original, and wrote a long, careful book about India that is unlike almost anything else from the period.

On the Hindu Shahis he is notably respectful. He describes the dynasty as generous and noble, and writes about their fall with something close to regret — which is a remarkable thing to find in a book written under the patronage of the ruler who ended them.

Why this matters as evidence: a hostile source praising its subject is unusually reliable on that point. Al-Biruni had no reason to flatter a defeated Indian dynasty and every reason not to.

And the limitation: he is one man, writing decades after some of the events, in a language and a framework of his own. Most of what he says about the Shahis cannot be checked against anything else, because there is nothing else.

2.3 — Why did nobody help?

THE ARGUMENT — WHY WAS THE NORTH-WEST LEFT TO FIGHT ALONE?

This is the question people ask most about this period, usually in a tone of accusation. It deserves a serious answer rather than a moral one.

They were not left alone — the help was real but inadequate

Anandapala did assemble a coalition. Sources describe contingents from several northern Indian kingdoms joining him around 1008. So the idea that nobody came is wrong. What is true is that the coalition lost — and that after it lost, nobody tried again on that scale. One failed alliance is a different thing from indifference.

The political system made sustained help impossible

There was no "India" to defend. There were a dozen kingdoms that had spent two centuries fighting each other over Kanauj. Each had rivals closer to home than Ghazni, and a ruler who sent his army north-west left his own borders open to the neighbour he actually feared.

Communication and supply made it worse: moving an army from Bengal or the Deccan to the Indus took months and cost enormously, to defend land that was not yours, against a threat that had not yet reached you.

The threat was misread

Mahmud's early campaigns looked like raids, not conquest — he came, took plunder, and went back to Ghazni. Raids had happened before. It would have been reasonable, and wrong, to conclude this was weather rather than climate.

By the time it was clear that Punjab was being annexed rather than robbed, the frontier dynasty that might have anchored a defence was gone.

Where things stand: all three contain truth. The most useful framing is the third, combined with the second — **a system of competing states facing a threat none of them individually had the incentive to bear the cost of stopping.**

This is a well-understood problem and not unique to India. It has appeared in every era where several rivals face a common danger: everyone benefits if someone stops it, everyone would prefer that someone else pay for stopping it, and so it is not stopped.

What is worth resisting is the retrospective moral version — "they should have united". They had no framework in which uniting made sense, no shared identity that would have made it obvious, and no way of knowing what we know now about how it turned out.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The question "why didn't India unite?" contains its own answer, and it is the wrong one.

The assumption is that "India" existed as a thing that could unite.

In 1000 CE there was no Indian state, no Indian identity, no Indian army and no concept under which a king in Bengal owed anything to a king near Kabul. There was a subcontinent containing many kingdoms, many languages and many peoples, who had been at war with each other continuously for centuries.

Asking why they did not unite against an outsider is like asking why the kingdoms of Europe did not unite against the Ottomans. Sometimes they partly did, usually they did not, and nobody today reads that as a moral failing of "Europe" — because we do not imagine Europe as a single thing that ought to have acted as one.

The assumption comes from reading a modern nation backwards into a period that had none. It is the same error as Part 3's, in another form: taking a category that exists now and treating it as though it must always have existed.

REMEMBER THIS

The **Hindu Shahis** held the north-west from the ninth century. Their capitals moved **Kabul → Indus → the Salt Range in Punjab** — each move a defeat.

Jayapala lost at Peshawar in 1001. **Anandapala** assembled a coalition and lost around 1008. **Trilochanapala** was pushed out of Punjab by 1021.

Much of what we know comes from **al-Biruni**, a scholar who arrived with the army that destroyed them — and who wrote about them with respect.

Help did come once, and failed. After that, **each kingdom had rivals closer than Ghazni** and no reason to bear the cost alone.

And "why didn't India unite?" assumes an India that did not exist. There were many kingdoms, not one country.

CHAPTER THREE

Mahmud of Ghazni

Seventeen campaigns into India in thirty years. He is remembered on one side of the modern border as a destroyer and on the other as a hero, and both versions leave out most of what he was actually doing.

3.1 — Where he came from

Ghazni is a town in eastern Afghanistan. In the tenth century it was held by a Turkish military family who had begun as slave-soldiers in the service of a Persian dynasty and had made themselves independent.

WORD BOX

Slave-soldier: across the medieval Islamic world, rulers bought or captured boys — often Turks from Central Asia — and trained them as elite professional soldiers. Because they had no local family or faction, they were considered more loyal than free nobles.

The system worked so well that these soldiers repeatedly took power for themselves. The Ghaznavids began this way. So, as Chapter 5 shows, did the first dynasty of the Delhi Sultanate. **A slave in this sense could become an emperor, and several did.**

Mahmud ruled from 998 to 1030. His empire ran across Afghanistan and into Iran and Central Asia. India was not where he lived. It was where he went for money.

3.2 — What he did

Between 1000 and 1027 he led something like seventeen campaigns into India.

The early ones broke the Hindu Shahis. Later ones reached far into the Ganges plain and across to Gujarat. Targets included Multan, Thanesar, Mathura, Kanauj, and — most famously — the great temple at **Somnath** on the coast of Gujarat, sacked in 1025–26.

The temples were the point. In this period a major temple was not only a religious building. It was a treasury, holding accumulated donations in gold, silver and jewels, and often the wealth of the surrounding region.

And in 1021, Punjab was annexed. After Trilochanapala's defeat, Lahore was placed under a Ghaznavid governor. It stopped being a target and became a province — the first permanent Muslim-ruled territory in India, and the subject of Chapter 4.

3.3 — Gold or God?

THE ARGUMENT — WHAT WAS MAHMUD ACTUALLY AFTER?

Religion

He described his campaigns in religious terms, and the court writers who recorded them presented him as a destroyer of idols acting for the faith. He sought and received recognition from the caliph in Baghdad. The targets were temples specifically. He is remembered in a great deal of later Islamic writing as a model of pious kingship.

Money and power

He was building an empire in Central Asia and Iran, and empires need cash. Professional armies must be paid continuously, whether or not they are fighting. India was the richest accessible source of portable wealth in his world, and temples were where it was concentrated.

Several things fit the money explanation better than the religious one. **He did not stay** — he took plunder and went home, which is not what someone campaigning to spread a religion does. **He attacked Muslim rulers too**, in Multan and in Iran, with the same energy. **He employed Hindu soldiers** in his own army, and had Hindu commanders. And the destruction of a temple served a practical purpose beyond ideology: it demonstrated that the local ruler could not protect what mattered most, which is how you break a region's will to resist.

Where things stand: most historians read the religious framing as **real but instrumental** — genuinely believed by many involved, and also extremely useful. It justified the campaigns, motivated the soldiers, earned recognition from the caliph, and made plunder into a virtue.

Asking which motive was "the real one" probably misunderstands how people work. **Mahmud could believe he was serving God and also need the gold, without experiencing any contradiction.** Most people who do large violent things believe they are justified.

What is not in dispute: the campaigns happened, the temples were destroyed, the plunder was enormous, and Punjab was annexed.

3.4 — The memory war

This needs saying plainly, because you will meet it constantly.

Mahmud is remembered very differently depending on where you are standing.

In much of Indian public memory he is the archetypal destroyer — Somnath in particular has become a symbol, invoked in politics for well over a century. In much of Pakistani public memory he is a founding hero, and military hardware has been named after him.

Both versions are doing present-day work. Neither is a description of an eleventh-century Turkish ruler whose main strategic concern was a rival dynasty in Central Asia.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Here is the assumption doing the damage, and it runs through the whole of this part:

That people in the past belonged to the same teams we belong to now, and were fighting the fights we are fighting.

Under this assumption, Mahmud attacking Somnath becomes an episode in a continuous war between two communities that runs from then to now.

But look at what he actually did. He attacked **Muslim**-ruled Multan. He fought **Muslim** rivals in Iran. He employed **Hindu** troops under **Hindu** officers. His most bitter rivalries were with other Muslim dynasties over Central Asian territory.

He was a Turkish warlord in a world of competing Turkish, Persian and Indian warlords, using the ideological tools available to him. **Attaching him to a modern communal narrative requires ignoring most of his actual career.**

The test that follows from this, and it cuts both ways: when someone tells you what a medieval ruler "represents", ask whether the claim survives contact with who that ruler actually fought. Very often it does not — and very often the person making the claim has not checked.

To be clear about what this is not saying. It is not saying the destruction did not happen or did not matter. It happened, it was violent, and for the people it happened to it was a catastrophe. What it says is that the violence belonged to eleventh-century politics, and reading it as an early chapter of a twentieth-century quarrel gets both centuries wrong.

3.5 — The scholar who came with the army

One more thing came out of Mahmud's campaigns, and it is remarkable.

Al-Biruni, whom Chapter 2 introduced, spent years in India as part of the Ghaznavid presence. He learned Sanskrit — properly, not superficially. He read Indian works on astronomy, mathematics and philosophy in the original. And around 1030 he produced a long book describing Indian religion, science, customs and thought.

What makes it extraordinary is the method. He states at the outset that he intends to report what Indians actually believe, in their own terms, rather than argue against it. He quotes his sources. He notes where he does not understand something. He corrects earlier foreign writers who got things wrong.

IN REAL TERMS

This is one of the strangest pairings in this series.

The same expedition produced the sack of Somnath **and** the first serious attempt by an outsider to understand Indian civilisation on its own terms — a book still used by scholars today as a source on eleventh-century Indian science and society.

Both men were on the same payroll.

History does not sort itself into good things and bad things happening to different people at different times. It is usually the same events, producing both.

REMEMBER THIS

Mahmud of Ghazni ruled from Afghanistan, 998–1030, and led around **seventeen campaigns** into India.

He targeted **temples**, because temples were treasuries. **Somnath** in 1025–26 is the most famous.

The religious framing was real and also useful. He also attacked **Muslim rulers**, employed **Hindu troops**, and did not stay — **which is not what a religious conquest looks like**.

In 1021 **Punjab** was annexed and Lahore given a governor. That is the permanent change, not the raids.

And the same expedition produced al-Biruni's book — the first serious outside study of India, written by a man who learned Sanskrit to do it properly.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lahore Becomes a Capital

In 1021 Lahore was a provincial town. Within a century and a half it was the seat of a dynasty, a centre of Persian poetry, and the home of the first book ever written on Sufism in Persian. This is the moment Punjab changes character.

4.1 — From target to province

The raids of Chapter 3 were spectacular but temporary. What actually changed Punjab was quieter.

After 1021, Punjab was **governed**. A Ghaznavid governor sat in Lahore. Taxes were assessed and collected. Soldiers were garrisoned and paid. Officials with Persian titles wrote records in Persian. Cases were heard. Land was granted.

Raids come and go. **Administration stays, and it changes everything it touches** — because to deal with a government you must eventually deal in its language, its categories and its calendar.

4.2 — And then a capital

In the middle of the twelfth century the Ghaznavids ran into a rising power in Afghanistan — the **Ghurids**, from the mountains of central Afghanistan. Around 1150 the Ghurids sacked Ghazni itself.

The Ghaznavids, driven out of their homeland, moved their capital to the one substantial territory they had left.

Lahore became the capital of a dynasty. Not a provincial headquarters — the seat of the court itself, from around 1163 until the Ghurids finished them off in 1186.

IN REAL TERMS

What actually changes when a town becomes a capital?

Money arrives. Tax revenue from the whole territory flows to where the ruler is and is spent there.

People arrive. Officials, soldiers, scribes, judges, and everyone who sells things to them — builders, weavers, cooks, grooms, jewellers.

Talent arrives. Poets, scholars and religious teachers go where the patronage is. A court is a job market for the educated.

And a language arrives with them. Because the court works in Persian, ambitious people learn Persian.

Part 3 described Punjab going from the centre of the Vedic world to the edge of the Gangetic one. **This is Punjab acquiring a centre of its own for the first time in over a thousand years** — and the last time before it happens again under Ranjit Singh in Part 10, in the same city.

4.3 — Persian

This is the most consequential thing in the chapter and it is easy to skip past.

Persian became the language of government in Punjab, and stayed the language of government for eight hundred years.

Ghaznavids, Ghurids, the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughals, and even the Sikh empire of Ranjit Singh in Part 10 all ran their administration in Persian. It was finally replaced as the official language of the region by the British, in the 1830s.

WORD BOX

Persian (Farsi): the language of Iran. In the medieval period it became the prestige language of government, poetry and refinement across a vast area — Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and northern India — rather as Latin functioned in medieval Europe.

Learning Persian was how an ambitious young man from any background got a government job. That is why so many Persian words are in Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi today: not through conquest so much as through **paperwork**.

Look at ordinary Punjabi vocabulary and the deposit is everywhere: words for government, law, land, revenue, courts, letters, and a great deal of everyday life. As Part 1 pointed out, even the name *Punjab* is Persian.

Lahore also became a place where Persian was written well. The best-known poet of the Ghaznavid court there, **Masud Sa'd Salman**, spent long years imprisoned and wrote a body of prison poetry that is still read — a Punjabi-born Persian poet, writing in a Punjabi city, in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries.

4.4 — Data Ganj Bakhsh

And in the same century, Lahore acquired the figure who still defines it religiously for millions of people.

Ali Hujwiri came to Lahore from Ghazni and died there around 1072. He is universally known as **Data Ganj Bakhsh** — roughly, "the giver who bestows treasure".

He wrote a book called the **Kashf al-Mahjub**, "the unveiling of the hidden". It is the **earliest treatise on Sufism written in Persian**, and it became one of the standard works of the tradition, studied for centuries afterwards across the Persian-reading world.

His shrine in Lahore is one of the most visited religious sites in South Asia. Chapter 7 explains what a shrine like that actually does.

IN REAL TERMS

Set two dates side by side.

1025–26: Mahmud sacks Somnath.

c. 1072: a Sufi teacher dies in Lahore, having written the first Persian book on the inner life of the spirit, and becomes the object of devotion for people of every background in the city for the next thousand years.

Fifty years apart. The same religion. The same political sphere.

Any account of this period that gives you only one of these is not describing it.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Something happens to how we describe cultural change depending on who brought it, and it is worth catching.

Part 5 described Greek artistic technique arriving in Gandhara and producing the Buddha image. That is usually called **influence**, or **synthesis**, or a **flowering**.

This chapter describes Persian arriving in Punjab and reshaping its administration, vocabulary, poetry and religious literature. That is very often called **imposition**.

The processes are structurally the same. A prestige language and its associated culture arrive with a ruling group, are adopted by locals who want to get on, and produce something new that is neither the source nor the original.

So why do they get different words? Usually because of what happened afterwards, and how the descendants of each are positioned today.

I am not arguing the two are morally identical. Conquest is conquest, and Chapter 6 describes real brutality. The point is narrower and worth holding: **notice when the same process gets a warm word in one chapter and a cold one in another, and ask what is actually doing the choosing.**

REMEMBER THIS

Raids change little. **Administration changes everything.** From 1021 Punjab was governed from Lahore, with taxes, records and courts.

After the Ghurids sacked Ghazni, **Lahore became the Ghaznavid capital** from around 1163 to 1186 — Punjab's first real centre in over a thousand years.

Persian became the language of government here for eight hundred years, until the British replaced it in the 1830s. That is why so much of Punjabi's official and everyday vocabulary is Persian.

Ali Hujwiri — Data Ganj Bakhsh — died in Lahore around 1072 and wrote the first Persian book on Sufism. His shrine is still one of South Asia's most visited.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tarain, and the Conquest

Two battles on the same ground, one year apart, between the same two commanders. The first was an Indian victory. The second changed northern India for six hundred years. What happened in between is the most useful military lesson in this series.

5.1 — The Ghurids

The Ghurids came from the mountains of central Afghanistan. They destroyed Ghazni around 1150, finished the Ghaznavids at Lahore in 1186, and then looked east.

Muhammad Ghori — properly Muizz al-Din Muhammad — is the commander who matters. Unlike Mahmud, he was not raiding. He was conquering, and he intended to hold what he took.

5.2 — Tarain, 1191

The most powerful Indian ruler in his path was **Prithviraj Chauhan**, whose kingdom covered much of what is now Rajasthan and Haryana, with Delhi and Ajmer as its centres.

They met at **Tarain**, north of Delhi, in 1191.

Prithviraj won. The Indian centre held, the Ghurid army broke, and Muhammad Ghori was wounded and carried from the field.

Then Prithviraj let him go. The Ghurid army withdrew to Afghanistan, and there was no pursuit.

5.3 — Tarain, 1192

Ghori came back the following year, to the same place, against the same opponent.

This time he won completely. Prithviraj's army was destroyed. Prithviraj himself was captured and killed. Within a few years Ghurid forces held Delhi, Ajmer and much of the Ganges plain.

THE ARGUMENT — WHY DID THE SECOND BATTLE GO THE OTHER WAY?

Same ground, same commanders, one year apart, opposite results. This is close to a controlled experiment, and historians have proposed several explanations.

Tactics — mounted archers against heavy formations

The Ghurid army relied on **light horse archers**: fast, mobile, shooting from the saddle and refusing to close. Against them, the Indian army's strength — heavy infantry, war elephants and armoured cavalry in a solid line — becomes a weakness. You cannot catch what will not stand and fight, and you take casualties all day.

The classic technique is the **feigned retreat**: pretend to break, draw the enemy into a disordered pursuit, then turn and destroy them. Sources describe Ghori using exactly this in 1192. It works only if the enemy has not seen it before — which is precisely the difference a year of preparation makes.

Organisation — a professional army versus a coalition

Ghori's army was a paid, permanent, professional force under one command, and it fought the same way every time.

Prithviraj's was a coalition of allied kings, each bringing his own contingent under his own commander, each with his own interests. Such an army fights well when things go well and comes apart when they do not, because there is no single chain of command to hold it together under pressure.

The unforced error of 1191

The most consequential decision may have been made after the first battle, not during the second.

Prithviraj won and did not pursue. Ghori was allowed to withdraw, reach safety, rebuild and return with a reformed army and a plan.

Why? Probably some mixture of conventions of warfare that treated a defeated enemy's withdrawal as the end of the matter, the practical difficulty of campaigning far from your base, and the more urgent problem of rivals at home. **Whatever the reason, it converted a decisive victory into a year's delay.**

Where things stand: most historians combine these. The tactical difference is real and well attested; the organisational difference is structural and explains why the tactical difference was decisive; and the failure to follow up in 1191 gave the losing side the one thing it needed, which was time.

A caution about the sources. Almost everything we have was written by the winning side's chroniclers or by later Indian bardic poetry composed centuries afterwards, which turned Prithviraj into a legendary figure and is not reliable as history. The details of both battles — numbers, movements, speeches — should be treated as approximate at best.

What is certain: the first battle was lost by the Ghurids, the second was won by them, and northern India had a new ruling order within a decade.

5.4 — What followed

Muhammad Ghori was assassinated in 1206 — at Damyak, on the Jhelum, in Punjab. He had no son.

His most capable commander in India was a man called **Qutb al-Din Aibak**, who had begun life as a slave-soldier. With Ghori dead, Aibak took power over the Indian territories and had himself proclaimed ruler at **Lahore**.

That is the beginning of the **Delhi Sultanate**, which would rule northern India in one form or another for over three hundred years — and it began with a former slave being crowned in a Punjab city.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The standard framing of this period is a question: **"Why did India fall?"**

Two assumptions hide inside it.

First, that there was an India to fall. Chapter 2 dealt with this. In 1192 there were many kingdoms; Prithviraj's defeat was the defeat of one of them, and several others carried on independently for a long time afterwards.

Second, and more interesting: that something needs explaining at all. The question assumes India ought to have won, so its losing requires a special cause — decadence, disunity, moral failure, some flaw in the civilisation.

But **armies with better tactics and unified command beat armies without them, everywhere, always.** The mounted archer beat heavy formations across Eurasia for centuries — in Iran, in Russia, in China, in Hungary, in the Islamic world itself. India was not singled out by history. It was subject to the same military logic as everyone else.

What makes the "why did we fall" framing so persistent is that it is not really a historical question. It is an attempt to find a moral lesson in a defeat, usually one that supports whatever the person asking already wants to argue about the present.

The historical answer is duller and better: **a professional army with a superior tactical system, under one commander, defeated a feudal coalition — twice, once losing and once winning, which is exactly what you would expect.**

REMEMBER THIS

The **Ghurids** replaced the Ghaznavids and came to conquer rather than to raid.

Tarain 1191: Prithviraj Chauhan won, and let the defeated army withdraw.

Tarain 1192: Muhammad Ghori won completely.

What changed: **mounted archers and the feigned retreat** against heavy formations; a **professional army under one command** against a coalition of allied kings; and **a year in which the loser of 1191 was allowed to rebuild.**

Ghori was assassinated in **1206 on the Jhelum**. His slave-soldier commander **Qutb al-Din Aibak** was crowned at **Lahore** — the beginning of the Delhi Sultanate.

And **"why did India fall?" is the wrong question twice over: there was no single India, and better armies beating worse ones needs no special explanation.**

CHAPTER SIX

Punjab as the Frontier

For three hundred years the Delhi Sultanate ruled northern India, and for most of that time Punjab was its shield. Being a shield is not a compliment. This chapter is about what it costs.

6.1 — The Sultanate in one page

Five dynasties ruled from Delhi between 1206 and 1526. You do not need to memorise them, but the shape matters.

DYNASTY	WHEN	WHAT IT IS KNOWN FOR
Mamluk (Slave)	1206–1290	Founded by Aibak. Consolidation, and the first Mongol crisis under Balban.
Khalji	1290–1320	Alauddin Khalji: expansion into the south, price controls, and the defeat of the largest Mongol invasions.
Tughlaq	1320–1414	The greatest extent, then decline. Ends with Timur.
Sayyid	1414–1451	Weak, small, picking up the pieces after Timur.
Lodi	1451–1526	Afghan dynasty. Partial recovery. Ends when Babur arrives — <i>Part 7</i> .

WORD BOX

Iqta: the core administrative device of the Sultanate. Instead of paying an officer a salary in cash, the sultan assigned him the right to collect the revenue of a district, out of which he maintained troops.

It solves a real problem — how to pay an army when you have land but little coin. It also creates one: **the holder starts behaving as though the land is his**. Nearly every medieval state that used a system like this had the same trouble, and much of the Sultanate's internal politics is sultans trying to stop iqta-holders becoming hereditary lords.

6.2 — Eighty years of Mongols

From the 1220s the Mongols were the central fact of Punjab's existence.

Genghis Khan's forces reached the Indus in 1221, pursuing a fleeing enemy. They did not stay. But over the following century, Mongol armies came through the passes again and again — raiding, occupying, sometimes reaching the walls of Delhi itself.

Punjab was in the way of every one of them.

The Sultanate's response hardened over time. One sultan, Balban, is described as deliberately **devastating the frontier** — destroying forts, clearing forest, wrecking anything that could shelter or supply an invading force. His own son was killed fighting Mongols near Multan.

Later, Alauddin Khalji met the largest invasions head-on and defeated them, and afterwards rebuilt the frontier fortifications properly.

IN REAL TERMS

Think about what a frontier policy looks like from a village.

When a Mongol army comes, your grain is taken, your animals are driven off, your people are killed or enslaved, and your village may be burned.

When your own government's army comes, your grain is requisitioned to feed it, your carts are taken for transport, and your young men may be conscripted.

And when your government decides on a scorched frontier policy, **your own side destroys your village so the enemy cannot use it.**

Multan and Lahore were sacked repeatedly across this period. Between the sackings, they were garrison towns paying for garrisons.

"Punjab was the frontier province" is a sentence in a textbook. On the ground it meant three centuries of being the place where other people's wars happened.

6.3 — Timur, 1398

The worst single event of the period came at the end of it.

Timur — known in Europe as Tamerlane — ruled a vast empire from Samarkand. In 1398 he invaded India.

His route ran straight through Punjab. He crossed the Indus, took Multan, moved through Dipalpur and the eastern Punjab towns, and reached Delhi in December 1398.

What he did at Delhi is one of the worst massacres in the recorded history of South Asia. The city was sacked, an enormous number of people were killed, and tens of thousands were carried off as slaves. Timur's own account, dictated afterwards, describes the killing without apology.

Then he left. He was not interested in ruling India; he had an empire elsewhere.

The Sultanate never fully recovered. The Tughlaq dynasty ended within a few years. What followed was a much smaller, weaker state, and northern India fragmented again for a century.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Our main sources for Timur's invasion are **his own court histories** — accounts commissioned by Timur, written to glorify him.

That produces an unusual evidential situation. Normally you discount a chronicle's claims of slaughter as boasting. Here the boasting *is* the slaughter: the texts describe massacres approvingly, as achievements.

So the direction of bias runs towards exaggeration, not concealment. The numbers given are almost certainly inflated, as medieval numbers nearly always are — but the events themselves are being reported by people with every incentive to report them, which makes the fact of the massacre about as well established as anything in this period.

What we cannot get from these sources: anything about the victims. Not their names, not their number, not what happened to the survivors or the region afterwards. The chroniclers were not interested, and nobody on the other side was in a position to write.

6.4 — What a frontier province becomes

Three centuries of this left marks that outlast the events.

A militarised society. Where raids are normal, every community needs armed men. Local strongmen, fortified villages and warrior clans become permanent features rather than emergencies. Punjab's later reputation as a recruiting ground — which Part 11 shows the British exploiting on an industrial scale — has roots here.

Weak central control. A region that is repeatedly overrun cannot be closely governed. Real power sat with local chiefs who could defend their own patch and who paid the distant capital when it was strong and ignored it when it was not.

Movement of people. Warfare, devastation and slave-taking moved populations around — and so, in the other direction, did the arrival of soldiers, administrators, traders and religious teachers from Central Asia, Afghanistan and Iran, many of whom settled.

And a religious opening. This last one matters most for Chapters 7 and 8. Where the old order had been broken — old temples plundered, old patronage networks destroyed, old elites displaced — there was room for new institutions. The Sufi hospices of the next chapter grew in exactly that space.

REMEMBER THIS

Five dynasties ruled from Delhi between **1206 and 1526**. Punjab was the **frontier province** for almost all of it.

The **Mongols** came through the passes repeatedly for eighty years. Punjab was in the way every time — and one sultan's answer was to **deliberately devastate his own frontier** so invaders could not live off it.

Timur invaded in 1398, marched through Punjab, and sacked Delhi with enormous slaughter. He left immediately. The Sultanate never recovered.

Three centuries as a frontier left Punjab **militarised, loosely governed, with a shifting population** — and with space for new religious institutions to grow.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Sufis

While sultans fought over Delhi, a different kind of institution was spreading through Punjab's countryside — with an open door, a free kitchen, and a teacher who wrote verses in the local language. One of those verses is the first Punjabi anybody can still read.

7.1 — What Sufism actually is

Sufism is the inward, mystical strand of Islam. Not a separate religion, not a sect — a way of practising the same faith with the emphasis in a different place.

The core idea, in the plainest terms: **religion is not only about doing the right things. It is about changing what you are.** Rules and rituals matter, but the goal is direct experience of God, and that requires working on yourself — stripping away ego, desire and self-importance until nothing is left between you and the divine.

The methods are practical: repeated recitation of God's names, meditation, fasting, poetry and music, and above all submitting yourself to the guidance of a teacher who has travelled the road before you.

WORD BOX

Pir / Shaikh / Murshid: a Sufi master or spiritual guide.

Murid: a disciple — someone who has placed themselves under a pir's instruction.

Silsila: literally "chain". A Sufi order — a lineage of teachers running back through the generations. The main ones in South Asia are the **Chishti**, **Suhrawardi**, **Qadiri** and **Naqshbandi**.

Khanqah: a Sufi lodge or hospice. Where the pir lived, taught, fed people and received visitors.

Dargah: the shrine built at a Sufi saint's tomb, which becomes a place of pilgrimage after his death.

7.2 — The khanqah

The institution matters more than the theology for understanding what happened in Punjab.

A khanqah was not a mosque. It was a compound where a teacher lived with his disciples, and it did several things at once:

- **It fed people.** Most khanqahs ran a free kitchen, open to anyone who came, without questions about who they were. Travellers, the poor, the sick, anybody.
- **It sheltered travellers.** On roads with no inns and real danger, this was not a small thing.
- **It taught.** Disciples lived there for years.
- **It arbitrated.** Disputes were brought to the pir, whose judgement carried weight because his authority did not come from the state.
- **It was open.** The Chishti order in particular made a point of accepting visitors regardless of religion or caste, and of refusing money and land from rulers.

IN REAL TERMS

Picture a Punjab village in 1250. The nearest sultanate official is far away and interested in you only at harvest. The local strongman is a fact of life. There is no hospital, no school, no court you can afford, and no help if the crop fails.

Now a khanqah appears a day's walk away. Anyone can go. There is food. The man who runs it takes nothing from the government, listens to anybody, and settles disputes without a bribe.

You do not need a theological argument to explain why people went.

And note what this means for Chapter 8. Whatever else the Sufis were, they were the only institution in much of the countryside that gave something to ordinary people and asked nothing about their birth.

7.3 — Punjab's two great figures

Bahauddin Zakariya settled at **Multan** and died there around 1262. He belonged to the **Suhrawardi** order, which took a different line from the Chishtis: it accepted royal patronage, held property, and engaged with political power rather than avoiding it. Multan under him became a major centre of learning, and remains a city of shrines.

And then there is the figure who matters most for everything that follows in this series.

7.4 — Baba Farid

Fariduddin Masud, known as **Ganjshakar** — "treasury of sugar" — lived roughly from the 1170s to 1266. He was a Chishti, trained in Delhi, and he settled at a small town then called Ajodhan, on the Sutlej. The town is now called **Pakpattan** and is named after him.

He is universally known as **Baba Farid**.

He did three things that changed Punjab.

One: he stayed in the countryside. He turned down the great centres and settled in a small town among ordinary farming people, and made his khanqah the centre of the region.

Two: he composed in Punjabi. Not Persian, not Arabic — the language people around him actually spoke. His verses are short, plain and hard: about hunger, old age, death, patience, and the futility of pride.

Three: his words entered the Sikh scripture. Over three hundred years later, Guru Arjan compiled the **Guru Granth Sahib** and included Farid's compositions in it — four hymns and a large body of couplets.

IN REAL TERMS

Sit with what that means.

The oldest Punjabi anybody can still read was composed by a Muslim Sufi in a small town on the Sutlej in the thirteenth century.

And it survives because **Sikhs preserved it in their scripture**, where it is recited daily, today, alongside the words of the Gurus.

Part 5 ended with Punjab having lost two entire writing traditions — the Harappan script and Kharosthi. Here is where the third one starts, and it starts with a poet who wrote for farmers in their own speech.

Whenever anybody tells you Punjab's religious traditions are separate streams, this is the fact to put in front of them. Not as an argument that everything was harmonious — Chapters 3 and 6 show it plainly was not — but because it is true and it is in the scripture.

THE ARGUMENT — IS THE FARID IN THE GURU GRANTH SAHIB THE SAME FARID?

An honest complication, and a good example of how careful scholarship works.

Yes — it is Baba Farid himself

Sikh tradition attributes the verses to Baba Farid, and they are placed under his name in the scripture. The content, imagery and religious outlook fit a thirteenth-century Chishti of his kind. The connection between the Gurus and the Pakpattan lineage is well attested — Guru Nanak is recorded as visiting.

Some or all may be by a successor

The language of the verses looks closer to sixteenth-century Punjabi than to thirteenth-century speech. Farid's successors at Pakpattan inherited his name and title, and Guru Nanak is recorded meeting one of them — a man who held the seat generations later and was also called Farid. Verses composed by a successor could easily have been transmitted under the founder's name, which is entirely normal in devotional traditions.

Where things stand: genuinely unresolved. Some scholars accept the traditional attribution; others hold that the language points later; many suspect a core going back to Baba Farid with additions and linguistic updating over three centuries of oral transmission.

What is not in dispute, and matters far more: the verses are **Chishti Sufi compositions in Punjabi from the Pakpattan lineage**, and they are in the Guru Granth Sahib. Whether the man who first spoke them died in 1266 or in 1554 does not change what that fact says about how Punjab's traditions grew into each other.

And notice the method. The doubt comes from **linguistic dating** — the same technique Part 3 used on the Rigveda. Language changes at a rate, and that rate can be read.

REMEMBER THIS

Sufism is the inward strand of Islam — the idea that religion is about changing what you are, not only doing the right things.

The **khanqah** was the institution that mattered: a lodge with a **free kitchen and an open door**, feeding and sheltering anyone, settling disputes, and taking nothing from the state.

Bahauddin Zakariya made **Multan** a centre. **Baba Farid** (d. 1266) settled at **Pakpattan** on the Sutlej.

Farid composed in Punjabi — the oldest Punjabi anyone can still read — and his verses are in the Guru Granth Sahib.

Whether every verse is his own or a successor's is genuinely argued. That it is Chishti Sufi Punjabi poetry inside the Sikh scripture is not.

CHAPTER EIGHT

How Punjab Became Partly Muslim

This is the question the whole part has been building toward. There are four standard answers. One of them can be tested against a map — and when you do, it fails badly.

8.1 — What has to be explained

By the twentieth century, Punjab as a whole had a Muslim majority. The distribution mattered enormously: **the western districts were overwhelmingly Muslim, the eastern districts had Hindu and Sikh majorities**, and that line is essentially where Punjab was cut in two in 1947.

How did that happen?

Note first what it is **not**. It is not a single event. It is a change spread over roughly eight hundred years, happening at different speeds in different districts, to people who mostly left no record of why they did it.

8.2 — The four explanations

THE ARGUMENT — WHY DID PEOPLE BECOME MUSLIM?

Four explanations are in circulation. They are not mutually exclusive, and the useful thing is to test each against evidence rather than to argue from principle.

1. The sword — conversion by force

The claim: people converted because the alternative was death, or because the pressure of living under Muslim rule made it impossible not to.

For: there was real violence in this period. Chapters 3 and 6 describe it. There were periods of pressure on non-Muslims, discriminatory taxation, and destruction of temples. Coercion existed and should not be minimised.

Against — and this is decisive: the theory makes a prediction, and the map contradicts it. See 8.3.

2. Immigration

The claim: the Muslim population is largely descended from soldiers, administrators, traders and religious figures who came from Central Asia, Afghanistan and Iran and settled.

For: such migration certainly happened, and some Punjabi Muslim families do trace descent from it.

Against: the numbers do not work. Immigration on the scale required to produce tens of millions of Muslims is far beyond what the sources suggest. Immigrants were concentrated in towns; the Muslim majority was overwhelmingly rural.

3. Patronage — conversion for advantage

The claim: people converted to get jobs, land, tax relief and access to the ruling class.

For: plainly true for some. This is how elites usually behave under a new order, and it happens everywhere.

Against: it explains the wrong people. Patronage reaches those near power — courtiers, officials, urban notables. It does not reach a farmer in a village a hundred kilometres from anywhere, and that farmer is who needs explaining.

4. Social liberation — escaping caste

The claim: people at the bottom of the caste order converted to a religion that declared all believers equal.

For: intuitively powerful, and it is a real theme in Sufi and later reformist preaching.

Against: the evidence is weak where it should be strongest. Conversion was **not** concentrated among the lowest castes; whole regions changed, cutting across caste. And converts frequently kept their caste identity afterwards — Muslim communities in Punjab retained clan and caste distinctions, and marriage patterns largely followed them. If escape from caste were the motive, it worked poorly.

Where things stand: each captures something real for some people, and none explains the pattern as a whole. The explanation most historians now favour is set out in 8.4 — and it is slower, less dramatic, and fits the map.

8.3 — The test that breaks the sword theory

This is the most useful piece of reasoning in the chapter, and it takes only a map.

If conversion happened by force, then **Islam should be strongest where Muslim political power was strongest, longest and closest**. That is what force means: the more of it applied, and the longer, the greater the effect.

Now look at where Muslim political power actually was. The **heartland** of the Delhi Sultanate and later the Mughal empire was the upper Ganges plain — Delhi, Agra, the Doab. That is where the capital sat, where the armies were, where the administration was thickest, and where the rule lasted longest and most continuously.

So where should the Muslim majorities be?

They are not there.

REGION	RESULT BY THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
Upper Ganges plain — the centre of Muslim political power for six centuries	Large Hindu majority. Muslims a substantial but clear minority.
Western Punjab — frontier	Overwhelmingly Muslim.
Sindh — frontier	Overwhelmingly Muslim.
Eastern Bengal — the far end of the empire, roughly as distant from Delhi as it is possible to be	Overwhelmingly Muslim.
Kashmir — mountainous, peripheral	Overwhelmingly Muslim.

IN REAL TERMS

Read that table again, because it is close to an experiment.

The Muslim majorities formed at the edges. The Hindu majorities held in the centre.

If the sword were the mechanism, this is exactly backwards. Six hundred years of Muslim rule from Delhi, with the full weight of the state, produced a Hindu-majority region. The far end of Bengal, which armies barely reached, went overwhelmingly Muslim.

A theory that predicts the opposite of what happened is not a weak theory. It is a wrong one.

This does not mean no one was ever forced. Individual coercion certainly occurred. It means force cannot be the **main** mechanism, because the pattern it would have produced is not the pattern we observe.

8.4 — What the pattern suggests instead

If conversion clusters at the frontiers rather than the centre, the explanation has to be something that frontiers have and centres lack.

The account most historians now find persuasive works like this.

Frontier regions were where new land was being brought under the plough. Forest cleared, marsh drained, pasture converted to fields. This was happening on Punjab's western reaches and, most dramatically, in eastern Bengal.

That work needed organisers. Someone had to gather labour, get authority over the land, provide seed and tools, and settle disputes. In practice, the people who did this were often religious figures — a Sufi granted land by a ruler, who built a khanqah, attracted followers, and turned wilderness into cultivated fields and a village.

So the shrine became the centre of the new community — not as a conquest, but as the institution the village was built around. It fed people, arbitrated, and marked the calendar.

And religious identity followed slowly. Not a moment of conversion but a drift across generations. First the local holy man is a Sufi, and you go to him as you would go to any holy man. Then his festivals become your festivals. Then his name is in your family's prayers. Then your grandchildren describe themselves as Muslim, while still keeping local customs, local shrines and local caste identity.

WORD BOX

Syncretism: the blending of elements from different religious traditions into one practice. A useful word, but treat it carefully — it implies two clean systems mixing, when what usually happens is people simply doing what their neighbours do without classifying it.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The whole question is usually framed as: "**why did people convert?**" That framing carries an assumption which does not fit what happened.

The assumption is that conversion is an event — a moment when a person stops being one thing and becomes another.

That is how conversion works in some traditions and some periods. It is not how this worked.

What the evidence suggests is a process spread across generations, in which no single person ever "converted" at all. A family goes on doing most of what it did, adds some practices, drops others, and after four or five generations answers a different word when a census-taker asks. **Nobody in that chain experienced a moment of change.**

And this is why the census matters so much to how we see it. The British counted people by religion, forced everyone into one box, and published the totals. **A sharp line appeared on paper where the reality had been gradual and overlapping.** Part 12 shows what happened when that paper line became a political one.

So a better question than "why did people convert?" is: "how did a landscape of local practices, holy men and overlapping customs turn into two counted populations?" The answer to that involves census-takers and politicians as much as it involves Sufis.

REMEMBER THIS

By the twentieth century **western Punjab was overwhelmingly Muslim and eastern Punjab was not** — and that line is roughly where Punjab was cut in 1947.

Four explanations are offered: **force, immigration, patronage, escape from caste.** Each fits some people; none fits the pattern.

The sword theory fails a simple test. Islam ended up strongest at the frontiers — west Punjab, Sindh, east Bengal, Kashmir — and weakest in the **Gangetic heartland** where Muslim power was strongest and longest. Force predicts the opposite of what happened.

The better explanation is **agrarian**: frontier land being cleared and settled, often organised around Sufi shrines, with religious identity following slowly over generations.

And "conversion" is the wrong word. **Almost nobody converted.** Families drifted, over centuries — and a sharp line only appeared when the British started counting.

CHAPTER NINE

The World Nanak Was Born Into

By the late fifteenth century Punjab had a language beginning to be written, a Persian-speaking government, Sufi shrines across the countryside, yogis in the hills, and poets from the lowest castes attacking both priesthods at once. Then, in 1469, a child was born near Lahore.

9.1 — The languages of Punjab in 1469

A person in fifteenth-century Punjab lived among several languages, each with its own job.

- **Punjabi** — what people actually spoke, descended from the Prakrit and Apabhramsha of Chapter 1. Beginning to be written, but with no settled script and no official status.
- **Persian** — government, law, revenue records, courts, high poetry. The language of getting on.
- **Arabic** — Islamic scripture and religious scholarship.
- **Sanskrit** — Hindu learning, ritual and scholarship, understood by a small educated group.
- **Braj and other regional speech** — used by devotional poets and travelling singers, understood across a wide area.

Note the gap in that list. **The language ordinary people spoke had no script of its own, no official use, and almost no literature.** What existed was verse composed to be sung and remembered — Farid's couplets, and the songs of wandering singers.

Gurmukhi, the script Punjabi is written in today, did not yet exist. It comes in Part 7.

9.2 — The yogis

Alongside the Sufi shrines, another spiritual tradition was strong in Punjab and the hills.

The **Nath** yogis traced themselves to a teacher called **Gorakhnath**. They practised severe physical and breathing disciplines aimed at mastering the body and achieving liberation. They wore distinctive earrings, travelled constantly, lived apart from ordinary society, and had a reputation for supernatural power.

They were not a fringe. They were an established, widely respected and somewhat feared presence, and they had their own critique of ritual religion — that priests, temples and scriptures were beside the point, and that what mattered was direct internal work.

Guru Nanak would later hold a famous recorded dialogue with Nath yogis, which tells you how significant they were: **they were the group whose position had to be answered.**

9.3 — The Bhakti poets

And a third current was moving through northern India, sharper than either.

WORD BOX

Bhakti: devotion. A broad religious movement across India, over many centuries, holding that a direct loving relationship with God is what matters — and that priests, ritual, scripture-learning and caste status are not required and may get in the way.

Its northern poets were, strikingly often, not from priestly or elite backgrounds:

- **Namdev**, from Maharashtra, a calico-printer by community.
- **Kabir** (roughly 1440–1518), from Varanasi, a weaver, raised in a Muslim weaving community — who attacked Hindu and Muslim religious authority with equal ferocity, mocking the pandit and the mullah in the same verse.
- **Ravidas**, a leatherworker — from a community treated as untouchable.

They composed in ordinary spoken language, not Sanskrit or Persian. Their verses travelled by being sung.

And the compositions of all three are in the Guru Granth Sahib. So are Farid's. When Guru Arjan compiled the scripture in Part 7, he included the work of a Muslim Sufi, a Maharashtrian calico-printer, a Varanasi weaver and a leatherworker, alongside the Gurus.

IN REAL TERMS

Look at the room Nanak was born into.

A **Persian-speaking government** that most people could not talk to. **Sufi shrines** in the countryside feeding anyone who came. **Nath yogis** saying ritual is worthless and only inner work counts. **Bhakti poets** — a weaver, a leatherworker — saying God does not care about your caste or your scripture, and saying it in language a farmer could understand. And a **spoken language with no script** and almost no written literature.

Every single one of those elements turns up in what Nanak did. Composition in Punjabi. Rejection of ritual and caste. A free kitchen open to all. Engagement with both Hindu and Muslim authority and submission to neither. A scripture that includes voices from outside his own tradition.

This does not diminish him. **It locates him.** Original people do not appear from nowhere; they appear where the materials are, and do something with them that nobody else did.

9.4 — 1469

In 1469, in a village called Talwandi, not far from Lahore, a child was born to a Hindu family of the accountant caste, in a district administered by a Muslim government, in a countryside dotted with Sufi shrines, in a province that had been a frontier for three centuries.

He was named **Nanak**.

Part 7 begins here.

REMEMBER THIS

In 1469 Punjab used **Punjabi** to speak, **Persian** to govern, **Arabic** and **Sanskrit** for religion — and Punjabi had **no script and almost no literature**.

Nath yogis taught that ritual is worthless and only inner discipline counts. Nanak would later have to answer them directly.

Bhakti poets — Namdev, Kabir, Ravidas, from weaving and leatherworking communities — attacked Hindu and Muslim religious authority alike, in ordinary language. **All three are in the Guru Granth Sahib, along with Baba Farid.**

Nanak was born in 1469 near Lahore, into exactly this room. Part 7 begins there.

CHAPTER TEN

An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

Nine centuries, and for large stretches of them the record is almost silent. Here is where that leaves us.

Genuinely unknown

- **Almost everything about Punjab between 550 and 900 CE.** Four and a half centuries with no substantial local records.
- **The size of the population** at any point in this part, and how much it fell after Timur.
- **How many people became Muslim, when, and where** — in any detail. We have twentieth-century census figures and almost nothing before.
- **Why any individual family changed religion.** Not one ordinary person left an account of it.
- **Whether the Farid verses in the Guru Granth Sahib are Baba Farid's own or a successor's.**
- **What actually happened at either battle of Tarain** in any tactical detail. The sources are the winners' chronicles and later legend.
- **How much Timur actually killed.** The figures come from texts written to glorify him.
- **What ordinary religious practice looked like** in a Punjab village at any point in these nine centuries.
- **How Punjabi actually developed** between Apabhramsha and Farid's verses. The intervening stages are unrecorded.
- **Whether the destroyed temples were rebuilt,** and how communities recovered afterwards.

Solid

- The Gupta order collapsed by around 550 CE and northern India fragmented.
- Xuanzang found the Buddhist monasteries of the north-west largely ruined by around 630–645 CE.
- The Hindu Shahis held the north-west from the ninth century, retreating from Kabul to the Indus to the Salt Range before ending in the 1020s.
- Mahmud of Ghazni campaigned into India roughly seventeen times between 1000 and 1027, sacked Somnath in 1025–26, and annexed Punjab in 1021.
- Al-Biruni came with the Ghaznavids, learned Sanskrit, and wrote the first serious outside study of Indian civilisation.
- Lahore was a Ghaznavid provincial seat from 1021 and the dynasty's capital from around 1163 to 1186.
- Persian became the language of government in Punjab and remained so until the British replaced it in the 1830s.
- Ali Hujwiri died at Lahore around 1072 and wrote the first Persian treatise on Sufism.
- Prithviraj Chauhan defeated Muhammad Ghori at Tarain in 1191; Ghori won there in 1192.
- Qutb al-Din Aibak was proclaimed ruler at Lahore in 1206, beginning the Delhi Sultanate.
- Mongol incursions struck Punjab repeatedly through the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.
- Timur invaded through Punjab in 1398 and sacked Delhi with enormous slaughter.
- Bahauddin Zakariya established a Suhrawardi centre at Multan; Baba Farid a Chishti one at Pakpattan.
- Verses attributed to Farid are in the Guru Granth Sahib, alongside Namdev, Kabir and Ravidas.
- By the twentieth century, Muslim majorities were concentrated at the geographical peripheries of Muslim political power, not at its centre.
- Guru Nanak was born in 1469.

A CLOSING WORD ON SILENCE

Notice something about the two lists. Nearly everything in the solid column is about **rulers, battles, dynasties and named religious figures**. Nearly everything in the unknown column is about **ordinary people**.

That is not a coincidence and it is not laziness. It is what the evidence is. Court chronicles, dynastic inscriptions, the writings of religious scholars, the accounts of foreign travellers — every surviving source for these nine centuries was produced by someone with power, money or an institution.

So we can say with confidence who ruled Lahore in 1170, and we cannot say what a farmer twenty kilometres away believed, ate, feared or hoped.

The single largest change described in this part — millions of people gradually coming to describe themselves as Muslim — happened almost entirely below the level at which anything was written down. Chapter 8's explanation is the best available reconstruction. It is a reconstruction.

When someone tells you with certainty why the people of medieval Punjab did what they did, remember: **those people left no record at all, and everyone claiming to speak for them is inferring.**

REFERENCE

Timeline of Part 6

Dates before about 1000 CE are approximate. Where a date is disputed, the dispute is in the chapter.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
c. 550 CE	The Gupta empire fragments. <i>Where Part 5 ended.</i>
606 – 647 CE	Harsha rules from Kanauj. Punjab on the edge. His kingdom dissolves at his death.
c. 630 – 645 CE	Xuanzang travels from China through India and finds the Buddhist monasteries of the north-west largely in ruins.
8th century	Lalitaditya of Kashmir dominates much of the Punjab plain.
8th – 10th centuries	The tripartite struggle for Kanauj between Palas, Pratiharas and Rashtrakutas. Punjab outside it.
c. 850s CE	The Hindu Shahis take power in the Kabul region and the north-west.
962 – 997 CE	Ghazni becomes an independent power under Alptigin, then Sabuktigin.
998 – 1030 CE	Mahmud of Ghazni rules. Around seventeen campaigns into India.
1001 CE	Jayapala defeated at Peshawar. The Shahi retreat begins.
c. 1008 CE	Anandapala's coalition of northern Indian kingdoms is defeated.
1021 CE	Punjab annexed. Lahore placed under a Ghaznavid governor. The permanent change.
1025 – 26 CE	Somnath sacked.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
c. 1030 CE	Al-Biruni completes his study of India, having learned Sanskrit to write it.
c. 1072 CE	Ali Hujwiri (Data Ganj Bakhsh) dies at Lahore. His <i>Kashf al-Mahjub</i> is the first Persian treatise on Sufism.
c. 1150 CE	The Ghurids sack Ghazni. The Ghaznavids lose their homeland.
c. 1163 – 1186 CE	Lahore is the Ghaznavid capital — Punjab's first real centre in over a thousand years.
c. 1173 – 1266 CE	Baba Farid , Chishti Sufi of Pakpattan. Composes in Punjabi.
1186 CE	Muhammad Ghori ends the Ghaznavids at Lahore.
1191 CE	First Battle of Tarain. Prithviraj Chauhan defeats Ghori and lets him withdraw.
1192 CE	Second Battle of Tarain. Ghori wins completely.
1206 CE	Ghori assassinated on the Jhelum. Qutb al-Din Aibak proclaimed at Lahore — the Delhi Sultanate begins.
1221 CE	Genghis Khan's forces reach the Indus. Eighty years of Mongol pressure on Punjab begin.
c. 1262 CE	Bahauddin Zakariya dies at Multan, having made it a Suhrawardi centre.
1290 – 1320 CE	Khalji dynasty. Alauddin Khalji defeats the largest Mongol invasions and rebuilds the frontier.
1398 CE	Timur invades through Punjab and sacks Delhi. The Sultanate never recovers.
1414 – 1451 CE	Sayyid dynasty — a much smaller state.
1451 – 1526 CE	Lodi dynasty. Partial recovery.
1469 CE	Guru Nanak born at Talwandi, near Lahore. Part 7 starts here.

REFERENCE

Glossary

Every hard word used in Part 6, in plain English.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Apabhramsha	The late Prakrit stage, roughly 600–1200 CE, out of which Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali and the other modern North Indian languages grew.
Bhakti	Devotion. A movement holding that a direct loving relationship with God matters more than ritual, scripture-learning or caste.
Chishti	The Sufi order of Baba Farid. Known for refusing state patronage, keeping an open door and running free kitchens.
Dargah	The shrine at a Sufi saint's tomb, which becomes a place of pilgrimage.
Ghaznavids	The Turkish dynasty of Ghazni in Afghanistan. Mahmud's family. Annexed Punjab in 1021 and later ruled from Lahore.
Ghurids	The dynasty from central Afghanistan that destroyed the Ghaznavids and conquered northern India under Muhammad Ghori.
Iqta	The right to collect a district's revenue, granted to an officer instead of a salary, out of which he maintained troops.
Khanqah	A Sufi lodge. Where the teacher lived, taught, fed anyone who came, and settled disputes.
Mamluk	A slave-soldier. Also the name of the first Delhi Sultanate dynasty, founded by one.
Murid	A disciple of a Sufi teacher.
Nath	An order of yogis tracing to Gorakhnath, practising severe physical and breathing disciplines. Widely influential in Punjab.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Persian (Farsi)	The language of Iran, and the prestige language of government and poetry across medieval Central and South Asia. Punjab's official language for eight hundred years.
Pir / Shaikh / Murshid	A Sufi master or spiritual guide.
Silsila	Literally "chain". A Sufi order — a lineage of teachers.
Slave-soldier	A boy bought or captured and trained as an elite professional soldier. Considered loyal because he had no local faction. Several became rulers.
Sufism	The inward, mystical strand of Islam. Emphasises direct experience of God and working on the self, under a teacher's guidance.
Suhrawardi	The Sufi order of Bahauddin Zakariya at Multan. Unlike the Chishtis, it accepted royal patronage and property.
Sultan	Arabic for "authority". A ruler's title across the Islamic world.
Syncretism	The blending of elements from different religious traditions. Use carefully — it implies two clean systems mixing, which is rarely how it feels from inside.

ABOUT

About the Author

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CURRENTLY

Second-year MBA, Panjab University — Business Strategy and Analysis, specialising in Business Intelligence

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Lovepreet Singh is a researcher and writer working toward doctoral research. He writes long-form work on Indian history, society, religion, philosophy, public policy and technology — built from the record, in plain language, with the competing views left in.

His background is not in a history department, and he thinks that is worth saying plainly. He came to this subject the way most people do: from the outside, wanting to understand the place he is from, and finding that the good books were unreadable and the readable books were thin.

What he brought instead was the habit of his own training — the analyst's discipline of asking what the data actually supports, where a claim is really coming from, and which assumptions are doing the quiet work underneath an argument. That discipline runs through every chapter of this series. It is why almost every chapter has a box labelled *The Hidden Assumption*, and it is the part of this work he is most attached to.

The Living Archive

This series belongs to a larger project. The Living Archive is a body of long-form research on history, society, religion, public policy and technology, published openly and free to read at misterlove.in.

- **Plain language.** Hard ideas explained in ordinary words, with nothing left out to make them fit.
- **Evidence first.** Show the thing itself, and be clear about what it can and cannot prove.
- **Competing views.** Where the field disagrees, both sides get their strongest case. Open questions stay open.

A word on sources

This is written for general readers, so it carries no footnotes. It is a synthesis of the published scholarly record — history, epigraphy, archaeology, literary and religious studies — rather than new primary research, and it does not claim otherwise. Where that record is contested, the contest is shown rather than smoothed over. Where it is thin, Chapter 10 says so.

This part covers material that is politically live in India and Pakistan today. No position taken here is offered as a verdict on any community. Where a popular claim is weakly supported by the evidence, that is said plainly — in whichever direction it cuts.

Corrections are genuinely welcome. If you find an error, or think an argument has been given less than its best case, write to the address above — later editions will say what was changed and who caught it.

WHAT COMES NEXT

Part 7 — Guru Nanak to Guru Arjan

Part 7 covers the first five Gurus, from Nanak's birth in 1469 to the martyrdom of Guru Arjan in 1606 — and with them the arrival of the Mughals, and the building of Amritsar.

Among the questions it takes on:

- What did **Nanak actually teach**, in his own words, before later tradition explained it for him?
- Why did he create a **succession** — and what changed when a teacher decided his message needed an institution?
- Where did **Gurmukhi** come from, and why does having your own script matter so much?
- How did **Amritsar** get built, and what is a city founded by a religious community for?
- **Akbar and the Sikhs**: what the relationship actually was, against the legends on both sides.
- How Guru Arjan compiled the **Adi Granth** — and why he put a Sufi, a weaver and a leatherworker in it.
- Why was Guru Arjan **killed in 1606**, and what did that single event set in motion?



END OF PART 6 OF 14

THE LIVING ARCHIVE · LOVEPREET SINGH · MISTERLOVE.IN

THE LIVING ARCHIVE

PART SEVEN OF FOURTEEN

The Complete History of Punjab

*Part Seven — Guru Nanak
to Guru Arjan*

A hundred and thirty-seven years in which a village accountant's son began teaching in Punjabi, a script was made for the language, a city was built around a pool, a scripture was compiled — and the man who compiled it was executed.

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

Lovepreet Singh

1469 – 1606

MISTERLOVE.IN

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Where We Left Off, and How I Will Handle This

A recap, a reminder of the boxes, and a straightforward statement about how a history book should treat material that millions of people hold sacred.

Six parts have brought us here.

Part 1 built the land. **Part 2** was Harappa — cities, drains, standardised bricks, and a script nobody can read. **Part 3** was the Vedic age, the Rigveda composed on this land, and the argument about where those people came from. **Part 4** brought Persians, Alexander and the Mauryas. **Part 5** was seven centuries of arrivals — Greeks, Sakas, Kushans, Hunas — every one absorbed, and the Buddha given a human face here.

Part 6 covered nine hundred years. Mahmud of Ghazni annexed Punjab in 1021. Lahore became a capital and Persian became the language of government for the next eight centuries. The Delhi Sultanate made Punjab its frontier, and Punjab paid for it — Mongols for eighty years, then Timur in 1398. Meanwhile Sufi lodges spread across the countryside with open doors and free kitchens, and at Pakpattan a teacher called Baba Farid composed verses in Punjabi — the oldest Punjabi anybody can still read.

Part 6 ended in **1469**, with a child born at Talwandi near Lahore into exactly that world: a Persian-speaking government, Sufi shrines in the countryside, Nath yogis in the hills, Bhakti poets from weaving and leatherworking communities attacking every priesthood at once, and a spoken language with no script and almost no literature.

This part is what he did with it, and what four men after him built on it.

What the boxes mean

WORD BOX

Blue explains a hard word, right where it appears.

Example — Guru: a teacher, but with more weight than the English word carries. In Punjabi and Sanskrit usage a guru is one who takes you from darkness to light — a guide whose authority comes from what they have understood, not from an office.

IN REAL TERMS

Green turns something too big or too strange to picture into something ordinary.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Brown shows the evidence itself, and is honest about what it can and cannot prove.

THE ARGUMENT

Orange means serious people disagree. Both sides get their strongest case.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Purple digs out something everyone takes for granted without proving.

REMEMBER THIS

Dark boxes close each chapter with the key points in the plainest words I can find.

How I will handle this

This part covers material that is scripture to about twenty-five million people, and part of the living faith of many who will read it. So let me be direct about method before we start.

I am writing history, not theology. That means I will do one thing consistently, and it is worth explaining because it can be misread.

I will distinguish between **what the historical record can establish** and **what the tradition remembers**. These are different kinds of knowledge and both are real.

When I say "the janamsakhis record this, and they were written down a century or more later", I am not saying it did not happen. I am telling you what kind of source it is, which is what a historian owes a reader. Later sources are not false sources. They are sources of a particular kind, and knowing the kind is how you read them properly.

And what a community remembers is itself a historical fact of the first importance. The stories a tradition tells about its founder tell you what that tradition understood itself to be. That is not a lesser subject than dates and documents. In some ways it is a larger one.

What I will not do is pretend to settle questions of faith. Whether Guru Nanak received revelation is not a question a history book can answer, and any book that claims to answer it — in either direction — has stopped doing history.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION — READ THIS ONE FIRST

There is an assumption that damages the writing of religious history more than any other, and it comes in two opposite forms that make the same mistake.

Form one: if a source is late or devotional, it is worthless.

Form two: if a tradition preserves something, questioning the source is an attack on the tradition.

Both assume that **"historically documented" and "true" are the same thing**. They are not, and treating them as identical is what makes this subject so hard to write about calmly.

Almost nothing about any ordinary person's life five hundred years ago is documented. That is a fact about record-keeping, not about the person. Meanwhile some very well-documented things are false, because documents are written by people with reasons.

The useful habit is to hold three separate questions apart:

- What do the earliest sources say?
- What kind of sources are they, and when were they written?
- What does the tradition understand this to mean?

Answering all three gives you a fuller picture than answering any one of them. Collapsing them into a single verdict — "true" or "false" — throws most of the information away.

What Is In Part 7

Before We Begin — Where We Left Off, and How I Will Handle This

Chapter 1 — What We Know About Nanak's Life

The sources · The documented outline · What the janamsakhis are · Argument: how to read them

Chapter 2 — What Nanak Taught

From his own verses · One reality · Against ritual and caste · The householder · Babur's invasion

Chapter 3 — Kartarpur: Turning Teaching Into an Institution

Sangat, langar and pangat · Why a shared meal is radical · Choosing a disciple over a son

Chapter 4 — Three Gurus Who Built the Structure

Angad · Amar Das and Goindwal · Ram Das and the founding of Amritsar

Chapter 5 — Gurmukhi: A Script of One's Own

Where it came from · Why a script changes what a language can do · Punjab's third writing system

Chapter 6 — Amritsar: A City Built Around a Pool

The sarovar · Four doors · Why you walk down to it · How a shrine became a city

Chapter 7 — The Adi Granth

Why compile at all · Arranged by music, not by author · The fifteen outsiders inside it

Chapter 8 — The Mughals

Babur · Akbar and what the relationship actually was · Why it changed in 1605

Chapter 9 — 1606

The rebellion · What Jahangir wrote in his own memoir · Argument: politics or religion?

Chapter 10 — An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

Timeline · Glossary · About the Author · Coming in Part 8

CHAPTER ONE

What We Know About Nanak's Life

*There are two kinds of source for his life, and they do very different jobs.
Understanding the difference is the key to everything else in this part.*

1.1 — The two kinds of source

The first kind is **his own words**.

Around 974 of Guru Nanak's compositions are preserved in the Guru Granth Sahib, collected within decades of his death by people who had known him or known those who did. This is an unusually strong position for any figure of the period. **We have what he actually said, in his own language, in enormous quantity.**

What those verses do *not* do is narrate his life. They are hymns. They tell you what he thought, argued and felt. They do not tell you where he was in 1508.

The second kind of source is the **janamsakhis**.

WORD BOX

Janamsakhi: literally "birth-story". A traditional account of Guru Nanak's life, made up of episodes — each one a self-contained story usually built around a lesson or an encounter, often ending with a verse of his.

Several distinct janamsakhi traditions exist, with different arrangements and different episodes. The surviving manuscripts date from the seventeenth century onwards, well over a hundred years after his death.

There is also a third, smaller source that matters a great deal: the writings of **Bhai Gurdas**, who was scribe to Guru Arjan and wrote in the early seventeenth century. His long poem on Nanak is early, is by someone at the centre of the community, and is closer in time than the janamsakhi manuscripts.

1.2 — The outline that is solid

Putting the sources together, this much is broadly agreed:

- Born in **1469** at Rai Bhoi di Talwandi, west of Lahore — the town is now **Nankana Sahib**, in Pakistan.
- His family were **Bedi Khatris**. His father worked as a **village revenue accountant** — an educated, literate, middling official position, not poverty and not aristocracy.
- He had an elder sister, **Nanaki**, who appears in every account as the first person to recognise what he was.
- He **married** and had **two sons**, Sri Chand and Lakhmi Das.
- He worked for a time at **Sultanpur Lodhi**, managing a granary or store for the local Lodhi governor. So he had a career in exactly the kind of administration Part 6 described — Persian-language revenue work.
- Around the age of thirty he underwent a **transformative experience** and left that life.
- He then **travelled**, over roughly two decades, in company with a Muslim musician named **Mardana**.
- He settled at **Kartarpur** on the Ravi, farmed, and led a community there.
- He appointed a **successor** who was not one of his sons.
- He died in **1539**.

IN REAL TERMS

Notice what that outline actually describes, because it cuts against a common picture.

He was **not** a wandering ascetic who had renounced the world. He was a literate man from an official family who held a government job, married, raised two sons, travelled for many years, and then **settled down and farmed** for the last two decades of his life, running a village community.

That is not incidental biography. **It is the teaching.** Chapter 2 shows him arguing repeatedly against withdrawal from the world — and he lived the argument.

1.3 — What the janamsakhis are for

The janamsakhi episodes are the stories most people actually know: the sacred thread he refused to wear; the meal at a carpenter's house rather than a rich man's; Mecca, where the direction he lay was made an argument about where God is; the encounters with yogis and with holy men of every kind.

These are not chronicles. They are **teaching stories**, and they are extremely good ones.

THE ARGUMENT — HOW SHOULD THE JANAMSAKHIS BE READ?

As substantially historical

They were composed within a community with a living memory of the Guru, in which many people had known him personally or at one remove. Oral transmission in this region has a demonstrated record of accuracy — Part 3 showed the Rigveda preserved by memory over a thousand years. The core episodes appear across independent janamsakhi traditions, which is what you expect from shared memory rather than invention. And the geography, the social detail and the customs described fit the period well.

As devotional literature with a historical core

The surviving manuscripts are late. The traditions disagree with each other on sequence and detail, and each was shaped by the group that produced it — one of them by a rival branch of the family with its own interests. The episodes follow recognisable patterns found in the lives of holy figures across many traditions. And the structure is thematic rather than chronological: episodes are arranged to make points, not to record a sequence.

Where things stand: most historians treat the janamsakhis as **devotional literature built around a genuine historical core** — reliable for the broad shape of his life, for the community's understanding of him, and for the world he moved in; less reliable for exact chronology, itineraries and the details of individual episodes.

Why this is not a demotion. Ask what a janamsakhi is *for*. It is not trying to establish that Nanak was in a particular town in a particular year. It is trying to convey what he taught, by showing him teaching. Judged as chronicle it is weak. Judged as what it is, it succeeds completely — which is why the stories are still told five centuries later while the chronicles of the period sit unread.

And there is one place where they are unimpeachable evidence: whatever else they show, they show what the community believed its Guru to have been. That is a historical fact about the community, and it is not in doubt.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Underneath the way people usually argue about religious biography sits this:

That a story is either a factual report or a fabrication.

Almost every human culture has used narrative to carry meaning without anyone involved treating it as a police report, and without anyone considering it a lie. The category we are missing is one that most traditions have and modern argument keeps losing: **a true story that is not primarily about what happened.**

Take the episode where Nanak refuses the sacred thread. Whether a specific ceremony took place on a specific day is, in the deepest sense, not what the story is about. **The story is an argument** — that an external mark cannot make a person good, and that the thread worth wearing is made of compassion and contentment. That argument is unmistakably his; it is all over his verses, in his own words, in the scripture.

So the episode is a faithful carrier of something documented, whatever happened on the day.

Reading it only as a factual claim to be checked misses the point twice over — once about the story, and once about the people who told it, who were not confused about what they were doing.

REMEMBER THIS

Two kinds of source. **His own compositions** — around 974 of them in the Guru Granth Sahib, which tell us what he thought but not where he went. And the **janamsakhis**, traditional life-stories written down later.

Solid outline: born **1469** at Talwandi (now **Nankana Sahib**), a Bedi Khatri family, father a **revenue accountant**, worked at **Sultanpur Lodhi**, transformed around thirty, travelled for two decades with **Mardana**, settled and **farmed at Kartarpur**, died **1539**.

He was **not a renouncer**. He had a job, a wife, two sons and a farm. That is part of the teaching, not a detail.

Janamsakhis are teaching stories, not chronicles — and judged as what they are, they work. They are also **unimpeachable evidence** of what the community understood him to be.

CHAPTER TWO

What Nanak Taught

This chapter works from his own verses rather than from later summaries.

What comes through is a set of arguments — sharp, plain, aimed at ordinary people, and aimed squarely at both religious establishments at once.

2.1 — Where he starts

The opening of the Guru Granth Sahib is a short statement that functions as the foundation of everything after it. It begins with **Ik Onkar** — one being, one reality.

What follows sets out that this reality is true, is the creator, is without fear and without hatred, is beyond time and beyond birth and death, is self-existent, and is realised through the grace of the guru.

WORD BOX

Ik Onkar: "one being is". The numeral one, followed by a word for the divine. It is the first thing in the scripture and the most-used symbol of the tradition.

Nam: literally "name", but in this usage closer to the divine reality itself as it can be held in human awareness. **Nam simran** — remembrance of the name — is the central practice.

Hukam: the divine order or command. The way things are. Living in harmony with it, rather than fighting it out of ego, is a constant theme.

Haumai: "I-am-ness". Ego, self-centredness. In Nanak's verses this is the fundamental human problem — the wall between a person and reality.

2.2 — Against ritual as a substitute

This is the theme that appears most often and most sharply.

His argument is not that religious practice is worthless. It is that **the outward act cannot do the inward work**, and that people constantly use the first to avoid the second.

He goes after bathing at holy places, pilgrimage, fasting, sacred marks and threads, ritual purity, and formal prayer performed without attention — and he goes after them in **both** traditions. The pandit and the mullah are criticised in the same terms, and often in the same verse.

The recurring move is to take a ritual object and redefine it as an inner quality. If you must wear a sacred thread, he says in effect, let it be spun from compassion and twisted with contentment — a thread like that does not break, burn or wear out. If you must be a true Muslim, then let mercy be your mosque and honest labour your prayer.

IN REAL TERMS

The argument is one anybody can follow, which is exactly why it travelled.

A man bathes in a holy river every morning and cheats his neighbour every afternoon. Another performs every prayer at the right hour and treats his servants as less than human.

Nanak's question is simply: what has the ritual actually done?

And note who this argument threatens. It does not threaten God. **It threatens the people who make their living administering the rituals** — which is why this kind of teaching has always been met with hostility from religious establishments, and why the Bhakti poets of Part 6 were saying similar things from the weaver's loom and the leatherworker's bench.

2.3 — Against caste

Nanak's rejection of caste is direct and it is not incidental.

His position, argued repeatedly: caste has no standing before God; it will count for nothing at the reckoning; pride in high birth is simply another form of ego; and it is conduct, not birth, that makes a person high or low. In one much-quoted passage he identifies himself with the lowest of the low rather than with the high.

And he did not leave it as a statement. Chapter 3 is about the institution he built to make it operational, which is where the argument acquires teeth.

2.4 — On women

One passage is quoted more than any other, and it is worth being precise about what it says.

The argument runs: it is from woman that we are conceived and born; to woman we are engaged and married; woman is our friend and from woman comes the family; when one woman dies another is sought; we are bound to the world through woman. **So why call her inferior, when she gives birth to kings?**

Read carefully, that is an argument from social reality rather than an abstract declaration of rights — it works by pointing out that the people who call women low depend on them at every stage of life. In a fifteenth-century text it is a striking passage, and it was followed up institutionally: Chapter 4 shows Guru Amar Das acting against **sati** and **purdah** and encouraging widow remarriage.

2.5 — Stay in the world

This is where Nanak diverges most clearly from the yogis of Part 6.

The Nath position was that liberation requires withdrawal — leave the household, break the social bonds, master the body in isolation. It was a serious, respected and demanding path.

Nanak's answer was that it is possible, and better, to live in the middle of ordinary life and remain unattached: to work, marry, raise children, deal honestly, and hold the divine in mind throughout. The image he uses is the lotus, which grows in muddy water and is not stained by it.

Later tradition summarised the practical form of this in three phrases: **work honestly, remember the divine, share what you have**. The wording is later. The substance is all through the verses, and Kartarpur is what it looked like in practice.

2.6 — On rulers

He was not politically quiet, and one group of hymns proves it.

When **Babur** invaded in the early 1520s, Nanak appears to have witnessed the destruction of a town in Punjab. Four hymns describe it: the killing, the women of the town whose lives were destroyed, the collapse of an order that had believed itself secure.

What is remarkable is that the criticism runs in every direction at once. Babur's soldiers are described committing atrocities. But the Lodhi rulers are also condemned — for their luxury, their negligence, their failure to defend the people who depended on them. And the hymns put the question to God directly, asking how such suffering was permitted.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

These hymns are unusual evidence and worth flagging as such.

They are contemporary. Not written a century later by a chronicler. Composed by someone who was there, at the time.

They are not court literature. Almost everything surviving from this period was produced for a ruler — Part 6 made that point repeatedly. These were composed by a village-based teacher with no patron to please, which is close to unique.

And they record the wrong people. Court histories record kings and battles. These hymns record what an invasion does to a town: the ordinary people, the captives, the women whose lives were destroyed. That perspective almost never survives from any period of this series.

The limitation: they are poetry, composed to be sung, using the language of lament. They are not a report, and specific details cannot be pressed hard.

2.7 — Was he founding a religion?

THE ARGUMENT — DID NANAK INTEND TO FOUND A SEPARATE RELIGION?

He was founding something new

He did not present himself as reforming an existing tradition from inside. He rejected the authority of both the Vedas and Islamic law as final, rejected caste, rejected the priesthood of both, and produced a body of teaching with its own vocabulary and its own founding statement.

Decisively, **he appointed a successor** — and not a son, but the disciple he judged best. That is not the act of a reformer within an existing system. It is the act of someone establishing a line. Everything institutional in this part follows from it.

The category did not exist as we mean it

"Founding a religion" is a modern way of describing things. In fifteenth-century Punjab there were teachers, disciples, lineages and paths — and people followed a teacher without leaving anything behind, as Chapter 8 of Part 6 described.

Nanak used vocabulary from existing traditions, was heard by people from all of them, and by later tradition said that there is neither Hindu nor Muslim — which is more naturally read as a rejection of the categories than as the announcement of a third one.

On this reading, the distinct religion is something that **formed over the following two centuries**, in response to the events of this part and Part 8 — and did not exist as a plan in 1499.

Where things stand: the second position is closer to how most historians describe it, and the two are less opposed than they look. Nanak established a **line of succession, a practice, a community and a body of teaching** — the components of a distinct tradition. Whether he conceived of it as a separate religion in the modern sense is a question the sources cannot answer, partly because the modern sense of "a religion" had not been invented.

What matters more than the label: the succession is the fact that made everything else possible. A teaching without an institution dies with the teacher. Chapter 3 is about the institution.

REMEMBER THIS

It begins with **Ik Onkar** — one reality. The central practice is **remembrance**; the central problem is **ego**.

Against **ritual as a substitute** for inner change — attacking pandit and mullah in the same breath, and redefining ritual objects as inner qualities.

Against **caste**, plainly, and followed up with an institution rather than left as a statement.

Stay in the world. Work, marry, deal honestly, remember. Not withdrawal — which is where he parts from the yogis.

And when Babur invaded, he wrote about it as an eyewitness — condemning the invaders and the rulers who failed their people, and recording what happened to ordinary people. Almost nothing else from this period does that.

CHAPTER THREE

Kartarpur: Turning Teaching Into an Institution

Ideas die with the person who has them unless somebody builds something. In the last two decades of his life Nanak built three things that are still running five hundred years later — and then he did something that guaranteed they would outlast him.

3.1 — Settling down

Around 1520 Nanak settled at a place on the Ravi that came to be called **Kartarpur** — "the creator's town".

He farmed. He led daily gatherings, morning and evening, with singing of his compositions. And around him a settled community formed of people who had come to live near him.

Three institutions took shape there.

3.2 — Sangat, pangat, langar

WORD BOX

Sangat: the congregation. The gathered community of followers. In this tradition, spiritual life is something you do together, not alone.

Langar: the free kitchen. Food cooked and served to everyone who comes, without charge and without conditions.

Pangat: the row. Everyone sits on the floor in a line to eat — the same food, at the same level, in the same room.

Langar was not a new idea in Punjab. Part 6 described Sufi khanqahs running free kitchens with open doors, and Baba Farid's lodge at Pakpattan doing exactly this two hundred and fifty years earlier. It would be dishonest to present it as an invention.

What was new was pangat. And that is where the force is.

IN REAL TERMS

To see why sitting in a row matters, you have to understand what eating meant in this society.

Caste rules were, above everything else, **rules about food and touch.** Who may cook for you. Who may hand you a vessel. Who may sit with you while you eat. Whether food touched by a particular person becomes unfit. These were not abstractions — they were the daily machinery by which the hierarchy was maintained and felt.

A shared meal, cooked by anyone, served to anyone, eaten side by side on the floor, breaks that machinery at the exact point where it operates.

And it does so without an argument. A person who eats in pangat has done something their entire social order says they must not do — and has found that the sky did not fall.

That is why langar is the institution rather than the charity. The feeding is real and matters. The seating arrangement is the teaching.

Chapter 4 shows Guru Amar Das making this explicit by requiring that anyone who wished to meet him must first eat in the langar — including, according to tradition, a Mughal emperor.

3.3 — The succession

Now the decision that made everything else possible.

Nanak had two sons. The elder, **Sri Chand**, was an ascetic of genuine reputation who later founded his own order. The younger was **Lakhmi Das**.

He passed over both.

He chose a follower named **Lehna**, who had come to him some years earlier, and who had shown — in the janamsakhi accounts — an absolute readiness to do whatever was asked, however menial or strange, without calculation.

Nanak renamed him **Angad**, from a word meaning "limb" or "part of my own body", installed him publicly, bowed to him, and made the transfer unmistakable.

IN REAL TERMS

This is one of the most consequential decisions in the history of Punjab, and it is easy to walk past.

In fifteenth-century India, position passed to sons. Land, office, craft, priesthood, kingship — all of it. Passing over a son, especially a respected ascetic son, in favour of a disciple was a deliberate public statement about what the succession was for.

It said: **this is not property, and it is not a family's possession. It goes to whoever is fit for it.**

And practically, it worked. A teaching passed to a devoted, capable successor who had been trained by the founder survives. A teaching passed to whoever happened to be born first usually does not.

Sri Chand's own following — the Udasis — continued as a separate ascetic order, which is itself evidence that the choice was contested by real people with real claims.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Religious history is usually told as the story of founders. The founder has the vision; everything after is described as spreading it, or as decline from it.

The assumption is that the ideas are the important part, and the institutions are just plumbing.

Test that against what is in front of us. Nanak's ideas about caste, ritual and inner devotion were **not unique**. Part 6 showed Kabir, Ravidas and Namdev saying comparable things, sometimes more fiercely, at the same time and in the same religious landscape. Their verses are in the same scripture.

So why is there a Sikh tradition of twenty-five million people, and not a Kabir tradition or a Ravidas tradition of comparable scale?

Not because the ideas were better. Because of the succession, the congregation, the kitchen, the town, the script, the scripture and the treasury — nine chapters of institution-building, carried out over a hundred and thirty-seven years by five men in a row who each added something the last one lacked.

Ideas do not survive on merit. They survive on infrastructure. That is not a cynical observation; it is the reason this part exists, and it is why Chapters 4 to 7 are about a script, a city, a kitchen and a book rather than about theology.

3.4 — And then he died

Nanak died at Kartarpur in 1539.

Tradition records that his Hindu and Muslim followers disagreed about whether to cremate or bury him, and that the dispute was resolved in a way that made the argument itself look foolish. Whatever happened, the story records something real: **the community he left contained both, and neither had a clear claim on him.**

REMEMBER THIS

Nanak settled at **Kartarpur** around 1520 and **farmed** for the last two decades of his life, leading a community.

Three institutions: **sangat** (the congregation), **langar** (the free kitchen), **pangat** (everyone eating in a row).

Langar existed in Sufi lodges already. Pangat is the radical part — because caste ran on rules about who may cook for, touch and sit beside whom, and a shared row breaks it exactly where it operates.

He **passed over both his sons** and appointed his disciple **Angad**, bowing to him publicly.

Ideas do not survive on merit; they survive on infrastructure. That succession is why there is a Sikh tradition and not just a set of verses.

CHAPTER FOUR

Three Gurus Who Built the Structure

Between Nanak's death and Guru Arjan's succession lie forty-two years and three Gurus. They are the least famous stretch of this history and possibly the most important — because this is when a community became an organisation.

4.1 — Guru Angad (1539–1552)

Angad moved the centre to **Khadur** and did three things.

He collected Nanak's compositions. Gathering the hymns, establishing which were genuine, and writing them down. Without this there is no scripture in Chapter 7 — everything Arjan compiled sixty years later rests on Angad's collection.

He standardised the Gurmukhi script. Chapter 5 is entirely about why this matters.

He built up the community's physical and educational life. Tradition records him establishing a wrestling and exercise ground, and schools where children were taught to read the new script. Both fit the same instinct: a community that lives in the world needs bodies and literacy, not only devotion.

4.2 — Guru Amar Das (1552–1574)

He became Guru at seventy-three and held it for twenty-two years, and he was the organiser.

He moved the centre to **Goindwal** on the Beas and had a **baoli** dug there — a large step-well with a long flight of steps down to the water.

WORD BOX

Baoli: a step-well. A well with a staircase running down to the water, so people can walk to it as the level drops through the year. A major piece of public infrastructure in dry regions, and expensive to build.

Then he did something with much longer consequences: he divided the community's territory into administrative districts, each under an appointed representative.

WORD BOX

Manji: literally a small cot or seat. Used for the twenty-two districts Guru Amar Das established, each with a representative who taught, led the local congregation, and connected it to the centre.

Masand: the later term for such representatives, developed further under Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjan, with responsibility for collecting the community's contributions and forwarding them.

IN REAL TERMS

This is the moment a scattered following becomes a structure.

Before it: people in many villages who revere the same teacher and travel to see him when they can.

After it: a **network**. Each district has someone responsible. Instructions go out; contributions come in. Somebody in a distant village belongs to something with a shape, and the centre knows they exist.

Any organisation that outlives its founder has to do this. Armies, states, religious orders and trading houses all discover the same thing: at a certain size you cannot run on personal contact, and you must appoint people.

It also creates a problem that Part 8 will have to deal with. **Representatives who collect money in a distant place tend, over generations, to start treating the position as theirs.** Part 6 saw exactly this with the iqta system. The masands go the same way, and a later Guru abolishes them.

Amar Das also made three decisions that pushed the community further towards being distinct.

He made langar compulsory before an audience. Anyone who wished to see the Guru had to eat in the kitchen first, sitting in the row. There was no exemption for rank. This converts Chapter 3's principle into an enforced rule at the door.

He acted against sati and purdah and encouraged the remarriage of widows — carrying Nanak's argument about women into social practice.

He established distinct gathering days, calling the community together at particular times of year. Small in itself, large in effect: a community that assembles on its own calendar is on its way to being a separate one.

4.3 — Guru Ram Das (1574–1581)

Guru Ram Das held office for only seven years and founded a city.

He established a settlement that came to be called **Ramdaspur** and later **Amritsar**, and began excavating the great pool at its centre. Chapter 6 is about what he started.

He also composed the **Lavan** — four hymns which became, and remain, the core of the Sikh marriage ceremony. It is worth noticing what that means institutionally: a **community with its own marriage rite is no longer using somebody else's.**

4.4 — The succession changes shape

THE ARGUMENT — WHY DID THE GURUSHIP BECOME HEREDITARY?

Nanak passed over his sons for a disciple. Angad's successor, Amar Das, was also not a son. But Amar Das appointed his **son-in-law**, Ram Das — and Ram Das appointed his **son**, Arjan. From then on it stayed in one family until the line of human Gurus ended.

A retreat from the original principle

The first succession was a deliberate statement that this was not property. Within two generations it had become exactly that. Each transfer was contested by a passed-over relative — Amar Das faced opposition from Angad's sons, Arjan from his elder brother Prithi Chand — which is what happens when an office becomes a family asset. The principle was compromised under ordinary human pressure.

A solution to a real problem

An office with no clear rule of succession is dangerously unstable, and a young community cannot survive a disputed transfer every generation. Every one of these appointments was still made **by the sitting Guru, on judgement of fitness** — Arjan was the youngest son, not the eldest, and was chosen over his brother precisely because the choice was made on merit within a family rather than by automatic right.

Hereditary succession also gave the community continuity, an identifiable centre, and a household that could be trained for the role from childhood — which is exactly what allowed a nine-year-old to take office in 1606 without the structure collapsing.

Where things stand: both are true, and the tension is real rather than something to be explained away. The community gained stability and paid for it with recurring family disputes — and one of those disputes, with Prithi Chand, is a direct cause of the scripture being compiled in Chapter 7.

The wider pattern: almost every institution founded on personal charisma faces this. The founder's authority cannot be inherited, so successors must find something that can be — a rule, a text, an office, a bloodline. Part 8 shows this tradition eventually solving it in a way nobody else did.

REMEMBER THIS

Angad collected Nanak's hymns, standardised **Gurmukhi**, and set up schools and exercise grounds.

Amar Das was the organiser: the **baoli** at Goindwal, **twenty-two districts** with appointed representatives, **langar made compulsory before an audience**, action against **sati and purdah**, and separate gathering days.

Ram Das founded **Amritsar** and composed the marriage hymns still used today.

The guruship became **hereditary** — gaining stability, and paying for it with family disputes. One of those disputes is why the scripture got compiled.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gurmukhi: A Script of One's Own

Part 6 ended with Punjabi as a language people spoke but could not properly write. This chapter is about the moment that changed — and about why having your own alphabet is a political fact as much as a technical one.

5.1 — The situation before

Recall where Part 6 left the languages of Punjab.

- **Persian** — government, law, revenue, courts, high poetry. Written in Arabic script.
- **Arabic** — Islamic scripture and scholarship.
- **Sanskrit** — Hindu learning and ritual, written in Devanagari or local variants.
- **Punjabi** — what everybody actually spoke. With no script of its own, no official use, and almost no written literature.

There were writing systems in commercial use — merchants' shorthand scripts used for accounts and letters. They worked for a trader who already knew what the note said, because they mostly left out vowels and were ambiguous. **They were not adequate for a text that had to be read exactly, by someone who had not written it.**

5.2 — What Gurmukhi is

Gurmukhi was developed and standardised under Guru Angad out of those existing local scripts, which trace back through a chain to the ancient Brahmi of Part 4.

The name is usually understood as "from the mouth of the Guru".

What Angad did was turn a rough commercial shorthand into a **complete, unambiguous writing system**: a fixed set of thirty-five letters in a fixed order, with proper vowel marks, so that a word could be written once and read the same way by everybody.

IN REAL TERMS

The difference between a shorthand and a full script is the difference between a shopping list and a legal contract.

A shorthand works when the reader already knows roughly what it says. Write *4 bgs wht, Rm* and a merchant who was expecting it will understand.

Now try using that system for a hymn that must be sung correctly, in the right words, in a village a hundred kilometres away, by someone who has never heard it.

It fails immediately. Not enough information is on the page. You need every vowel, every distinction, in a form that cannot be read two ways.

That is what Angad built, and that is why he built it. Not as a cultural gesture — as a technical requirement for transmitting a body of sacred verse accurately across distance and time.

5.3 — Why a script is never just a script

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The assumption is that a script is a neutral tool — a way of recording sounds, with no meaning of its own.

It is never that.

A script determines **who can read what**, and therefore who has access to knowledge. It carries the prestige of whatever is already written in it. And it marks a text as belonging to one world rather than another.

Consider what the alternatives would have meant for Nanak's hymns.

Written in Arabic script: they would have sat visually alongside Persian government documents and Islamic religious texts, and been read by the class educated in those.

Written in Devanagari: they would have sat alongside Sanskrit scripture, and been read by the class educated in that.

Written in Gurmukhi: they sit alongside nothing. The script is new. It carries no prior authority, no existing library, and no established priesthood who already control access to it.

That last point is the whole thing. A new script is a way of putting a text outside every existing gatekeeper's reach. There is no class of hereditary scholars with a claim on it, because it did not exist until now. Anyone who learns thirty-five letters can read the scripture directly, without an intermediary.

For a tradition whose founding argument was that no priesthood should stand between a person and God, a script nobody owned was not a side-effect. It was the argument, made in ink.

5.4 — Punjab's third writing system

One thing to place this in the series.

Part 2 described the **Harappan script**: used for seven hundred years across a region larger than Egypt, and lost so completely that nobody can read a word of it.

Part 5 described **Kharosthi**: Punjab's own script for seven centuries, in which the oldest Buddhist manuscripts in the world were written, extinct by around the fourth century CE with no descendants at all.

Gurmukhi is the third. It is the one that survived.

IN REAL TERMS

Two complete writing systems have died on this land. Everything written in them is either unreadable or gone.

The third was created in the mid-sixteenth century by a man standardising an alphabet so that hymns could be copied accurately — and it is on road signs, in schoolbooks and on government forms in Indian Punjab today.

It survived for exactly the reason the other two did not: it was attached to a living institution that had a reason to keep teaching it. Kharosthi died when the monasteries died. Gurmukhi had a community that needed every generation to read the scripture for itself.

REMEMBER THIS

Before this, **Punjabi had no proper script** — only merchants' shorthand that worked for accounts and failed for anything that had to be read exactly.

Guru Angad standardised Gurmukhi out of those local scripts: thirty-five letters, fixed order, full vowel marks, no ambiguity.

He did it for a **technical reason** — hymns had to travel accurately — and the consequence was political.

A new script has no existing priesthood attached to it. Anyone who learns the letters can read the scripture without an intermediary. For a tradition built on rejecting intermediaries, that is the argument in ink.

Punjab has lost two complete writing systems. Gurmukhi is the third, and the one that lived.

CHAPTER SIX

Amritsar: A City Built Around a Pool

Guru Ram Das started digging a tank. His son built a shrine in the middle of it with a door on every side, set lower than the ground around it, and invited traders to come and live there. Every one of those decisions was deliberate.

6.1 — The founding

Around 1577, Guru Ram Das established a settlement on land in central Punjab and began excavating a large pool — a **sarovar**.

The town was first called Ramdaspur. It took its later name from the pool: **Amritsar**, the pool of nectar.

THE ARGUMENT — WHERE DID THE LAND COME FROM?

A grant from Akbar

One tradition holds that Emperor Akbar granted the land to Bibi Bhani, daughter of Guru Amar Das and wife of Guru Ram Das. This fits what is known of Akbar's relations with the Gurus, which Chapter 8 examines, and it would explain how a substantial site was secured.

Purchased from local villagers

Another tradition holds that the land was bought from the proprietors of neighbouring villages with money raised by the community. This fits the pattern of the Gurus building with the sangat's own contributions rather than depending on rulers, which is how the masand system in Chapter 4 was designed to work.

Where things stand: unresolved, and both traditions are old. The documentary record is not decisive either way.

Why the question is asked so often is more interesting than the answer. If the land was granted by the emperor, the community's early growth looks connected to imperial favour. If it was bought, it looks self-financed and independent. Each version supports a different account of the relationship in Chapter 8 — which is why it is argued about, and why neither side's certainty should be taken at face value.

6.2 — Why a pool

A sarovar in this period was a familiar thing — sacred tanks were built at religious sites across India. But this one was placed at the centre of the settlement and made the reason for the town's existence, rather than an addition to a temple.

It also had a practical dimension that should not be romanticised away. **A large body of stored water in central Punjab is infrastructure.** It supports a population, permits building, and makes a settlement viable in the dry months.

6.3 — Guru Arjan's decisions

Under Guru Arjan, from 1581, the pool was lined and a shrine was built in the middle of it, reached by a causeway. This is the building later known as the **Harmandir Sahib**.

Three features of it are arguments in architecture.

It has a door on each of the four sides. The standard reading is that it is open in every direction, to people of every kind — and specifically not oriented so as to admit some and exclude others.

You walk down to it. Almost every temple in India is raised: you climb steps to approach the divine. This one is set below the level of the surrounding land, so you descend. The point is humility — you go down, not up.

It sits in water. Approached along a causeway with the pool on both sides.

IN REAL TERMS

Buildings make arguments, and this one makes several before anybody speaks.

Four doors: there is no back entrance and no side for particular castes. Every approach is the main approach.

Going down: the entire physical grammar of Indian religious architecture says the sacred is above and you ascend towards it. Inverting that is not a stylistic choice. It is a statement about what approaching God requires.

A ruler and a labourer walk the same causeway, through the same doors, down the same steps, and sit on the same floor. This is Chapter 3's pangat, built in brick.

A widely held tradition holds that the foundation was laid by **Mian Mir**, a Sufi of Lahore. Some historians accept it; others note that it appears in relatively late sources and treat it cautiously. What is not in dispute is that the tradition exists and has been meaningful for centuries — and that relations between the Gurus and Sufi figures of Lahore were real, which is why the story was plausible enough to take root.

6.4 — And it was a city, not only a shrine

This part is often skipped and it matters.

Guru Arjan deliberately built Amritsar as a **working town**. He encouraged traders and craftsmen to settle, developed markets, and made it a place of commerce as well as devotion. Bazaars grew around the pool. It became a centre for horse trading, among other things.

He also formalised the community's finances. Followers were expected to contribute a share of their income — a tenth — collected through the representatives Chapter 4 described and forwarded to the centre.

WORD BOX

Dasvandh: "a tenth". The practice of giving a tenth of one's earnings to the community's common fund. Formalised under Guru Arjan.

IN REAL TERMS

Follow the money, because it explains the next two parts.

A tenth of the income of a large and growing community, collected systematically through appointed representatives across many districts and delivered to a central point, is a **serious revenue stream**.

It paid for the pool, the shrine, the town, the compilation of the scripture and the langar. It made the community **financially independent of any ruler** — which is exactly what Nanak's teaching required, since a community funded by a king serves the king.

And it made the community visible in a way it had not been. By 1600 there was a town, a treasury, a network of officials, a distinct script, its own marriage rite, and a scripture in preparation.

Chapter 9 is about what happened when the government noticed.

REMEMBER THIS

Guru Ram Das founded Amritsar around 1577 and began digging the pool. Whether the land was granted by Akbar or bought by the community is genuinely disputed.

Under **Guru Arjan** the shrine was built in the middle of the pool — **four doors**, and set **below** the surrounding ground so you walk down to it rather than up.

Almost every Indian temple is raised. **Inverting that is an argument about humility, built in brick** — and the four doors are pangat in architecture.

Arjan built it as a **real working city**, with traders, craftsmen and markets — and formalised **dasvandh**, a tenth of income, collected through the district representatives.

By 1600 there was a town, a treasury, an official network, a script, a marriage rite and a scripture coming. That is when governments start paying attention.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Adi Granth

In 1604 Guru Arjan completed a book and installed it in the shrine. Its arrangement is unlike any other scripture, and its contents include a Muslim Sufi, a weaver, a leatherworker and a butcher.

7.1 — Why compile at all

There was an immediate practical reason, and it came from the family dispute in Chapter 4.

Guru Arjan's elder brother **Prithi Chand** had been passed over for the succession and did not accept it. He and his followers established a rival claim — and, importantly, **circulated their own compositions**, some written to resemble those of the Gurus.

That is a serious problem for a tradition whose authority rests on a body of verse. If nobody can tell which hymns are genuine, the teaching becomes whatever the loudest claimant says it is.

The answer was to fix it. Establish an authoritative text, write it once, correctly, in a form that could be copied and checked.

7.2 — How it was done

Guru Arjan gathered the collections that had been passed down from Guru Angad and Guru Amar Das, together with material sought out from elsewhere, and worked through them.

Bhai Gurdas — the same writer whose poem is a source for Chapter 1 — acted as scribe. The work was carried out at Ramsar, near Amritsar, and completed in 1604.

The finished volume was installed in the **Harmandir Sahib**, and **Baba Buddha** — an elderly follower who had known Guru Nanak himself — was appointed its first attendant.

IN REAL TERMS

Hold that last detail for a moment.

The man appointed to look after the completed scripture in 1604 had, as a young man, met Nanak.

One lifetime spans the whole of this part. Baba Buddha is recorded as having taken part in the installation of every Guru from Angad onwards. The gap between a farmer at Kartarpur and a scripture in a shrine is not an age of history. It is one long life.

7.3 — Arranged by music

This is the feature that makes it unlike other scriptures, and it is easy to miss the significance.

The book is not organised by author, by subject, or by chronology. It is organised by musical measure.

WORD BOX

Raga: a melodic framework in Indian classical music — a set of notes with rules about how they move, associated with a particular mood and often a time of day or season.

The scripture is divided into major sections, each one a raga. Within each raga the compositions are arranged by Guru in order, then by the other contributors.

So a hymn's place in the book is determined by **how it is meant to be sung**.

IN REAL TERMS

Why does the arrangement matter?

Because it tells you what the book is for. This is not a doctrinal handbook to be studied and argued over, organised so a scholar can look up a topic. **It is a book to be sung, by a congregation, at the appropriate hour.**

The organising principle assumes musicians and a gathering, not a library and a commentator.

And it has a levelling effect that is entirely consistent with everything else in this part. In a book arranged by author, hierarchy is unavoidable — the important writers come first and get the most space. **Arranged by raga, a hymn by a leatherworker sits in the same section as a hymn by a Guru, because they are sung to the same measure.**

7.4 — Who is in it

The scripture contains the compositions of the Gurus. It also contains the work of a group of earlier and contemporary devotional poets — the **bhagats** — and of several musicians and court poets attached to the Gurus.

Look at who the bhagats are, by background:

CONTRIBUTOR	BACKGROUND
Farid	A Muslim Sufi of the Chishti order, from Pakpattan — <i>Part 6, Chapter 7</i> .
Kabir	A weaver from Varanasi, raised in a Muslim weaving community, who attacked Hindu and Muslim religious authority alike.
Ravidas	A leatherworker — from a community treated as untouchable.
Namdev	A calico-printer from Maharashtra.
Sadhna	By tradition, a butcher.

CONTRIBUTOR	BACKGROUND
Sain	By tradition, a barber.
Dhanna	A farmer.
Pipa	By tradition, a king who gave it up.

Among the others are a Sanskrit poet, several devotional figures from across northern and western India, and — alongside the Gurus themselves — the Muslim musician **Mardana**, who had travelled with Nanak for two decades.

THE ARGUMENT — WHAT DOES INCLUDING THE BHAGATS MEAN?

A statement that truth has no owner

The inclusion is deliberate and unmistakable. A Muslim Sufi, a weaver, a leatherworker and a butcher are placed inside the community's own scripture, to be recited daily as scripture. In a society organised around who may touch whose food, that is a position taken, not an act of tolerance.

It also puts Nanak's argument into the structure of the book: if caste and religious label do not determine a person's standing before God, then a scripture that recognised only its own tradition's authors would contradict itself on its own pages.

A careful and selective act, not an open door

The bhagats were chosen. Their compositions were selected, and a large amount of comparable devotional material was not included. Some verses appear alongside a Guru's response that qualifies or redirects them.

So this is not indiscriminate inclusion — it is **editorial judgement**, admitting what was consistent with the tradition's own position and leaving out what was not. Every canon is as much a set of exclusions as inclusions.

Where things stand: both are right and they are not in conflict. The inclusion is genuinely radical **and** genuinely edited. Recognising the second does not diminish the first; it makes it a decision rather than an accident.

What is not in dispute: a book compiled in Punjab in 1604 places the words of a Muslim Sufi and an untouchable leatherworker in the same volume as its own founders', to be sung as scripture. Very few religious texts anywhere do anything comparable.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

We tend to treat scriptures as things that simply exist — received, complete, without a history of assembly.

The assumption is that a scripture is found rather than made.

What this chapter shows is the opposite, and shows it unusually clearly because the process is documented. Someone gathered material. Someone decided what was genuine and what was not. Someone chose an arrangement. Someone chose which outside voices to admit. Someone wrote it down, and someone installed it.

Every scripture has been through this, in every tradition. What is unusual here is that we can name the compiler, the scribe, the year and the reason — because it happened in 1604 rather than in the deep past, and because the community kept the record.

This is not a diminishment. **It is the opposite:** a tradition that can tell you exactly how its book was made, by whom, and why, is in a stronger position than one that cannot. And the reason for compiling it — that rival compositions were circulating and the genuine text needed fixing — is precisely a concern for accuracy.

REMEMBER THIS

The **Adi Granth** was compiled by **Guru Arjan** with **Bhai Gurdas** as scribe, completed in **1604**, and installed in the Harmandir Sahib.

The immediate reason was practical: **a rival branch of the family was circulating false compositions**, and the genuine text had to be fixed.

It is arranged **by musical measure, not by author** — which tells you it is a book to be sung by a congregation, and which places a leatherworker's hymn in the same section as a Guru's.

It includes a Muslim Sufi, a weaver, a leatherworker, a butcher and a barber. Selected, edited — and still a position almost no other scripture takes.

Its first attendant, Baba Buddha, had met Nanak as a young man. The whole of this part fits inside one lifetime.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Mughals

For most of this part the empire and the community coexisted without much friction. Understanding why — and what changed in a single year — is the difference between a story about inevitable conflict and an account of what actually happened.

8.1 — Babur, 1526

Babur, a Central Asian prince descended from both Timur and Genghis Khan, invaded India and defeated the last Lodhi sultan at Panipat in 1526. That is the beginning of the Mughal empire.

Punjab, as always, was the road he came down. Chapter 2 covered Nanak's eyewitness hymns on the earlier raid.

Babur died in 1530. His son Humayun lost the empire to an Afghan ruler, Sher Shah Suri, and won it back after fifteen years in exile. Humayun died in 1556, and his thirteen-year-old son took the throne.

8.2 — Akbar

Akbar ruled from 1556 to 1605 — almost exactly the middle three Gurus' period.

He is relevant here because of a deliberate policy. Akbar governed a population that was overwhelmingly not Muslim, and concluded early that an empire of that shape could not be run on religious exclusivity.

So he abolished the tax levied on non-Muslims, brought Hindu nobles into the highest levels of government and the army, married into Rajput families, and held religious debates at his court to which he invited scholars of every tradition available — Muslim, Hindu, Jain, Zoroastrian and Christian.

WORD BOX

Jizya: a tax levied on non-Muslim subjects in Islamic states, in principle in exchange for exemption from military service and in return for protection. Akbar abolished it in 1564. A later emperor reimposed it, which becomes important in Part 8.

Sulh-i-kul: "peace with all" — the phrase used for Akbar's policy of not privileging one religious community in the running of the state.

8.3 — What the relationship actually was

THE ARGUMENT — HOW CLOSE WERE AKBAR AND THE GURUS?

Sikh tradition records several encounters: that Akbar visited Guru Amar Das at Goindwal and, like every other visitor, ate in the langar sitting on the floor before being received; that he remitted revenue in the district during a hard year at the Guru's request; and that when complaints were made to him that the Adi Granth contained material hostile to Islam, he had passages read out, found nothing objectionable, and dismissed the complaint.

The encounters were real and significant

They are recorded within the tradition close to the period, and they fit everything independently known about Akbar — his personal curiosity about religious teachers, his practice of visiting holy men of all kinds, and his declared policy of even-handedness. A Mughal emperor eating in a communal kitchen would have been entirely in character for him, and imperial revenue remissions in bad years are well documented as a practice.

The accounts are internal and may be shaped

The detailed versions come from Sikh sources rather than from Mughal court records, which do not mention the Gurus. A community naturally remembers imperial approval, and such stories serve a purpose — they establish that the tradition was recognised and vindicated at the highest level, which is a useful thing to be able to say after 1606.

That does not make them invented. It means they should be read as what they are.

Where things stand: most historians accept that relations under Akbar were **cordial and untroubled**, whatever the status of individual episodes. What is beyond dispute is the negative evidence, and it is strong: **during Akbar's forty-nine-year reign the community grew, built a town, dug a pool, ran a treasury and compiled a scripture without imperial interference.** A hostile state does not permit that.

Why this matters for Chapter 9: if the conflict that follows were simply structural — an Islamic empire against a non-Islamic community — it should have appeared under Akbar. It did not. Something specific changed, and it changed at a datable moment.

8.4 — 1605

Akbar died in October 1605. His eldest surviving son took the throne as **Jahangir**.

Jahangir's position was different from his father's in two ways that matter.

He had a weaker claim and a rival. He had himself rebelled against Akbar, and his own eldest son, **Khusrau**, had significant support — including from nobles who had preferred Khusrau as Akbar's successor. A new emperor with a credible rival inside his own family is not a secure emperor.

And he faced pressure from a different direction on religious policy. Akbar's even-handedness had never been universally popular among the orthodox at court. A new reign is when accumulated objections get raised.

IN REAL TERMS

Set the two positions side by side.

Akbar in 1590: secure on the throne for over thirty years, no serious rival, running a deliberate policy of not taking sides between religious communities. A growing devotional community in Punjab is not a problem. It might even be useful.

Jahangir in 1606: six months on the throne, an armed rebellion by his own son, uncertainty about which nobles are loyal, and a court faction pressing him to be less accommodating than his father.

The community in Punjab has not changed. What it looks like from Delhi has changed completely — because the man looking has different problems.

REMEMBER THIS

Babur founded the Mughal empire in **1526**. **Akbar** ruled 1556–1605 — almost exactly the period of the middle Gurus.

Akbar governed a mostly non-Muslim population and ran a deliberate policy of **not privileging one community**. He abolished the **jizya** in 1564.

Sikh tradition records him **eating in the langar** at Goindwal and dismissing complaints about the scripture. The episodes come from internal sources — but the **negative evidence is strong**: the community grew, built and compiled for forty-nine years without interference.

Akbar died in 1605. Jahangir took the throne with a rival son, an armed rebellion, and a court pressing for a harder line. Nothing in Punjab had changed. Everything in Delhi had.

CHAPTER NINE

1606

On the last day of May 1606, Guru Arjan died in Mughal custody at Lahore. We have the emperor's own account of why he ordered it, written in his own memoir. This chapter sets out what it says.

9.1 — The rebellion

In April 1606, six months into Jahangir's reign, his eldest son **Khusrau** rebelled and fled north from Agra with a body of supporters, heading towards Lahore and gathering men as he went.

He was pursued, defeated near the Beas, and captured. His supporters were dealt with severely — impalements along the road out of Lahore are recorded in the sources.

Khusrau's route north took him through Punjab. And at some point on that route, according to Jahangir, he met Guru Arjan.

9.2 — What Jahangir wrote

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

This is an unusual situation for this series. **We have the order-giver's own written account, composed by him, in the first person.**

Jahangir kept a memoir. In it he records the following, in summary:

- That at Goindwal there was a Hindu, in the dress of a religious teacher, who had captivated many simple people — Hindus, and also, he says, foolish Muslims — by his manner and his teaching.
- That this had been going on for **three or four generations**, and that he calls the whole enterprise a shop of falsehood.
- That he had for some time intended either to put a stop to it or to bring the man into Islam.
- That when Khusrau passed that way, the Guru met him, applied a mark to his forehead, and gave him some form of blessing or good wishes.
- That he therefore ordered the Guru's property confiscated and the man himself put to death under the rules applied to political offenders.

Why this source is so valuable: it is contemporary, it is by the person who gave the order, and it has no reason to understate. He is not defending himself to posterity; he is recording a decision he considers justified.

What it does not tell us: what actually happened between Khusrau and the Guru, whether any blessing was given or in what spirit, or what took place in custody. On those, we have only later accounts from various directions.

9.3 — Politics or religion?

THE ARGUMENT — WHY WAS GURU ARJAN EXECUTED?

Political — treason against a new emperor

The trigger is explicit in the memoir: contact with a rebel prince. A new ruler facing armed rebellion by his own son, uncertain of his nobles, deals ruthlessly with anyone who appears to have supported the rival. Khusrau's other supporters were treated with extreme severity, and the Guru's punishment is described in the language of state offences, not of religious ones.

On this reading the Guru's religion was incidental. Any figure of comparable local standing who had received Khusrau would have been treated similarly.

Religious — and the memoir says so itself

Read the passage again. Jahangir does not begin with the rebellion. He begins by describing the teaching as false, notes that **Muslims** were being drawn to it, complains that it has flourished for generations, and states that **he had already intended to stop it or convert the man** before Khusrau enters the story.

That is the emperor recording a pre-existing intention on explicitly religious grounds. Khusrau supplies the occasion, not the motive.

Both, plus wealth and local rivalry

Chapter 6 described a town, a treasury and a network of collectors. A wealthy, growing, well-organised body with its own revenue, its own script and its own scripture is a political fact whatever it teaches — an alternative centre of loyalty in a frontier province.

Sikh tradition also records the hostility of a particular Mughal official as a factor. Whatever the truth of that specific tradition, local enemies with access to the court are a normal part of how such decisions get made.

Where things stand: most historians take the third position, and the memoir supports it directly rather than by inference. **Jahangir states a religious objection and a prior intention; the rebellion supplies the trigger; and the community's wealth and organisation are the background that made it worth acting on.**

The either/or framing is the weakest part of the debate. **Rulers rarely have one reason.** A ruler who finds a teaching objectionable, is offended that it is drawing Muslims, is insecure on a new throne, has just been given a pretext, and knows the target has a treasury worth confiscating, does not need to decide which of those is his real motive.

What is not in dispute: the emperor ordered it, said why in his own hand, and it happened.

9.4 — What it changed

Everything after this in the series runs through 1606.

Guru Arjan was succeeded by his son **Hargobind**, who was **eleven years old**.

According to tradition, at his installation the new Guru asked for two swords rather than the customary garments — one representing spiritual authority, the other temporal power. He built a structure facing the Harmandir Sahib called the **Akal Takht**, the throne of the timeless, from which worldly affairs would be conducted. He kept armed men. He fortified Amritsar.

Part 8 is about that turn and everything that followed from it.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

A word about the category of **martyrdom**, which is what this event became.

The assumption people usually make is that martyrdom is simply a description — a person was killed for their faith, and that is what the word records.

It is more than a description. It is an **interpretation applied afterwards**, and applying it does work in the world.

Consider what changes when a death is understood as martyrdom rather than as an execution. It transfers the moral position entirely to the victim. It makes the killing evidence of the truth of what was killed for. It creates an obligation on those who remain. And it gives a community a shared, unforgettable, non-negotiable point of reference.

None of this makes the interpretation wrong. Guru Arjan was killed by a state, on the order of an emperor who recorded a religious objection in his own hand. If any death qualifies, this one does.

The point is what the interpretation *did*. A scattered devotional following that had been growing peacefully for a century acquired, in a single day, a founding injury — and an eleven-year-old Guru who responded by putting on swords.

Communities are not only made by what they believe. They are made by what has been done to them, and by how they choose to remember it. Part 8 is the working-out of that, and Parts 9 and 13 return to the same pattern.

REMEMBER THIS

In April 1606, **Khusrau** rebelled against his father Jahangir and fled through Punjab. Guru Arjan is said to have met him.

Jahangir recorded his reasons in his own memoir. He calls the teaching false, complains that **Muslims** were being drawn to it, says it had flourished for three or four generations, and states that **he had already meant to stop it** before Khusrau appeared.

Guru Arjan died in Mughal custody at **Lahore on 30 May 1606.**

It was **political, religious and financial at once** — the either/or framing is the weakest part of the argument. Rulers rarely have one reason.

His eleven-year-old son Hargobind took the guruship and asked for two swords. Part 8 is what follows.

CHAPTER TEN

An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

This part has better sources than any before it in the series. It still has large gaps, and they are worth naming.

Genuinely unknown

- **Where Guru Nanak travelled, when, and in what order.** The janamsakhi traditions disagree, and no independent record exists.
- **What happened at Sultanpur** — the nature of the experience that changed his life. The sources describe it; what it was is not a historical question.
- **The exact date of his birth.** Different traditions place it in different months, and the argument is old.
- **How large the community was at any point in this part.** No census, no membership record.
- **Whether the land at Amritsar was granted or bought.**
- **Whether Mian Mir laid the foundation of the Harmandir Sahib.** Widely held; the sources are later.
- **What actually passed between Khusrau and Guru Arjan, if anything.**
- **What happened in custody at Lahore.** Accounts differ and none is contemporary.
- **How the general population of Punjab regarded the community in this period.** We have the community's own record and almost nothing from outside it.
- **The detail of Akbar's contacts with the Gurus.** Mughal court records do not mention them.

Solid

- Guru Nanak was born in 1469 at Talwandi and died in 1539 at Kartarpur.

- Around 974 of his compositions survive in the Guru Granth Sahib, in his own language.
- He held a post at Sultanpur Lodhi before his change of life, and he farmed at Kartarpur after his travels.
- He composed hymns describing Babur's invasion as a contemporary witness.
- He appointed Angad, a disciple, over his own sons.
- Guru Angad standardised the Gurmukhi script and collected Nanak's compositions.
- Guru Amar Das established the manji districts, made langar compulsory before an audience, and acted against sati and purdah.
- Guru Ram Das founded Amritsar around 1577 and composed the marriage hymns.
- Guru Arjan built the Harmandir Sahib, developed Amritsar as a commercial town, and formalised dasvandh.
- The Adi Granth was compiled in 1604, with Bhai Gurdas as scribe, arranged by raga, and includes the compositions of fifteen bhagats from outside the line of Gurus.
- Guru Arjan died in Mughal custody at Lahore on 30 May 1606, on Jahangir's order.
- Jahangir recorded his reasons in his own memoir.

A CLOSING WORD ON SOURCES

Something has changed in this part and it is worth naming.

For six parts, the honest lists have been dominated by silence — no records, no writing, no voice from anyone who was not a king or a monk. **Here, for the first time in this series, we have a community's own words in quantity.**

Around 974 compositions by Guru Nanak. Thousands more by his successors. Written down within living memory, in a script made for the purpose, and preserved with unusual care because the whole point of the script was accuracy.

Compare that with Part 5, where seven centuries produced a list of kings from coins and almost nothing about anyone else.

And notice what kind of voice it is. Not a court chronicle. Not a monastery's records. The compositions of a village-based teacher and his successors, addressed to farmers and traders and weavers, in the language they actually spoke, saying that birth counts for nothing.

That is close to unique in this entire series. **For most of Punjab's history the people who left records were the people with power. This is one of the few places where somebody else got to write.**

REFERENCE

Timeline of Part 7

Dates in this part are firmer than in any earlier one. Where a date is traditional rather than documented, it is marked.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
1469	Guru Nanak born at Rai Bhoi di Talwandi, now Nankana Sahib. <i>Where Part 6 ended.</i>
c. 1490s	Works at Sultanpur Lodhi, managing a store for the local governor.
c. 1499	The transformative experience. He leaves his post and begins travelling with Mardana.
c. 1500 – 1520	The years of travel — the <i>udasis</i> . Itineraries traditional, not documented.
c. 1520 – 21	Babur's raid on Punjab. Nanak composes the hymns describing it as an eyewitness.
c. 1520s	Settles at Kartarpur on the Ravi. Sangat, langar and pangat established.
1526	Babur defeats the last Lodhi sultan at Panipat. The Mughal empire begins.
1539	Nanak appoints Angad — a disciple, not a son — and dies at Kartarpur.
1539 – 1552	Guru Angad . Standardises Gurmukhi ; collects Nanak's compositions; centre at Khadur.
1552 – 1574	Guru Amar Das . Centre at Goindwal; the baoli; twenty-two manjis ; langar compulsory before an audience; action against sati and purdah.
1556 – 1605	Akbar rules. Jizya abolished 1564. Relations with the Gurus untroubled throughout.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
1574 – 1581	Guru Ram Das. Composes the Lavan marriage hymns.
c. 1577	Amritsar founded. Excavation of the sarovar begins.
1581 – 1606	Guru Arjan. Contested succession with his elder brother Prithi Chand.
c. 1588	Foundation of the Harmandir Sahib in the middle of the pool. Four doors; set below ground level.
1580s – 1600s	Amritsar developed as a commercial town. Dasvandh formalised.
1603 – 1604	The Adi Granth compiled at Ramsar, Bhai Gurdas as scribe.
1604	Installed in the Harmandir Sahib. Baba Buddha , who had known Nanak, appointed its first attendant.
Oct 1605	Akbar dies. Jahangir takes the throne.
April 1606	Khusrau rebels and flees north through Punjab. Defeated and captured.
30 May 1606	Guru Arjan dies in Mughal custody at Lahore , on Jahangir's order.
1606	Guru Hargobind , aged eleven, succeeds — and asks for two swords. Part 8 starts here.

REFERENCE

Glossary

Every hard word used in Part 7, in plain English.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Adi Granth	"First book". The scripture compiled by Guru Arjan in 1604.
Akal Takht	"Throne of the timeless". The structure built by Guru Hargobind facing the Harmandir Sahib, from which worldly affairs were conducted.
Baoli	A step-well — a well with a staircase down to the water. Major public infrastructure in a dry region.
Bhagat	A devotee. Used for the fifteen earlier and contemporary poets whose compositions are included in the scripture.
Dasvandh	"A tenth". The share of income given to the community's common fund. Formalised under Guru Arjan.
Guru	A teacher who takes one from darkness to light. Authority comes from understanding, not from office.
Gurmukhi	The script standardised by Guru Angad for writing Punjabi. Thirty-five letters. Punjab's third writing system, and the first to survive.
Harmandir Sahib	The shrine built by Guru Arjan in the middle of the pool at Amritsar. Four doors; approached downwards.
Haumai	"I-am-ness". Ego, self-centredness — in Nanak's verses, the fundamental human problem.
Hukam	The divine order. Living in harmony with it rather than fighting it out of ego.
Ik Onkar	"One being is". The opening of the scripture and the central statement of the tradition.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Janamsakhi	"Birth-story". A traditional life of Guru Nanak, made of episodes. Devotional literature with a historical core.
Jizya	A tax on non-Muslim subjects in Islamic states. Abolished by Akbar in 1564; reimposed later.
Langar	The free kitchen. Food for anyone who comes, without charge or condition.
Lavan	The four marriage hymns composed by Guru Ram Das, still the core of the Sikh wedding.
Manji	One of the twenty-two districts established by Guru Amar Das, each with an appointed representative.
Masand	A community representative responsible for a district, including collecting and forwarding contributions.
Nam / nam simran	The divine reality as held in awareness, and the practice of remembering it. The central discipline.
Pangat	"The row". Everyone sitting on the floor in a line to eat, regardless of rank or caste.
Raga	A melodic framework in Indian classical music. The scripture is arranged by raga rather than by author.
Sangat	The congregation — the gathered community.
Sarovar	A large pool or tank. The one at Amritsar gave the city its name.
Sulh-i-kul	"Peace with all". Akbar's policy of not privileging one religious community in the state.
Udasi	A journey. Used for Guru Nanak's travels; also the name of the ascetic order founded by his elder son.

ABOUT

About the Author

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Second-year MBA, Panjab University — Business Strategy and Analysis, specialising in Business Intelligence

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Lovepreet Singh is a researcher and writer working toward doctoral research. He writes long-form work on Indian history, society, religion, philosophy, public policy and technology — built from the record, in plain language, with the competing views left in.

His background is not in a history department, and he thinks that is worth saying plainly. He came to this subject the way most people do: from the outside, wanting to understand the place he is from, and finding that the good books were unreadable and the readable books were thin.

What he brought instead was the habit of his own training — the analyst's discipline of asking what the data actually supports, where a claim is really coming from, and which assumptions are doing the quiet work underneath an argument. That discipline runs through every chapter of this series. It is why almost every chapter has a box labelled *The Hidden Assumption*, and it is the part of this work he is most attached to.

The Living Archive

This series belongs to a larger project. The Living Archive is a body of long-form research on history, society, religion, public policy and technology, published openly and free to read at misterlove.in.

- **Plain language.** Hard ideas explained in ordinary words, with nothing left out to make them fit.
- **Evidence first.** Show the thing itself, and be clear about what it can and cannot prove.
- **Competing views.** Where the field disagrees, both sides get their strongest case. Open questions stay open.

A word on sources

This is written for general readers, so it carries no footnotes. It is a synthesis of the published scholarly record rather than new primary research, and it does not claim otherwise.

This part covers material that is scripture to millions of people. It is written as history, which means it distinguishes between what the record establishes and what the tradition remembers — and treats both as real and worth knowing. That distinction is a matter of method, not of judgement on anyone's faith. Questions of revelation are not questions a history book can settle, and no attempt is made here to settle them in either direction.

Corrections are genuinely welcome. If you find an error, or think an argument has been given less than its best case, write to the address above — later editions will say what was changed and who caught it.

WHAT COMES NEXT

Part 8 — Guru Hargobind to Guru Gobind Singh

Part 8 runs from an eleven-year-old asking for two swords in 1606 to the death of the tenth Guru in 1708. It is the century in which the community becomes something new — and in which the line of human Gurus deliberately ends.

Among the questions it takes on:

- What did **miri-piri** actually mean, and was the turn to arms a break with Nanak or a continuation of him? Both cases, fully.
- Why did **Aurangzeb** reverse Akbar's policy — and how much of the standard picture of him survives the evidence?
- Why was **Guru Tegh Bahadur** executed in Delhi in 1675, and what makes that martyrdom different from 1606?
- What happened at **Anandpur in 1699**, what the Khalsa was for, and what it changed about who could be a soldier.
- The **Zafarnama** — a letter from a defeated man to the emperor who had destroyed his family, and why it is one of the most remarkable documents in Indian history.
- Why did Guru Gobind Singh **end the line of human Gurus** and vest authority in a book and a community instead — and what problem was he solving?



END OF PART 7 OF 14

THE LIVING ARCHIVE · LOVEPREET SINGH · MISTERLOVE.IN

THE LIVING ARCHIVE

PART EIGHT OF FOURTEEN

The Complete History of Punjab

*Part Eight — Guru Hargobind
to Guru Gobind Singh*

A century that begins with an eleven-year-old asking for two swords and ends with a dying man declaring that there will be no more human Gurus — and that authority now belongs to a book and to the community itself.

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

Lovepreet Singh

1606 – 1708

MISTERLOVE.IN

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Where We Left Off

A recap, a reminder of the boxes, and a note about writing plainly on material that includes the killing of children.

Part 7 covered a hundred and thirty-seven years and five Gurus.

Guru Nanak, born in 1469, taught in Punjabi against ritual as a substitute for inner change, against caste, and against withdrawal from the world. He farmed at Kartarpur and built three institutions: the congregation, the free kitchen, and the row in which everyone sits to eat regardless of birth. Then he passed over both his sons and appointed a disciple.

Guru Angad standardised **Gurmukhi** and collected Nanak's hymns. Guru Amar Das built a district network, made eating in the kitchen compulsory before an audience, and acted against sati and purdah. Guru Ram Das founded **Amritsar**. Guru Arjan built the shrine in the middle of the pool, made the town a working commercial city, formalised a tenth of income as the community's revenue, and in 1604 compiled the **Adi Granth** — arranged by musical measure, and containing the verses of a Muslim Sufi, a weaver, a leatherworker and a butcher.

For forty-nine years under Akbar this happened without interference.

Then Akbar died. In 1606 his son Jahangir, six months on the throne and facing an armed rebellion by his own son, ordered Guru Arjan's execution at Lahore — recording in his own memoir that he had objected to the teaching for some time already, and that **Muslims** as well as Hindus were being drawn to it.

Guru Arjan's successor was his son **Hargobind**, aged eleven.

This part is what he did, and what happened over the following hundred and two years.

What the boxes mean

WORD BOX

Blue explains a hard word, right where it appears.

Example — Panth: literally "path". Used for the Sikh community as a body. It matters greatly in Chapter 9, where authority is placed in the Panth itself.

IN REAL TERMS

Green turns something too big or too strange to picture into something ordinary.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Brown shows the evidence itself, and is honest about what it can and cannot prove.

THE ARGUMENT

Orange means serious people disagree. Both sides get their strongest case.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Purple digs out something everyone takes for granted without proving.

REMEMBER THIS

Dark boxes close each chapter with the key points in the plainest words I can find.

A note on how I have written Chapter 7

This part contains events that are, in the plainest terms, atrocities. Two boys aged nine and seven were executed at Sirhind in 1704, along with the death of their grandmother. Two older brothers, seventeen and thirteen, were killed in battle days earlier.

I have written those events **factually and without embellishment**.

That is a deliberate choice and worth explaining. A great deal of writing about this period reaches for maximum emotional intensity — extended descriptions of suffering, imagined dialogue, dramatic scene-setting. I understand why. But it does two things I want to avoid. It substitutes feeling for fact, so the reader ends up moved without being informed. And it makes the events into a performance, which is not a way of honouring people.

The facts are sufficient. They do not need help.

Where a detail comes from tradition rather than from a contemporary record, I say so — not to cast doubt, but because Part 7 established that method and it applies here too.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION — READ THIS BEFORE CHAPTER 1

This part is about a religious community that took up arms. Almost everyone approaches that with a prior assumption already installed, and it is worth naming both versions.

One version: religion and violence are opposites, so a religious community arming itself is a fall from its own ideals — the pure teaching corrupted by the world.

The other version: the arming was inevitable and needs no explanation, because that is simply what happens when you are attacked.

Both stop the enquiry before it starts.

The first assumes Nanak's teaching was pacifist. Chapter 1 examines whether it was — and the answer is more interesting than either side usually allows. He was emphatically *not* a renouncer. He wrote about rulers, injustice and the suffering of ordinary people in an invasion, and he wrote about them angrily.

The second assumes that being attacked automatically produces armed resistance. It very often does not. Plenty of persecuted groups have chosen flight, submission, secrecy or accommodation instead — and all of those were available here.

So the question is genuinely open and worth asking properly: what did the turn to arms mean, was it a break with the founder, and why this response rather than one of the others? Chapter 1 gives both cases in full.

What Is In Part 8

Before We Begin — Where We Left Off

Chapter 1 — The Two Swords

Miri and piri · The Akal Takht · Argument: a break with Nanak, or not?

Chapter 2 — Two Quiet Gurus and a Move to the Hills

Har Rai · Har Krishan · Why the centre moved · A son who altered a verse

Chapter 3 — Aurangzeb

A throne taken by force · The policy reversal · Argument: how much of the standard picture holds?

Chapter 4 — 1675

Guru Tegh Bahadur · The Kashmiri delegation · Argument: why was he executed?

Chapter 5 — Anandpur

A nine-year-old Guru · The hill states · Poets and soldiers in the same court

Chapter 6 — 1699: The Khalsa

The five · What initiation did · Who is permitted to carry a sword

Chapter 7 — Anandpur, Chamkaur, Sirhind

The siege · The broken oath · Four sons in one December

Chapter 8 — The Zafarnama

A letter from a defeated man to the emperor who destroyed his family

Chapter 9 — 1708: Ending the Line

Nanded · Authority placed in a book and a community · What problem that solved

Chapter 10 — An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

[Timeline](#) · [Glossary](#) · [About the Author](#) · [Coming in Part 9](#)

CHAPTER ONE

The Two Swords

At his installation the new Guru asked for weapons instead of the customary cloth. It is the most argued-over decision in the tradition's history, and both sides of that argument deserve to be heard properly.

1.1 — What he did

Guru Hargobind took office in 1606, weeks after his father's execution, at the age of eleven.

Tradition records that at the ceremony he asked to be given two swords rather than the cloth headwear normally used in the installation. One, he said, stood for **miri** — worldly authority. The other for **piri** — spiritual authority.

WORD BOX

Miri: from a Persian word for a commander or lord. Temporal, worldly power.

Piri: from *pir*, the Sufi word for a spiritual guide (see Part 6). Spiritual authority.

Miri-piri together names the doctrine that the two are not to be separated — that a religious authority must also be responsible for the worldly conditions its people live under.

What followed was not symbolic.

- He built a structure facing the Harmandir Sahib called the **Akal Takht** — the throne of the timeless — a raised platform from which **worldly matters** would be decided, deliberately physically higher than the shrine's own plinth.
- He **fortified Amritsar** and built a fort there.
- He kept **armed retainers** and horses, accepted gifts of weapons and mounts rather than only money, and trained men.

- He adopted the outward marks of a ruler — a war drum, a standard, an umbrella, and the title **sacha padshah**, "the true emperor".

IN REAL TERMS

Look at the geography of the Akal Takht, because it is the whole argument in brick.

The Harmandir Sahib sits **in the middle of the pool, below ground level** — Part 7 explained why: you walk down to it, in humility.

The Akal Takht sits **on the bank, raised up, facing it**.

Two buildings, a short walk apart, looking at each other. One where you go down before God. One where you stand up in the world.

The message is that these are the same authority, exercised in two directions. And placing a seat of worldly decision-making directly opposite the shrine, at the community's own centre, is a statement about where such decisions should be made — which is not a neutral thing to say in an empire.

1.2 — Was it a break with Nanak?

THE ARGUMENT — DID THE TURN TO ARMS BREAK WITH NANAK'S TEACHING?

Yes — this is a change of direction

Nanak's compositions contain no call to arms and no military imagery used approvingly. Guru Arjan, faced with a state that intended to kill him, submitted rather than resisted. The first five Gurus built a congregation, a kitchen, a script and a book — not an army.

Within a generation the community had forts, cavalry, a war drum and a leader styling himself an emperor, and was fighting battles. That is a different kind of organisation with a different centre of gravity, and calling it continuity requires reading a great deal into verses that do not say it.

The strongest version of this case is not hostile. It simply says: **the community was forced to change, and something was genuinely given up in the process.**

No — it follows from what he already taught

Three points, and they are substantial.

Nanak rejected withdrawal, not engagement. Part 7's Chapter 2 showed him arguing against the yogis precisely on the ground that liberation is found *in* the world, in the household, in ordinary responsibility. A teaching that refuses withdrawal cannot then refuse to deal with what the world does to its people.

He condemned rulers, not only invaders. The hymns on Babur's invasion attack the Lodhi rulers for their negligence and luxury as sharply as they attack the invaders — a statement that those with power are accountable for the suffering of those without it.

The institution was already worldly. Guru Arjan built a town, ran markets, collected a tenth of the community's income through appointed officials and administered a treasury. Miri did not begin in 1606. Only its armed form did.

Where things stand: most historians describe it as a **development under pressure** rather than either a clean continuation or a reversal — and the honest position is that both sides are describing something real.

Something did change in 1606, and it would be false to pretend otherwise. A community that had grown for over a century without weapons acquired them within a year of its Guru being executed by the state. **That is cause and effect, and the tradition says so openly.**

What the continuity argument establishes is that the change was not arbitrary — that the materials for it were already present in a teaching which had always insisted on staying in the world and holding power accountable.

The question that actually matters is not whether it was a break. It is what alternatives existed. A community with a town, a treasury and a scripture, whose leader had just been executed, could have fled, gone underground, submitted, or armed. Chapter 9 shows what the last option eventually produced. The others would have produced something else, and possibly nothing at all.

1.3 — Gwalior

Guru Hargobind was at some point imprisoned by Jahangir in the fort at **Gwalior**. The date is uncertain and the reasons given in the sources vary — a fine owed, or the emperor's continuing unease about the community.

Tradition records that when his release was ordered he refused to leave alone, insisting that the princes imprisoned with him be freed too, and that this was granted on a condition he then met. His return to Amritsar is commemorated as **Bandi Chhor Divas** — the day of liberation from imprisonment — and falls at the same time as Diwali.

The episode is traditional rather than documented in Mughal records. What is documented is that he was imprisoned and released, and that relations with Jahangir afterwards were reasonably settled.

1.4 — The battles, and what they were about

Between roughly 1628 and 1635, Guru Hargobind fought several engagements with Mughal forces in Punjab. The dates given in different sources vary.

Their causes are worth noting, because they are more ordinary than the later framing suggests. The sources describe disputes over a hunting hawk, over horses intended for the Guru that were seized, and over local jurisdiction. These were **local frictions between an armed community and provincial officials**, not a declared war between the Mughal state and the Sikhs.

He won most of them and then, around 1635, withdrew from the plains.

1.5 — The move to the hills

Guru Hargobind established a new centre at **Kiratpur**, in the **Shivalik** foothills at the edge of the Punjab plain, and died there in 1644.

IN REAL TERMS

This move governs the next seventy years, so it is worth understanding why.

The plain is flat. Part 1 spent a chapter on that. Flat land is superb for farming and for trade — and it is indefensible. Cavalry crosses it at speed and there is nothing to hide behind.

The Shivaliks are the opposite. Broken, wooded, cut by ravines, with defensible positions and a scatter of small hill states whose rulers were largely left alone because subduing them cost more than it was worth.

A community with an army too small to face a Mughal field force, but too visible to hide, has an obvious answer: **move to ground where a small force can hold out and a large one struggles to operate.**

The cost is that you leave the rich plain, the great city and the shrine behind. Amritsar remained the sacred centre; the Gurus lived elsewhere for most of the next century.

REMEMBER THIS

Guru Hargobind took office in 1606 at **eleven**, weeks after his father's execution, and asked for **two swords** — **miri** (worldly) and **piri** (spiritual).

He built the **Akal Takht** facing the shrine — raised, where the shrine is sunken. Two buildings looking at each other: one where you go down before God, one where you stand up in the world.

Whether this **broke with Nanak** is genuinely argued. Something changed; the materials for the change were already there; and the real question is what other options existed.

His battles were **local frictions** over hawks, horses and jurisdiction — not a declared war.

Around 1635 he moved the centre to the Shivalik hills, because the plain cannot be defended and broken ground can.

CHAPTER TWO

Two Quiet Gurus and a Move to the Hills

Twenty years, two Gurus, no famous battles — and one small incident involving an altered line of scripture that says more about this tradition than most of the fighting does.

2.1 — Guru Har Rai (1644–1661)

Guru Hargobind was succeeded by his grandson, **Har Rai**, who was fourteen.

He kept the armed retinue his grandfather had built — the sources give a figure of over two thousand horsemen — and used it for none of the seventeen years he held office. He avoided conflict deliberately, staying in the hills at Kiratpur and later Sirmur.

He is remembered for two other things. He maintained a garden of medicinal plants and a dispensary that treated anyone who came. And, according to tradition, when the Mughal prince **Dara Shukoh** — Aurangzeb's elder brother and rival — was in need, the Guru helped him: with medicine in one version, with safe passage in another.

That mattered later, because Dara lost.

2.2 — The altered verse

The incident that defines Guru Har Rai's guruship is small and it is worth understanding fully.

Aurangzeb, now emperor, summoned the Guru to court. The Guru sent his elder son **Ram Rai** instead.

At the court, a line from the scripture was raised as objectionable — a verse of Guru Nanak's containing the word for a Muslim, in a context that could be read as unflattering.

Ram Rai altered the word. He substituted another, changing the meaning so that the offence disappeared, and explained that the original had been a copyist's error.

The emperor was satisfied. The Guru was not.

Guru Har Rai disinherited his son and barred him from the succession, and appointed his younger son instead. Ram Rai never became Guru; he received Mughal patronage, was granted land, and his followers became a separate group.

IN REAL TERMS

Consider the size of the offence and the size of the response.

Ram Rai changed **one word**, in a room with an emperor, under pressure, to avoid trouble for his community — and it worked.

His father's response was to remove him permanently from a succession he was next in line for.

Why so severe? Because of what Part 7 established about why the scripture was compiled at all. Guru Arjan fixed the text in 1604 **precisely because rival compositions were circulating and nobody could tell what was genuine.** The entire purpose of having an authoritative book is that it does not change.

A Guru's son altering a word to please a ruler destroys that in a single sentence. If the text can be adjusted for political convenience once, it can be adjusted always, and it is no longer an authority — it is a negotiating position.

The severity is the point. It establishes that the text is not the Guru's property to edit. That principle becomes decisive in Chapter 9, when the book itself is made the Guru.

2.3 — Guru Har Krishan (1661–1664)

Guru Har Rai's younger son **Har Krishan** became Guru at the age of five.

Ram Rai contested it, and the dispute reached the court. The child Guru was summoned to Delhi. There he contracted **smallpox** — which was epidemic in the city — and died in 1664, aged eight. Tradition records that he spent his final days among the sick.

The site in Delhi associated with his stay is now the gurdwara at **Bangla Sahib**.

Before dying he indicated his successor with the words "**Baba Bakala**" — the elder at the village of Bakala. That pointed to his great-uncle, **Tegh Bahadur**, the youngest son of Guru Hargobind, who had been living quietly in that village for years.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Guru Har Rai and Guru Har Krishan get a few paragraphs in most accounts. Twenty years, and nothing "happened".

The assumption is that history is made of events, and that periods without dramatic events are gaps between the real story.

Part 5 and Part 6 both ran into this and it recurs here in miniature. What actually happened in these twenty years?

- A community that had just fought several engagements **stopped fighting and was not destroyed**.
- The armed structure was **maintained without being used** — which is harder than it sounds, and is what allowed it to exist when it was needed.
- A principle about **the inviolability of the scripture** was established at real cost, and it held.
- Two contested successions were **survived**.

Institutions are mostly built in periods that produce no anecdotes. The dramatic events of Chapters 6 and 7 were possible because the structure was still intact when they arrived — and it was intact because of two decades in which, by the usual telling, nothing happened.

REMEMBER THIS

Guru Har Rai (1644–1661) kept the armed force and **never used it**, staying in the hills. He ran a dispensary and, by tradition, helped the losing prince Dara Shukoh.

His son **Ram Rai** altered one word of the **scripture** at Aurangzeb's court to avoid offence — and was permanently barred from the succession for it.

The severity is the principle: a text that can be edited for political convenience is not an authority. That becomes decisive in Chapter 9.

Guru Har Krishan became Guru at five and died of smallpox in Delhi at eight, pointing to **Tegh Bahadur** as successor.

Twenty years with no famous events — and the structure that survives Chapter 7 was kept alive in them.

CHAPTER THREE

Aurangzeb

He ruled for forty-nine years and is the most argued-over figure in Indian history. The standard picture is partly right and partly wrong, and separating the two matters for everything in the next six chapters.

3.1 — How he came to the throne

Shah Jahan fell ill in 1657 and his four sons went to war over the succession.

The eldest, **Dara Shukoh**, was the designated heir and the favourite. He was also a scholar of comparative religion who had Sanskrit texts translated into Persian and argued that the deepest truths of the Hindu and Islamic traditions converged.

Aurangzeb won the war. He defeated and executed Dara in 1659, killed or imprisoned his other brothers, and confined his father in the fort at Agra until Shah Jahan's death in 1666.

He then ruled until 1707.

IN REAL TERMS

Start with the position he was in, because it explains a great deal.

He had taken the throne by **killing his brothers and imprisoning his father**, both of which are difficult to justify in Islamic terms, and everybody at court knew it.

A ruler in that position needs legitimacy urgently, and there is one obvious place to get it: **the religious establishment**. Present yourself as the pious defender of the faith against your brother the heretic, govern by the law more strictly than your predecessors did, and the objection to how you took power becomes harder to voice.

This does not mean his piety was insincere. By every account it was entirely sincere — he was personally austere, memorised the Quran, and sewed caps for his own upkeep.

It means the sincere piety and the political need **pointed the same way**, which is the most dangerous combination there is. A ruler who believes and needs to be seen believing has no internal brake.

3.2 — The policy reversal

Part 7 described Akbar's approach: the tax on non-Muslims abolished, Hindu nobles at the highest levels, religious debate at court, and a declared policy of not privileging one community.

Aurangzeb reversed significant parts of this.

- He **reimposed the jizya** in 1679, after more than a century.
- He **ordered the destruction of temples**, including several of the most important in northern India.
- He ended the court's engagement with other traditions, ended practices he considered un-Islamic, and imposed stricter observance at court.
- He **enforced conversion in some places** — the tradition in Chapter 4 concerns exactly this in Kashmir.

3.3 — How much of the picture survives

THE ARGUMENT — WAS AURANGZEB WHAT THE STANDARD PICTURE SAYS?

He is used in modern Indian argument as a symbol, in both directions. It is worth separating what the evidence supports from what the symbol requires.

The standard picture holds up

The jizya was reimposed and is documented. Major temples were destroyed on his order and the destructions are documented. Practices at court changed. His own orders survive. Guru Tegh Bahadur was executed in Delhi in 1675 during his reign, and Guru Gobind Singh's sons were executed at Sirhind in 1704 by his officials.

Whatever nuance is added, **a Mughal emperor reversed a century of accommodation, taxed people for their religion, destroyed their places of worship and executed a religious leader.** Those are not contested facts.

The picture is flatter than the record

Several findings complicate it.

He also issued grants to temples — land and revenue for Hindu religious institutions — throughout his reign. These documents survive.

He employed more Hindu nobles than any Mughal emperor before him, in absolute numbers and as a proportion, largely through incorporating Maratha commanders.

The temple destructions were targeted rather than general. Careful work on the documented cases has found they cluster around political disloyalty — temples associated with rulers who had rebelled or defected. Thousands of temples in his empire were untouched. This does not make it acceptable; it means the mechanism was **political punishment using religious form**, not a programme of erasure.

And forty-nine years is not one policy. The early reign, the middle, and the long ruinous Deccan wars after 1681 are different periods with different pressures.

Where things stand: most historians now hold both halves. **The reversal of Akbar's policy was real, documented and consequential** — and the popular image of a uniquely fanatical ruler bent on erasing a religion does not survive contact with his own administrative record.

What that changes for this part: not the events. Guru Tegh Bahadur was still executed and the children at Sirhind still died. What it changes is the **explanation**. If Aurangzeb had been simply exterminating non-Muslims, the Sikh community would have been a target from the start of his reign in 1658. It was not. The conflict has specific triggers and specific dates, and Chapters 4 and 7 are about what they were.

The honest summary: a strict, sincere, insecure ruler who used religious policy for legitimacy and political control, whose reign was genuinely worse for non-Muslims than his predecessors', and who was not the cartoon.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

There is a habit that shapes almost all popular argument about this period:

The assumption that a ruler has one character, and that his reign expresses it.

Under this assumption the question becomes "was Aurangzeb a bigot or was he not?" — and every piece of evidence is recruited to one side of that verdict. Temple grants prove he was tolerant. The jizya proves he was not. Both camps collect exhibits.

Forty-nine years is not a character. It is a career, conducted under changing pressures by a man who was securing a contested throne in one decade, managing an orthodox faction in another, and bankrupting his empire in a war in the Deccan for the last twenty-six.

The useful questions are narrower and answerable: **What did he do, when, to whom, and what was happening at the time?** Those questions have documented answers. "What kind of man was he?" mostly does not, and the arguing over it is a proxy for arguments about the present.

And notice the cost of the verdict-hunting. If you have already decided he was a fanatic, you do not need to ask why the conflict with the Sikhs began in 1675 rather than 1658 — the answer is just "he was a fanatic". That closes off the actual history, which is more specific and more interesting.

REMEMBER THIS

Aurangzeb took the throne in 1658 by killing his brothers and imprisoning his father — and needed religious legitimacy urgently as a result.

He **reversed Akbar's policy**: jizya reimposed in **1679**, major temples destroyed, court practice made stricter. All documented.

He **also** granted land to temples, employed more Hindu nobles than any predecessor, and the temple destructions were **targeted at political disloyalty** rather than general.

Both halves are true. The reversal was real and consequential; the cartoon does not survive his own records.

And that matters: if he had simply been exterminating non-Muslims, the conflict would have started in 1658. It did not. It has specific triggers — which is Chapter 4.

CHAPTER FOUR

1675

The ninth Guru was executed in Delhi in November 1675. What makes it different from 1606 is the reason — and the reason, if the tradition is right, is close to unique in the religious history of the world.

4.1 — Who he was

Tegh Bahadur was the youngest son of Guru Hargobind, born in 1621. When his great-nephew Har Krishan died in 1664 pointing to "the elder at Bakala", he had been living in that village for around twenty years, largely in seclusion.

He became Guru in 1665, at forty-four, after his claim was recognised over several rivals — the sources record a number of men at Bakala presenting themselves as the intended successor.

He then did three things.

He founded a town. He bought land in the Shivalik foothills and established a settlement called Chak Nanaki, which became **Anandpur** — the base for everything in Chapters 5 to 7.

He travelled east, through the Ganges plain to Patna, Bengal and Assam, over several years — teaching, establishing congregations, and extending the community's reach far beyond Punjab. His son **Gobind Rai** was born at Patna in 1666 while he was away.

He composed. His hymns — around a hundred and fifteen — were later added to the scripture by his son. They are unlike anything else in it in tone: sparse, unadorned, insistently concerned with the shortness of life, the emptiness of attachment and the fear of death.

IN REAL TERMS

His verses are worth pausing on because of what happened to him.

The dominant theme is **detachment in the face of death** — that a person who is not gripped by fear and not gripped by desire is free, and that this freedom is available now.

He wrote that before 1675. Then he walked to Delhi.

Whatever else can be said, the compositions and the conduct match. That is not something one can say about most people.

4.2 — The Kashmiri delegation

The tradition of why he went to Delhi is specific.

Aurangzeb's governor in Kashmir was, on this account, forcing conversions among the Hindu Brahmin community there. A delegation of Kashmiri Pandits came to Anandpur in 1675 to ask for help.

Tradition records that Guru Tegh Bahadur was considering the problem when his nine-year-old son asked what was troubling him. Told that the situation called for a holy man willing to sacrifice himself, the child is said to have replied that no one was holier than his father.

The Guru's advice to the delegation, according to the tradition, was that they should tell the authorities they would convert if Tegh Bahadur could be persuaded to convert first.

He was summoned, went to Delhi, and was executed in November 1675, along with three companions.

The site of the execution in Chandni Chowk is now **Gurdwara Sis Ganj**. The site where his body was cremated is **Gurdwara Rakab Ganj**.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The evidential situation here is very different from 1606, and it should be stated plainly.

For 1606 we had Jahangir's own memoir — the order-giver's account in his own hand, stating his reasons.

For 1675 there is no equivalent. Mughal court records of the period are thin on this event. Aurangzeb kept no comparable personal memoir. The later Persian histories that mention it were written decades afterwards.

The most important early source is on the Sikh side: the **Bachitar Natak**, a composition attributed to Guru Gobind Singh himself, written within a few decades of the event by the executed man's son. It states that his father gave his head for the sake of others' **sacred thread and forehead mark** — the outward marks of Hindu practice — and that he performed a deed unmatched in the world.

What that source is: close in time, and by an intimately involved party. It is not neutral and does not claim to be.

What it establishes: that within a generation, the community's own understanding — stated by the next Guru — was that the death was undertaken on behalf of a **different** religious community's freedom of practice. That understanding is very early and it is not a later embellishment.

4.3 — Why was he executed?

THE ARGUMENT — WHY DID AURANGZEB ORDER IT?

To defend others' freedom of religion

The traditional account, supported by the very early testimony of his son. Guru Tegh Bahadur intervened on behalf of a community not his own, whose practices he did not follow, against forced conversion — and was executed for refusing to convert himself.

The Bachitar Natak's framing is explicit and is the earliest statement we have of the reason.

Political — an alternative centre of authority

Some later Persian accounts present it differently, describing the Guru as having gathered a large following and become a disruptive power in the region, and the execution as a matter of order rather than doctrine.

This fits the general Mughal approach: Chapter 3 showed that Aurangzeb's actions typically targeted political disloyalty using religious form. Part 7 showed the same logic in 1606.

Both — and the distinction may be false

Under a ruler enforcing conversion as state policy, **publicly refusing to convert is itself a political act**. A widely followed teacher who declares that people cannot be forced into a religion is challenging a policy, whatever his intentions.

So the two explanations are not alternatives. The religious stand *was* the political offence.

Where things stand: the third position is where most careful accounts land. The traditional reason and the political reason describe the same act from two sides.

What is agreed: he was summoned, he refused to convert, and he was executed on the emperor's authority in Delhi in November 1675.

What cannot be independently verified: the Kashmiri delegation, the conversation with his son, and the exact form of his answer. These come from the tradition. The *reason* — that he died over the question of forced conversion — is attested within a generation by the person closest to it.

4.4 — Why this is different from 1606

IN REAL TERMS

Set the two executions side by side, because the difference shapes everything after.

1606. Guru Arjan was accused of blessing a rebel prince. Jahangir's own memoir gives a religious objection *and* a political trigger. Whatever the balance, the Guru was in some sense a party to the dispute — it concerned him, his community and the throne.

1675. On the tradition's account, Guru Tegh Bahadur was not a party at all. The people being forced to convert were **not Sikhs**. They followed practices — the sacred thread, the forehead mark — that Guru Nanak had explicitly argued against, as Part 7's Chapter 2 showed.

He is remembered as having died for the right of people to practise a religion he did not himself accept.

That is a rare thing. Religious history is full of people who died rather than abandon their own faith. It contains very few who died for somebody else's right to keep theirs.

And it converts the community's position from self-defence into something more general — a claim about what rulers may not do to anyone. That claim is what Chapter 8's letter is built on.

4.5 — And it produced a nine-year-old Guru

Guru Tegh Bahadur was succeeded by his son **Gobind Rai**, who was nine.

For the second time in seventy years, a child took office immediately after his father had been executed by the state. The first time produced two swords. This time would produce something considerably larger.

REMEMBER THIS

Guru Tegh Bahadur, youngest son of Hargobind, became Guru in 1665, founded **Anandpur**, travelled east as far as Assam, and composed around **115 hymns** on detachment and the fear of death.

Tradition holds that **Kashmiri Pandits** came to him for help against forced conversion, and that he offered himself in their place.

He was executed in **Delhi in November 1675**. There is **no Mughal memoir** for this one — the earliest statement of the reason is his son's own composition, written within a generation.

The difference from 1606 is the whole point. The people he intervened for were **not Sikhs**, and followed practices Nanak had argued against.

He is remembered as dying for the right of others to keep a religion he did not himself hold. Very little in religious history looks like that.

CHAPTER FIVE

Anandpur

For twenty-four years the tenth Guru built something at the edge of the hills: an army, a literary court, a network of congregations, and a base that could be defended. This chapter is about the preparation.

5.1 — The position

Anandpur sits where the Shivalik foothills meet the Punjab plain, near the Sutlej.

That location is a compromise between two needs. Far enough into the hills to be defensible and outside easy Mughal administrative reach. Close enough to the plain that the community's people — who lived out there, in the villages and towns — could reach it.

Around it lay a scatter of small **hill states**, ruled by rajas who paid tribute to the empire when pressed and governed themselves the rest of the time.

IN REAL TERMS

The hill rajas are the key to Chapters 5 and 7, and their position is worth understanding sympathetically rather than as villainy.

They ruled small territories with small revenues. They survived by **not attracting imperial attention** — paying what was demanded, keeping quiet, and settling their own disputes.

Now a growing armed community establishes itself in the middle of them, refuses to acknowledge the local hierarchy, attracts followers from their own subjects, and is on bad terms with Delhi.

From the rajas' side this is a serious problem **whatever they think of the Guru's teaching**. He is a rival power in territory they consider theirs, and his presence risks bringing a Mughal army into hills that had been left alone for generations.

That is why they fight him, then ally with him, then fight him again. It is not conviction. It is a small state calculating its position between two larger forces — the same calculation Part 6's Chapter 2 described the north-western kingdoms making, and the same answer.

5.2 — The fighting before 1699

Two engagements matter.

Bhangani, 1688. A coalition of hill rajas attacked the Guru's forces. He won. He was twenty-two, and it was his first battle.

Nadaun, 1691. Here the alignment reverses: the Guru fought **alongside** hill rajas against a Mughal commander sent to collect arrears of tribute. They won.

IN REAL TERMS

Three years apart, the same hill rajas are on opposite sides.

This is what the politics of the period actually looked like, and it is worth holding against the simplified version in which everything is a straight religious confrontation.

Alliances formed and broke on immediate interest. The Guru fought Hindu rajas in 1688 and fought beside them against a Mughal force in 1691. His own army included Muslim soldiers — the sources name Pathan contingents in his service, and a Muslim commander who fought for him at Bhangani.

Sides were not drawn on religion. They were drawn on who threatened whom, that year.

5.3 — Poets and soldiers

The court at Anandpur was not only military.

Guru Gobind Singh maintained a substantial body of poets and scholars — tradition gives the number as fifty-two. They translated Sanskrit works into the regional language, composed original poetry, and produced a large body of writing in Braj, Punjabi and Persian.

His own compositions are extensive and include martial poetry, devotional verse, and the Persian letter that is Chapter 8.

WORD BOX

Dasam Granth: "the tenth book" — a large collection of compositions associated with Guru Gobind Singh, assembled after his death. It is distinct from the Guru Granth Sahib and does not have the same status.

The authorship of parts of it has been debated by scholars for over a century — some sections are broadly accepted as his, others are disputed as the work of court poets. This is a live scholarly question and it is worth knowing it exists.

5.4 — Why an army needs a reason

The purpose of all this was stated repeatedly in his own writing, and it is worth being precise about it because it is often flattened.

The claim is not that fighting is good. It is **conditional**: that the use of force is legitimate only when every other means has been tried and failed, and that when it becomes legitimate it also becomes an obligation. Chapter 8's letter states this in a single famous couplet.

Attached to it is a second idea running through his compositions: that the fight is **against tyranny as such**, not against a religion or a people. Whatever else can be said about the century that follows, that distinction is in the founding texts and it is explicit.

REMEMBER THIS

Anandpur sits where the Shivalik hills meet the plain — defensible, and still reachable by the community in the plains.

The **hill rajas** fought him in 1688 and fought **beside** him in 1691. They were small states calculating between two larger powers, not acting on conviction.

His army **included Muslim soldiers and commanders**. Sides in this period were drawn on who threatened whom, not on religion.

The court held **fifty-two poets** alongside the soldiers, and produced a large body of literature.

The doctrine of force in his own writing is **conditional**: legitimate only when every other means has failed — and directed against tyranny, not against a religion.

CHAPTER SIX

1699: The Khalsa

On a spring day at Anandpur the Guru asked for a head. Five men came forward. What he did next reorganised the community permanently — and, in one stroke, broke a monopoly on the right to bear arms that had lasted for two thousand years.

6.1 — What happened

At the spring festival of **Vaisakhi in 1699**, with a large gathering assembled at Anandpur, Guru Gobind Rai came before the congregation with a drawn sword and asked for a Sikh willing to give his head.

After a silence, one man stood. The Guru took him into a tent. He came out with the sword bloodied and asked again. A second stood, and then a third, a fourth and a fifth.

Then all five were brought out alive.

The five are remembered as the **Panj Pyare** — the five beloved.

NAME	FROM	BY OCCUPATION OR COMMUNITY
Daya Ram	Lahore	Khatri — a trading caste
Dharam Das	Hastinapur region	Jat — a farming community
Himmat Rai	Jagannath Puri, Odisha	Water-carrier
Mohkam Chand	Dwarka, Gujarat	Washerman / cloth-printer
Sahib Chand	Bidar, in the Deccan	Barber

IN REAL TERMS

Read that table twice, because both columns are the point.

The geography. Lahore, the Ganges plain, Odisha, Gujarat, the Deccan. Five men from five widely separated regions, at a gathering in the Punjab hills. That tells you how far the congregations established by Guru Tegh Bahadur's travels actually reached.

The occupations. A trader, a farmer, a water-carrier, a washerman and a barber. Three of the five came from communities ranked low in the caste order — the kind of work that made a person ritually impure to those above them.

Not one of them was from a warrior caste. That is not an accident of who happened to stand up. It is the substance of what follows.

6.2 — The initiation

The Guru then initiated the five with a ceremony he devised.

Water was placed in an iron bowl and stirred with a **khanda** — a straight double-edged sword — while verses were recited. Sugar crystals were added, brought, according to tradition, by his wife. The five drank from the same bowl and were sprinkled with it.

WORD BOX

Khande di pahul: the initiation ceremony — literally, the preparation by the double-edged sword. Often called **amrit**.

Khalsa: from a Persian and Arabic term meaning "pure", and also used administratively for land held directly by the crown rather than through an intermediary. Both senses are relevant: the initiated belong directly, with no one in between.

They were given new names. The men would be **Singh** — lion. The women would be **Kaur** — a term implying princely rank.

They were given a code of conduct and five items to keep on the body at all times: **uncut hair, a comb, an iron bracelet, a particular undergarment, and a sword.**

And then the Guru asked the five to initiate him.

He received the same ceremony from the men he had just created, and took the name **Gobind Singh**. The teacher took initiation from his own disciples.

6.3 — Why the names matter

IN REAL TERMS

In this society, **your surname announced your caste**. It said what your family did, whom you could marry, who could eat with you and where you stood. It was the single most efficient piece of social information a person carried.

Replacing every surname with **Singh** or **Kaur** deletes it.

A washerman and a Khatri trader now carry the same name. Introduced to a stranger, neither can be placed. **The machinery that sorted people at first contact stops working.**

And note which name was chosen. **Singh was a Rajput name** — the surname of the warrior aristocracy of northern India, and not available to a barber or a water-carrier.

Giving it to everyone is not neutral. It is **taking a warrior title away from a caste that claimed it by birth and handing it to whoever will take initiation.**

6.4 — The right to carry a sword

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Modern readers see the five items and read them as religious symbols — outward marks of belonging, comparable to a cross or a skullcap.

The assumption is that they are primarily symbolic.

Look at the list again: **a sword, an iron bracelet, an undergarment cut for movement, a comb, and long hair.**

That is not a set of emblems. Four of the five are **practical items for a person expected to fight and to live rough**, and the fifth is hair, which is retained rather than acquired.

And the first item is the one that matters most, because of what it meant socially.

In the caste order, arms were a monopoly. Warfare was the hereditary function of one varna — Part 3 covered the four-fold scheme. In practice this was never absolute, but the principle was old, deep and enforced: a farmer, a weaver, a washerman or a leatherworker was not a person who bore weapons.

The Khalsa initiation **required** a sword of everyone who took it, regardless of birth — and gave them a warrior name to go with it.

That is not a religious symbol. It is the transfer of a hereditary privilege to anyone who asks for it.

Consider what it means for a man from a community treated as untouchable to be handed a weapon, given a Rajput surname, and told he is now the equal of anyone in the room. It is the most concrete thing anyone in this series does about caste — more concrete than any verse, because it changes what a person is permitted to hold.

And it explains something that Part 9 will need. A community in which every member is armed and trained does not need its leadership to survive. That becomes the decisive fact within ten years.

6.5 — And the masands were abolished

One administrative change is easy to skip and should not be.

Guru Gobind Singh **abolished the masand system** — the network of regional representatives established by Guru Amar Das and developed under Guru Arjan, which Part 7 described.

The reason is the one Part 7 predicted. Over four generations, representatives who collected the community's money in distant districts had begun treating the position as hereditary property and the revenue as their own. Part 6 saw exactly this happen to the iqta system in the Delhi Sultanate.

From then on, congregations dealt with the centre directly.

6.6 — What the Khalsa was for

THE ARGUMENT — WHAT DID 1699 ACTUALLY DO?

It created a distinct religion

Before 1699 the community was a devotional following whose boundaries with the surrounding society were soft — people could be Sikhs and much else besides, as Part 6's Chapter 8 described of religious identity generally in this period.

After 1699 there was a **formal initiation, a name, a code of conduct and a visible appearance**. A Khalsa Sikh was identifiable across a room. That is the creation of a bounded community where there had been a permeable one.

It was a military reorganisation

The context is a community that had fought several wars and expected more. The five items are equipment. The initiation is an oath. The abolition of the masands removes an unreliable intermediate layer. The name replaces caste with a single military identity.

Read as an organisational reform under the threat of war, every element has an obvious function, and no theological explanation is required for any of it.

It completed what Nanak began

Nanak argued that birth counts for nothing. Amar Das made everyone eat in the same row. Arjan put a leatherworker's verses in the scripture.

The Khalsa **finishes the argument** by removing the last markers: the surname goes, the caste-restricted right to arms goes, and everyone is initiated by the same ceremony from the same bowl. The Guru taking initiation from his own disciples is the final removal of hierarchy — **including his own**.

Where things stand: all three describe the same event and none is wrong. The disagreement is about emphasis, and the emphasis chosen usually reflects the writer's wider argument.

What is not in dispute: a formal initiation was created, caste surnames were replaced, arms were required of everyone regardless of birth, the intermediary officials were abolished, and the Guru submitted to the ceremony himself.

The one thing worth adding: not every Sikh took initiation, then or since. A distinction between initiated Khalsa Sikhs and others exists from 1699 onwards and has been a live question in the tradition ever since. 1699 did not simply convert the community; it created a body **within** it, with a particular discipline and a particular role.

REMEMBER THIS

At Vaisakhi 1699 at Anandpur, five men offered their heads. They came from Lahore, the Ganges plain, Odisha, Gujarat and the Deccan — and were a trader, a farmer, a water-carrier, a washerman and a barber. **None from a warrior caste.**

They were initiated with water stirred by a double-edged sword, given the names **Singh** and **Kaur**, and required to keep five items — **including a sword.**

Then the Guru asked them to initiate him.

Singh was a Rajput warrior name. Giving it to a barber, with a sword, breaks a hereditary monopoly on who is permitted to bear arms. That is the most concrete act against caste in this entire series.

He also abolished the masands — and created a community in which every member was armed. Within ten years that becomes the fact everything depends on.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Anandpur, Chamkaur, Sirhind

In the space of about three weeks in December 1704, the Guru lost his fortress, his army, his mother and all four of his sons. This chapter states what happened, as plainly as it can be stated.

7.1 — The siege

After 1699 the pressure on Anandpur increased. The hill rajas, alarmed by the Khalsa, appealed to the Mughal authorities. Imperial forces under the governor of Sirhind joined them.

Anandpur was besieged. The blockade lasted months. Food ran out. Sources describe the defenders reduced to eating leaves and bark.

During the siege a group of Sikhs told the Guru they could not continue and wished to leave. He is recorded as having required those who left to sign a document disclaiming him as their Guru — a **bedava**. Forty men signed it and went. That document returns in section 7.5.

7.2 — The oath, and what followed

In December 1704 the besiegers offered terms: if the Guru evacuated Anandpur, he and his people would be allowed to leave unharmed. The offer was accompanied by oaths — the Mughal commanders swearing on the Quran, the hill rajas on the cow.

The Guru's own account, in the letter that is Chapter 8, says he did not believe them and that his people pressed him to accept.

The evacuation took place at night. The column was attacked as it moved.

At the **Sarsa** river, in flood and in darkness, the party was broken apart. Much of the community's library and papers were lost in the water. The family was separated: the Guru and his two elder sons went one way; his mother **Mata Gujri** and his two younger sons went another.

7.3 — Chamkaur

With around forty men remaining, the Guru took shelter in a fortified mud house at **Chamkaur** and was surrounded by a far larger force.

The defenders went out in small groups to fight rather than wait. Among them were his two elder sons: **Ajit Singh**, aged seventeen, and **Jujhar Singh**, aged thirteen. Both were killed.

The remaining Sikhs then took a decision that the sources are explicit about: they instructed the Guru to leave. As a body acting collectively, they overruled him — invoking the principle established in 1699 that the Khalsa could command its own Guru. He left Chamkaur at night with two companions.

IN REAL TERMS

That last detail is easy to walk past and it should not be.

Five years earlier the Guru had taken initiation from his own disciples, placing himself inside the body he had created rather than above it.

At Chamkaur that principle was used against him, and he obeyed it. The Khalsa ordered its Guru to withdraw, and he went.

Chapter 9 makes this permanent. The authority that overruled him at Chamkaur is the authority he formally vests in the community four years later.

7.4 — Sirhind

Mata Gujri and the two younger sons — **Zorawar Singh**, aged nine, and **Fateh Singh**, aged seven — were taken to **Sirhind** and brought before the governor, **Wazir Khan**.

The sources record that the boys were offered their lives if they converted to Islam, and that they refused. They were then executed. Mata Gujri died at Sirhind at the same time.

Tradition records that a Muslim noble present, **Sher Muhammad Khan of Malerkotla**, objected to the execution of children as contrary to Islamic law. His protest was overruled. It is remembered in Punjab, and Malerkotla's later history in 1947 — which Part 13 will reach — is often connected to it.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

These events are recorded in Sikh sources written from the early eighteenth century onwards, and in later Persian accounts. There is no contemporary Mughal administrative record giving an official version.

What that means in practice: the **outline** is not seriously disputed by historians of any background — the siege, the evacuation, the attack, the deaths at Chamkaur, the deaths at Sirhind. Multiple independent traditions record them and no source denies them.

The details are of varying weight. Exact wording of exchanges, the precise manner of the executions, and individual episodes come from later narrative accounts which developed over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

And one source is close to contemporary and unusually direct: the Guru's own letter to Aurangzeb, written within a year or two. It states plainly that oaths were sworn and broken. Chapter 8 is about it.

I have set these events out without embellishment for the reason given in the front matter. **They do not require it.**

7.5 — Muktsar, and the forty

In December 1705 the Guru, moving through the Malwa region south of the Sutlej, was pursued by a Mughal force and made a stand at a place called Khidrana.

The forty men who had signed the disclaimer and left Anandpur had, on returning to their villages, been turned away — in the tradition, principally by a woman named **Mai Bhago**, who then armed herself and led them back.

They fought at Khidrana and were killed, having held the pursuing force.

Tradition records that the Guru found the document they had signed on one of the bodies and tore it up.

They are remembered as the **Chali Mukte** — the forty liberated. The place is now called **Muktsar**.

IN REAL TERMS

The tearing up of the document is the part people remember, and it is worth being clear about why it lands.

These men had, in writing, publicly disowned him at the worst moment. Then they came back and died fighting for him.

He destroyed the record of their disavowal rather than preserving it.

And note who is recorded as having shamed them into returning: a woman, who then fought herself. In an account of a martial community in 1705, that detail is doing something deliberate — and it is consistent with everything Part 7 recorded about Amar Das and sati, and with the name Kaur.

REMEMBER THIS

Anandpur was besieged and starved. Terms were offered under oath — sworn on the Quran and on the cow — and the evacuation in **December 1704** was attacked.

At the flooded **Sarsa** river the family was separated and much of the community's library lost.

At **Chamkaur**, **Ajit Singh (17)** and **Jujhar Singh (13)** were killed. The surviving Sikhs then **ordered their Guru to leave, and he obeyed** — the 1699 principle used on him.

At **Sirhind**, **Zorawar Singh (9)** and **Fateh Singh (7)** were offered their lives if they converted, refused, and were executed. **Mata Gujri** died there too.

At **Muktsar** in 1705, forty men who had signed a document disowning him came back and died fighting. He tore the document up.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Zafarnama

Having lost everything, the Guru wrote a letter in Persian verse to the emperor whose officers had killed his children. It is one of the most extraordinary documents produced anywhere in this series.

8.1 — What it is

Some time around 1705, from a village in the Malwa, Guru Gobind Singh dictated a letter to **Aurangzeb**, then in his eighties and campaigning in the Deccan.

It is written in **Persian verse** — the language of the empire, in the classical metre of Persian epic. It runs to just over a hundred couplets. It was carried south and, by the tradition, delivered.

It is called the **Zafarnama** — the letter of victory.

IN REAL TERMS

Start with the title, because the title is the argument.

The man writing has lost his fortress, his army, his mother and all four of his sons. He is being hunted. By every military measure he has been comprehensively defeated.

He calls the letter the letter of victory.

And it is addressed to the most powerful man in the world at that moment, in that man's own court language, in his own literary form, from someone with nothing left.

8.2 — What it says

The letter makes four moves.

It accuses the emperor of oath-breaking. This is the central charge and it is pressed hard. Oaths were sworn on the Quran to secure the evacuation of Anandpur, and those oaths were broken. The letter tells Aurangzeb that a man who swears on his own scripture and then breaks the oath has dishonoured that scripture, not the person he deceived.

It challenges his religious standing. The argument turns Aurangzeb's own claim against him: a ruler who governs in the name of God and then acts without honour has forfeited the ground he stands on.

It states the conditions under which force is legitimate. This is the most quoted passage in the letter, and it says: when all other means of resolving a matter have been exhausted, it is lawful and right to take up the sword. The condition is as important as the permission.

It refuses to concede defeat in the terms that matter. The armies are gone; the position is not. The letter states that killing a few children extinguished nothing, and that what stands against the emperor is not a person who can be killed.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Notice something unusual about the argument this letter makes, because it is easy to miss what is *not* in it.

It does not argue that the emperor's religion is false.

That would be the expected move. A religious leader whose children have been killed by a Muslim ruler, writing to that ruler, might be expected to attack Islam.

The Zafarnama does the opposite. **It holds him to his own scripture.** The charge is not that the Quran is wrong; it is that the emperor swore on it and then lied, and that this is an offence against the book he swore on.

The assumption the letter refuses is that a conflict between people of two religions must be a conflict between the religions.

This is entirely consistent with the rest of this part: Guru Tegh Bahadur died for the practices of a religion he did not follow; the Guru's own army contained Muslim soldiers; a Muslim noble protested the execution at Sirhind. **The line being drawn is between just and unjust conduct, not between communities.**

That distinction is stated in the founding documents. What later generations did with it is Part 9's problem, and it is not always the same thing.

8.3 — Is it genuine?

The letter is included in the collection of compositions associated with Guru Gobind Singh, and its authenticity is broadly accepted, though — like other parts of that collection — it has been examined by scholars.

The arguments in its favour are that it is early, that its content fits the known events closely and in specific detail, that its Persian is of a quality consistent with a court that maintained fifty-two poets, and that it says things no later devotee would have invented — including the Guru's admission that he accepted terms he did not trust because his people urged him to.

8.4 — What happened next

Aurangzeb died in **March 1707**, aged eighty-eight, after twenty-six years of ruinous war in the Deccan. The succession was disputed among his sons.

Guru Gobind Singh met the eventual winner, **Bahadur Shah**, and relations were cordial. He travelled south with the imperial camp into the Deccan.

REMEMBER THIS

Having lost everything, the Guru wrote to **Aurangzeb in Persian verse** — the emperor's own court language and literary form — and called it the **letter of victory**.

It accuses him of **breaking oaths sworn on the Quran**, and argues that the dishonour falls on the man who swore, not on the man deceived.

Its most quoted lines state that force is legitimate **only when every other means has failed** — the condition being as important as the permission.

It does not attack Islam. It holds the emperor to his own scripture. The line drawn is between just and unjust conduct, not between religions.

Aurangzeb died in March 1707.

CHAPTER NINE

1708: Ending the Line

In October 1708 the tenth Guru died of wounds at Nanded, having declared that there would be no eleventh. What he did instead solved a problem that had troubled the community for a century — and it had never been done anywhere in quite this way.

9.1 — Nanded

In 1708 Guru Gobind Singh was at **Nanded**, on the Godavari in the Deccan, having travelled south with Bahadur Shah's camp.

He was attacked there and stabbed. The tradition holds that the assassin was sent by **Wazir Khan**, the governor of Sirhind — the man responsible for the deaths at Sirhind in 1704. The wound was treated and reopened. He died on **7 October 1708**, aged forty-one.

9.2 — What he did before he died

He declared that the line of human Gurus was ended, and that authority would pass to two things.

The scripture. The **Adi Granth** — to which he had added his father's compositions — was declared the Guru in perpetuity. From that point it is the **Guru Granth Sahib**, and it is treated as a living Guru rather than as a book about one.

And the community. The **Khalsa**, gathered and acting collectively, holds authority in worldly matters. This is the **Guru Panth**.

WORD BOX

Guru Granth: the scripture as eternal Guru. Consulted for guidance; treated with the honours given to a living Guru.

Guru Panth: the community as Guru. In practice, decisions taken by an assembly of initiated Sikhs — a **Gurmata** — carry the authority of the Guru.

He also, according to the tradition, commissioned a man he had met at Nanded — an ascetic who took the name **Banda Singh Bahadur** — and sent him north to Punjab with a small band and written orders.

Part 9 begins with what Banda did.

9.3 — What problem this solved

IN REAL TERMS

Look at the record of the previous century and the problem becomes obvious.

Every single succession had been contested. Prithi Chand against Arjan. Ram Rai against Har Krishan. Multiple claimants at Bakala. Rival branches with their own followings, their own compositions and, in one case, imperial patronage.

And the Guru was a target. Two of the last five had been executed by the state. Two others had been children when they took office. The whole structure could be decapitated by killing one man.

A line of human Gurus is therefore **two vulnerabilities in one**: it can be disputed from inside and removed from outside.

Vesting authority in a book solves the first. A text fixed in 1604, whose inviolability had been established at the cost of a son's inheritance in Chapter 2, cannot be claimed by a rival, cannot be bribed, and cannot be altered — the whole point of Ram Rai's punishment.

Vesting authority in the community solves the second. You cannot assassinate a community. Every initiated member is armed and trained, as Chapter 6 established. The structure has no head to remove.

Part 9 is the immediate test of this. Within thirteen years the community faces sustained campaigns of extermination — and it survives, without a Guru to lead it, because there was nothing left to decapitate.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Underneath most thinking about religious institutions sits an assumption so ordinary it is invisible:

That authority has to live in a person.

Look at the alternatives available in 1708 and what each would have meant.

Another human Guru: another contested succession, another target, another point of failure — with the community now under sustained attack.

A hereditary priesthood: exactly what Nanak had spent his life arguing against, and what the whole tradition was constructed to avoid.

A council of leaders: better, but it recreates the problem in miniature — leaders can be bought, killed or discredited, and Chapter 6 had just abolished the masands for going that way.

A book and an assembly: the text cannot be corrupted because it is fixed and widely copied; the assembly cannot be killed because it is everyone.

The assumption being rejected is that someone must be in charge. Part 2 noted that Harappa may be the counter-example to the belief that complex societies need a ruler. Here is a second one, and this time we can watch the decision being made and know exactly why.

Whether it worked is a real question and not a rhetorical one. It has produced its own difficulties over three centuries — disputes about who may speak for the Panth, and about what carries authority. **But the immediate problem it was designed for, it solved completely.** Part 9 is the proof.

9.4 — A hundred and two years

Set the two ends of this part beside each other.

1606: a boy of eleven takes office days after his father has been executed, and asks for two swords.

1708: a man of forty-one dies of an assassin's wound, having buried four sons and his mother, and hands authority to a book and to everyone.

In between: two Gurus executed by the state, two who took office as small children, a scripture kept from being edited at the cost of a succession, a new initiation that broke a two-thousand-year monopoly on arms, a fortress lost, and a letter in Persian verse that called defeat a victory.

REMEMBER THIS

Guru Gobind Singh was **assassinated at Nanded** and died on **7 October 1708**, aged forty-one.

He ended the line of human Gurus and vested authority in **the scripture — the Guru Granth Sahib** — and in **the community, the Guru Panth**.

This solved two real problems. Every succession for a century had been contested, and two of the last five Gurus had been executed. A book cannot be disputed or bribed. A community cannot be assassinated.

He also commissioned **Banda Singh Bahadur** and sent him north. **Part 9** begins there.

And within thirteen years the design was tested by sustained campaigns of extermination — and held, because there was no longer a head to remove.

CHAPTER TEN

An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

The events of this part are well remembered. That is not the same as being well documented, and the difference is worth setting out.

Genuinely unknown

- **The dates of several of Guru Hargobind's battles**, and in some cases their sequence. Sources differ by years.
- **The circumstances and length of the Gwalior imprisonment**. The release of the princes is traditional and not in Mughal records.
- **What was actually said at Aurangzeb's court by Ram Rai**, beyond that a verse was altered.
- **Whether the Kashmiri Pandit delegation happened as described**. The reason for Guru Tegh Bahadur's execution is attested very early by his son; the specific episode is traditional.
- **Aurangzeb's own stated reasoning for the 1675 execution**. Unlike 1606, there is no memoir.
- **What exactly happened inside the tent at Vaisakhi 1699**. The sources describe the outcome, not the mechanism.
- **The size of the forces at Bhangani, Nadaun, Anandpur, Chamkaur or Muktsar**. All figures in the sources are conventional rather than counted.
- **The precise manner of the executions at Sirhind**. Accounts developed over the following two centuries.
- **Whether the Zafarnama reached Aurangzeb**, and whether he read it.
- **Who ordered the assassination at Nanded**. The tradition names Wazir Khan; there is no independent confirmation.
- **How many Sikhs there were at any point in this century**, and how many took Khalsa initiation.

Solid

- Guru Hargobind took office in 1606 after his father's execution, fortified Amritsar, built the Akal Takht, maintained armed forces and fought several engagements with Mughal provincial forces.
- The centre of the community moved to the Shivalik hills in the 1630s.
- Ram Rai altered a scriptural verse at the Mughal court and was excluded from the succession.
- Guru Har Krishan became Guru as a child and died of smallpox in Delhi in 1664.
- Guru Tegh Bahadur founded Anandpur, travelled as far east as Assam, composed around 115 hymns, and was executed in Delhi in November 1675 on the emperor's authority.
- Guru Gobind Singh succeeded at the age of nine.
- Aurangzeb reimposed the jizya in 1679 and reversed significant parts of Akbar's religious policy, while also granting land to temples and employing more Hindu nobles than any predecessor.
- The Khalsa was instituted at Anandpur in 1699, with a formal initiation, the names Singh and Kaur, five required articles including a sword, and the abolition of the masands.
- The Guru received initiation from the five he had initiated.
- Anandpur was besieged and evacuated under sworn terms in December 1704, and the evacuating column was attacked.
- His two elder sons were killed at Chamkaur; his two younger sons and his mother died at Sirhind.
- The Zafarnama exists, is in Persian verse, and states the case set out in Chapter 8.
- Guru Gobind Singh died at Nanded on 7 October 1708, having declared the Guru Granth Sahib the eternal Guru and vested worldly authority in the Khalsa.

A CLOSING WORD ON MEMORY AND RECORD

This part sits in an unusual place for this series.

For Parts 1 to 5, we had almost no record and almost no memory — a few coins, some ruins, a great silence.

Here we have **overwhelming memory and patchy record**. These events are recited, sung, painted, commemorated in place-names and marked annually by millions of people. They are among the most intensely remembered events in Punjab's history.

And the Mughal administrative record of them is thin.

That combination has a specific effect. When a community remembers something for three centuries with great intensity, the memory develops: details sharpen, dialogue is supplied, meaning is drawn out, and the account becomes better at conveying what the events meant. This is what remembering does, in every culture, and it is not dishonesty.

It does mean that the **outline** and the **detail** have different evidential weight, and I have tried to mark which is which.

What is not in question is the outline — and the outline alone is sufficient. Two Gurus executed by the state. Four sons killed in one December, two of them aged nine and seven. A community that responded by making every one of its members a soldier and then handing its authority to a book so that killing anyone would no longer break it.

No embellishment improves that.

REFERENCE

Timeline of Part 8

Dates given as traditional are recorded in the community's own sources rather than in independent records.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
30 May 1606	Guru Arjan executed at Lahore. <i>Where Part 7 ended.</i>
1606	Guru Hargobind installed, aged 11. Takes two swords — miri and piri.
1606 – 09	The Akal Takht built facing the Harmandir Sahib. Amritsar fortified.
c. 1609 – 12	Imprisonment at Gwalior and release. <i>Traditional; dates uncertain.</i>
c. 1628 – 1635	Several engagements with Mughal provincial forces over local disputes. Dates vary between sources.
c. 1635	Centre moved to Kiratpur in the Shivalik hills.
1644	Guru Hargobind dies. Guru Har Rai succeeds, aged 14.
1657 – 59	Mughal war of succession. Aurangzeb defeats and executes Dara Shukoh, imprisons Shah Jahan.
c. 1660	Ram Rai alters a verse at Aurangzeb's court and is barred from the succession.
1661	Guru Har Krishan succeeds, aged 5.
1664	Guru Har Krishan dies of smallpox in Delhi, aged 8. Points to " Baba Bakala ".
1665	Guru Tegh Bahadur recognised as Guru. Founds Chak Nanaki — later Anandpur.
1666	Gobind Rai born at Patna, while his father travels in the east.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
Nov 1675	Guru Tegh Bahadur executed in Delhi. Guru Gobind Rai succeeds, aged 9.
1679	Aurangzeb reimposes the jizya after more than a century.
1681 onwards	Aurangzeb's Deccan campaigns begin — twenty-six years of ruinous war.
1688	Battle of Bhangani. Hill rajas attack; the Guru wins. He is 22.
1691	Battle of Nadaun. The Guru fights alongside hill rajas against a Mughal commander.
Vaisakhi 1699	The Khalsa instituted at Anandpur. The Panj Pyare. Singh and Kaur. The five articles. The masands abolished. The Guru initiated by the five.
1704	Anandpur besieged by hill rajas and Mughal forces. Forty men leave, signing a disclaimer.
Dec 1704	Evacuation under sworn oaths; the column attacked at the Sarsa . Chamkaur: Ajit Singh (17) and Jujhar Singh (13) killed; the Khalsa orders the Guru to leave. Sirhind: Zorawar Singh (9), Fateh Singh (7) and Mata Gujri die.
Dec 1705	Muktsar. The forty return and are killed. The Guru destroys the document they had signed.
c. 1705 – 06	The Zafarnama written and sent to Aurangzeb.
March 1707	Aurangzeb dies , aged 88. Succession disputed.
1707 – 08	Guru Gobind Singh meets Bahadur Shah and travels south to the Deccan.
7 Oct 1708	Guru Gobind Singh dies at Nanded of an assassin's wound. Declares the Guru Granth Sahib the eternal Guru and vests worldly authority in the Khalsa . Commissions Banda Singh Bahadur and sends him north. Part 9 starts here.

REFERENCE

Glossary

Every hard word used in Part 8, in plain English.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Akal Takht	"Throne of the timeless". The raised seat built facing the Harmandir Sahib, from which worldly matters are decided.
Amrit	The initiation water, prepared with a double-edged sword. Also used for the ceremony itself.
Bandi Chhor Divas	"Day of liberation from imprisonment". Commemorates Guru Hargobind's release from Gwalior; falls with Diwali.
Bedava	A written disclaimer. The document signed by the forty who left Anandpur, and torn up after Muktsar.
Chali Mukte	"The forty liberated" — the men who returned and died at Khidrana, now Muktsar.
Dasam Granth	"The tenth book". A collection associated with Guru Gobind Singh, distinct from the Guru Granth Sahib. Parts of its authorship are debated.
Gurmata	A decision taken by an assembly of the Khalsa, carrying the authority of the Guru.
Guru Granth	The scripture as eternal Guru, from 1708.
Guru Panth	The community as Guru — the Khalsa acting collectively.
Jizya	The tax on non-Muslim subjects. Abolished by Akbar in 1564; reimposed by Aurangzeb in 1679.
Kaur	The name given to Khalsa women, implying princely rank. Replaces the caste surname.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Khalsa	From a word meaning "pure", also used for land held directly by the crown. The initiated body created in 1699.
Khanda	A straight double-edged sword. Used to prepare the initiation water.
Khande di pahul	The initiation ceremony — "preparation by the double-edged sword".
Masand	A regional representative who collected the community's contributions. Abolished by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699.
Miri	Worldly, temporal authority. From a Persian word for a commander.
Panj Pyare	"The five beloved" — the five who offered their heads at Vaisakhi 1699 and became the first Khalsa.
Panth	"Path". The Sikh community as a body.
Piri	Spiritual authority. From <i>pir</i> , the Sufi word for a guide.
Sacha padshah	"The true emperor". A title used of the Gurus.
Shivaliks	The low, broken foothill range at the northern edge of the Punjab plain. Defensible ground.
Singh	"Lion". A Rajput warrior surname, given by Guru Gobind Singh to all initiated men regardless of birth.
Zafarnama	"Letter of victory". Guru Gobind Singh's Persian verse letter to Aurangzeb.

ABOUT

About the Author

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Second-year MBA, Panjab University — Business Strategy and Analysis, specialising in Business Intelligence

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Lovepreet Singh is a researcher and writer working toward doctoral research. He writes long-form work on Indian history, society, religion, philosophy, public policy and technology — built from the record, in plain language, with the competing views left in.

His background is not in a history department, and he thinks that is worth saying plainly. He came to this subject the way most people do: from the outside, wanting to understand the place he is from, and finding that the good books were unreadable and the readable books were thin.

What he brought instead was the habit of his own training — the analyst's discipline of asking what the data actually supports, where a claim is really coming from, and which assumptions are doing the quiet work underneath an argument. That discipline runs through every chapter of this series. It is why almost every chapter has a box labelled *The Hidden Assumption*, and it is the part of this work he is most attached to.

The Living Archive

This series belongs to a larger project. The Living Archive is a body of long-form research on history, society, religion, public policy and technology, published openly and free to read at misterlove.in.

- **Plain language.** Hard ideas explained in ordinary words, with nothing left out to make them fit.
- **Evidence first.** Show the thing itself, and be clear about what it can and cannot prove.
- **Competing views.** Where the field disagrees, both sides get their strongest case. Open questions stay open.

A word on sources

This is written for general readers, so it carries no footnotes. It is a synthesis of the published scholarly record rather than new primary research, and it does not claim otherwise.

This part covers events that are sacred memory to millions. It distinguishes throughout between what independent records establish and what the community's own sources record — and treats both as real. Where a detail is traditional, it is said so, not to cast doubt but because that is what a reader is owed. The events of Chapter 7 are written without embellishment, for the reason given in the front matter.

Corrections are welcome. If you find an error, or think an argument has been given less than its best case, write to the address above — later editions will say what was changed and who caught it.

WHAT COMES NEXT

Part 9 — Banda Singh Bahadur to the Misls

Part 9 runs from 1708 to the 1790s, and it is the harshest stretch in this series. It begins with a man arriving in Punjab with a written order and no army, and ends with Punjab divided among twelve independent confederacies.

Among the questions it takes on:

- How did **Banda Singh Bahadur**, arriving with a handful of men, take Sirhind within two years — and what did he do with it that made him more than a avenger?
- What were the **Ghallugharas**, and what does it mean for a state to attempt the extermination of a community?
- How did a people survive when a price was placed on their heads and they were driven into forests and deserts?
- **Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali**: what repeated invasion from the north-west did to Punjab, and how the Sikhs turned it to their advantage.
- What was a **misl**, how did twelve of them govern Punjab without a king, and how did decisions get made?
- Did the design of 1708 actually work — and what did it cost?



END OF PART 8 OF 14

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THE LIVING ARCHIVE

PART NINE OF FOURTEEN

The Complete History of Punjab

Part Nine — Banda Singh Bahadur to the Misl

Ninety years in which a state set out to exterminate a community, failed, and was replaced by it — and in which Punjab was governed, for a generation, by twelve confederacies with no king between them.

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

Lovepreet Singh

1708 – 1799

MISTERLOVE.IN

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Where We Left Off

A recap, a reminder of the boxes, and a warning about numbers.

Part 8 covered a hundred and two years.

It began in 1606 with an eleven-year-old taking office days after his father's execution and asking for two swords — **miri** and **piri**, worldly and spiritual authority held together. Guru Hargobind fortified Amritsar, built the Akal Takht facing the shrine, and moved the community's centre into the Shivalik hills where a small force could hold out.

Two quiet Gurus followed, and one small incident that mattered: a Guru's son altered a single word of the scripture at Aurangzeb's court to avoid offence, and was permanently barred from the succession for it. **The text was not the Guru's to edit.**

In 1675 **Guru Tegh Bahadur** was executed in Delhi — on the tradition's account, for intervening on behalf of Kashmiri Brahmins facing forced conversion, in defence of practices he did not himself follow. His nine-year-old son succeeded him.

At Vaisakhi **1699**, Guru Gobind Singh created the **Khalsa**: a formal initiation, the names Singh and Kaur replacing caste surnames, five required articles including a sword, and the abolition of the intermediary officials. A barber and a water-carrier were given a Rajput warrior name and a weapon. Then the Guru took initiation from the five he had initiated.

In December **1704** Anandpur was besieged and evacuated under sworn oaths that were broken. His two elder sons were killed at Chamkaur; his two younger sons, aged nine and seven, and his mother died at Sirhind.

He wrote to Aurangzeb in Persian verse and called the letter the letter of victory.

In **1708**, dying of an assassin's wound at Nanded, he ended the line of human Gurus. Authority passed to the **scripture** and to the **community**. And he sent a man north to Punjab with a written order and a handful of companions.

This part is the test of that design.

What the boxes mean

WORD BOX

Blue explains a hard word, right where it appears.

Example — Misl: from a word meaning a file of papers, and by extension a group of equals. Used for the twelve Sikh confederacies that governed Punjab between roughly 1748 and 1799.

IN REAL TERMS

Green turns something too big or too strange to picture into something ordinary.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Brown shows the evidence itself, and is honest about what it can and cannot prove.

THE ARGUMENT

Orange means serious people disagree. Both sides get their strongest case.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Purple digs out something everyone takes for granted without proving.

REMEMBER THIS

Dark boxes close each chapter with the key points in the plainest words I can find.

A warning about numbers

This part contains massacres, and massacres come with casualty figures. You will read that seven thousand died in one, and twenty-five or thirty thousand in another.

Treat every one of those numbers with suspicion. Not because the events did not happen — they did, and they are not seriously disputed — but because of where the figures come from.

Nobody counted. There were no registries, no burial records and no censuses. The figures come from chroniclers writing afterwards, on both sides, none of whom were doing arithmetic. **Victors inflate to impress. Survivors inflate to memorialise.** Medieval and early modern numbers of every kind, everywhere in the world, run high.

Where I give a figure I give it as a range and say whose it is. What is solid is the **event** — that a state ordered the killing of a community, that it was carried out, and that the community survived it. That much is documented from several directions and needs no help from arithmetic.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION — READ THIS BEFORE CHAPTER 1

There is a story people tell about persecuted groups, and it is so common that it is almost never examined:

That persecution unites and strengthens a community.

It sounds obviously true. It is mostly false.

Persecution usually **destroys** communities. That is what it is for and it generally works. The historical record is full of groups that were suppressed and simply ceased to exist — their people killed, scattered, absorbed, or quietly conforming until there was nothing left to suppress. We do not hear about them, precisely because it worked.

Survival is the exception, and it requires specific things. Somewhere to go. A structure that does not depend on any one person. Something to fund it. A reason to keep going that survives the death of leaders.

So the question this part has to answer is not "how did persecution make them strong?" — that is the wrong shape. It is: **what did this community have that the ones who vanished did not?**

Part 8 built most of the answer without knowing it would be needed. Chapters 2 and 5 collect it.

What Is In Part 9

Before We Begin — Where We Left Off

Chapter 1 — Banda Singh Bahadur

Sirhind in two years · Coins in the Gurus' names · Land given to the men who farmed it

Chapter 2 — The Extermination Orders

A price on every head · Where people went · Why the killing did not work

Chapter 3 — The Door Opens Again

Nadir Shah · Abdali's nine invasions · What a power vacuum actually looks like

Chapter 4 — The Ghallugharas

1746 and 1762 · The numbers problem · What happened in the months after

Chapter 5 — How the Hunted Organised

Jathas to the Dal Khalsa · The twice-yearly assembly · The protection system

Chapter 6 — The Twelve Misls

What a misl was · Who held what · Why the number is not really twelve

Chapter 7 — Government Without a King

How decisions were made · Revenue and justice · Where it worked and where it did not

Chapter 8 — 1765

Lahore taken · A coin with no ruler's name on it · Sovereignty without a monarch

Chapter 9 — Why the Confederacy Failed

Fighting each other · The problem no assembly solved · A boy born in 1780

Chapter 10 — An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

Timeline · Glossary · About the Author · Coming in Part 10

CHAPTER ONE

Banda Singh Bahadur

He arrived in Punjab with five companions and a letter. Within two years he had taken the provincial capital, struck his own coinage, and done something no ruler in India had done: given the land to the men who worked it.

1.1 — Who he was

He was born around 1670 in the hill country of Rajouri, in what is now Jammu, and named Lachhman Dev. He left home young, became an ascetic, and eventually settled at Nanded on the Godavari, far south in the Deccan, where he lived as a holy man under the name Madho Das.

In September 1708, Guru Gobind Singh — who was at Nanded with the imperial camp — went to see him.

What passed between them is recorded in the tradition and not independently. What is not in doubt is the outcome. The ascetic became a Sikh, took the name **Banda** — meaning slave, or bondsman — and was sent north with a written order, a war drum, a standard, and five Sikhs to accompany him.

Weeks later the Guru was dead. Banda went to Punjab anyway.

WORD BOX

Hukamnama: a written order or letter of command issued under a Guru's authority. Banda carried these, addressed to Sikh congregations in Punjab, instructing them to support him.

They are the reason he was able to raise a force at all. He arrived as a stranger with no local standing. **What he had was a piece of paper from the Guru**, and in a community that had just placed its authority in written and collective form, that turned out to be enough.

1.2 — Two years

He reached Punjab in 1709 and began raising men in the Malwa region south of the Sutlej — country full of people who had suffered under local officials and had nothing to lose.

The campaign moved fast. Sonipat. **Samana**, in November 1709 — the town from which the executioners of Guru Tegh Bahadur and the Guru's younger sons had come, and which was sacked. Then a string of towns across the eastern Punjab plain.

In May 1710 he met the main Mughal force at **Chappar Chiri**, outside Sirhind.

Wazir Khan — the governor who had ordered the executions of the two children in 1704 — was killed in the battle. Sirhind fell and was destroyed.

IN REAL TERMS

Measure the speed of this.

In December 1704 the Guru's family was destroyed and he was a fugitive with almost nothing. In October 1708 he was dead. His community had been under orders of extermination on and off for decades.

Nineteen months after Banda crossed into Punjab, the provincial capital of the Mughal empire in this region had fallen and its governor was dead.

That is not a peasant revolt getting lucky. It is a sign of how much anger was already present and how little it needed to be organised — and of how thin Mughal authority in Punjab had become while the empire spent twenty-six years fighting in the Deccan.

1.3 — What he did with it

This is the part that matters, and it is usually reduced to a single line about revenge.

He established a government. He took a hill fort north of Sirhind, renamed it **Lohgarh**, and made it his capital. He appointed administrators. He issued orders under his own seal.

He struck coins. And the inscription on them is remarkable: it puts the victory in the names of **Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh** — not in Banda's own name.

And he abolished the zamindari system.

WORD BOX

Zamindar: literally "landholder". Under the Mughal system, an intermediary who held rights over land and collected revenue from the cultivators, keeping a share and passing the rest up. The position was hereditary and gave enormous local power.

To the farmer, the zamindar was the state. He set what was taken, he decided what happened in a bad year, and there was no appeal.

In the territory Banda controlled, he ended that arrangement. **The cultivators became the proprietors of the land they worked.**

IN REAL TERMS

Stop on this, because it is easy to read past and it is one of the most radical acts in this entire series.

In 1710, in Punjab, a man abolished landlordism and made tenant farmers into owners.

Land reform of this kind would not be seriously attempted again in India for two hundred and forty years — and when it was, in the 1950s, by a modern state with a bureaucracy and a police force, it largely failed.

Consider what it does. A farmer who owns his land keeps what he grows above the tax. He has a reason to improve it. He has a reason to defend it. And he has a reason to support whoever gave it to him.

It also explains the ferocity of the response. Banda was not only a rebel. He was a rebel who had shown the peasantry of northern India what a different arrangement looked like — and the Mughal order rested on zamindars.

This is the practical form of what Part 8's Chapter 6 did with the sword: taking a hereditary privilege and handing it to people whose birth excluded them from it.

1.4 — The war, and the end

The empire responded in force. Bahadur Shah brought an army north in 1710–11 and issued orders for Sikhs to be killed wherever found. Banda lost Lohgarh, retreated into the hills, came back, took territory again, and was pushed back again.

The war ran for six years across eastern Punjab and the Shivaliks.

In 1715 he was besieged at **Gurdas Nangal**, near Gurdaspur. The siege lasted around eight months. The defenders ran out of food entirely; the accounts describe them eating leaves, bark and finally their animals.

He was captured in December 1715 with several hundred followers, paraded to Delhi, and executed there in June 1716. The manner of it was deliberately public and deliberately prolonged. His young son was killed in front of him.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Banda is unusually well documented for this series, from three independent directions.

Mughal court newsletters. The imperial administration circulated regular written reports of events, and these survive for parts of this period. They record his campaigns, the fall of Sirhind, the siege and the executions — in the flat, administrative language of an official record, which is exactly what makes them useful.

Persian histories. Contemporary and near-contemporary historians wrote about him, hostilely. One well-known account describes the executions in Delhi, including that the prisoners went to their deaths without recanting — a detail included by a writer who plainly disapproved of them, which is why it carries weight.

The physical objects. His coins and his seal survive. These are not testimony; they are artefacts. They tell us directly what he claimed, in his own words, at the time — and the words put the authority with the Gurus and not with himself.

Where the evidence is thin: his own thinking. We have what he did and what he minted. We have almost nothing about why, in his own voice.

1.5 — The argument about him

THE ARGUMENT — WAS BANDA FAITHFUL TO THE GURU'S COMMISSION?

Banda's standing has been debated within the tradition since his own lifetime, and the dispute is old rather than modern.

He deviated

Contemporary criticism from some Sikhs held that he had set himself up as a leader in a way that came close to claiming the authority the tenth Guru had just placed in the scripture and the community. Some accounts describe followers of his adopting distinct practices and a distinct greeting, and a split opening between his followers and others.

Guru Gobind Singh had ended the line of Gurus deliberately. A charismatic commander governing in his own right, however loyal, sits awkwardly with that.

He did what he was sent to do

He was commissioned by the Guru himself, carried written orders, and struck coins that placed the victory in the Gurus' names rather than his own — which is the opposite of self-aggrandisement and is documented on the objects themselves.

He fought for six years, refused to save himself by converting, and died with his son killed in front of him. Whatever disagreements arose about method, the charge of disloyalty is hard to sustain against that record.

Where things stand: the tradition itself has largely resolved this in his favour, and he is honoured. The disagreements of the 1710s were real, and they were partly about a genuine structural problem: **a community that had just abolished single leadership had to fight a war, and wars are not fought by assemblies.**

That tension does not go away. It reappears in Chapter 9, when twelve confederacies with no supreme authority prove unable to hold together — and it is finally resolved in Part 10, in a way that costs something.

REMEMBER THIS

Banda Singh Bahadur was commissioned by Guru Gobind Singh at Nanded in 1708 and sent north with five men and **written orders.**

Within nineteen months he took **Sirhind** and killed the governor responsible for the deaths of the Guru's younger sons.

He built a government, struck **coins in the names of the Gurus rather than his own**, and **abolished the zamindari system — giving the land to the men who farmed it.**

That last act is one of the most radical in this series. Comparable land reform was not seriously attempted in India again for over two centuries.

He was besieged for eight months, captured in 1715, and executed at Delhi in 1716 with his son killed in front of him.

CHAPTER TWO

The Extermination Orders

For roughly thirty years it was official policy that Sikhs were to be killed wherever found, with a published price for a head. This chapter is about how a state tries to erase a community, and why this attempt did not work.

2.1 — The policy

After Banda's execution the Mughal administration did not treat the matter as closed.

Orders were issued that Sikhs were to be hunted and killed. Under successive governors of Lahore through the 1720s, 1730s and 1740s, this hardened into a standing policy with an administrative machinery behind it.

- **A price was paid for a Sikh head**, brought in and verified. Rates are recorded for a living captive and for a head alone.
- **Informers were rewarded**. Anyone reporting a Sikh's whereabouts, or the fact that someone was sheltering one, received payment.
- **Sheltering was punished**. Villages that harboured Sikhs were fined, and in some cases destroyed.
- **Access to Amritsar was cut off**. The pool was defiled and the shrine occupied at various points, and gathering there was made a capital matter.

IN REAL TERMS

Think about what a bounty system does to a society, because it is worse than a campaign of soldiers.

An army must be paid, fed and moved, and it can only be in one place at a time. **A bounty turns every person in the province into a potential hunter, at no cost to the state.**

It works on ordinary people, not on enthusiasts. A man with debts, a bad harvest, a grudge against a neighbour — none of them need to hate anyone. They need money.

And it destroys the thing a hunted community most needs, which is the willingness of ordinary neighbours to look the other way. **Once concealment is punished and betrayal is paid for, the calculation in every village changes.**

2.2 — The public executions

Alongside the bounties there were exemplary killings, conducted publicly at Lahore. Several are remembered by name.

Bhai Mani Singh, a scholar who had served under Guru Gobind Singh and who managed the shrine at Amritsar, was executed in 1738 after a dispute over a permitted gathering and the payment demanded for it.

Bhai Taru Singh, a young farmer, was executed around 1745. The accounts record that he was offered his life if he cut his hair, refused, and had his scalp removed instead.

Bhai Subeg Singh and his son Shahbaz Singh were broken on the wheel in the same period.

These were not secret. **They were meant to be watched**, and the point of them was to establish that identifying as a Sikh had a known and terrible price.

2.3 — Where people went

The response was dispersal, and the geography of Punjab from Part 1 determined where.

- **The Shivalik hills** in the north — broken ground, as Part 8's Chapter 1 described.
- **The Lakhi jungle** and the scrub of the Malwa, south of the Sutlej — dense, poor country that armies avoided.
- **The Rajasthan desert** to the south-east, where a pursuing force could not carry water.
- **Across the rivers**, in the doabs, moving with the season and the flood.

Life became mounted, mobile and seasonal: living light, raiding for supplies, striking at revenue convoys and moving before a response could arrive. Groups formed around individual leaders — a **jatha**, a band — which is the unit Chapter 5 shows becoming something larger.

WORD BOX

Jatha: a band or group. In this period, a fighting party gathered around a particular leader, usually mounted, operating semi-independently.

The word is still used for organised groups in Sikh contexts, and its ordinariness is the point: **this was not a formal military structure but people banding together under whoever could lead.**

2.4 — Why it did not work

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The front matter warned against the idea that persecution strengthens a community. Here is the specific answer to why this one survived, and none of it is about spirit.

There was no head to remove. Part 8's Chapter 9 was written thirty years before it was needed. Killing the leader had worked against Banda, and it had almost worked in 1606 and 1675. After 1708 there was no single person whose death would end the matter. Bhai Mani Singh was executed and nothing structural changed. **You cannot decapitate a body with no head.**

Every member was armed and trained. The Khalsa initiation required a sword. A hunted population that can fight back is a different problem from one that cannot — it raises the cost of every encounter and makes casual local violence dangerous rather than free.

The identity was voluntary and portable. It did not depend on holding a place. Amritsar could be taken and defiled — and was — without ending anything, because the scripture existed in copies and the initiation could be given by any five initiated Sikhs anywhere.

There was somewhere to go. Hills, jungle and desert, all within a few days' ride. Persecuted groups in open, well-administered country have historically fared much worse.

And the state was distracted. Chapter 3 is about this. From 1739 the Mughal government in Punjab was fighting for its own existence, and a bounty system requires an administration to run it.

Notice that four of those five are structural. They were decisions taken by people who could not have known what was coming. That is what institutional design is for.

REMEMBER THIS

For roughly thirty years after 1716 it was **official policy** that Sikhs be killed on sight, with a **published price for a head**, rewards for informers, and punishment for anyone sheltering them.

A bounty is worse than an army: **it turns every neighbour into a possible hunter** and destroys the willingness of ordinary people to look away.

Public executions at Lahore — **Bhai Mani Singh, Bhai Taru Singh** and others — were meant to be watched.

People dispersed into the **hills, the Lakhi jungle, the desert**, and lived mounted and mobile in bands called **jathas**.

It failed for structural reasons: no leader to kill, an armed population, an identity that needed no fixed place, somewhere to hide, and a state increasingly busy fighting for its own survival.

CHAPTER THREE

The Door Opens Again

Part 1 said Punjab sits behind the only easy way into India. For the third time in this series, that turned out to matter more than anything else. Between 1739 and 1767 the north-western passes were used repeatedly, and Mughal Punjab simply ceased to exist.

3.1 — Nadir Shah, 1739

Nadir Shah, ruler of Iran, invaded India in 1739. He came down the same road as everyone else in this series — through Afghanistan, over the passes, across Punjab.

He defeated the Mughal army, entered Delhi, and after a disturbance in the city ordered a general massacre. He then left, taking with him an enormous quantity of treasure, including the imperial throne and the great diamond that later ends up in Part 11.

The invasion lasted months. Its effects lasted a century.

IN REAL TERMS

What Nadir Shah destroyed was not an army. It was a reputation.

The Mughal empire had been the fact of northern India for two hundred years. In 1739 it was shown, publicly and completely, to be unable to defend its own capital.

Everyone was watching. Provincial governors, local chiefs, zamindars, neighbouring powers — everyone now knew that the centre could not enforce anything, and adjusted accordingly.

An empire runs, as Part 5's Chapter 1 explained, on local elites deciding that going along with it pays. **1739 changed that calculation everywhere at once**, and nothing after it reversed the change.

There is also a detail worth keeping. As Nadir Shah's loaded baggage train moved back north through Punjab, it was raided — repeatedly and effectively — by Sikh bands operating from the hills and scrub. They were, at that moment, an outlawed and hunted people with a price on their heads. **They were also the only force in Punjab taking anything back.**

3.2 — Ahmad Shah Abdali

Nadir Shah was assassinated in 1747. One of his Afghan commanders took power in Kandahar and founded a state that became modern Afghanistan.

His name was **Ahmad Shah Abdali**, also called Durrani. Between 1748 and 1767 he invaded India roughly **nine times**.

Every single invasion came through Punjab.

The most consequential of them, for India as a whole, was in 1761. At **Panipat**, north of Delhi, Abdali destroyed the army of the Marathas, the rising power of the subcontinent, in one of the largest battles of the century. The Maratha bid to replace the Mughals as the paramount power in India ended there.

IN REAL TERMS

Now look at what nine invasions in nineteen years does to the province they pass through.

The harvest is taken, every time, by an army that must live off the land.

The revenue system stops working, because nobody pays tax to an administration that cannot protect them and may not exist next season.

The provincial government becomes a formality. Governors were appointed by Delhi, appointed by Abdali, and sometimes by both — and none of them could hold the countryside.

And a gap opens. Between the arrival of one army and the next there were months and sometimes years in which no state controlled Punjab at all.

That gap is where the Sikhs became a government. Not by defeating the empire — the empire was destroyed by Iranians and Afghans. By being the only organised armed force that was permanently present when everyone else had gone home.

3.3 — Amritsar

Abdali's campaigns included specific attacks on the Sikh centre. In 1757 his forces destroyed the Harmandir Sahib and filled the pool. It was rebuilt. In 1762 he destroyed it again and filled the pool again.

It was rebuilt again.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Destroying a religious building is one of the oldest instruments of political control, and it rests on an assumption that is often wrong.

The assumption is that a community's strength lives in its holy place, so destroying the place breaks the community.

Sometimes this works. It has worked in history — Part 5 described Gandharan Buddhism disappearing along with its monasteries.

But look at what it requires. It works when **the institution is the building**: when the priesthood lives there, the texts are stored there, the training happens there, and the funding flows through it. Destroy that and the whole apparatus stops.

It does not work when the community's essentials are **portable**. Part 8's Chapter 9 had placed authority in a text that existed in many copies and in a body of people who could initiate anywhere. There was nothing in the building that could not be rebuilt.

So the destruction had the opposite of its intended effect. It cost Abdali time and men, produced no strategic gain, and gave the Sikhs a grievance that was renewed each time the pool was filled in — and each rebuilding was a public demonstration that he could not finish the job.

The general lesson is worth carrying: **attacking a symbol works against a community that is held together by that symbol, and backfires against one that is not.** Distinguishing the two requires knowing how the community is actually organised — which conquerors rarely bother to find out.

REMEMBER THIS

Nadir Shah invaded in 1739, sacked Delhi and left. What he destroyed was not an army but the Mughal empire's **reputation for being able to enforce anything**.

Ahmad Shah Abdali invaded around **nine times between 1748 and 1767**, every time through Punjab, and destroyed the Marathas at **Panipat in 1761**.

Nine invasions in nineteen years **destroyed Mughal government in Punjab** — the revenue stopped, the governors could not hold the country, and long gaps opened when no state controlled it at all.

The Sikhs became a government in that gap — not by defeating the empire, but by being the only organised force permanently present when everyone else went home.

Abdali destroyed the Harmandir Sahib twice and filled the pool twice. It was rebuilt twice. Attacking a symbol only works if the community is actually held together by it.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Ghallugharas

Twice in sixteen years a Sikh population was caught in the open and killed in numbers. The second time included families. What happened in the months afterwards is the part that explains everything else in this part.

4.1 — The word

Ghallughara is a Punjabi word for a massacre or a catastrophe — a holocaust in the older sense of the word, meaning total destruction rather than any specific event.

Two are named. The **Chhota Ghallughara** — the lesser one — in 1746. The **Vadda Ghallughara** — the greater one — in 1762.

4.2 — 1746

The trigger was local. A senior Hindu official in the Lahore administration, whose brother had been killed by Sikhs, obtained authority for a full campaign against them.

Sikh bands operating in the Bari Doab were pursued and driven towards the marshes and forest near **Kahnuwan**, in the Gurdaspur region — ground that offered cover but no way out.

They were surrounded and cut down. Accounts give figures around **seven thousand** killed, with a further number — often given as three thousand — taken prisoner and executed publicly at Lahore.

4.3 — 1762

The second was larger and different in kind.

In early February 1762, Ahmad Shah Abdali was in Punjab on one of his campaigns. He received intelligence that a large body of Sikhs was moving south-east towards the desert — and that it was **not an army**. It was a migration: fighting men, but also women, children and old people, moving their families to safety.

He rode through the night with a fast force and caught them in open country near **Kup**, close to Malerkotla, on 5 February.

The fighting that followed was a running action across many kilometres, with the Sikh fighters attempting to form a moving screen around the non-combatants while the column kept going. Much of it was cavalry cutting into people on foot.

Figures given in the sources range from around **ten thousand to thirty thousand** killed in a single day. The higher end is the more commonly repeated.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS — AND THE NUMBERS PROBLEM

The front matter warned about figures. Here is why, specifically.

Nobody counted. There was no burial, no registration and no survey. The bodies were left in open country.

The sources have opposite incentives that push the same way. Abdali's chroniclers had reason to record a large slaughter — it was a victory. Sikh accounts had reason to record a large slaughter — it was a catastrophe that had to be remembered. **Both sides inflate, in the same direction.** That is unusual and it makes the numbers particularly unreliable.

Pre-modern numbers are conventional. Figures like ten thousand or thirty thousand function in these sources roughly the way "countless" does in English. They signal scale, not arithmetic.

What can be said with confidence: that a large mixed population was caught in the open by cavalry and that the losses were severe enough that every source on every side treats it as a catastrophe. Some estimates suggest a very large share of the Sikh population of the time died that day.

What cannot be said: the number. Anyone who gives you a precise one is repeating a chronicle, not counting.

None of this softens the event. It is a caution about a figure, not about a fact.

4.4 — What happened next

This is the part that matters most, and it is usually left out.

The massacre was in February. Abdali went on to Lahore and then, in the autumn, to Amritsar, where he destroyed the shrine and filled the pool for the second time.

In October 1762 — eight months later — the Sikhs fought him at Amritsar. The engagement was inconclusive and Abdali withdrew from Punjab shortly afterwards.

Within two years they were raiding at will across the province.

In 1765 they took Lahore. Chapter 8 is about what they did with it.

IN REAL TERMS

Sit with that sequence, because it is the whole argument of this part in four lines.

February 1762: a very large proportion of the community is killed in a day.

October 1762: they are fighting the same man again.

1765: they hold the capital of the province.

Three years, from near-annihilation to government.

That is not resilience of spirit. It is what the structure in Chapter 5 makes possible: a decentralised body of mounted men with no central command to destroy, no capital to capture, and no leadership to kill — operating in a province where the state had already collapsed.

Abdali could win any battle he chose to fight. **He could not stay.** And against an opponent with nothing to besiege, winning battles achieves nothing.

REMEMBER THIS

A **ghallughara** is a catastrophe or massacre. Two are named: **1746** near Kahnuwan, and **1762** near Kup.

1762 was different: Abdali caught a column that included women, children and the elderly, in open country, with cavalry.

Figures run from ten to thirty thousand. **Nobody counted, and both sides had reason to inflate.** The event is certain; the number is not.

Eight months later they fought Abdali again. Three years later they held Lahore.

He could win any battle. He could not stay — and against an enemy with no capital and no commander, winning battles achieves nothing.

CHAPTER FIVE

How the Hunted Organised

Scattered bands became an army, and an army became a government, without anyone being put in charge. This chapter is about the machinery — a twice-yearly assembly, a protection tax, and a rule about how decisions bind.

5.1 — From bands to an army

Chapter 2 left the community as jathas — mounted bands gathered around individual leaders, operating separately.

Bands are excellent for survival and useless for anything larger. They cannot hold territory, cannot besiege, cannot coordinate, and spend as much energy competing with each other as fighting anyone else.

Around 1748, at Amritsar, the jathas were consolidated.

WORD BOX

Dal Khalsa: "the army of the Khalsa". The combined force created by merging the separate bands, under an agreed overall commander.

It was divided into two parts: the **Buddha Dal** — the elders' force, made up of veterans, responsible for the shrines and for broader strategy — and the **Taruna Dal**, the young force, which did most of the fighting.

Two names matter. **Nawab Kapur Singh**, the senior figure who oversaw the consolidation — his title came from an offer of accommodation the Mughal government had made to the Sikhs years earlier, which was accepted on the community's behalf rather than personally. And **Jassa Singh Ahluwalia**, who became the overall commander of the combined force.

IN REAL TERMS

Note what the consolidation did and did not do.

The bands did **not** dissolve. Each leader kept his own men, his own horses and his own territory. What changed is that they agreed to operate together when it mattered, under an agreed commander, and to abide by decisions taken collectively.

This is a federation, not a merger. It gets you the ability to concentrate force without requiring anyone to give up their independence.

It also carries the weakness that will end the period. **A federation of equals can concentrate when there is an enemy and cannot be held together when there is not.** Chapter 9 is about that.

5.2 — The assembly

Decisions were taken at a gathering held at Amritsar, traditionally twice a year — at Vaisakhi in spring and at Diwali in autumn.

WORD BOX

Sarbat Khalsa: "the entire Khalsa". The general assembly, open to the whole initiated community, held in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib at the Akal Takht.

Gurmata: "the Guru's intention" — a resolution passed by that assembly. Under the doctrine of Part 8's Chapter 9, such a resolution carries the authority of the Guru, and is binding on everyone.

This is the mechanism that turns the doctrine of 1708 into something operational. Guru Gobind Singh had said authority lay with the community acting collectively. **The Sarbat Khalsa is what "acting collectively" was made to mean in practice.**

Matters decided there included campaigns, the division of conquered territory, disputes between leaders, and the general policy of the whole body.

IN REAL TERMS

Consider the setting, because the setting is the enforcement.

There was no police force to make anyone obey a gurmata. There was no court, no prison, and no executive.

What there was: **an assembly held in front of the scripture, at the seat of temporal authority built by Guru Hargobind, on a day when everyone was present.**

A leader who ignored a gurmata was not breaking a law. He was publicly setting himself against the Guru in front of the entire community, and everyone would know.

This works, and it works only up to a point. It holds while the shared sense of obligation is strong and while there is an external threat making cooperation obviously necessary. Chapter 9 shows what happens when both of those weaken.

5.3 — Rakhi

The third piece of machinery is the one that turned an armed movement into something with an income, and it deserves a careful look.

WORD BOX

Rakhi: "protection". An arrangement under which a village or district paid a Sikh chief an agreed share of its produce — commonly a fifth — and in return that chief undertook to protect it from raiders, including from other Sikh bands.

It spread widely across Punjab in the 1750s and 1760s, in exactly the conditions Chapter 3 described: no functioning state, harvests being seized by passing armies, and no one to complain to.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS RAKHI PROTECTION OR EXTORTION?

It was protection, and villages wanted it

The alternative was not safety — it was being plundered by whoever came through, which in this period was frequent and total. A fifth of the produce is **less than Mughal revenue demand had been**, and it bought something the Mughal demand no longer bought: an armed force with a direct interest in the village not being raided.

The arrangement spread rapidly and villages are recorded seeking it out and switching between protectors. That is not the behaviour of people being robbed.

It was a protection racket with better manners

The offer was backed by the implicit threat of what happens to a village that declines. The protector chose the rate, and the village had no way of enforcing the bargain if he failed to deliver. And the raiders one was being protected from included other Sikh chiefs — which means the same class of people were selling both the problem and the solution.

Calling it protection describes it from the collector's side.

Where things stand: both descriptions fit, and the distinction is thinner than it looks. **A protection payment backed by force that is broadly accepted, delivers a real service, and becomes regularised is what we call taxation.** Every state's revenue began somewhere on this spectrum.

What is not in dispute is what rakhi did. It gave the Sikh chiefs a steady, predictable income tied to specific territory, which meant they could keep standing forces, and it gave them a direct stake in the security and prosperity of particular districts.

That is the moment a raiding movement becomes a government. Once your income depends on a district doing well, you start behaving like its ruler — because your interests and its interests have become the same thing.

REMEMBER THIS

Around 1748 the separate bands were consolidated into the **Dal Khalsa** — a federation, not a merger. Each leader kept his own men and territory.

Decisions were taken by the **Sarbat Khalsa**, the general assembly at Amritsar, and passed as a **gurmata** — binding on all, with the authority of the Guru.

Enforcement was social, not legal. Ignoring a gurmata meant publicly defying the Guru in front of everyone. That works — up to a point.

Rakhi — a fifth of the produce in return for protection — gave the chiefs a steady income tied to territory.

That is the moment a raiding movement becomes a government: when your income depends on a district prospering, your interests and its interests become the same.

CHAPTER SIX

The Twelve Misl

By the 1760s Punjab was divided among a set of independent Sikh confederacies. There were roughly twelve, the number is not exact, and understanding what they actually were matters more than memorising the list.

6.1 — What a misl was

The word comes from a term for a file of papers, and by extension for a set of things of the same kind — a group of equals.

A misl was a confederacy: a leading family or chief, the fighting men who followed him, and the territory those men collectively controlled and drew revenue from.

Its features are worth stating precisely because they are unusual.

- **Membership was voluntary.** A horseman could in principle leave one misl and join another, and did. A leader's strength was the number of men who chose to ride with him.
- **Territory belonged to the misl, not to the chief personally** — though in practice, over a generation, the distinction blurred, and by the 1790s most misls were hereditary in a single family.
- **Each was independent.** No misl gave orders to another.
- **They combined for the Dal Khalsa** under a gurmata, and dispersed afterwards.
- **Share of plunder and of conquered land was allotted by agreement**, roughly in proportion to the men brought.

6.2 — Who they were

The standard list gives twelve, though different sources name slightly different sets and some count eleven. The major ones:

MISL	WHERE, AND WHAT IT IS REMEMBERED FOR
Bhangi	The largest for much of the period. Held Lahore, Amritsar and much of central Punjab. Powerful, and the one Ranjit Singh eventually displaces.
Ahluwalia	Around Kapurthala. Its chief, Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, was the overall commander of the Dal Khalsa.
Sukerchakia	North-west of Lahore, around Gujranwala. Initially minor. Ranjit Singh's misl.
Kanhaiya	North-east, towards the hills. Its territory came to Ranjit Singh through marriage.
Ramgarhia	Around Batala. Named for the fort at Amritsar its chief held. Notable as a misl whose leadership came from artisan communities.
Nakai	South-west of Lahore.
Dallewalia, Nishanwalia, Karorasinghia, Singhpuria	Smaller confederacies across the Jalandhar Doab and the eastern plain.
Shaheedan	The smallest, associated with the Nihangs — the standing armed order.
Phulkian	South of the Sutlej: the houses that became Patiala, Nabha and Jind. Often counted separately, because they operated apart from the Dal Khalsa and their later history diverges sharply — see Part 10.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The misl period is documented from an unusual mixture of sources, and each has a distinct bias worth knowing.

Persian chronicles written for or about the Afghan and Mughal side. Useful for campaigns and dates; hostile, and interested in the Sikhs only when they were a problem.

Sikh accounts, written later, often organised around particular families and their claims. Useful for internal structure and genealogy; partisan about who did what.

European observers. From the 1780s onwards, British agents and travellers began writing detailed reports on Punjab, because it was becoming strategically interesting to them. These are outsiders' accounts, sometimes uncomprehending — but they describe the system as a working machine, which the internal sources take for granted and rarely explain.

Coins and inscriptions. Physical, contemporary, and unarguable about what was claimed by whom and when.

What is missing: anything much from ordinary people living under the misls. We know what the chiefs did. We have very little about what it was like to be a farmer paying rakhi.

6.3 — Why "twelve" is misleading

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Lists of twelve misls with neat territories appear in every account, and they encourage a picture that is wrong.

The assumption is that these were states with borders.

They were not. There were no fixed frontiers, no maps and no surveys. What a misl actually held was a **set of villages that paid it** — and that set changed constantly as villages were won, lost, transferred by agreement, or simply stopped paying when a chief was weak.

Two misls could hold villages in the same district, a few kilometres apart. A large chief might hold territory in three separate regions with other people's land in between.

The number twelve is also a **later tidying-up**. Contemporary sources give varying counts. Some misls split; some absorbed others; some were significant for a decade and then gone.

The picture to hold is not a map with twelve colours. It is a shifting pattern of who is currently paying whom — which is much closer to how power actually worked across most of the pre-modern world, and much less tidy than any textbook diagram.

REMEMBER THIS

A **misl** was a confederacy: a chief, the men who chose to ride with him, and the territory that paid them. **Membership was voluntary** and men could switch.

Each was **independent**. They combined under a gurmata for the Dal Khalsa and dispersed afterwards.

The big ones: **Bhangi** (largest, held Lahore), **Ahluwalia** (supplied the Dal Khalsa's commander), **Kanhaiya**, **Ramgarhia** — and **Sukerchakia**, which was minor and produces Ranjit Singh.

They were not states with borders. A misl held a set of villages that paid it, and that set changed constantly.

The number twelve is a later tidying-up. The reality was a shifting pattern of who was paying whom.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Government Without a King

For roughly thirty years Punjab was run by a system with no monarch, no capital, no standing bureaucracy and no written constitution. It worked better than it should have — and its failures were exactly the ones you would predict.

7.1 — What it looked like from below

Start with a village in the Bari Doab in about 1770.

It pays a share of its produce to a particular Sikh chief. In return, his horsemen are within reach, and other bands leave the village alone because it is known to be under his protection.

Local disputes are settled as they had always been settled — by the village's own council of elders, according to custom. Serious matters go to the chief.

The chief's own income is what the villages pay. He has no salary, no treasury behind him and no ministry. If he mistreats his villages, they can and do transfer to a neighbour, and his income falls.

IN REAL TERMS

Compare this with the Mughal arrangement it replaced.

Under the empire: revenue set by a distant administration, collected by a zamindar or a revenue-farmer with hereditary rights, remitted to a provincial capital, and used to fund an army the village would never see and a court in Delhi. A bad zamindar was a permanent fact.

Under the misls: revenue set by negotiation with an armed neighbour, who lived nearby, whose men could be seen, and who lost income if the village went elsewhere.

Neither is a good deal. Both are a large share of a farmer's crop taken by men with weapons.

But the second has a feature the first lacks: **the collector is close enough to be affected by what he does.** That is not democracy. It is proximity, and in a world without institutions, proximity is what accountability looks like.

7.2 — What worked

Defence. The system's design purpose. Against an external threat the misls could combine into a force of tens of thousands of cavalry within weeks, and did so repeatedly. That is a serious capability with no central command.

Recovery. Because power was distributed, the destruction of any one chief or town changed little. Chapter 4 showed a community rebuilding within months of catastrophe.

Revenue without a bureaucracy. Rakhi required no records, no surveys and no officials. Its simplicity was its strength.

Religious plurality in practice. The population under Sikh rule was overwhelmingly Muslim and Hindu. The chiefs generally did not interfere with religious practice, employed men of all communities, and made grants to shrines and temples. This is well attested and continues under Ranjit Singh in Part 10. It was pragmatic rather than principled — a small ruling group cannot govern a large population it is at war with — but it was real.

7.3 — What did not work

Nobody could enforce anything against a strong chief. The gurmata bound by shared obligation, not by force. A powerful misl that ignored a decision could not be compelled.

There was no way to settle a dispute between equals. When two misls wanted the same district, the assembly could recommend. If both refused, the only remaining method was fighting each other.

No unified diplomacy. Twelve confederacies meant twelve foreign policies. Outsiders could deal with them one at a time — which the British were noting with interest by the 1780s.

No common army in peacetime. The Dal Khalsa assembled and dispersed. Between threats there was no standing force answering to the whole community, only each chief's own men.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

There is a temptation, especially for anyone attached to this history, to describe the misl period as an early experiment in republican government — a kind of democracy that later monarchy destroyed.

The assumption is that decentralised means democratic.

It does not. Consider who actually held power.

The Sarbat Khalsa was open to initiated Sikhs — **an armed minority in a province that was mostly Muslim and Hindu.** The overwhelming majority of the population of Punjab had no say of any kind in a gurmata.

Within the assembly, weight followed **how many horsemen you brought.** A chief with three thousand men was listened to; a chief with fifty was not. That is not one person one voice; it is influence proportional to force.

And the farmer paying a fifth of his crop was not a participant in the system. He was **what the system ran on.**

What the misl period genuinely was: a functioning example of complex coordination without a single sovereign — rare, real, and worth studying. Part 2 raised the same possibility about Harappa; Part 8 designed for it deliberately.

What it was not: government by the governed. Calling it a republic flatters it in a way that obscures both what it achieved and who paid for it.

REMEMBER THIS

For about thirty years Punjab ran with **no monarch, no capital and no bureaucracy**. A village paid a chief; the chief protected it; disputes went to village elders or to him.

The collector **lived nearby and lost income if villages left**. That is not democracy — it is proximity, which in a world without institutions is what accountability looks like.

What worked: defence, fast recovery from catastrophe, revenue without paperwork, and general non-interference in the religion of a mostly non-Sikh population.

What did not: nothing could be enforced against a strong chief, disputes between equals could only be settled by fighting, and twelve confederacies meant twelve foreign policies.

And decentralised is not the same as democratic. Weight in the assembly followed how many horsemen you brought, and most of Punjab's population had no voice at all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

1765

Three years after the worst day in their history, the Sikhs took Lahore. What they struck on the coinage is the most interesting thing about it — because there is no ruler's name on it.

8.1 — Taking the capital

Abdali's last effective campaigns in Punjab were in the mid-1760s. He could still march in; he could no longer hold anything after he left.

In 1765 the misls occupied **Lahore** — the capital of the province, the seat of government since Part 6, the city of Data Ganj Bakhsh and the Mughal governors.

It was taken jointly, by several misls acting together, and it was **divided between them**. Three Bhangi chiefs held the city and its districts between them, with other misls holding territory around it. There was no single conqueror and no single ruler installed.

8.2 — The coin

They struck coinage at Lahore, and the inscription is the point.

It is essentially the same formula Banda Singh Bahadur had used fifty-five years earlier: the victory, the sustenance and the sword are attributed to **Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh**.

No ruler is named. Not a king, not a commander, not a misl.

IN REAL TERMS

Coins are the loudest statement a pre-modern government makes, and everyone in this series has used them the same way.

Part 5's Indo-Greek kings put their own portraits on their coins, and their titles: saviour, the just, the invincible. Kushan emperors put themselves and their gods. Mughal coins carry the emperor's name, his titles and his regnal year. **The whole purpose of the medium is to say who is in charge.**

The Sikhs took the richest city in Punjab and issued money that **named nobody living.**

That is not modesty. It is a precise constitutional statement, and it is the doctrine of Part 8's Chapter 9 rendered in metal: **sovereignty belongs to the Gurus, and the men currently holding Lahore are administering it, not owning it.**

It also had a practical effect that mattered. **Because no chief's name was on the coin, no chief could claim the city.** A formula that names only the Gurus is the only one all twelve could accept.

8.3 — Amritsar and Lahore

One structural detail is worth noting because it recurs.

The Sikhs now held both the province's political capital and its religious centre — and they kept them **separate.**

Lahore was where revenue and administration happened. **Amritsar was where the assembly met.** The Sarbat Khalsa continued to gather at the Akal Takht, not at the seat of government.

Compare that with almost every other state in this series, in which the ruler's capital is also the ceremonial and religious centre and the two reinforce each other. Here they were deliberately not the same place, which meant that **whoever held Lahore did not thereby hold the authority to make decisions for the community.**

That arrangement survives until Part 10, when one man takes Lahore and everything changes.

8.4 — What the period had achieved

Set 1716 against 1765.

1716: the leader executed in Delhi, a price on every Sikh head, gatherings at Amritsar forbidden, the community dispersed into jungle and desert.

1765: Lahore held, Punjab administered, the Afghan invasions no longer able to take root, and coinage struck in the Gurus' names.

Forty-nine years.

REMEMBER THIS

In 1765 the misls took **Lahore** — jointly, and divided it between them. **No single conqueror, no single ruler.**

They struck coins carrying the same formula Banda had used: the victory attributed to **Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh**, with **no living ruler named.**

Every other power in this series used coins to announce who was in charge. **This one announced that nobody was.**

They kept **Lahore and Amritsar separate** — government in one, the assembly in the other. Holding the capital did not confer authority over the community.

Forty-nine years from a price on every head to holding the province.

CHAPTER NINE

Why the Confederacy Failed

Having survived everything the Mughals and the Afghans could do, the misls spent the next thirty years fighting each other. The reason is not a moral failure. It is a structural problem that no assembly in this system could solve.

9.1 — What changed after 1767

Abdali's last invasion was in 1766–67. After that the external threat receded, and something predictable happened.

The Dal Khalsa had assembled against a common enemy. With no common enemy, there was nothing to assemble for.

The misls turned on each other. Through the 1770s and 1780s the record is one of shifting alliances, seized districts, marriages made and broken for advantage, and continual small warfare between Sikh chiefs across Punjab.

The twice-yearly Sarbat Khalsa met less often, and its resolutions carried less weight. By the 1790s it had largely ceased to function as a governing body.

IN REAL TERMS

This is a general pattern and it is worth naming plainly, because it is not about anyone's character.

An alliance held together by a shared enemy dissolves when the enemy goes.

It has happened everywhere. Coalitions that win a war fall out over the peace. The reason is structural: while the threat exists, cooperating is obviously in everyone's interest, and the cost of defecting is obvious too. Remove the threat and both of those disappear, while every reason to compete remains.

The misls had built an **excellent machine for surviving attack** — distributed, redundant, impossible to decapitate, capable of concentrating fast. Every one of those features works against holding together in peacetime.

Distributed means no one can enforce a settlement. Redundant means no one is indispensable. Impossible to decapitate means impossible to lead.

9.2 — The problem nobody could solve

THE ARGUMENT — COULD THE MISL SYSTEM HAVE HELD TOGETHER?

Yes, with different choices

The machinery existed. The Sarbat Khalsa was a real institution with genuine authority, and it had settled major disputes before. What was missing was enforcement — and enforcement could have been built: a standing force answerable to the assembly rather than to individual chiefs, a rule for arbitrating territorial disputes, a fixed share of revenue paid to the common body.

Other confederacies in history have made the transition from wartime alliance to permanent federation. It required deliberate constitutional work, and the misls did not do it.

No — the design forbade it

Every mechanism that would have held it together requires **somebody to have authority over an independent chief**, and the whole system was constructed to prevent exactly that.

A standing force answerable to the assembly means a commander with power over the misls. A rule for arbitrating disputes means a body that can impose a settlement. A common revenue means a treasury someone controls.

Each of these is a step towards a single sovereign — which is what Part 8 had deliberately abolished. **The misls could not federate without recreating the thing the tradition had been built to do without.**

Where things stand: the second is the stronger case, and it is the more interesting one, because it means this was not a failure of will. **It was a genuine trade-off, and the system was working as designed.**

The design of 1708 optimised for survival under persecution, and it was spectacularly successful at that — Chapters 2 to 5 are the proof. The same features that made it unkillable made it ungovernable.

And that is the setup for Part 10. The problem was eventually solved, by one man consolidating the misls under himself and becoming, in all but name, a king. It worked. It also ended the arrangement in Chapter 8 — and when that king died, the state he had built lasted ten years.

9.3 — The Sukerchakias

One misl in the north-west, around Gujranwala, had been minor for most of the period.

Its chief **Charat Singh** built it up in the 1760s. His son **Maha Singh** expanded it further through the 1770s and 1780s — absorbing weaker neighbours, taking territory from rivals, and marrying into the Kanhaiya misl.

Maha Singh died in 1792, leaving a son who was twelve.

The boy had been born in 1780, had survived smallpox as an infant which left him blind in one eye and marked, and had already ridden on campaign with his father.

His name was **Ranjit Singh**.

In 1799 he took Lahore from the Bhangi chiefs who had held it since 1765.

Part 10 begins there.

REMEMBER THIS

After Abdali's last invasion in 1767 the external threat receded — and the misls **turned on each other** for the next thirty years.

An alliance held together by a shared enemy dissolves when the enemy goes. This is structural, not a failure of character.

The features that made the system **unkillable** — distributed, redundant, no head — are exactly the features that made it **ungovernable**.

It could not federate without recreating a single sovereign, which is precisely what 1708 had abolished. The system was working as designed.

Ranjit Singh was born in 1780 into the minor Sukerchakia misl. In 1799 he took Lahore. Part 10 begins there.

CHAPTER TEN

An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

This is a well-attested period by the standards of this series. It is also the period where the numbers are least trustworthy, and where one whole side of the story is missing.

Genuinely unknown

- **The casualty figures for either ghallughara.** Nobody counted, and every source had reason to inflate.
- **The Sikh population of Punjab** at any point in this period, and therefore what proportion died in 1762.
- **How many people the bounty system actually killed** over thirty years.
- **What passed between Guru Gobind Singh and Banda at Nanded.**
- **Banda's own reasoning** — for the land reform, or for anything else. We have his acts and his coins, not his voice.
- **How widely rakhi was actually paid**, at what rates, and how often villages switched protectors.
- **How the Sarbat Khalsa actually conducted business** — who spoke, how a resolution was arrived at, whether votes were taken.
- **Exactly which misls existed at which dates.** The lists are later reconstructions and they disagree.
- **What life under misl rule was like for ordinary people** — the great gap in this part.
- **How much of Punjab's population was Sikh in 1780**, as against Muslim and Hindu subjects of Sikh chiefs.

Solid

- Banda Singh Bahadur was commissioned at Nanded in 1708, took Sirhind in 1710, struck coins in the Gurus' names, abolished zamindari rights in his territory, and was executed at Delhi in 1716.
- Mughal authorities issued and maintained orders for the killing of Sikhs, with rewards paid for heads and captives.
- Public executions at Lahore in this period included Bhai Mani Singh and Bhai Taru Singh.
- Nadir Shah invaded in 1739 and sacked Delhi.
- Ahmad Shah Abdali invaded roughly nine times between 1748 and 1767, and destroyed the Marathas at Panipat in 1761.
- The Harmandir Sahib was destroyed and the pool filled in 1757 and again in 1762, and rebuilt both times.
- Large massacres of Sikhs occurred in 1746 near Kahnuwan and on 5 February 1762 near Kup.
- The Dal Khalsa was formed around 1748 from the separate jathas, with a Buddha Dal and a Taruna Dal.
- Decisions were taken by the Sarbat Khalsa at Amritsar and passed as gurmata.
- Rakhi — a share of produce in return for protection — was widespread across Punjab in the 1750s and 1760s.
- Punjab was divided among roughly twelve independent Sikh confederacies.
- The misls took Lahore in 1765 and struck coinage naming no living ruler.
- After 1767 the misls fought each other, and the Sarbat Khalsa declined as a governing institution.
- Ranjit Singh was born in 1780 and took Lahore in 1799.

A CLOSING WORD ON WHO IS MISSING

Look at the unknown list and notice the shape of what is absent.

We know a great deal about the chiefs — their campaigns, their alliances, their marriages, their coins. We know almost nothing about the people they governed.

And the people they governed were mostly not Sikhs. The population of Punjab in this period was in the majority Muslim, with a large Hindu population, and a Sikh minority that held political and military power. That is the central social fact of the whole period and it is very easy to lose.

So when this part says "the Sikhs took Lahore" or "the misls governed Punjab", it is describing a **ruling group, not a population.** The farmer paying rakhi in the Bari Doab in 1770 was, more likely than not, a Muslim. He appears in this part only as revenue.

What we can say is that the arrangement was not generally coercive in religion — practice was not interfered with, shrines received grants, and men of all communities served the chiefs. That is attested and it continues under Ranjit Singh.

What we cannot say is what any of those people thought about it, because nobody asked and nobody wrote it down.

Part 5 made the same observation about kings and coins. It is the permanent condition of this series: **the record is made by whoever can afford to make one.**

REFERENCE

Timeline of Part 9

Casualty figures are given as ranges reported in the sources, not as counts. See the warning in the front matter.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
7 Oct 1708	Guru Gobind Singh dies at Nanded, having commissioned Banda Singh Bahadur . <i>Where Part 8 ended.</i>
1709	Banda reaches Punjab and raises forces in the Malwa. Samana taken in November.
12 May 1710	Battle of Chappar Chiri . Wazir Khan killed; Sirhind falls.
1710	Lohgarh made capital. Coins struck in the Gurus' names. Zamindari abolished — land to the cultivators.
1710 – 11	Bahadur Shah brings an army north and orders Sikhs killed on sight.
1715	Banda besieged at Gurdas Nangal for around eight months and captured in December.
June 1716	Banda executed at Delhi with several hundred followers. His son killed before him.
1716 – 1745	Sustained state campaign against the Sikhs: bounties for heads , rewards for informers, punishment for sheltering. Dispersal into hills, jungle and desert.
1733	An offer of accommodation from the Mughal government is accepted on the community's behalf; the title of Nawab goes to Kapur Singh .
1738	Bhai Mani Singh executed at Lahore.
1739	Nadir Shah invades, sacks Delhi, and destroys Mughal credibility. Sikh bands raid his baggage train on its way back through Punjab.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
June 1746	Chhota Ghallughara near Kahnuwan. Reported figures around 7,000 killed and 3,000 executed afterwards.
c. 1745	Bhai Taru Singh executed at Lahore.
1747	Nadir Shah assassinated. Ahmad Shah Abdali founds the Durrani state at Kandahar.
1748	The jathas consolidated into the Dal Khalsa at Amritsar, under Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. Abdali's first invasion.
1750s – 60s	Rakhi spreads across Punjab. Mughal administration in the province effectively ceases.
1757	Abdali's forces destroy the Harmandir Sahib and fill the pool. It is rebuilt.
14 Jan 1761	Third Battle of Panipat . Abdali destroys the Marathas.
5 Feb 1762	Vadda Ghallughara near Kup. A column including women, children and the elderly caught in the open. Reported figures 10,000–30,000 killed in a day.
1762	Abdali destroys the Harmandir Sahib and fills the pool a second time. It is rebuilt.
Oct 1762	Eight months after the massacre , the Sikhs fight Abdali at Amritsar. He withdraws from Punjab soon after.
1765	The misls take Lahore and divide it between them. Coins struck naming no living ruler .
1766 – 67	Abdali's last invasion. The external threat recedes.
1770s – 90s	The misls fight each other. The Sarbat Khalsa declines as a governing institution.
13 Nov 1780	Ranjit Singh born , into the minor Sukerchakia misl.
1792	Maha Singh dies. Ranjit Singh, aged twelve, inherits the Sukerchakia misl.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
1799	Ranjit Singh takes Lahore. Part 10 starts here.

REFERENCE

Glossary

Every hard word used in Part 9, in plain English.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Buddha Dal	"The elders' force" — the veteran half of the Dal Khalsa, responsible for the shrines and for wider strategy.
Dal Khalsa	"The army of the Khalsa". The combined force created around 1748 by federating the separate bands.
Durrani	The dynasty founded by Ahmad Shah Abdali at Kandahar in 1747 — the origin of the modern Afghan state.
Ghallughara	A massacre or catastrophe. Two are named: the lesser (1746) and the greater (1762).
Gurmata	"The Guru's intention". A resolution of the Sarbat Khalsa, binding on the whole community.
Hukamnama	A written order issued under a Guru's authority. What Banda carried to Punjab.
Jatha	A band or fighting party gathered around one leader. The basic unit of survival in the persecution years.
Misl	From a word for a file of papers, hence a group of equals. One of the roughly twelve independent Sikh confederacies of this period.
Nihang	A member of the standing armed order within the Khalsa, associated with the Shaheedan misl. Distinctive blue dress.
Rakhi	"Protection". A share of a village's produce — commonly a fifth — paid to a Sikh chief in return for security.
Sarbat Khalsa	"The entire Khalsa". The general assembly at Amritsar, held before the Guru Granth Sahib at the Akal Takht.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Taruna Dal	"The young force" — the younger half of the Dal Khalsa, which did most of the fighting.
Zamindar	A hereditary intermediary landholder who collected revenue from cultivators and kept a share. Abolished by Banda in his territory.

ABOUT

About the Author

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CURRENTLY	Second-year MBA, Panjab University — Business Strategy and Analysis, specialising in Business Intelligence
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Lovepreet Singh is a researcher and writer working toward doctoral research. He writes long-form work on Indian history, society, religion, philosophy, public policy and technology — built from the record, in plain language, with the competing views left in.

His background is not in a history department, and he thinks that is worth saying plainly. He came to this subject the way most people do: from the outside, wanting to understand the place he is from, and finding that the good books were unreadable and the readable books were thin.

What he brought instead was the habit of his own training — the analyst's discipline of asking what the data actually supports, where a claim is really coming from, and which assumptions are doing the quiet work underneath an argument. That discipline runs through every chapter of this series. It is why almost every chapter has a box labelled *The Hidden Assumption*, and it is the part of this work he is most attached to.

The Living Archive

This series belongs to a larger project. The Living Archive is a body of long-form research on history, society, religion, public policy and technology, published openly and free to read at misterlove.in.

- **Plain language.** Hard ideas explained in ordinary words, with nothing left out to make them fit.
- **Evidence first.** Show the thing itself, and be clear about what it can and cannot prove.
- **Competing views.** Where the field disagrees, both sides get their strongest case. Open questions stay open.

A word on sources

This is written for general readers, so it carries no footnotes. It is a synthesis of the published scholarly record rather than new primary research, and it does not claim otherwise. Casualty figures in this part are given as reported ranges rather than as counts, for the reasons set out in the front matter.

Corrections are welcome. If you find an error, or think an argument has been given less than its best case, write to the address above — later editions will say what was changed and who caught it.

WHAT COMES NEXT

Part 10 — Ranjit Singh and the Fall

Part 10 runs from 1799 to 1849. It covers the only period in the last thousand years when Punjab was an independent power ruling itself — and the ten years in which that ended.

Among the questions it takes on:

- How did a one-eyed teenager from a minor misl take **Lahore at nineteen** and the whole of Punjab within twenty years?
- Why did he refuse the title of **king**, and keep striking coins in the Gurus' names?
- How did he build an army that **British officers rated as the best in Asia** — and what did hiring Napoleonic veterans to train it actually involve?
- What was the **Treaty of Amritsar** in 1809, and why did it decide the fate of Punjab forty years before anyone fought over it?
- Why did a state that had never lost a war **collapse within ten years** of one man's death?
- What actually happened in the **Anglo-Sikh Wars** — including the parts about betrayal that both sides find uncomfortable?



END OF PART 9 OF 14

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THE LIVING ARCHIVE

PART TEN OF FOURTEEN

The Complete History of Punjab

Part Ten — Ranjit Singh and the Fall

Fifty years in which Punjab was, for the only time in a thousand, an independent power ruling itself — built in forty years by one man who refused to call himself king, and lost in the ten after he died.

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

Lovepreet Singh

1799 – 1849

MISTERLOVE.IN

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Where We Left Off

A recap, a reminder of the boxes, and a warning about a different problem from the last one — not too little evidence, but too much affection.

Part 9 covered ninety years.

It began in 1708 with **Banda Singh Bahadur** arriving in Punjab carrying a written order and five companions. Within nineteen months he had taken Sirhind, struck coins in the Gurus' names rather than his own, and abolished the zamindari system — giving the land to the men who farmed it. He was besieged for eight months, captured in 1715 and executed at Delhi in 1716.

What followed was roughly thirty years of official policy that Sikhs were to be killed on sight, with a published price for a head. The community dispersed into hills, jungle and desert and survived — for structural reasons, not spiritual ones. There was no leader to kill, every member was armed, the identity needed no fixed place, and there was somewhere to hide.

Then the door opened again. **Nadir Shah** in 1739 destroyed the Mughal empire's reputation for being able to enforce anything. **Ahmad Shah Abdali** invaded roughly nine times between 1748 and 1767, every time through Punjab, and destroyed the Marathas at Panipat in 1761. Mughal government in the province simply stopped existing.

In the gap, the Sikhs became a government. The scattered bands federated into the **Dal Khalsa**. Decisions were taken by the **Sarbat Khalsa** at Amritsar and passed as binding resolutions. A protection payment called **rakhi** gave the chiefs a steady income tied to territory — which is the moment a raiding movement becomes a state.

They survived the **Vadda Ghallughara** of February 1762, fought Abdali again eight months later, and in 1765 took **Lahore** — striking coins that named the Gurus and no living ruler.

And then, with the external threat gone, the twelve confederacies spent thirty years fighting each other. Part 9 argued this was not a failure of character but a structural trade-off: the features that made the system unkillable made it ungovernable, and it could not federate without recreating the single sovereign that 1708 had deliberately abolished.

This part is what happened when somebody recreated it anyway.

What the boxes mean

WORD BOX

Blue explains a hard word, right where it appears.

Example — Maharaja: "great king". A title, not a job description. What matters in this part is not the word but what a ruler does and does not claim with it — see Chapter 2.

IN REAL TERMS

Green turns something too big or too strange to picture into something ordinary.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Brown shows the evidence itself, and is honest about what it can and cannot prove.

THE ARGUMENT

Orange means serious people disagree. Both sides get their strongest case.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Purple digs out something everyone takes for granted without proving.

REMEMBER THIS

Dark boxes close each chapter with the key points in the plainest words I can find.

A different kind of warning

Every part so far has come with a warning about the evidence being thin, or the numbers being unreliable, or the politics being loud.

This part has the opposite problem. The evidence is excellent — Persian court records, British diplomatic correspondence, European travellers' accounts, army muster rolls, treaty texts, and a large body of contemporary description. For the first time in this series we can say what a government actually spent, how many soldiers it had, and what visitors thought of the man in charge.

The problem is affection.

Ranjit Singh is the last independent ruler of Punjab, and he is remembered with enormous warmth. That warmth is not unearned — the record supports a great deal of it. But it produces an account in which everything he did was wise, everything that went wrong afterwards was somebody else's fault, and the collapse of 1839–49 is a story of betrayal by a handful of villains.

That account does not survive the evidence, and I am not going to write it.

What I will do is show what he built and how, name what it cost and who paid, and take the collapse seriously as a structural failure rather than a morality play.

Chapter 7 argues that the ten years after his death were not an accident but the predictable consequence of how the state was constructed — and that he knew, and did not solve it.

Where treachery is genuinely documented — and in 1845 some of it is — I say so. Where a comfortable story about treachery is doing work that the evidence does not support, I say that too.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION — READ THIS BEFORE CHAPTER 1

There is a habit in how the fall of any state gets explained, and it is worth naming before we start.

The assumption is that a defeat requires a traitor.

When something valuable is lost, the search is for someone who sold it. It is a satisfying explanation: it has a villain, it preserves the honour of everyone else, and it implies that without that one person the outcome would have been different.

Sometimes it is even true. Part 8's Chapter 7 turned on a broken oath. Chapter 8 of this part involves two men who were, on the evidence, communicating with the enemy.

But treachery is usually a symptom, not a cause. The question to ask is not "who betrayed?" but "why was betrayal available, and why did it work?" A state in which one commander's disloyalty can lose a war is a state with a structural problem — and that problem existed before he made his choice.

Watch for this throughout. The comfortable version of 1846 is that a great army was sold by its generals. The uncomfortable version is that by 1845 there was no government left to be loyal to, the army had been choosing and unmaking rulers for six years, and the men at the top had every reason to believe the state would not survive whatever they did.

Both contain truth. Only one of them explains anything.

What Is In Part 10

Before We Begin — Where We Left Off

Chapter 1 — The Boy Who Took Lahore

A minor misl · A mother-in-law with an army · Nineteen years old

Chapter 2 — Why He Refused to Be King

Coins with no name on them · The seal · What the refusal actually bought him

Chapter 3 — Building a State

Multan, Kashmir, Peshawar · The court · Who ran the government

Chapter 4 — The Army

Napoleonic veterans in Lahore · What a modern army costs · Why he built one

Chapter 5 — 1809: The Line on the Sutlej

Metcalf's mission · The treaty · Argument: was signing it a mistake?

Chapter 6 — What His Punjab Was Actually Like

Who lived in it · Revenue and justice · Kashmir · Argument: golden age or well-run conquest?

Chapter 7 — The Ten Years

Four rulers in four years · An army that chose kings · The problem he never solved

Chapter 8 — The First War

Mudki to Sobraon · Argument: treachery, or something worse · A province sold

Chapter 9 — Annexation

Multan · Chillianwala · Gujrat · A ten-year-old signs · The diamond

Chapter 10 — An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

Timeline · Glossary · About the Author · Coming in Part 11

CHAPTER ONE

The Boy Who Took Lahore

He inherited a second-rank confederacy at twelve, was blind in one eye, could not read, and took the capital of Punjab at nineteen. The interesting question is not how he was brave. It is how he was positioned.

1.1 — What he started with

Ranjit Singh was born on **13 November 1780** at Gujranwala, into the **Sukerchakia** misl — which Part 9's Chapter 9 described as minor for most of the confederate period, built up by his grandfather Charat Singh and expanded by his father Maha Singh.

He had smallpox as a small child. It left him **blind in the left eye** and his face deeply marked. He was never taught to read or write, and remained illiterate for life — documents were read to him and he dictated.

His father died in **1792**, leaving him the misl at the age of twelve.

1.2 — The alliance that mattered

In 1796 he married **Mehtab Kaur**, daughter of **Sada Kaur**, who led the **Kanhaiya** misl after her husband's death.

Sada Kaur is one of the most consequential figures in this part and is usually reduced to a footnote.

She was an experienced commander with her own forces, her own territory and her own political judgement. She backed her son-in-law consistently through his rise, brought Kanhaiya troops to his campaigns, and — by most accounts — pushed him towards Lahore when he was still hesitating.

IN REAL TERMS

Consider the arithmetic of what she did.

A twelve-year-old inherits a middling confederacy in a province where a dozen armed chiefs are competing. On his own he is one of the smaller players and likely to be absorbed.

The marriage joins his forces to the Kanhaiya misl's. **Overnight he is one of the largest powers in Punjab**, backed by a commander who has been running a confederacy for years and knows exactly how the politics work.

Part 9 described misl alliances being made and broken by marriage constantly. This is the one that worked — and it worked because of who Sada Kaur was, not because of who Ranjit Singh's father had been.

He later stripped her of her territories and confined her. That is in Chapter 3, and it is part of the record.

1.3 — Lahore, 1799

Lahore had been held since 1765 by three Bhangi chiefs, sharing the city between them. By the late 1790s their rule was weak, quarrelsome and unpopular.

In 1798–99 the Afghan ruler **Zaman Shah** — Abdali's grandson — invaded Punjab. His artillery got stuck crossing the flooded Jhelum on the way back. Ranjit Singh, then eighteen, recovered the guns and returned them.

Whatever the details, Zaman Shah confirmed him in possession of Lahore, and in **July 1799** he took the city.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS THERE A PETITION FROM THE CITIZENS?

The traditional account holds that leading residents of Lahore — including Muslim notables — sent a petition inviting Ranjit Singh to take the city and relieve them of the Bhangi chiefs.

It happened, and it matters

The account is recorded in multiple sources and is consistent with everything known about Bhangi rule in the city, which was fragmented and predatory by the 1790s. Cities in this period did negotiate their own transfers of allegiance — it was a normal way for a weak garrison to be replaced without a siege. And Lahore fell with very little fighting, which is what an arranged handover looks like.

It is at least partly a story told afterwards

An invitation from the city's own people — specifically including Muslims — is exactly the story a new ruler of a Muslim-majority city would want told about himself. It converts a conquest into a rescue.

It may well be true. But it is the kind of detail that gets improved in the retelling, and the early evidence for it is thinner than its constant repetition suggests.

Where things stand: most historians accept that there was real local support for the change, without treating the formal petition as established. **The city fell easily, which is the fact that needs explaining, and local weariness with the Bhangis explains it.**

Why the story matters beyond itself: it is the first appearance of a theme that runs through this whole part. Ranjit Singh's rule over a Muslim-majority province was, from the very beginning, presented — by him and by others — as something other than conquest. Chapter 6 examines how much of that presentation the evidence supports.

1.4 — 1801

Two years later, at Vaisakhi in 1801, he was proclaimed **Maharaja** at Lahore. The ceremony was performed by a descendant of Guru Nanak.

He was twenty.

What he did next with that title — and more importantly, what he refused to do with it — is the subject of the next chapter.

REMEMBER THIS

Ranjit Singh was born in 1780 into the **minor Sukerchakia misl**, blinded in one eye by smallpox, never taught to read, and inherited the misl at **twelve**.

His marriage in 1796 to the daughter of **Sada Kaur** of the Kanhaiya misl **doubled his forces overnight** and gave him an experienced commander as an ally. She is central to his rise and usually left out.

He took **Lahore in July 1799**, at nineteen, from three quarrelling Bhangi chiefs — with very little fighting.

He was proclaimed Maharaja in 1801, aged twenty.

CHAPTER TWO

Why He Refused to Be King

He ruled an empire for forty years and never put his own name on a coin, never wore a crown, and never called his government anything but the Khalsa's. This was not humility. It was the most intelligent political decision he made.

2.1 — What he did not do

Start with the list of things a new ruler in this period would normally do, and which he did not.

He did not put his name on the coinage. The mint at Lahore continued striking the same formula Part 9's Chapter 8 described — the victory attributed to **Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh**. Forty years of rule, and no coin carries his name.

He did not use a crown or a formal enthronement in the imperial manner.

European visitors repeatedly remark on it — that he sat cross-legged on a chair or on the floor, dressed plainly, among men dressed better than he was.

He did not name the state after himself. The government was the **Sarkar Khalsa** — the Khalsa's government. He was **Singh Sahib**, and later **Sarkar-i-Khalsa**.

His seal did not name him either. It carried a phrase meaning, roughly, *the Eternal is my help*.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

This is one of the best-evidenced claims in the whole series, because the evidence is physical and abundant.

The coins survive in quantity. Thousands of them, from mints across his territory, over four decades. Anyone can examine them. There is no ruler's name.

The seal impressions survive on documents, and the documents themselves survive in archives.

And European eyewitnesses describe the court in detail. British envoys, French officers, travellers and diplomats wrote extensive accounts. They had no reason to flatter him on this point and several were plainly baffled by it — accustomed to courts where a ruler's magnificence was the entire display, they kept noting that the richest man in the room was the plainest.

Three independent kinds of evidence, all agreeing. That is as solid as this series gets.

2.2 — Why it worked

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

This behaviour is almost always explained as personal humility — a modest man, unimpressed by grandeur.

The assumption is that refusing the symbols of power means not wanting power.

He wanted power. He took it from every rival he had, including his own mother-in-law. He ruled absolutely for forty years and there was no institution in his state that could check him.

So look at the refusal as a solution to a problem, and it becomes obvious.

Part 9 ended with the misls unable to unite because uniting required a single sovereign — which the doctrine of 1708 had abolished. **Any Sikh chief who declared himself king of Punjab would be, in the community's own terms, a usurper.** He would be taking for himself an authority that belonged to the Guru Granth and the Panth. Every rival chief would have both a grievance and a doctrine to fight him with.

Now look at what the refusal does. **If the coins name the Gurus, nobody is being displaced.** Sovereignty stays exactly where 1708 put it. Ranjit Singh is not a king who has replaced the Khalsa's authority; he is a servant administering it.

It is a legitimacy strategy, and it is close to perfect — because it makes opposing him theologically awkward while conceding absolutely nothing in practice.

The honest way to hold both halves: the modesty was probably real, by every account of his personal habits. **And it was also extremely useful.** Part 6's Chapter 3 made the same point about Mahmud of Ghazni's piety. Sincere belief and political advantage pointing the same way is the most powerful combination in politics, and it is usually a mistake to ask which one is the real motive.

2.3 — What it did not preserve

Here is the part that is usually left out, and it matters for Chapter 7.

The institutions of Part 9 stopped functioning under him.

The **Sarbat Khalsa** — the general assembly at Amritsar that had governed the misl period — ceased to meet as a decision-making body. The **gurmata**, the binding collective resolution, fell out of use as an instrument of government.

Both had been the practical machinery through which the doctrine of 1708 operated. He kept the doctrine on the coins and dismantled the machinery that made it real.

IN REAL TERMS

This is the trade at the centre of the whole part, and it should be stated plainly.

What Punjab gained: unity, a single command, forty years without internal war, an army that no neighbour could beat, and a state that dealt with the British as an equal.

What Punjab lost: the only mechanism it had for making collective decisions and transferring authority without a fight.

Part 9 argued that the misls could not federate without recreating a sovereign.

Ranjit Singh recreated the sovereign. It worked. And a sovereign is one person.

Chapter 7 is what happens when that person dies.

REMEMBER THIS

In forty years of rule he **never put his name on a coin**, never wore a crown, and called his government the **Sarkar Khalsa** — the Khalsa's government, not his own.

Coins, seals and eyewitness accounts all confirm it independently. This is one of the best-evidenced facts in the series.

It was not only humility. It was a legitimacy strategy — because a Sikh chief declaring himself king would be usurping authority the tradition had placed in the scripture and the community. Naming the Gurus made him an administrator rather than a usurper.

But the Sarbat Khalsa stopped meeting and the gurmata fell out of use. He kept the doctrine on the coins and dismantled the machinery that made it work.

Punjab gained unity and lost its only way of transferring authority without a fight.

CHAPTER THREE

Building a State

In twenty years he went from one city to an empire running from the Khyber Pass to the Sutlej and from Kashmir to the Sindh desert. Then he had to govern it, which is the harder problem and the one he is less often given credit for.

3.1 — The conquests

The expansion followed a clear logic: absorb the other misls first, then take the surrounding regions the Afghans could no longer hold.

YEAR	WHAT WAS TAKEN
1802	Amritsar , from the Bhangis. The religious centre and the commercial hub — and with it the great gun the Bhangis had held.
1800s–1810s	The other misls, one by one — by conquest, inheritance, marriage or agreement. Some chiefs were absorbed into his service; others were dispossessed.
1818	Multan , after a long siege. The gateway to the south-west.
1819	Kashmir , taken from its Afghan governor.
1823	Peshawar made tributary after the battle of Nowshera; formally annexed in 1834.
1830s	Ladakh and Baltistan , conquered by his Dogra general Zorawar Singh on behalf of the Jammu house.

IN REAL TERMS

Look at where Peshawar is.

Part 1 established that Punjab sits behind the north-western passes, and every part since has described somebody coming through them — Persians, Greeks, Sakas, Kushans, Hunas, Ghaznavids, Ghurids, Mongols, Timur, Babur, Nadir Shah, Abdali.

For the first time in this entire series, the traffic stopped.

With Peshawar held and the frontier garrisoned — Chapter 4's European-trained troops and Chapter 6's harsh governor — invasion from the north-west simply ceased. Not repelled once. **Ended.**

Two and a half thousand years of Punjab being the doorway, and one state closed the door. That is the single largest strategic achievement in this book, and it is almost never described that way.

3.2 — How it was governed

The administration was, in its bones, the one Part 6 described arriving in the eleventh century.

The language of government was Persian. The revenue system, the record-keeping and the official vocabulary were inherited from Mughal practice — because that was the working machinery available, and Part 5's Chapter 9 explained why conquerors keep the machinery.

The territory was divided into four large provinces, each under a governor, subdivided into districts under officials called **kardars** who collected revenue and administered justice.

Revenue was the main business of the state, taken as a share of the crop, in kind or in cash, and often collected through contractors who bid for the right.

3.3 — Who ran it

The composition of his government is the most-cited fact about him, and it is worth being precise.

- **Fakir Azizuddin**, a Muslim, was his foreign minister for decades and his most trusted envoy — the man he sent to negotiate with the British.
- **Diwan Dina Nath**, a Hindu, ran the finances.
- The **Dogra brothers** from Jammu — Dhian Singh as chief minister, Gulab Singh in Jammu, Suchet Singh — held enormous power. All three are Hindu Rajputs, and Chapters 7 to 9 turn on what they did with that power.
- His generals included Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus and Europeans.

He made grants to mosques, temples and gurdwaras alike. He never levied the **jizya**. He funded the gold plating and marble work that gave the Harmandir Sahib the appearance it has today, and he also endowed Muslim and Hindu institutions.

3.4 — And the parts that are less comfortable

An honest account has to include these.

Sada Kaur. The mother-in-law whose alliance made his rise possible was, in 1821, stripped of her territories and held in confinement until her death. Her misl was absorbed.

The Badshahi Mosque. Lahore's great Mughal mosque was used by his army as a magazine and its precincts for stabling. Some other mosques in the city were similarly put to state use during his reign.

The misls. The confederacies of Part 9 were dismantled. Some chiefs were pensioned or given service; others lost everything.

THE ARGUMENT — HOW GENUINELY PLURAL WAS HIS STATE?

Genuinely, and unusually for its time

Muslims and Hindus held the highest offices — not token positions but the foreign ministry and the treasury. No religious tax was levied on anyone. Grants went to institutions of every faith. The army recruited across communities. Public office was not restricted by religion, in a period when that was the norm almost everywhere.

And the negative evidence is strong: there was no significant communal revolt in the Punjab heartland in forty years, in a province where Sikhs were a minority ruling a Muslim majority. That does not happen under a regime experienced as sectarian.

Pragmatic, and with real costs

A Sikh minority of perhaps a tenth of the population governing a Muslim majority **had no alternative** to inclusion. It was necessity before it was principle.

And the record is not clean. The Badshahi Mosque was used as a magazine. Some mosques were taken for state purposes. Governance in **Kashmir and Peshawar was harsh** and is remembered as such — those were conquered provinces, taxed hard and held by force, and Chapter 6 covers what that meant.

The plural court was in Lahore. The experience on the frontier was different.

Where things stand: both are right and they are not in tension. **The inclusion was real, unusual, and consistently applied at the level of state office and religious endowment.** It was also the only workable policy for a minority ruling a majority, and it did not extend to gentle treatment of conquered provinces.

The fair summary: a conquest state that did not persecute, run by a ruler who understood that a small ruling group cannot afford enemies it does not need. That is a genuine achievement and it is not the same as a golden age. Chapter 6 tests the golden-age claim directly.

REMEMBER THIS

He took Amritsar in 1802, Multan in 1818, Kashmir in 1819, Peshawar from 1823, and absorbed every other misl.

With Peshawar held, invasion through the north-western passes stopped. After two and a half thousand years of being the doorway into India, Punjab closed the door. That is the largest strategic achievement in this book.

The state was run in **Persian**, on inherited Mughal machinery, through provinces and district officials.

His foreign minister was Muslim, his finance minister Hindu, his chief minister a Dogra Rajput. No jizya was ever levied.

And he confined the mother-in-law who made his rise possible, used the Badshahi Mosque as a magazine, and governed Kashmir and Peshawar hard. All of that is in the record too.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Army

He hired veterans of Napoleon's wars to train it, paid for it with most of his revenue, and built a force that British officers privately rated as the most dangerous in Asia. Then he never used it against them.

4.1 — Why he built it

The misl armies of Part 9 were superb light cavalry: fast, self-supplied, able to concentrate and disperse, unbeatable in a raiding war.

They were also unable to do the things a state needs. They could not take a fortified city. They could not stand against disciplined infantry with artillery. And they could not hold a position under fire, because holding a position is a matter of drill rather than courage.

There is a specific moment when this became obvious to him. In 1809, during the negotiations of Chapter 5, a small British escort — a few hundred sepoy — was attacked at Amritsar by a much larger body of Sikh irregulars. The sepoy formed up, held, and drove them off with heavy losses.

IN REAL TERMS

He watched that happen, and he drew the correct conclusion.

His men were braver, more numerous and better horsemen. **They lost anyway**, to a small number of ordinary Indian soldiers who had been drilled to load, fire and reload in unison, and to stand while being shot at.

Drill is not glamorous. What it produces is a body of men who behave as one object rather than as several hundred individuals — and against that, individual quality does not matter.

Almost every ruler who saw this demonstration in this era refused to learn from it, because it required admitting that a warrior tradition was obsolete and rebuilding an army from nothing.

Ranjit Singh spent the next thirty years doing exactly that.

4.2 — The Europeans

From the early 1820s he began recruiting European officers — mostly Frenchmen and Italians, many of them veterans of Napoleon's armies who had been unemployed since 1815 and had made their way east looking for work.

The best known are **Jean-Baptiste Ventura**, who organised the infantry, **Jean-François Allard**, who built the cavalry, **Claude Auguste Court**, who developed the artillery, and **Paolo Avitabile**, who ended up as the formidable governor of Peshawar.

Their terms of service are worth reading, because they say a great deal about the man who set them.

- They were not to eat beef.
- They were not to smoke.
- They were not to shave their beards.
- They were to learn Punjabi.
- They were to marry locally and settle.
- They were not to leave his service without permission.

IN REAL TERMS

Look at what those conditions are actually doing.

He wanted European military technique. **He did not want a European enclave inside his army.**

Every condition on that list is designed to prevent the officers becoming a separate caste with their own loyalties, their own quarter and their own line back to a foreign government. They were to look like his men, live like his men, marry into the country, and have nowhere else to be.

Compare this with what was happening elsewhere in Asia in the same decades, where European military advisers routinely became the thin end of European political control.

He took the technology and refused the dependency. It is one of the most clear-sighted things any ruler in this series does.

4.3 — What it became

By the end of his reign the regular army — the **Fauj-i-Khas** and the broader regular establishment — numbered somewhere in the region of **seventy to ninety thousand men**, with several hundred guns cast in his own foundries at Lahore. Figures vary between sources and none of them is exact.

Alongside it were the irregular cavalry, the levies of his chiefs, and the **Nihangs** — the standing armed order from Part 9, who fought in their own way and were not drilled by anyone.

British assessments of this force, written privately in the 1830s, are unambiguous. It was regarded as the only army in India capable of meeting the East India Company's on equal terms.

4.4 — What it cost

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The army is always presented as the triumph of the reign. It was. It was also the thing that destroyed the state, and the mechanism is worth understanding.

The assumption is that a strong army makes a state strong.

Only if the state can control it. A modern standing army is different in kind from a feudal levy, and the difference is not size — it is that **it must be paid, continuously, in cash, whether or not there is a war.**

That produces three consequences that every state in this position has faced.

One: it dominates the budget. A large share of the revenue of the whole empire went to the army. That means constant pressure to raise revenue, which means harder taxation, which means Chapter 6's Kashmir.

Two: it must be used or it becomes a problem. An idle army with arrears of pay is the most dangerous institution a state can own.

Three, and decisively: it is an organised body of men with a collective interest. Under a strong ruler this is invisible. Remove the strong ruler and you have the only coherent institution left in the country — armed, organised, unpaid, and aware that it is the only thing holding the state together.

Chapter 7 is that mechanism running to completion. By 1841 the army was choosing rulers. It is not a betrayal of what Ranjit Singh built. It is what he built, without him on top of it.

REMEMBER THIS

Misl cavalry could raid but could not take cities or stand against drilled infantry. In **1809** he watched a few hundred British-trained sepoys defeat a much larger body of his own irregulars, and drew the right conclusion.

From the 1820s he hired **Napoleonic veterans** — Ventura, Allard, Court, Avitabile — to rebuild the army on European lines.

Their terms: **no beef, no smoking, no shaving, learn the language, marry locally, do not leave**. He took the technique and refused the dependency.

By 1839: roughly **seventy to ninety thousand regulars** and several hundred guns, privately rated by British officers as the only army in India that could meet theirs.

And a standing army must be paid in cash forever. Under a strong ruler that is invisible. Without one, it is the only organised institution left — armed, unpaid, and aware of it.

CHAPTER FIVE

1809: The Line on the Sutlej

One treaty, signed when he was twenty-eight, fixed the eastern edge of his empire for the rest of his life and decided how the wars of 1845 and 1848 would be fought. It is the most consequential document in this part.

5.1 — The situation

By 1806 Ranjit Singh held most of Punjab north of the Sutlej and was moving south of it.

South of the Sutlej lay the **Cis-Sutlej states** — Sikh principalities including **Patiala**, **Nabha and Jind**, the Phulkian houses that Part 9's Chapter 6 noted had always operated apart from the Dal Khalsa.

They did not want to be absorbed. So they appealed to the other rising power in the region.

The **East India Company** by this date controlled Bengal, much of the south, and — since 1803 — Delhi. Its frontier was creeping north-west. It had its own reason to be interested in Punjab: fear that Napoleon, allied with Persia, might send an army overland towards India.

5.2 — Metcalfe's mission

In 1808 the Company sent a young envoy, **Charles Metcalfe**, to Ranjit Singh's court. He was twenty-three.

The negotiations ran for months and went badly for the British at first — Ranjit Singh kept moving, kept campaigning south of the Sutlej while talking, and was in no hurry.

Then, in February 1809 at Amritsar, came the incident of Chapter 4: Metcalfe's small escort of sepoys was attacked by a large body of Nihangs during Muharram observances, and beat them off decisively.

IN REAL TERMS

That skirmish did two things at once, and they pulled in opposite directions.

It taught him what a drilled army could do — which produced Chapter 4 and made his state formidable for the next thirty years.

And it taught him what he would be fighting if he went to war with the Company. A few hundred sepoys had handled a much larger force of his own men. The Company had tens of thousands of them.

He was twenty-eight, had held Lahore for ten years, and had just been shown exactly where he stood.

He signed.

5.3 — The treaty

The **Treaty of Amritsar**, April 1809, was short.

- The **Sutlej** became the boundary between Ranjit Singh's territory and the Company's sphere.
- He renounced claims to the Cis-Sutlej states, which passed under **British protection**.
- In return, the British recognised his authority north of the river and undertook not to interfere there.

He kept it for the rest of his life. There were frictions, but no war between them in his lifetime.

5.4 — What it decided

THE ARGUMENT — WAS SIGNING THE TREATY A MISTAKE?

It was the only sensible choice

He was twenty-eight, had held Lahore for a decade, had not yet taken Multan, Kashmir or Peshawar, and had a cavalry army that had just been beaten by a British escort. Fighting the Company in 1809 would have been fighting the strongest military power in India with the weakest version of his own state.

What the treaty bought was **thirty years of security on one frontier** — during which he took Multan, Kashmir and Peshawar, closed the north-western passes, and built the army of Chapter 4. Almost everything he achieved happened in the space that treaty created.

It sealed the eventual defeat

The treaty did three things with long consequences.

It fixed his frontier permanently. He could expand west, north and south-west — into poor, mountainous, hard-to-hold country. He could not expand into the rich, populous Ganges plain, which is where power in northern India had always come from.

It handed the Cis-Sutlej states to the British. Sikh principalities became British protectorates — and in 1845 they were on the British side of the line, providing supplies and passage to the army that invaded Punjab.

And it let the British choose the timing. A boundary treaty with a much stronger neighbour lasts exactly as long as that neighbour finds it useful. He kept it for thirty years. They broke it six years after he died.

Where things stand: most historians hold both — that it was the correct decision in 1809 and that it determined the outcome in 1849.

What is worth resisting is the hindsight. The alternative was not "fight and win". It was fighting the Company thirty years earlier, with a fraction of the army and none of the territory. The most likely outcome of refusing was annexation in the 1810s rather than 1849.

The honest framing: he bought thirty years, used every one of them, and the price was that the thirty years were all there was. That is not a mistake. It is a trade made by someone with a clear view of what he could and could not do — which is what the rest of this part shows him doing consistently.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

There is a version of this history in which Ranjit Singh should have fought the British, or should have allied with other Indian powers against them, and his failure to do so is treated as a lack of vision.

The assumption is that he could see what we can see.

In 1809 the East India Company was a trading company with an army, holding Bengal and some coastal territory. **It was not obvious that it would end up ruling the subcontinent.** That outcome looks inevitable now because it happened.

What he could see was a strong neighbour to the east that was willing to guarantee a border. What he did was secure that border and spend three decades expanding in the only directions available, building the strongest army in India, and dying with his state intact.

Judging a decision by an outcome the decider could not have known is the commonest error in reading history, and it produces confident advice that would have been ruinous at the time.

The useful question is never "was he right, given what we know?" It is "**was he right, given what he knew?**" On that test he does well.

REMEMBER THIS

The **Cis-Sutlej states** — Patiala, Nabha, Jind — appealed to the British rather than be absorbed by him.

At Amritsar in February 1809, a small British escort **beat off a much larger Sikh force**. It taught him what drilled infantry could do, and what he would be fighting.

The **Treaty of Amritsar, April 1809**, made the **Sutlej** the boundary. He kept it for thirty years.

It **bought him the space in which he took Multan, Kashmir and Peshawar and built his army**. It also fixed his frontier permanently and put Sikh states on the British side of the line — where they were in 1845.

Judge the decision by what he knew, not by what happened forty years later.

CHAPTER SIX

What His Punjab Was Actually Like

To live in it, rather than to read about it. This chapter is about who the population actually were, what the state took from them, and whether "golden age" survives contact with the evidence.

6.1 — Who lived there

Start with the fact that most accounts skip, because it changes the meaning of everything else.

The population of Ranjit Singh's Punjab was in the majority Muslim. There was a large Hindu population. **Sikhs were a minority — perhaps a tenth to an eighth of the whole.**

So this was a state in which a religious minority held political and military power over a large majority, across a territory stretching from the Khyber to the Sutlej and including Kashmir, Multan and the Derajat, whose populations were overwhelmingly Muslim.

IN REAL TERMS

Hold that fact next to Chapter 3's court.

A Muslim foreign minister and a Hindu finance minister in a Sikh-ruled, Muslim-majority state is not a curiosity. **It is the only arrangement under which such a state can exist at all.**

It also reframes what a "Sikh empire" means. It was a state ruled by Sikhs. **It was not a Sikh country**, in the sense of most of its people being Sikhs — and the phrase misleads badly if you carry the modern idea of a nation into it.

Part 9's closing note made the same point about the misls. It is the central social fact of both parts and it is the easiest thing in the series to forget.

6.2 — What the state took

Revenue was the business of government, and the demand was heavy.

The state took a large share of the crop — the proportion varied by region and by year, and in the richest districts it was very substantial. Collection was frequently **farmed out**: the right to collect a district's revenue was auctioned to a contractor, who paid the state a fixed sum and kept whatever more he could extract.

WORD BOX

Revenue farming: selling the right to collect taxes in an area to the highest bidder. The state gets its money immediately and without administrative cost.

The problem is structural and universal. The contractor's profit is whatever he collects above his bid, so he has every incentive to squeeze — and no interest in the district's long-term condition, because he may not hold it next year.

Nearly every pre-modern state used this system at some point, and nearly every one of them found that it produced maximum short-term revenue and maximum local misery.

6.3 — Justice

Most disputes were settled where they had always been settled — by village councils, caste bodies and local custom. Serious matters went to the district official, and above him to the governor and ultimately the court at Lahore.

One feature is remarked on by every European visitor, and it is unusual enough to be worth stating.

He did not use the death penalty. Punishments were fines, confiscation, mutilation in some cases, and imprisonment — but execution for crime is almost absent from the record of his reign, in an era and a region where it was entirely routine.

Visitors noted it with something between admiration and bafflement, and it is corroborated across several independent accounts.

6.4 — Kashmir

The conquered provinces are where the honest account has to be least comfortable, and Kashmir is the hardest case.

Kashmir under Sikh rule was governed as a conquered territory and taxed heavily. Its main industry — the fine shawl weaving for which it was famous across the world — was taxed at a level that damaged it, and weavers emigrated in numbers.

In 1832 the valley suffered a severe famine, with very heavy mortality and further emigration. Contemporary accounts of the administration are consistently negative, and Kashmiri memory of the period is not warm.

Peshawar was held under a governor whose methods were notorious even by the standards of the time.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS IT A GOLDEN AGE?

Yes, by the standards of what came before and around it

Forty years without internal war, in a province that had known almost nothing else for a century. **Invasion from the north-west stopped entirely.** Trade recovered; Amritsar became a major commercial centre. No religious persecution, no jizya, no restriction on office by faith. A ruler who did not execute people. And an independent state that dealt with the British as an equal for thirty years — the only Indian power that managed it.

Compare with 1760, or with 1850. On both sides the comparison is favourable.

It was a well-run conquest state, which is different

The revenue demand was heavy and revenue farming was standard.

Kashmir was taxed into decline and suffered a catastrophic famine.

Peshawar was held by terror. The wealth of Lahore was extracted from provinces that experienced the state very differently from the capital.

And there was no institution of any kind that could restrain the ruler — no assembly, no council with independent standing, no law above his word.

Chapter 2 showed the machinery of collective decision falling into disuse.

Calling it a golden age describes the view from the court.

Where things stand: the achievements are real and considerable, and the phrase is still doing too much work.

Part 5's Chapter 7 set the test for this series: **golden for whom?** For a merchant in Amritsar, or a Muslim gentleman serving in the Lahore administration, this was a good period. For a shawl weaver in Srinagar it was a disaster.

The fair description: the strongest, best-governed and most tolerant state Punjab had had in centuries, which was also a conquest empire that taxed hard and answered to nobody. Both halves are true and neither cancels the other.

REMEMBER THIS

The population was **majority Muslim**, with a large Hindu population. **Sikhs were perhaps a tenth**. It was a state ruled by Sikhs, not a Sikh country.

Revenue demand was **heavy**, and collection was often **farmed out** to contractors who profited from squeezing.

He **did not use the death penalty** — remarked on by every European visitor and unusual for the era.

Kashmir was taxed into decline, its shawl industry damaged, and it suffered a severe famine in 1832. Peshawar was held by terror.

Golden for whom? Excellent from Amritsar, disastrous from Srinagar. Both are true.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Ten Years

He died in June 1839. Within four years the throne had passed through four rulers, three of whom were murdered. This chapter argues that it was not bad luck, and that the flaw was designed in.

7.1 — What happened

Ranjit Singh died on 27 June 1839, aged fifty-eight, after a series of strokes. The sequence that followed is easier as a table than as prose.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
1839 – 1840	Kharak Singh , his eldest son, succeeds. He is quickly sidelined, confined, and dies in November 1840 — poisoning is widely alleged.
Nov 1840	Nau Nihal Singh , Kharak Singh's son and a genuinely capable young man, is killed the same day as his father's cremation when an archway collapses on him as he passes beneath it. The circumstances have been questioned ever since.
1840 – 41	A contested interval, with Chand Kaur — Nau Nihal Singh's mother — claiming the regency.
1841 – 1843	Sher Singh , another of Ranjit Singh's sons, takes the throne with army backing. He and the chief minister Dhian Singh are both murdered in September 1843.
1843 – 1849	Duleep Singh , aged five, becomes Maharaja, with his mother Jind Kaur as regent. Real power shifts repeatedly between court factions and the army.

7.2 — The army becomes the state

The most important development of these years is not in that table.

The regular army — Chapter 4's creation, now seventy or eighty thousand men who had to be paid in cash — found that there was no longer anyone above it.

Regiments began electing committees, called **panchayats**, to represent them. These committees negotiated pay, demanded arrears, deliberated on political questions, and increasingly decided which claimant to the throne would be supported.

By 1841 no one could rule at Lahore without the army's consent. By 1844 the army's committees were effectively the government.

IN REAL TERMS

This is not chaos, and it is worth being precise about what it was.

The soldiers were not a mob. They were the most organised body of men in the country, with a functioning internal structure, a clear collective interest, and — as they saw it — a legitimate claim.

Their argument was straightforward: **they were the Khalsa's army, the state was the Khalsa's government, and the court had become a nest of factions murdering each other over a child's throne.** If the Sarkar Khalsa meant anything, they were closer to being it than the men in the palace were.

You can see the doctrine of Part 8's Chapter 9 in that argument — authority in the community, not in a person. **The army was, in a real sense, the Panth in arms making the claim the coins had always made.**

The trouble is that an army is not a deliberative body. It cannot balance revenue against expenditure, negotiate with a foreign power, or plan more than one season ahead. **It can only choose between the men in front of it, and demand its pay.**

7.3 — Why this was structural

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The standard account of these ten years is a story of individuals: ambitious ministers, murderous courtiers, a scheming queen, weak heirs. The Dogra brothers in particular are usually cast as the villains.

The assumption is that the collapse was caused by the bad character of particular people.

Bad characters were certainly present. But ask the harder question: **why did their behaviour have this effect?**

Every state has ambitious ministers and disputed successions. Most survive them. What determines whether a succession crisis destroys a state is whether there is any institution outside the ruler's person that can carry authority through the gap.

Ranjit Singh's state had none, and this was not an oversight.

Chapter 2 showed him keeping the doctrine of collective sovereignty on the coins while the **Sarbat Khalsa stopped meeting** and the **gurmata fell out of use**. Those were the mechanisms Part 9 had built for exactly this situation — deciding disputes, transferring authority, binding chiefs to a common decision.

He did not replace them. There was no council with independent standing, no rule of succession, no law above his word, and no body that could legitimately arbitrate between claimants.

Everything ran through one man. When he died, there was nothing underneath.

And the army stepped in precisely because it was the only structure left standing — organised, self-governing, and with a doctrine that told it authority belonged to the community.

The tragedy is exact. Part 9's misls could not unite because they had no sovereign. Ranjit Singh united them by becoming one. The problem was solved for forty years and returned worse, because the machinery that had managed it before had been allowed to rust.

7.4 — Did he know?

On the evidence, yes.

He was ill for the last years of his life and had time to consider it. He made no arrangement for the succession beyond the ordinary expectation that his eldest son would follow. He appointed no council. He established no rule.

Why not is unanswerable — the sources do not record his reasoning. What can be said is that the problem was visible, that he was not a man who missed things, and that he did not act.

REMEMBER THIS

He died on **27 June 1839**. Within four years the throne passed through **four rulers, three of them murdered**.

The **army became the state**. Regiments elected committees, demanded arrears, and decided who would rule. By 1844 those committees were effectively the government.

They were **not a mob**. Their claim was that they were the Khalsa's army and the state was the Khalsa's — which is the doctrine of 1708, made by the only organised body left.

The **collapse was structural, not personal**. He kept collective sovereignty on the coins while letting the **Sarbat Khalsa and the gurmata fall out of use** — and replaced them with nothing.

Everything ran through one man. When he died there was nothing underneath.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The First War

Four battles in eight weeks, fought by an army that outfought the British in the field and lost anyway. The reason involves genuine treachery — and the treachery is the least interesting part of it.

8.1 — How it started

By 1845 both sides were preparing.

The British had been building up forces along the Sutlej for several years, improving cantonments at Ferozepur and Ludhiana, and — a detail contemporaries noticed — assembling large numbers of boats and bridging materials on the river. Boats are for crossing.

On the Lahore side, the court had its own reason to want a war. The army was unpaid, ungovernable and the effective power in the state. **A war would either occupy it or destroy it, and either outcome suited the men trying to govern around it.**

In December 1845 the Sikh army crossed the Sutlej.

8.2 — The battles

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
18 Dec 1845	Mudki. A confused evening action. British hold the field with heavy losses.
21–22 Dec 1845	Ferozeshah. The hardest-fought battle the British army had faced in India. They spent the night in the open among the Sikh guns, expecting to be destroyed at dawn. A large Sikh force under Tej Singh arrived in the morning — and withdrew without attacking.
28 Jan 1846	Aliwal. A clear British victory.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
10 Feb 1846	Sobraon. The Sikh army holds an entrenched bridgehead on the Sutlej. The bridge of boats behind it fails or is cut. The army is destroyed against the river.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The First Anglo-Sikh War is one of the best-documented conflicts in this series, and the sources are unusual in one respect.

The most damning evidence about the Sikh command comes from the British side — from the private and official correspondence of British political officers, which survives in archives, and from the memoirs of officers who fought there.

Those documents record communication between British agents and senior Sikh commanders **before and during the campaign**. They are not later accusations; they are the paperwork of the people receiving the information.

British battlefield accounts are also strikingly respectful of the Sikh army, which is why they are useful. Officers who had fought across Asia described the Sikh artillery as the best they had encountered and the infantry as steady under conditions that broke other armies. Men do not write that about an enemy they beat easily, and they had no motive to inflate it.

What is thin: the Sikh side's own record. The state that fought this war was destroyed by it, and there was no functioning government to keep archives.

8.3 — The betrayal question

THE ARGUMENT — WHY DID THE SIKH ARMY LOSE?

Treachery at the top

Two men held the highest positions: **Lal Singh** as chief minister, and **Tej Singh** as commander-in-chief. British political correspondence documents both of them communicating with the British before and during the campaign.

Their conduct on the field matches. At Ferozeshah, Tej Singh's fresh force arrived when the exhausted British army was at its most vulnerable — and withdrew. At Sobraon, the army was left with a river at its back and a single fragile crossing, and the commanders were not with it when it broke.

This is not a suspicion. The documentary evidence is real and it is on the British side, where there was no reason to invent it.

Treachery explains the defeats, not the war

Grant everything above — and ask why two men could do that.

By 1845 **there was no government to be loyal to**. Chapter 7 described four rulers in four years, three murdered. The men at the top had watched every predecessor die violently and had good reason to believe the state would not survive whatever they did. Their calculation was about which side would be ruling Punjab in two years, and it was not an unreasonable calculation.

And the structural problems were independent of them. The army had no unified command it trusted, no coherent war aim, no supply organisation and no political direction. The British had all four, plus the Cis-Sutlej states — Sikh states, on their side of the 1809 line — providing passage and supplies.

And the British were very good

It should be said plainly, because accounts on both sides tend to skip it. The Company's army was a superb military instrument: professional, well-supplied, with excellent staff work and commanders who had fought campaigns across Asia. It won at Mudki and Aliwal on the day, without help.

Attributing the entire outcome to treachery is a way of avoiding this, and it does not survive the record of the fighting.

Where things stand: all three. The treachery is documented and it decided at least two battles. The structural collapse made the treachery possible and would have caused serious problems without it. And the opposing army was one of the best in the world.

The front matter warned about this. The question is not "who betrayed?" but "why was betrayal available, and why did it work?" A state in which two men's decisions can lose a war is a state that had already lost something more important — and it lost that in the ten years after 1839, not in December 1845.

8.4 — What it cost

Two treaties followed in March 1846.

The **Treaty of Lahore** imposed a large indemnity, ceded the **Jalandhar Doab** — the territory between the Beas and the Sutlej — to the British, required the surrender of guns, cut the army to a fraction of its size, and installed a British Resident at Lahore.

Punjab could not pay the indemnity in full. So part of it was settled another way.

By the **Treaty of Amritsar**, a week later, **Kashmir was sold to Gulab Singh** — the Dogra ruler of Jammu, one of the three brothers of Chapter 3 — for seventy-five lakh rupees, and he became its Maharaja under British suzerainty.

IN REAL TERMS

Read that again slowly, because it is one of the most consequential transactions in the history of South Asia.

A province and everybody in it was sold, by one government to a private individual, for a sum of money, to settle a debt owed to a third party.

Nobody in Kashmir was consulted. The valley's population — overwhelmingly Muslim — became the hereditary property of a Dogra Hindu dynasty because that dynasty could produce the cash.

That arrangement lasted until 1947. **The dispute over Kashmir that has run ever since, through wars and to the present day, begins with this document.**

Part 6 warned about the phrase "the misls governed Punjab" describing a ruling group rather than a population. Here is the sharpest version of the same point: **a province changed hands and its people were the thing being transferred.**

REMEMBER THIS

Both sides prepared through 1845. The British massed **boats and bridging materials**; the Lahore court wanted a war that would occupy or destroy an army it could not control.

Four battles: **Mudki, Ferozeshah, Aliwal, Sobraon**. At Ferozeshah the British spent the night expecting destruction, and a fresh Sikh force arrived and withdrew.

Lal Singh and Tej Singh were in documented communication with the British. The evidence is in British archives, where there was no reason to invent it.

But treachery explains the battles, not the war. By 1845 there was no government to be loyal to — and the Company's army was genuinely one of the best in the world.

The peace cost the Jalandhar Doab, most of the army, and Kashmir — which was sold to Gulab Singh for cash. That transaction is where the Kashmir dispute begins.

CHAPTER NINE

Annexation

Two years later a local revolt in Multan became a second war. The British nearly lost a battle, won the campaign, and on 29 March 1849 a ten-year-old signed away his kingdom and a diamond.

9.1 — The protectorate

The 1846 settlement left Punjab nominally independent under the child Maharaja **Duleep Singh**, with his mother **Jind Kaur** as regent.

That lasted eight months. By the **Treaty of Bhairowal** in December 1846, the British Resident was given full authority over every department of the government, a British-appointed council of regency was installed, and **Jind Kaur was removed from the regency** and pensioned.

In 1847 she was moved out of Lahore. In 1848 she was exiled from Punjab altogether.

IN REAL TERMS

Look at what the 1846–47 arrangement actually was.

Punjab was independent on paper and governed by a British officer in practice.

The Maharaja was a child. His mother, the only figure with an independent claim to authority, was first sidelined and then removed from the province.

This is a well-known device and it has a name: **indirect rule**. It gets you the substance of control without the cost of administration or the awkwardness of conquest, and it leaves a local government to absorb the blame for whatever goes wrong.

It also has a standard failure mode. Because nobody local has real authority, local grievances have nowhere to go, and when something breaks there is no legitimate government to contain it.

That is exactly what happened at Multan.

9.2 — Multan

In April 1848 the governor of Multan, **Mulraj**, resigned under pressure over revenue demands. Two British officers, **Vans Agnew and Anderson**, were sent to install his replacement.

They were attacked by Mulraj's troops and killed.

What began as a local mutiny spread. Sikh commanders sent to suppress it joined it instead — most importantly **Sher Singh Attariwala** and his father **Chattar Singh**, whose grievances were their own but who found a general willingness to rise.

By late 1848 it was a war.

9.3 — The second war

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
Nov 1848	Ramnagar. An inconclusive and costly British action on the Chenab.
13 Jan 1849	Chillianwala. One of the bloodiest battles the British fought in India. They lost heavily, lost guns and colours, and held the field only in the technical sense. In Britain it was reported as close to a disaster.
21 Feb 1849	Gujrat. A methodical British victory built on overwhelming artillery. The Sikh army was broken.
March 1849	Surrender near Rawalpindi . The soldiers laid down their arms.

IN REAL TERMS

Chillianwala is worth pausing on, because it is the last time in this series that the balance of power was genuinely in doubt.

The British suffered casualties on a scale that shocked London. Regiments broke. Guns were lost. It was fought in dense scrub where formations could not be controlled, which cancelled much of the British advantage in drill and staff work.

Had it gone slightly differently, the Company's position in northern India would have been in serious trouble.

It went slightly differently at Gujrat six weeks later — where the British commander used his artillery methodically for hours before committing his infantry, and the Sikh guns were silenced before the assault began.

That is the story of the whole encounter in miniature. **The Sikh army could match anything on the field. It could not match the organisation behind the field** — the supply, the replacement of losses, the ability to lose a battle and still be stronger six weeks later.

9.4 — 29 March 1849

On **29 March 1849**, at Lahore, the Punjab was annexed to British India.

Duleep Singh, aged ten, signed the instrument of his own deposition. He gave up all claim to sovereignty, was granted a pension, and agreed to be sent wherever the Company decided.

Among the terms was the surrender of the **Koh-i-Noor diamond** — taken by Nadir Shah from Delhi in 1739, as Part 9's Chapter 3 described, acquired by Ranjit Singh in 1813, and now to be presented to Queen Victoria.

Duleep Singh was separated from his mother, placed in the care of a British doctor and his wife, converted to Christianity at fifteen, and taken to England at sixteen. He spent most of his life there as a country gentleman. Later he attempted to return to India and to reclaim his position, was prevented, and died in Paris in 1893.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Annexation is usually described as inevitable — the natural outcome of a rising empire meeting a declining kingdom.

The assumption is that what happened had to happen.

Look at the actual decision points and the inevitability thins out.

In 1839 Punjab was the strongest state in India with the best army, a full treasury and a secure frontier. Nothing about 1849 was visible.

The British did not annex in 1846, when they could have. They chose indirect rule instead, and the decision was debated.

Chillianwala could have gone the other way, and did nearly.

What made annexation likely was not destiny. It was a **specific sequence of things going wrong**, most of them internal, most of them traceable to Chapter 7 — a state with no institution capable of surviving its founder's death.

Why the inevitability story is attractive is that it lets everybody off. If it had to happen, nobody chose wrong. The British were an irresistible force rather than a government making decisions; the Lahore court were victims of history rather than men with options.

Neither is true, and both are comfortable.

9.5 — What ended

Set the two ends of this part beside each other.

1799: a nineteen-year-old with one eye takes Lahore from three quarrelling chiefs.

1849: a ten-year-old signs away the last independent state in India, and is sent to England.

In between, for the only time in a thousand years, Punjab was a sovereign power that ruled itself, closed its own frontier, and dealt with the greatest empire on earth as an equal.

It lasted fifty years, and forty of them were one man.

REMEMBER THIS

By the **Treaty of Bhairowal** in December 1846 the British Resident took full control. **Jind Kaur** was removed from the regency and then exiled.

In April 1848 two British officers were killed at **Multan**. Commanders sent to suppress the revolt joined it.

Chillianwala in January 1849 was close to a British disaster. **Gujrat** six weeks later was methodical and decisive.

The Sikh army could match anything on the field. It could not match the organisation behind the field.

On 29 March 1849 the ten-year-old Duleep Singh signed away his kingdom and the Koh-i-Noor. Annexation was not inevitable — it was a sequence of things going wrong, most of them internal.

CHAPTER TEN

An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

The best-evidenced part of this series so far. The gaps are therefore unusually specific — and one of them is very large.

Genuinely unknown

- **Whether the Lahore citizens' petition of 1799 happened as described.**
- **Ranjit Singh's own reasoning** on almost anything. He was illiterate and left no memoir. We have his decisions, his coins and other people's descriptions of him — not his voice.
- **Why he made no succession arrangement**, despite years of illness and an obvious problem.
- **How Kharak Singh died**, and whether Nau Nihal Singh's death was an accident.
- **The exact size of the army** at any date. Figures vary widely between sources.
- **What proportion of the population was Sikh.** There was no census before the British, and estimates are inferences.
- **The real revenue burden** on cultivators, district by district — revenue farming means the recorded state demand is not what was actually taken.
- **The scale of mortality in the Kashmir famine of 1832.**
- **The full extent and content of Lal Singh's and Tej Singh's dealings with the British.** We have what the British recorded receiving, not everything that passed.
- **What ordinary people in Punjab thought about any of it.** Still the great gap, as in every part of this series.

Solid

- Ranjit Singh was born in 1780, inherited the Sukerchakia misl in 1792, took Lahore in 1799 and was proclaimed Maharaja in 1801.

- He never issued coinage in his own name; the mints continued the formula naming Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh.
- He took Amritsar in 1802, Multan in 1818, Kashmir in 1819 and Peshawar from 1823, and absorbed the other misls.
- His foreign minister was Muslim and his finance minister Hindu. No jizya was levied.
- He recruited European officers from the 1820s and built a regular army on European lines, with conditions of service requiring them to settle locally.
- The Treaty of Amritsar of 1809 fixed the Sutlej as the boundary with British territory, and he observed it until his death.
- The Sarbat Khalsa ceased to function as a governing institution during his reign.
- He died on 27 June 1839. Four rulers followed in four years; three died violently.
- Regiments of the army formed elected committees and became the effective power at Lahore.
- The First Anglo-Sikh War was fought December 1845 to February 1846; the Treaty of Lahore ceded the Jalandhar Doab, and Kashmir was sold to Gulab Singh for seventy-five lakh rupees.
- British political correspondence documents contacts with Lal Singh and Tej Singh during the campaign.
- The Second Anglo-Sikh War followed the killing of two British officers at Multan in April 1848; Chillianwala was fought in January 1849 and Gujrat in February.
- Punjab was annexed on 29 March 1849. Duleep Singh, aged ten, signed, and the Koh-i-Noor was surrendered.

A CLOSING WORD ON AFFECTION

The front matter warned that the problem with this part is not thin evidence but affection. It is worth returning to at the end.

Everything admirable in the standard account is **in the record**. The coins with no name on them are real. The Muslim foreign minister is real. The absence of the death penalty is attested by hostile witnesses. Closing the north-western frontier after two and a half thousand years is real, and it is extraordinary.

And the Kashmir famine is also real, and the revenue farming, and Sada Kaur's confinement, and the Badshahi Mosque used as a magazine, and forty years in which the machinery of collective decision was allowed to fall into disuse.

The temptation is to choose. To write the golden age, or to write the debunking.

Both are easier than the truth, which is that a remarkable man built a remarkable state on a foundation that could not survive him — and that he had the tools to fix it, inherited from the century in Parts 8 and 9, and did not use them.

That is not a smaller story. It is a much better one, and it is the only one that explains why the ten years after 1839 went the way they did.

REFERENCE

Timeline of Part 10

Dates in this part are firm. Where a figure is disputed, the dispute is in the chapter.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
13 Nov 1780	Ranjit Singh born at Gujranwala, into the Sukerchakia misl. <i>Where Part 9 ended.</i>
1792	His father dies. He inherits the misl aged twelve.
1796	Marries Mehtab Kaur, daughter of Sada Kaur of the Kanhaiya misl. His forces roughly double.
July 1799	Takes Lahore from the three Bhangi chiefs, aged nineteen.
April 1801	Proclaimed Maharaja at Lahore. Coins continue to name only the Gurus.
1802	Amritsar taken from the Bhangis.
Feb 1809	A small British escort defeats a much larger Sikh force at Amritsar. He draws his conclusions.
April 1809	Treaty of Amritsar . The Sutlej becomes the boundary with British territory. The Cis-Sutlej states pass under British protection.
1813	Acquires the Koh-i-Noor .
1818	Multan taken.
1819	Kashmir taken.
1821	Sada Kaur stripped of her territories and confined.
1820s	European officers recruited — Ventura, Allard, Court, Avitabile . The regular army built.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
1823	Peshawar made tributary after Nowshera; annexed 1834. Invasion through the north-western passes ends.
1830s	Gilding and marble work at the Harmandir Sahib . Ladakh conquered by Zorawar Singh.
1832	Severe famine in Kashmir .
27 June 1839	Ranjit Singh dies , aged fifty-eight.
1839 – 40	Kharak Singh succeeds, is sidelined, and dies in November 1840.
Nov 1840	Nau Nihal Singh killed by a collapsing archway on the day of his father's cremation.
1841 – 43	Sher Singh rules with army backing. He and Dhian Singh are murdered in September 1843.
1843	Duleep Singh , aged five, becomes Maharaja. Jind Kaur regent. The army's elected committees become the effective power.
Dec 1845	The Sikh army crosses the Sutlej. Mudki (18th), Ferozeshah (21st–22nd).
Jan – Feb 1846	Aliwal (28 Jan), Sobraon (10 Feb). The army is destroyed against the river.
March 1846	Treaty of Lahore : indemnity, Jalandhar Doab ceded, army reduced, British Resident installed. Treaty of Amritsar : Kashmir sold to Gulab Singh for seventy-five lakh rupees.
Dec 1846	Treaty of Bhairawal . The Resident takes full authority. Jind Kaur removed from the regency.
1847 – 48	Jind Kaur moved from Lahore, then exiled from Punjab.
April 1848	Two British officers killed at Multan . Revolt spreads; Sikh commanders join it.
13 Jan 1849	Chillianwala . Very heavy British losses; close to a disaster for them.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
21 Feb 1849	Gujrat. Decisive British victory. Surrender near Rawalpindi in March.
29 March 1849	Punjab annexed. Duleep Singh, aged ten, signs. The Koh-i-Noor surrendered. Part 11 starts here.

REFERENCE

Glossary

Every hard word used in Part 10, in plain English.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Cis-Sutlej states	The Sikh principalities south of the Sutlej — Patiala, Nabha, Jind and others — which came under British protection in 1809.
Doab	The land between two rivers. The Jalandhar Doab, ceded in 1846, lies between the Beas and the Sutlej.
Dogra	A Rajput community of the Jammu hills. The three Dogra brothers held the highest offices under Ranjit Singh; Gulab Singh bought Kashmir in 1846.
East India Company	The British trading company that acquired territory and armies in India and governed it until 1858.
Fauj-i-Khas	The elite European-trained division of Ranjit Singh's regular army.
Jizya	The tax on non-Muslim subjects in Islamic states. Never levied by Ranjit Singh.
Kardar	A district revenue and administrative official.
Koh-i-Noor	The great diamond taken from Delhi by Nadir Shah in 1739, acquired by Ranjit Singh in 1813, and surrendered to the British in 1849.
Panchayat	A council. In the 1840s, the elected regimental committees through which the army governed itself and then the state.
Resident	A British political officer stationed at an Indian court. After 1846 the Resident at Lahore held real executive power.
Revenue farming	Auctioning the right to collect a district's taxes. Immediate cash for the state; maximum pressure on the cultivator.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Sarkar Khalsa	"The Khalsa's government" — the official name of Ranjit Singh's state. Not named after him.
Suzerainty	A relationship in which a ruler governs internally but acknowledges a superior power's authority over external affairs.

ABOUT

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Lovepreet Singh is a researcher and writer working toward doctoral research. He writes long-form work on Indian history, society, religion, philosophy, public policy and technology — built from the record, in plain language, with the competing views left in.

His background is not in a history department, and he thinks that is worth saying plainly. He came to this subject the way most people do: from the outside, wanting to understand the place he is from, and finding that the good books were unreadable and the readable books were thin.

What he brought instead was the habit of his own training — the analyst's discipline of asking what the data actually supports, where a claim is really coming from, and which assumptions are doing the quiet work underneath an argument. That discipline runs through every chapter of this series. It is why almost every chapter has a box labelled *The Hidden Assumption*, and it is the part of this work he is most attached to.

The Living Archive

This series belongs to a larger project. The Living Archive is a body of long-form research on history, society, religion, public policy and technology, published openly and free to read at misterlove.in.

- **Plain language.** Hard ideas explained in ordinary words, with nothing left out to make them fit.
- **Evidence first.** Show the thing itself, and be clear about what it can and cannot prove.
- **Competing views.** Where the field disagrees, both sides get their strongest case. Open questions stay open.

A word on sources

This is written for general readers, so it carries no footnotes. It is a synthesis of the published scholarly record rather than new primary research, and it does not claim otherwise. This part draws on an unusually good evidence base — court records, treaty texts, British diplomatic correspondence and European travellers' accounts — and where a claim rests on one of these rather than on tradition, that is indicated.

Corrections are welcome. If you find an error, or think an argument has been given less than its best case, write to the address above — later editions will say what was changed and who caught it.

WHAT COMES NEXT

Part 11 — British Punjab

Part 11 runs from 1849 to roughly 1914. It is the part in which Punjab is rebuilt from the ground up by an administration that had no interest in what it had been — and in which almost everything that people now think of as traditional Punjab was actually made.

Among the questions it takes on:

- What were the **canal colonies** — the largest irrigation project in the world at the time — and what did turning desert into farmland actually do to Punjab's society?
- Why did the British recruit so heavily from Punjab, and what was the "**martial races**" theory actually for?
- Why did Punjab **stay quiet in 1857**, eight years after being conquered — and what did that buy it?
- How did the **Land Alienation Act** and the new revenue system reshape who owned Punjab?
- What did the census, the railway and the printing press do to religious identity — and how did the **Singh Sabha, Arya Samaj and Anjuman-i-Islamia** movements reshape all three communities at once?
- How much of "traditional" Punjab is actually a colonial creation?



END OF PART 10 OF 14

THE LIVING ARCHIVE · LOVEPREET SINGH · MISTERLOVE.IN

THE LIVING ARCHIVE

PART ELEVEN OF FOURTEEN

The Complete History of Punjab

Part Eleven — British Punjab

Sixty-five years in which a desert was turned into the richest farmland in Asia, half an army was recruited from one province, and almost everything people now call traditional Punjab was quietly manufactured.

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

Lovepreet Singh

1849 – 1914

MISTERLOVE.IN

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Where We Left Off, and the Hardest Balance in the Series

A recap, a reminder of the boxes, and an explanation of why this part is harder to write fairly than the ones about massacres.

Part 10 covered fifty years.

A nineteen-year-old from the minor Sukerchakia misl took Lahore in 1799 and was proclaimed Maharaja at twenty. In forty years **Ranjit Singh** absorbed every rival confederacy, took Multan, Kashmir and Peshawar, and — for the first time in two and a half thousand years — **closed the north-western passes**. Invasion into India through Punjab simply stopped.

He never put his name on a coin. The mints went on naming Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, and the state was called the Khalsa's government, not his. That was partly humility and mostly a legitimacy strategy — a Sikh chief declaring himself king would have been usurping authority the tradition had placed in the scripture and the community.

He hired Napoleonic veterans to rebuild his army on European lines, took the technique and refused the dependency, and produced the only force in India that British officers privately rated as equal to their own.

The Treaty of Amritsar in **1809** fixed the Sutlej as his eastern boundary. It bought thirty years of security in which everything else was achieved. It also put Sikh states on the British side of the line, permanently.

He died in **1839**. Within four years the throne passed through four rulers, three murdered. The army — the only organised institution left — began electing committees and choosing kings. Part 10 argued this was structural: he had kept collective sovereignty on the coins while letting the Sarbat Khalsa and the gurmata fall out of use, and replaced them with nothing.

Two wars followed. In **1846** Punjab lost the Jalandhar Doab, most of its army, and Kashmir — which was sold to Gulab Singh for cash. In **1849**, after Chillianwala and Gujrat, the ten-year-old Duleep Singh signed away his kingdom and the Koh-i-Noor.

On **29 March 1849**, Punjab became British territory.

What the boxes mean

WORD BOX

Blue explains a hard word, right where it appears.

Example — Colonial: relating to rule by a foreign power over a territory it has taken. The word describes a relationship of control, not a judgement about whether particular things done under it were useful.

IN REAL TERMS

Green turns something too big or too strange to picture into something ordinary.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Brown shows the evidence itself, and is honest about what it can and cannot prove.

THE ARGUMENT

Orange means serious people disagree. Both sides get their strongest case.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Purple digs out something everyone takes for granted without proving.

REMEMBER THIS

Dark boxes close each chapter with the key points in the plainest words I can find.

Why this part is hard

Parts 8 and 9 contained massacres and executions. They were painful to write and straightforward to judge.

This part is harder, because British Punjab did enormous good and enormous harm, often through the same act, and both are thoroughly documented.

The canal system of Chapter 4 was the largest irrigation project in the world. It turned semi-desert into some of the most productive farmland on the planet, and it is still the basis of Punjab's agriculture today, on both sides of the border. It was built by a government that took the profits, chose who got the land by caste, and left behind waterlogging and salt that are still a problem.

The recruitment of Chapter 3 brought cash, pensions and land into rural Punjab on a scale nothing else could have. It also turned the province into a reservoir of soldiers for other people's wars, and hardened caste categories into official ones.

You will meet two ready-made accounts.

One says: the British built modern Punjab — canals, railways, law, education, peace — and whatever their motives, the province gained.

The other says: it was extraction dressed as improvement, and every apparent benefit was a by-product of taking wealth out.

Both are too simple, and Chapter 8 tests them against the evidence directly.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION — READ THIS BEFORE CHAPTER 1

Underneath almost every argument about colonial rule sits an assumption that makes the argument unwinnable.

The assumption is that benefits and harms can be added up in the same units and a net figure produced.

So one side lists canals, railways, roads and vaccination. The other lists famine, extraction, racial rule and dependence. Each treats their list as settling the matter, and neither can be refuted, because **the items are not the same kind of thing and cannot be totalled.**

How many acres of irrigated land is a famine worth? How many miles of railway offsets being ruled by people who thought you were racially unfit to govern yourself? **The question has no answer, because it is not a question about quantities.**

What can be done instead — and what this part tries to do — is more specific and more useful:

- **What was actually built or changed?** Answerable, and this part answers it.
- **Who paid, and who benefited?** Also answerable, and usually different groups.
- **Was it done for the stated reason?** Usually not, and the real reason is normally documented.
- **What would have happened otherwise?** The hardest question, and the one where honest people should admit they are guessing.

Answer those four and you know more than any verdict could tell you. Insist on a verdict and you will spend the argument shouting past somebody with a different list.

What Is In Part 11

Before We Begin — Where We Left Off, and the Hardest Balance in the Series

Chapter 1 — What the Conquerors Did First

The Punjab School · Disarmament and roads · The paternalist idea

Chapter 2 — 1857: Why Punjab Stayed Quiet

Conquered eight years earlier and loyal · Argument: loyalty or calculation? · What it bought

Chapter 3 — The Martial Races

Half an army from one province · A theory that created what it described

Chapter 4 — The Canal Colonies

The largest irrigation work in the world · Who got the land · What it left behind

Chapter 5 — Who Owned Punjab

Debt and the moneylender · The Land Alienation Act · Turning castes into law

Chapter 6 — Counting, Printing, Sorting

The census · The reform movements · How three communities hardened at once

Chapter 7 — The New Middle Class

Colleges and newspapers · Which language, which script · The seeds of Part 12

Chapter 8 — What It Cost

Plague and famine · The 1907 agitation · Argument: the balance sheet

Chapter 9 — 1914

Ghadar · The Komagata Maru · Punjab goes to war

Chapter 10 — An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

Timeline · Glossary · About the Author · Coming in Part 12

CHAPTER ONE

What the Conquerors Did First

They disarmed the province, built roads through it, reassessed every field in it, and governed it by a method they thought too rough for the rest of India. Understanding why they were in a hurry explains most of what follows.

1.1 — The men in charge

Punjab was handed to a Board of Administration, dominated by two brothers.

Henry Lawrence had been Resident at Lahore since 1846 and knew the Sikh aristocracy well. He wanted to govern through them — keeping the chiefs, respecting existing arrangements, avoiding disruption.

John Lawrence, his younger brother, disagreed on almost everything. He wanted to break the old order, deal directly with the peasant cultivator, cut revenue demands and let the aristocracy sink.

They fought about it for four years. In 1853 the Board was dissolved, Henry was moved elsewhere, and John Lawrence became Chief Commissioner. His approach won.

1.2 — The Punjab School

Punjab was made a **non-regulation province**, which meant something specific and important.

WORD BOX

Non-regulation province: a territory governed outside the elaborate legal codes applied in older British India. The district officer combined the powers of magistrate, judge, revenue collector and police chief in one person, with wide discretion and little procedure.

The justification was speed and simplicity in a newly conquered frontier. **The effect was personal rule** — a district of a million people administered by one young Englishman on horseback with very few written rules constraining him.

This became known as the **Punjab School** of administration, and it was consciously exported elsewhere as a model. Its officers were selected for energy and toughness, expected to travel constantly, and encouraged to know their districts personally.

1.3 — What they did

Disarmament. The first priority. Enormous quantities of weapons were collected and destroyed across the province. Forts were dismantled. The Sikh army was disbanded, its soldiers pensioned or sent home — and, as Chapter 3 shows, many of them re-enlisted under new colours within a decade.

Roads and communication. The Grand Trunk Road was rebuilt and extended through Punjab to Peshawar. The telegraph followed. The railway reached Lahore in the 1860s. All of this was primarily military infrastructure — it moved troops — and it also moved grain, and later everything else.

A land settlement. Every district was surveyed, rights in every field recorded, and a revenue demand fixed for a term of years. This was a colossal administrative undertaking and it did something no previous government here had done: **it produced a written record of who held what.**

Social legislation. Sati was prohibited, female infanticide made a crime and actively investigated, and slavery abolished.

1.4 — Why the hurry

IN REAL TERMS

Look at their position in 1849 and the urgency makes sense.

They had just conquered, at considerable cost, a province that had fought two hard wars and nearly beaten them at Chillianwala. It contained a disbanded army of tens of thousands of trained men, a population that had been independent within living memory, and a frontier with Afghanistan.

They were a very small number of foreigners holding a large and recently hostile country. Every measure above follows from that.

Disarm, so that a rising has no weapons. Build roads, so troops can move faster than a rebellion. Record every field, so revenue arrives without an intermediary who might become a rival. Cut the revenue demand, so the cultivator has less reason to rise. Deal with peasants directly, so the aristocracy has no followers to raise.

The lighter tax burden was real and cultivators benefited from it. It was also a security policy. Both things at once — which is the pattern for this entire part.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The Punjab administrators wrote a great deal about themselves, and their self-description has largely survived into how the period is taught.

The assumption is that the stated motive is the motive.

They described themselves as paternalists — as fathers to a simple peasantry, protecting the honest cultivator from moneylenders, aristocrats and his own ignorance. That language is everywhere in the official record.

Some of them believed it entirely. Several worked themselves to death in their districts.

But look at what the paternalist framework licenses. If the population are children, then they cannot be consulted, do not need representative institutions, and cannot be trusted with the discretion an English county would have. **The kindness and the absence of rights are the same doctrine.**

And it is worth noticing when the framework was applied. Punjab was governed as a special case, by personal rule with minimal law, for decades — because it was a frontier, because it was recently conquered, and because Chapter 2 made it strategically indispensable.

The useful habit is to hold both: that individual administrators were often sincere and sometimes admirable, and that sincerity is not evidence about a system. Part 6's Chapter 3 said the same about Mahmud of Ghazni's piety. **Believing your own justification is the normal condition of people exercising power, not an exception to it.**

REMEMBER THIS

Punjab was governed by a Board dominated by the **Lawrence brothers**, who disagreed — Henry wanted to rule through the old aristocracy, **John wanted to break it and deal with peasants directly.** John won.

Punjab became a **non-regulation province**: one officer holding judicial, revenue and police powers, with wide discretion and little procedure. Personal rule, justified by frontier conditions.

First priorities: **disarmament, roads, a land settlement recording every field, and a lighter revenue demand.**

All of it was **simultaneously improvement and security policy.** That is the pattern for the whole part.

The paternalist language was often sincere — and it licensed rule without consultation, because children do not need rights.

CHAPTER TWO

1857: Why Punjab Stayed Quiet

Eight years after being conquered, Punjab did not rise. It supplied the troops that retook Delhi instead. Explaining that is the key to the next sixty years — and the usual explanation is wrong.

2.1 — What happened elsewhere

In May 1857 regiments of the Bengal Army mutinied at Meerut, marched on Delhi, and proclaimed the aged Mughal emperor **Bahadur Shah Zafar** the ruler of India.

The rising spread across the Ganges plain — Awadh, Rohilkhand, parts of central India. It was the most serious challenge British rule in India ever faced.

Punjab did not join it.

2.2 — What Punjab did instead

John Lawrence's administration moved fast and preemptively.

Bengal Army regiments stationed in Punjab were **disarmed** before they could act — at Lahore within days of the news arriving, then at Peshawar, Ferozepur and elsewhere. Some were disarmed on parade, surrounded by artillery.

Then Punjab was stripped of troops to send east. New levies were raised locally in large numbers. A mobile column moved through the province suppressing outbreaks.

And Punjabi troops — Sikhs, Punjabi Muslims, Pathans — formed a very large part of the force that besieged and retook **Delhi** in September 1857.

2.3 — Why

THE ARGUMENT — WAS IT LOYALTY?

The British at the time and after described it as loyalty, and the idea of the "loyal Punjab" shaped policy for ninety years. It does not survive examination.

The old grudge explanation

The Bengal Army was recruited heavily from Awadh and Bihar — **Purbias**, easterners. And the Bengal Army was the army that had conquered Punjab in 1845–49. The men now mutinying were, from a Punjabi point of view, the same men who had taken the country eight years earlier.

Punjab did not rise *against* the British so much as it declined to rise *alongside* the Purbias.

The Delhi problem

The rebellion's rallying point was the restoration of the **Mughal emperor** at Delhi.

Consider what that offered a Sikh. Parts 7 and 8 of this series are, from one angle, an account of what Mughal power did to the Sikh community — Guru Arjan in 1606, Guru Tegh Bahadur in 1675, the children at Sirhind in 1704, and the extermination orders of Part 9 issued under Mughal authority.

A Mughal restoration was not a liberation. It was the return of the thing the community had spent a century fighting.

The calculation

Punjab had been conquered by an army that had just proved it could win. The Sikh state had collapsed less than a decade earlier and nobody was nostalgic for the ten years of Part 10's Chapter 7.

Meanwhile the British were recruiting, urgently, at good rates, with the prospect of plunder at Delhi. For disbanded soldiers of a destroyed army, that was a concrete and immediate offer.

The Cis-Sutlej chiefs — Patiala, Nabha, Jind, on the British side of the 1809 line — actively supported the British, protecting communications and supplying troops.

Where things stand: historians give little weight to loyalty and a great deal to the other three. **The rebellion offered Punjab nothing it wanted and asked it to fight alongside people it had recent reason to dislike, for a dynasty it had specific reason to fear.**

Add fast preemptive disarmament and an attractive recruitment offer, and the outcome follows without anyone needing to feel loyal to anybody.

What matters is the consequence, not the motive. Whatever the reason, the British concluded that Punjab was reliable — and acted on that conclusion for the next ninety years.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Both the British version and its nationalist mirror-image share a mistake.

The assumption is that a region has a collective attitude — that "Punjab was loyal" or "Punjab betrayed the rebellion" describes something a place can do.

Punjab in 1857 contained disbanded Sikh soldiers, Punjabi Muslim cultivators, Pathan tribesmen, Cis-Sutlej princes, urban moneylenders, and a peasantry that had just had its revenue demand cut. **These groups had different interests and made different decisions.**

Some men enlisted for pay. Some chiefs calculated. Some districts saw local risings that were suppressed. Nobody voted.

And notice the trap in the nationalist version specifically. Calling it betrayal requires assuming there was an Indian nation in 1857 to betray — which is Part 6's assumption in a different costume. There were many communities with many interests, and a mutiny by one army in one region, joined by some rulers and opposed by others.

The honest statement is narrow: **most people in Punjab, for their own reasons, did not join, and enough of them enlisted to make the difference at Delhi.**

2.4 — What it bought

Everything in Chapters 3 and 4.

The British came out of 1857 having concluded three things about Punjab: that its men were good soldiers, that they could be relied on, and that the province mattered strategically because it faced Afghanistan and Russia beyond.

That conclusion is the reason Punjab received the canals, the railways and the recruitment — and the reason it was governed with a mixture of investment and firm control for the next ninety years.

REMEMBER THIS

In 1857 the Bengal Army mutinied and proclaimed the **Mughal emperor** at Delhi. **Punjab did not join**. Its troops helped retake Delhi.

Not loyalty. Three better reasons: the mutineers were the **same army that had conquered Punjab** eight years earlier; a **Mughal restoration** was the return of the power Parts 7 to 9 had been about; and **recruitment was an attractive offer** to soldiers of a destroyed army.

Add **fast preemptive disarmament** and active support from the Cis-Sutlej chiefs.

"Punjab was loyal" and "Punjab betrayed India" make the same mistake — treating a region as something that can hold an attitude.

What it bought: the British decided Punjab was reliable and strategically vital. Everything in the next two chapters follows.

CHAPTER THREE

The Martial Races

By 1914 one province with about a fourteenth of India's population was supplying around half its army. The theory used to justify that was nonsense as science and extremely effective as policy — and it reshaped Punjab permanently.

3.1 — The reorganisation

After 1857 the Indian Army was rebuilt from the ground up.

The Bengal Army — which had mutinied — was largely dismantled. Recruitment was deliberately shifted away from the regions that had risen, and towards those that had not: **Punjab**, the North-West Frontier, and Nepal.

Regiments were reorganised on the "class" principle — companies or whole battalions recruited from a single caste or community, so that no single grievance could unite them all.

3.2 — The theory

The justification for concentrating recruitment in a few communities was the doctrine of **martial races**.

Its claim, stated plainly: **some peoples of India are naturally suited to soldiering and others are not**. Sikhs, Punjabi Muslims, Dogras, Pathans, Gurkhas, Rajputs and a few others were held to be fighting stock. Bengalis, Tamils, Marathas and most of the rest were held not to be.

Reasons offered included climate, diet, racial descent, hill country versus plains, and — in the more candid formulations — the observation that the martial races had a warrior tradition and the others had grown soft under long settled government.

Recruiting handbooks were published setting out which castes in which districts of which provinces were suitable, and how to identify them.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Unusually, we know exactly what the theory said, because **the British wrote it down in official manuals for their own recruiting officers.**

These handbooks were not propaganda for public consumption. They were internal working documents, describing which communities to approach, what their supposed characteristics were, and how to assess a recruit.

Which means we can test the theory against its own history. And the test is decisive: the Bengal Army that **mutinied in 1857 was recruited largely from high-caste men of Awadh and Bihar — who had, until that year, been considered excellent military material.** They were reclassified as unsuitable after they rebelled.

The category tracked political reliability, not fighting ability. That is not an inference; it is visible in the timing.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The martial races theory is now universally rejected as science. What is much less noticed is that **it worked anyway** — and the mechanism is worth understanding, because it is not confined to the nineteenth century.

The assumption underneath it is that a category describes reality. Sometimes a category creates it.

Follow what happened. The British declared certain Punjabi communities martial. They then recruited almost exclusively from them, in specific districts. In those districts, army service became the main route to cash income, a pension, and land grants in the new canal colonies.

Within a generation, families in those districts were sending sons to the army as a matter of course. Villages had serving soldiers, retired soldiers and army widows. Military service became part of what the community was, and was described — by its own members — as a tradition.

Two generations later, the martial races theory looked true. Those communities really did produce soldiers at extraordinary rates, really did have military traditions, and really did think of themselves that way.

The theory did not discover a fact. It manufactured one, and then pointed at it.

This is worth carrying beyond this chapter. Official categories — in censuses, in law, in recruitment — are not neutral descriptions. **They change incentives, and incentives change what people do, and what people do for long enough becomes what they are.** Chapters 5 and 6 are two more examples of exactly this process.

3.3 — What it did to Punjab

The numbers are striking. By 1914, Punjab held something like a **fourteenth of India's population and supplied roughly half of the Indian Army**. Recruitment was concentrated in particular districts — Rawalpindi, Jhelum, Ludhiana, Amritsar, Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, Attock — where the proportion of military households was extraordinary.

IN REAL TERMS

Follow what this meant in a village in, say, Jalandhar district in 1900.

Cash arrives. A soldier's pay was remitted home. In a rural economy that ran mostly on grain and debt, a monthly cash payment from outside was transformative.

Pensions arrive. A retired soldier had an income for life. He was the richest man in many villages and the one who lent money.

Land arrives. Grants in the canal colonies of Chapter 4 were given to veterans and to families with service records. Military service became a route to owning land in the new districts.

Status arrives. A family with a serving son had standing.

And a dependency arrives. Districts organised around army pay are districts whose prosperity depends on the army continuing to recruit — which means on wars continuing to be fought somewhere.

All of this is why Punjab supplied so heavily in 1914–18 and again in 1939–45. It is also why the demobilisations after each war were so destabilising, and why Chapter 9's Ghadar movement found some of its recruits among ex-soldiers who had seen the world and come home to a colour bar.

REMEMBER THIS

After 1857 the army was rebuilt, recruiting away from the regions that had risen and towards Punjab, the Frontier and Nepal, in single-caste units.

The martial races theory claimed some peoples are naturally suited to soldiering. It is nonsense as science — the men who mutinied in 1857 had been rated excellent material until that year, and were reclassified afterwards. The category tracked reliability, not fighting ability.

By 1914 Punjab held about a fourteenth of India's people and supplied roughly half its army.

That brought cash, pensions, land grants and status into specific districts — and a dependency on recruitment continuing.

The theory did not discover a fact. It manufactured one and then pointed at it. Watch for that mechanism in the next three chapters.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Canal Colonies

Between 1885 and 1914 the British built the largest irrigation system in the world across western Punjab, turned several million acres of scrub into farmland, and populated it by selecting settlers on paper. This is the single largest physical change in this entire series.

4.1 — The problem and the opportunity

Part 1 described the geography. Punjab's five rivers run roughly parallel across a flat plain, and between them lie the **bars** — the high ground of the doabs, above the reach of the rivers.

Those bars were not desert exactly, but they were dry scrub grazing, thinly populated by pastoralists, and produced almost nothing in revenue terms.

They were also flat, deep, fertile soil — Part 1's silt, kilometres thick — **lacking only water.**

And the rivers were right there, running past them, carrying Himalayan snowmelt to the sea.

4.2 — What was built

The engineering answer was a system of perennial canals: permanent headworks on the rivers, main canals running along the crest of each bar, and branches and distributaries feeding a grid of watercourses.

SCHEME	WHAT IT DID
Upper Bari Doab Canal (1850s–1859)	The first major work, taking water from the Ravi. Built partly to employ disbanded Sikh soldiers.
Sirhind Canal (1882)	From the Sutlej, watering the south-east.

SCHEME	WHAT IT DID
Lower Chenab Canal (from 1892)	The great one. Created the Chenab Colony — around two million acres — and the city of Lyallpur, now Faisalabad.
Lower Jhelum Canal (from 1901)	The Jhelum Colony, and the town of Sargodha.
Triple Canals Project (1905–1917)	An engineering feat: linking three rivers so that surplus water from one could be transferred to another. The Lower Bari Doab Colony followed.

IN REAL TERMS

Try to hold the scale of this.

Several million acres of land that had produced grazing began producing wheat and cotton. A region that had been thinly inhabited by herders became one of the most productive agricultural areas on earth.

Entirely new cities were laid out on empty ground, on a plan, with a clock tower at the centre and eight bazaars radiating from it like the spokes of a wheel. **Lyallpur was founded in the 1890s on land where there had been nothing.** It is now Faisalabad, a city of several million people.

Grain moved by new railway lines to Karachi and out to the world. Punjab became a wheat exporter.

Part 1 said Punjab's history follows from flat, deep, fertile soil with water. This is the moment somebody engineered the water to reach all of it — and it is why the agricultural Punjab of today, on both sides of the border, looks the way it does.

4.3 — Who got the land

This is the part that shaped the society, and it was decided by administrators with maps and files.

The new land was Crown property. It was allotted in grants, and the grantees were selected.

- **Peasant grantees** — the largest category. Families recruited from the crowded central districts of Punjab — Jalandhar, Amritsar, Ludhiana, Hoshiarpur, Gurdaspur — and moved west, hundreds of kilometres, to farm land they had never seen.
- **Selection by caste and district.** Officers chose colonists from communities they considered good cultivators, and recorded the criteria openly. Certain castes were favoured; others were not eligible.
- **Military grants.** Land reserved for serving and retired soldiers, and for districts that recruited well. Chapters 3 and 4 lock together here: **the army supplied the men and the canals supplied the reward.**
- **Horse-breeding grants,** requiring the holder to maintain brood mares for the army.
- **Yeoman and capitalist grants** — larger holdings to men of standing, and some large blocks to investors.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The canal colonies are usually described as an engineering achievement, which they were. Describing them only that way hides the more consequential thing.

The assumption is that the canals were a technical project with social side-effects.

They were a **social project executed with technical means.** The engineering created empty valuable land; the administration then decided who Punjab's population would be in that land, using explicit criteria.

Consider what that involves. A government drew up rules about which castes made good farmers, which districts should supply migrants, which families deserved reward, and how much each should get. **Then it moved hundreds of thousands of people accordingly.**

The result was a region whose demographic composition was **designed.** Villages in the colonies were often laid out on a grid, named by number, and settled with people from one district and one community together.

Almost nothing about western Punjab's population in 1914 was the accumulated result of centuries. It was the result of allotment files from the 1890s.

Hold that when Part 13 arrives. The people who moved west into the canal colonies in the 1890s, and their grandchildren, are among those who had to move again in 1947 — and the communal arithmetic of the districts they moved into had itself been set by these allotments.

4.4 — What it left behind

Three costs, and all three are still present.

Waterlogging and salinity. Irrigating a flat plain without adequate drainage raises the water table. When it reaches the root zone, land waterlogs. When water evaporates from near the surface it leaves salt behind, and the land goes white and dies. This was recognised in the early 1900s and has never been fully solved. **Large areas of the best colony land have been damaged by it.**

Disease. Standing water breeds mosquitoes. Malaria increased sharply in the canal tracts.

Displacement of the people already there. The bars were not empty. Pastoral communities grazed them and were largely not given colony land, because they were not considered cultivators. They lost their grazing and gained nothing.

And a fourth, which Chapter 8 returns to: **the colonists were tenants of the state, not owners**, subject to conditions and fees the government could alter — which produced the largest agitation of the period in 1907.

REMEMBER THIS

The **bars** — the high dry ground between Punjab's rivers — were deep fertile soil lacking only water. The British built the **largest irrigation system in the world** to get water onto them.

Several million acres of scrub became wheat and cotton land. New cities were laid out on empty ground — **Lyallpur, now Faisalabad**, founded in the 1890s.

The land was allotted, not settled. Officers chose colonists by caste and district, moved families hundreds of kilometres west, and reserved large blocks for soldiers.

Western Punjab's population was designed. It was the result of allotment files, not of centuries of settlement.

What it left: waterlogging and salt that are still killing land, malaria, and pastoral communities who lost their grazing and got nothing.

CHAPTER FIVE

Who Owned Punjab

A recorded title deed sounds like protection. In practice it made land sellable, which made it borrowable against, which transferred it — and the law passed to stop that is the most consequential piece of legislation in this part.

5.1 — What a settlement did

Chapter 1 described the land settlement: every field surveyed, every right recorded, a revenue demand fixed in cash for a term of years.

Each of those three elements had a consequence nobody fully intended.

Recording the right made it a property. Before, a cultivator held land by custom, occupancy and the acknowledgement of his village. Afterwards he held a documented, transferable title.

Fixing the demand in cash made the crop a commodity. Revenue had to be paid in money on a fixed date, whatever the harvest. So the crop had to be sold — and sold at harvest time, when everyone else was selling and prices were lowest.

Making the demand rigid removed the old flexibility. A pre-colonial revenue system took a share of what there was; a bad year produced less revenue. A fixed cash demand does not care.

IN REAL TERMS

Follow one farmer through one bad year, because the mechanism is the whole chapter.

The crop fails. The revenue is still due on the date, in cash. He goes to the local moneylender.

The moneylender now has something he never had before: **the farmer has a recorded title that can be pledged.** The loan is secured against the land, at interest that reflects a captive borrower.

Next year is average. He services the interest and does not clear the principal. The year after there is a wedding, or a funeral, or another bad harvest.

Eventually the debt is enforced through a court that exists to enforce contracts — and **the land changes hands legally, by a process the government designed and administers.**

No fraud is required. Every step is lawful. **That is what makes it hard to stop.**

5.2 — The transfer

By the 1890s, official reports were recording substantial and continuing transfer of agricultural land from cultivating communities to **non-cultivating** ones — chiefly urban and trading castes who had lent the money.

This alarmed the administration considerably, and not for sentimental reasons.

IN REAL TERMS

Why did the British care?

Because of Chapter 3. The men they recruited came from the cultivating communities of specific districts. A peasant with land had a stake, a family income and a reason to serve. A dispossessed labourer had none of those, and was a recruiting problem and a political risk.

The Punjab administration's paternalism was real. It was also, precisely here, **the protection of a military recruiting base.**

Both motives were stated in the official record at the time. They did not see a contradiction, and there is no reason to invent one.

5.3 — The Land Alienation Act

In 1900 the government passed the **Punjab Land Alienation Act**.

Its mechanism was simple and drastic. The Act defined certain communities as **"agricultural tribes"**, listed by name, district by district. Land could be permanently sold or mortgaged **only** between members of these notified groups. A moneylender who was not on the list could lend, but could not take the land.

WORD BOX

Agricultural tribe: a legal category created by the 1900 Act. Membership was by caste, fixed by official notification.

Note what that means. **A person's legal capacity to buy land depended on their caste as recorded by the government.** Not on whether they farmed, or wanted to farm, or were good at it.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS THE LAND ALIENATION ACT PROTECTION OR SOMETHING WORSE?

It worked, and it protected people who needed protecting

The transfer of land from cultivators to creditors was real, was documented, and was ruining families. The Act substantially slowed it. Peasant proprietorship in Punjab survived into the twentieth century in a way it did not in some other provinces, and the Act is a large part of why.

Whatever the reasoning behind it, a great many small farmers kept their land who would otherwise have lost it.

It turned caste into law and built the politics that followed

The Act did not protect **cultivators**. It protected **listed castes**. That is a different thing, and the difference had permanent effects.

It made caste a legal status. Being on the list conferred a right that being a farmer did not.

It created a bloc. Notified agricultural tribes across all three religions — Muslim, Hindu and Sikh — now shared a specific legal interest against urban trading castes. Part 12 shows exactly that bloc becoming the **Unionist Party**, which governed Punjab for most of the 1920s and 1930s.

And it sharpened a division. Urban trading communities, largely Hindu, were legally excluded from acquiring rural land — a grievance that fed directly into the communal politics of Chapter 6 and Part 12.

Where things stand: historians accept both. **It genuinely slowed dispossession, and it genuinely converted a social category into a legal one with lasting political consequences.**

Notice the pattern from Chapter 3. The martial races theory took a category and made it real by attaching rewards to it. The Land Alienation Act took a category and made it real by attaching legal rights to it. In both cases the government did not find the group it named — **it created a reason for that group to exist and act together.**

Chapter 6 is the third instance, and the largest.

REMEMBER THIS

The land settlement made holdings into **recorded, transferable titles**, and fixed revenue in **cash on a date** regardless of the harvest.

That produced a mechanism: bad year → borrow → pledge the title → debt enforced in court → **land changes hands entirely lawfully**.

The **Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900** stopped it by listing certain castes as "**agricultural tribes**" and allowing land to pass only between them.

It **worked** — dispossession slowed and peasant proprietorship survived. It also **made caste a legal status**, created a cross-religious rural bloc that becomes the Unionist Party in Part 12, and gave urban trading communities a lasting grievance.

Same pattern as the martial races: the government did not find a group. It gave a group a reason to exist.

CHAPTER SIX

Counting, Printing, Sorting

Between 1881 and 1911 something happened to religious identity in Punjab that had not happened in the previous eight hundred years. Three communities hardened at once, and the machinery that did it included a census form and a printing press.

6.1 — What identity had been like

Part 6's Chapter 8 described religious identity in Punjab as it had actually worked for centuries: overlapping, local, and rarely requiring anyone to choose.

A village might contain a Sufi shrine visited by everyone, a local deity honoured by everyone, and families whose practices could not be sorted into a single box. People described themselves by caste, clan, village and occupation at least as readily as by religion. Sikhs might keep Hindu customs; Muslims kept caste; Hindus revered Sufi saints.

None of this was confusion. It was how a landscape of practices works when nobody is required to file a return.

6.2 — The census

From 1881 the British conducted a decennial census of all India. It recorded, among much else, **religion**.

A census form requires **one answer per person**. There is no box for "we go to the shrine and also the temple". The enumerator must write something.

IN REAL TERMS

Think about what a census actually does, beyond counting.

It forces a choice. People who had never had to define themselves in a single word now did.

It publishes the totals. For the first time, everyone could see how many of each community there were, province by province, district by district.

It makes numbers politically valuable. Once representation, jobs and grants start being distributed by community — which they increasingly were — **the size of your community becomes an asset.**

And that changes the incentives of every religious organisation in the province at once. If numbers matter, then persuading ambiguous people to declare for your side matters. **Conversion, definition and boundary-policing stop being theological questions and become political arithmetic.**

This is not a claim that the British intended it. It is a claim about what happens when you count people by category and then attach anything at all to the count.

6.3 — The reform movements

Into this arrived the printing press, cheap vernacular publishing, the railway, and a generation of educated men with a reforming temperament. The result was a wave of organisations across all three communities, and they defined themselves against each other.

The Arya Samaj, founded by Dayanand Saraswati in 1875 and established at Lahore in 1877, became powerful in Punjab. It called for a return to the Vedas, rejected idol worship and priestly authority, campaigned against caste discrimination and for women's education — and, decisively, developed **shuddhi**, a rite for bringing converts and their descendants back into the Hindu fold.

The Singh Sabha movement began at Amritsar in 1873 and Lahore in 1879. It aimed to reform Sikh practice, promote education and Punjabi in Gurmukhi, and — increasingly, in its Lahore wing — to define Sikh identity as distinct rather than as a branch of Hinduism. Khalsa College was founded at Amritsar in 1892. In 1898 a

leading Singh Sabha writer published a book whose title translates as "**We Are Not Hindus**". The **Anand Marriage Act of 1909** gave the Sikh marriage rite legal standing of its own.

Muslim organisations developed in parallel — the Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam at Lahore in 1884, Islamia College, a large publishing effort, and reform currents arriving from the seminaries of northern India. The Ahmadiyya movement was founded at Qadian in Punjab in 1889 and became a source of intense controversy in its own right.

THE ARGUMENT — DID THE BRITISH CREATE COMMUNAL IDENTITY?

Largely yes — it was made by colonial machinery

The census forced single answers where none had existed. Official categories attached benefits to membership. Separate electorates from 1909 made religion an electoral unit. Recruitment, land law and job quotas all sorted people by community.

Before this apparatus, the boundaries were genuinely soft — Part 6 showed a landscape of overlapping practice with a Muslim Sufi's verses in the Sikh scripture. Afterwards they were hard.

The identities that fought in Part 13 were not ancient. They were, in their modern political form, several decades old.

No — the material was already there

The distinctions were not invented. Parts 7, 8 and 9 contain executions, martyrdoms and wars in which religious identity was entirely real and people died for it. Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur were not killed over a census category.

And the reform movements were **Indian** movements, led by Indians, driven by their own theological and social arguments. Treating them as colonial products denies their leaders any agency and is patronising.

What the British did was change the **terms of competition** — from religious argument to demographic arithmetic. That is a real and serious change. It is not the same as creating the communities.

Where things stand: the mainstream position is between the two, and closer to a specific formulation worth stating carefully.

The communities existed. The boundaries did not. There had been Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus in Punjab for centuries, with real distinctions and real history. What did not exist was a sharp line requiring every individual to fall on one side, with a count kept, and with resources attached to the count.

The colonial state did not create the categories. It made them exclusive, countable and worth fighting over — and Indian organisations, acting for their own reasons, responded rationally to that incentive.

Both halves are needed. Blaming the British alone removes agency from everyone involved. Denying the machinery's effect ignores what happened to a landscape of overlapping practice in thirty years.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Underneath the whole argument sits a belief that feels self-evident:

The assumption is that measuring something does not change it.

A census sounds like a photograph. It is not. **It is an instrument that acts on what it measures.**

The mechanism is worth stating in general terms, because it operates far outside this chapter. When an authority defines categories and requires everyone to be sorted into one, three things follow automatically.

- **Ambiguity is destroyed.** People who lived between categories must now be assigned.
- **The categories acquire boundaries.** Someone must decide the edge cases, and deciding an edge case is defining a boundary.
- **The count becomes a resource.** And anything that is a resource will be competed for.

Chapter 3 made the same point about the martial races and Chapter 5 about agricultural tribes. **This is the third and largest instance, and the one whose consequences arrive in Part 13.**

None of this requires malice, and the evidence does not support a claim of deliberate divide-and-rule as the origin. **The machinery produces the effect whether or not anyone intends it** — which is precisely why it is worth understanding as machinery rather than as a plot.

REMEMBER THIS

Religious identity in Punjab had been **overlapping and local** for centuries. Nobody had been required to choose one word.

The **census from 1881** required exactly that, published the totals, and — as benefits came to be distributed by community — **made the numbers worth fighting over**.

Reform movements rose across all three communities and defined themselves against each other: the **Arya Samaj**, the **Singh Sabha**, and Muslim organisations at Lahore.

The communities existed. The hard boundaries did not. The colonial state did not create the categories — it made them exclusive, countable and valuable.

Measuring something is not photographing it. A census acts on what it counts.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The New Middle Class

Colleges, newspapers, courts and clerks produced a class of educated Punjabis who had not existed before. They also produced an argument about which language Punjab spoke, and in which script — which turned out to be an argument about something else entirely.

7.1 — The institutions

British rule needed clerks, and clerks need schools. What followed went well beyond what was needed.

INSTITUTION	FOUNDED
Government College, Lahore	1864
Punjab University, Lahore	1882
Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam, Lahore	1884
DAV College, Lahore (Arya Samaj)	1886
Islamia College, Lahore	1892
Khalsa College, Amritsar	1892

Look at the dates and the sponsors. **Three of these are community colleges founded within eight years of each other**, by the three reform movements of Chapter 6, in the same city.

IN REAL TERMS

That clustering is not a coincidence and it matters more than the buildings.

Once education becomes the route to employment, and once communities are counted and competing, **each community needs its own college** — to produce its own graduates, who will fill its share of the jobs, and who will be educated among their own.

Which means the new professional class of Punjab was, from the beginning, **educated in separate institutions by community.**

A generation of lawyers, teachers, journalists and officials grew up who had not met each other. Their networks, their friendships and their assumptions were formed inside communal institutions — and they became the political leadership of Part 12.

7.2 — Print

The printing press reached Punjab in force in the second half of the century, and the effect was enormous.

Newspapers appeared in Urdu, English, Punjabi and Hindi. Religious tracts were printed cheaply in tens of thousands. Scriptural texts became available to anyone who could read rather than to those who could reach a manuscript. Controversies that had been conducted between scholars became public arguments conducted in print, in the marketplace, with pamphlets answered by pamphlets.

Print rewards the sharp position. A tract saying "our tradition and theirs are essentially compatible" does not sell. A tract explaining why they are irreconcilable does.

7.3 — Which language, which script

And this is where it became explicit.

British administration in Punjab used **Urdu**, written in the Persian script, as the language of the courts, the schools and the government. Persian had been the language of government since Part 6 — the change was to the vernacular, but not to the vernacular most people actually spoke.

Punjabi was the mother tongue of the overwhelming majority of the province and had no official standing.

What followed over the next decades was a three-way alignment that has shaped the region ever since:

- **Urdu in the Persian script** — increasingly identified with Muslim Punjabis, and already the language of administration.
- **Hindi in Devanagari** — promoted by the Arya Samaj and Hindu organisations.
- **Punjabi in Gurmukhi** — promoted by the Singh Sabha, and increasingly identified with Sikhs.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The language controversy is usually explained as a natural expression of religious difference. It was very nearly the opposite.

The assumption is that the argument was about language.

Notice what is strange about the alignment. **Almost everyone in Punjab spoke Punjabi** — Muslim, Hindu and Sikh, in the same villages, in the same dialects. Language was the one thing they demonstrably shared.

What differed was the **script** and the **literary register** — which are not what people speak but what they write, and which had become attached to communal institutions and communal schooling.

So the shared thing was made into the dividing thing, by three movements each promoting a written form associated with itself, and by a government that had chosen a fourth option and given it all the jobs.

Part 7's Chapter 5 argued that Gurmukhi mattered because a new script has no existing priesthood attached to it — that it put scripture beyond every existing gatekeeper. **Three hundred years later the same logic runs in reverse:** a script that belongs to one community is a boundary marker as well as a tool.

The deepest cost is easy to miss. Punjabi — the actual spoken language of the province, with a literature running back to Baba Farid — ended up as nobody's official language, claimed by one community and disowned by the others. Part 13 shows what that produced after 1947, on both sides of the border.

REMEMBER THIS

Colleges multiplied — Government College 1864, Punjab University 1882, and within eight years **three community colleges in Lahore and Amritsar**, one for each reform movement.

So Punjab's new professional class was **educated separately by community from the start**. They became the political leadership of Part 12.

Print rewards the sharp position. Controversies moved from scholars' debates to cheap pamphlets answering each other.

Administration ran in Urdu. **Punjabi — what nearly everyone actually spoke — had no official standing.**

The argument was never really about language. Everyone spoke Punjabi. It was about script and schooling — so the one thing all three communities shared was turned into the thing that divided them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

What It Cost

Plague, debt, dispossession and a colour bar — and in 1907 the first mass agitation in Punjab's modern history, over a Bill about who really owned the canal colonies.

8.1 — Plague

Bubonic plague reached India in 1896 and Punjab shortly after. It became the single deadliest event of this part, and it is barely remembered.

Mortality was severe through the first decade of the twentieth century, with the worst years in the middle of it. Whole districts recorded almost no population growth across the decade between censuses — deaths cancelling births entirely.

The government's response involved forced hospitalisation, house searches, segregation camps and the destruction of property, carried out by British officers and Indian subordinates entering homes.

IN REAL TERMS

Set two things side by side.

The canals of Chapter 4 were built to prevent famine and increase production. They did both.

The railways of Chapter 1 moved troops and grain. They also moved plague, faster and further than it could otherwise have travelled.

And irrigation raised the water table, which increased mosquito breeding, which increased malaria — **the largest single cause of death in the canal districts.**

None of this was intended. All of it followed directly from the improvements.

This is why the balance-sheet framing in the front matter does not work. The canal and the malaria are not two entries to be netted off. They are the same project.

8.2 — Debt

Chapter 5's mechanism did not stop with the 1900 Act. The Act prevented land passing to non-agriculturists; it did not prevent debt.

Rural indebtedness remained very high through this period and got worse. What changed was who held the mortgage — increasingly, better-off members of the notified agricultural tribes themselves.

The Act protected the caste category, not the poor farmer. A small cultivator could still lose his land; it just went to a larger cultivator instead of to a moneylender.

8.3 — 1907

The largest political event of the period grew directly out of Chapter 4, and it turned on a question of ownership.

The canal colonists had been given land on terms. They had assumed — and had been broadly encouraged to assume — that after fulfilling conditions they would hold it as proprietors.

The **Punjab Colonisation of Land Bill** of 1906 made explicit that they would not. It confirmed that colonists were **tenants of the government**, subject to conditions, fees and fines the administration could set, with restrictions on inheritance and on what they could do with their holdings.

At the same time, water rates on the Bari Doab Canal were raised and land revenue was enhanced in several districts.

The reaction was the first mass agitation Punjab had seen under British rule.

- Meetings across the colony districts and the central Punjab districts the colonists had come from.
- A protest song that became the movement's name — "**Pagri Sambhal Jatta**", roughly "hold on to your turban, farmer" — meaning hold on to your honour and your land.
- Leadership from **Ajit Singh**, whose organisation carried the agitation into the villages, and support from **Lala Lajpat Rai**.
- Unease in the army, whose recruits came from precisely these families.

The government responded by **deporting Ajit Singh and Lala Lajpat Rai** without trial in May 1907. And then the Viceroy **vetoed the Bill**.

IN REAL TERMS

The veto is the interesting part, and it tells you where the real limits of colonial power were.

The government could deport leaders without trial, and did. **It could not afford to alienate the canal colonists.**

Why? Because Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 had locked together. **The colonists were the recruiting base.** The families holding canal land were the families supplying the Indian Army. An agitation spreading from the colonies into the regiments was the one thing the administration could not risk.

So it climbed down on the substance while punishing the individuals.

The lesson was noticed. 1907 demonstrated that mass agitation in Punjab could force the government to retreat — and it produced, in Ajit Singh's deportation, a generation of politically formed young men. His nephew was born in 1907. His name was Bhagat Singh, and he is in Part 12.

8.4 — The balance

THE ARGUMENT — WHAT WAS THE NET EFFECT OF BRITISH RULE ON PUNJAB?

The front matter argued that a net figure cannot be produced. It is still worth setting the two cases out at full strength, because both are made seriously.

Punjab gained, substantially

The canal system transformed agriculture permanently and still underpins it. Railways, roads and the telegraph connected the province. A recorded land title gave cultivators a security they had not had. Peace ended a century in which Punjab had been fought over continuously. Education expanded from almost nothing. Sati, female infanticide and slavery were suppressed. Cash income arrived through army service on a scale no other institution could have supplied. Punjab was, by 1914, among the most prosperous provinces in India — and it had been among the most disordered in 1849.

The gains were incidental to extraction

Every item on that list served the ruling power first. Canals generated revenue and produced exportable wheat. Railways moved troops and raw materials out. Land titles made revenue collectable. Recruitment served imperial wars in Africa, China and Europe.

Meanwhile: **plague and malaria killed on a scale nothing in this part matches**; rural debt was endemic; the colonists were tenants of the state and told so in 1906; political rights were minimal and Punjab was governed by personal rule for decades; and Chapters 5 and 6 turned social categories into legal and countable ones with consequences that arrive in Part 13.

Where things stand: the four questions from the front matter, answered as directly as the evidence allows.

What was built? A great deal, and it was real. The canals, the railways, the record of rights, the colleges.

Who paid and who benefited? Revenue came from Punjabi cultivators. Benefits went unevenly — favoured castes in favoured districts gained a great deal; pastoralists, unlisted castes and the urban poor gained little or lost.

Was it done for the stated reason? Largely not. Security, revenue and recruitment explain the pattern of investment better than improvement does, and the official record says so openly.

What would have happened otherwise? Genuinely unknown, and anyone confident here is guessing. Punjab in 1849 was a collapsing state with an army in politics. It is not obvious what forty years of that would have produced.

Those four answers are worth more than any verdict, and they do not add up to one.

REMEMBER THIS

Plague from 1897 was the deadliest event of the period — whole districts recorded almost no population growth across a decade. Irrigation raised the water table and **malaria** followed.

The canal and the malaria are **the same project**, not two entries to be netted off.

The **1906 Colonisation Bill** confirmed that colonists were government **tenants, not owners**. The result was "**Pagri Sambhal Jatta**" — the first mass agitation in Punjab under British rule.

The government **deported Ajit Singh and Lajpat Rai** without trial and then **vetoed the Bill** — because the colonists were the army's recruiting base and it could not risk them.

1907 proved that mass agitation could force a retreat. That lesson did not go unnoticed.

CHAPTER NINE

1914

A revolutionary movement founded by Punjabi labourers on the American west coast, a ship turned away from Vancouver, and the largest recruiting drive in the province's history — all in the same eighteen months.

9.1 — Punjabis abroad

By the early twentieth century Punjabis were emigrating in numbers — to Canada, the United States, East Africa, Malaya, Hong Kong and Australia.

Many were ex-soldiers. Chapter 3 had produced a population of men who had served overseas, seen other countries, and come home to districts where opportunity was limited.

What they found abroad was work, better wages — and a colour bar. Immigration restrictions, denial of citizenship, exclusion from voting, and open hostility.

IN REAL TERMS

Consider the contradiction from inside.

A man has served in the Indian Army. He has been told he belongs to a martial race, has fought for the British Empire, and is a subject of the same Crown as the people in British Columbia.

He arrives in Canada and finds he cannot vote, cannot bring his family, and is legally barred from entry by rules written specifically to exclude him.

The empire's own logic had been broken in front of him. Either he was a subject with rights or he was not, and the answer turned out to depend on where he stood.

That contradiction is the origin of the movement in the next section, and it was articulated by the men who experienced it, not imported from anywhere.

9.2 — Ghadar

In 1913, Indian emigrants on the American west coast — overwhelmingly Punjabi, and largely Sikh — founded an organisation dedicated to the armed overthrow of British rule in India.

It took its name from its newspaper: **Ghadar**, meaning revolt. **Sohan Singh Bhakna**, a former soldier and mill worker, was its president; **Lala Har Dayal**, an intellectual, its most prominent writer.

The paper was printed in Urdu, Punjabi and other languages and smuggled into India and to Punjabi communities across the world.

Its argument was direct and unusual for the period: **that reform was pointless, that the British would not leave voluntarily, and that Indians should return home and rise**. It was explicitly secular, addressing Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs as Indians, and its writing is notably free of religious appeal.

9.3 — The Komagata Maru

In 1914 a Punjabi businessman, **Gurdit Singh**, chartered a Japanese ship, the **Komagata Maru**, and filled it with several hundred passengers — mostly Sikhs, some Muslims and Hindus — intending to test Canada's exclusion laws by sailing directly to Vancouver.

The ship arrived in May 1914 and was not permitted to land. It sat in the harbour for two months while the passengers ran short of food and water and the case was fought in the courts. They lost. In July the ship was escorted out by a naval vessel.

It sailed back across the Pacific and arrived at **Budge Budge**, near Calcutta, in September 1914. There the passengers were met by police who intended to send them directly to Punjab under escort. There was a confrontation. Firing killed around twenty people.

IN REAL TERMS

The Komagata Maru did more political work than any pamphlet.

It was a test case, conducted in public, and it produced an unambiguous answer.

Several hundred British subjects, travelling legally on a chartered ship, were refused entry to a British dominion, held offshore for two months, sent back across an ocean, and fired on when they arrived home.

Nobody had to explain what it meant. **The empire had answered the question itself, in front of witnesses, in the newspapers.**

Ghadar's recruitment increased sharply afterwards.

9.4 — And the war

In August 1914 the European war began, and Punjab's other role took over.

Recruitment expanded enormously. Over the course of the war Punjab supplied several hundred thousand men — the largest contribution of any Indian province by a wide margin, from a province with a fraction of India's population. Punjabi troops fought in France, Mesopotamia, East Africa and Gallipoli.

At the same time, Ghadar activists returned from abroad intending to raise a mutiny in the Indian Army. The attempt was penetrated by informers and broken in early 1915. Trials followed, and a number of men were executed — among them **Kartar Singh Sarabha**, who was nineteen.

IN REAL TERMS

Hold the two facts together, because they are the shape of Part 12.

In 1914–18, Punjab supplied more soldiers to the British Empire than any other Indian province.

In 1914–15, Punjab produced the most serious attempt at armed revolution against that empire that India had seen.

Often from the same districts. Sometimes from the same families.

This is not a contradiction to be resolved. It is what a province looks like when service is the main route to a living and the empire has just demonstrated, in Vancouver harbour, exactly what it thinks of the people serving it.

Part 12 begins four years later, when the men who fought in France came home and found out what their service had bought them.

REMEMBER THIS

Punjabis emigrated in numbers — many ex-soldiers — and met a colour bar abroad that broke the empire's own logic in front of them.

In 1913 they founded **Ghadar** on the American west coast: explicitly secular, explicitly revolutionary, arguing that the British would not leave voluntarily.

The **Komagata Maru** was refused entry to Vancouver in 1914, held offshore for two months, sent back, and its passengers fired on at Budge Budge. **The empire answered the question itself, in public.**

In the war Punjab supplied **more soldiers than any other Indian province**. In the same months, the Ghadar rising was attempted and broken, and **Kartar Singh Sarabha** was executed at nineteen.

Both at once, often from the same districts. That is the shape of Part 12.

CHAPTER TEN

An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

This is the best-documented part of the series by a wide margin. The gaps are therefore of a particular kind — and one of them is the same gap as every other part.

Genuinely unknown

- **How many people plague and malaria actually killed in Punjab.** Registration was incomplete and many deaths were never recorded.
- **The real level of rural indebtedness.** Most lending was informal and undocumented; official figures are estimates.
- **How much land actually changed hands before the 1900 Act,** as against how much the administration believed had.
- **What the pastoralists displaced by the canal colonies did afterwards.** They appear in the record as an obstacle and then disappear from it.
- **Whether the census changed how people thought of themselves, or only how they answered.** The forms record the answer, not the belief.
- **How widely Ghadar's ideas actually circulated in Punjab,** as opposed to among emigrants.
- **What soldiers thought about their service.** A small number of letters survive, censored. Most of several hundred thousand men left nothing.
- **Whether the 1907 agitation would have spread to the army.** The government believed it might. Nobody knows.
- **What most Punjabis made of British rule.** The great gap in every part of this series, and it does not close just because the records improve.

Solid

- Punjab was annexed in 1849 and governed as a non-regulation province with wide personal powers for district officers.
- Punjab did not join the rebellion of 1857, was disarmed preemptively, and supplied a large part of the force that retook Delhi.
- Recruitment was deliberately shifted to Punjab, the Frontier and Nepal after 1857, justified by the martial races doctrine.
- By 1914 Punjab supplied approximately half the Indian Army from roughly a fourteenth of India's population.
- A canal system was built from the 1850s onwards, the largest in the world, bringing several million acres under cultivation and creating new cities including Lyallpur.
- Colony land was allotted by the state, with grantees selected by caste, district and military service.
- Waterlogging and salinity were recognised as serious problems by the early twentieth century and have not been solved.
- The Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900 restricted land transfer to notified "agricultural tribes", defined by caste.
- Decennial censuses from 1881 recorded religion and required a single answer per person.
- The Arya Samaj, Singh Sabha and Muslim reform organisations all expanded rapidly in Punjab in this period, founding separate colleges within a few years of each other.
- Urdu in the Persian script was the language of administration; Punjabi had no official standing.
- Plague arrived in 1897 and caused very heavy mortality through the following decade.
- The Colonisation Bill agitation of 1906–07 led to the deportation of Ajit Singh and Lala Lajpat Rai and to the Viceroy vetoing the Bill.

- The Ghadar Party was founded in 1913 on the American west coast; the Komagata Maru was refused entry to Canada in 1914; the Ghadar rising was broken in 1915.

A CLOSING WORD ON MADE THINGS

One theme has run through six of these ten chapters, and it is worth stating on its own before Part 12.

A very large amount of what people now think of as traditional Punjab was made in this sixty-five years.

The **agricultural landscape** of western Punjab — the canals, the grid villages, the wheat and cotton economy — was engineered from the 1880s.

The **military tradition** of specific Punjabi communities was created by a recruitment policy attached to rewards, and became true because it was acted on.

The **caste categories** that determine who may own agricultural land were written into statute in 1900.

The **hard religious boundaries**, the requirement to be one thing, and the political value of numbers, came with the census and the movements that responded to it.

The **language-and-script alignment** that still divides the region was formed in the same decades.

None of this means any of it is false or shallow. Things that are made are still real. A tradition that is a century old is still a tradition, and people have lived and died by all of these.

But it does mean that when someone appeals to how things have always been in Punjab, the honest response is usually a date. **Very often the answer is: since about 1890.**

REFERENCE

Timeline of Part 11

Dates are firm in this part. Where a figure is an estimate, it is marked in the chapter.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
29 March 1849	Punjab annexed. <i>Where Part 10 ended.</i> Board of Administration under the Lawrence brothers.
1849 – 53	Disarmament, road-building, the first land settlement. Sati, female infanticide and slavery suppressed.
1853	The Board dissolved. John Lawrence Chief Commissioner; rule through the peasantry rather than the aristocracy.
1859	Upper Bari Doab Canal completed — the first major irrigation work.
May 1857	The Bengal Army mutinies at Meerut. Punjab does not join. Regiments disarmed preemptively at Lahore, Peshawar and Ferozepur.
Sept 1857	Delhi retaken , with Punjabi troops forming a large part of the besieging force.
1858 – 60s	The Indian Army rebuilt. Recruitment shifted to Punjab, the Frontier and Nepal. The martial races doctrine takes hold.
1864	Government College, Lahore founded.
1875 – 77	Arya Samaj founded; established at Lahore.
1873 / 1879	Singh Sabha founded at Amritsar, then Lahore.
1881	The first of the regular decennial censuses , recording religion.
1882	Punjab University founded. Sirhind Canal opened.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
1884 – 92	Community colleges founded in quick succession: DAV (1886), Islamia (1892), Khalsa College Amritsar (1892).
1889	The Ahmadiyya movement founded at Qadian.
from 1892	Lower Chenab Canal and the Chenab Colony — around two million acres. Lyallpur founded.
1896 – 97	Plague reaches India and then Punjab. Very heavy mortality through the following decade.
1898	" <i>We Are Not Hindus</i> " published — the Singh Sabha case for a distinct Sikh identity.
1900	Punjab Land Alienation Act . Land transfer restricted to notified "agricultural tribes", defined by caste.
from 1901	Lower Jhelum Canal and the Jhelum Colony. Sargodha founded 1903.
1905 – 17	Triple Canals Project — three rivers linked to transfer surplus water.
1906 – 07	Colonisation Bill agitation. " Pagri Sambhal Jatta ." Ajit Singh and Lala Lajpat Rai deported without trial; the Viceroy vetoed the Bill .
1909	Anand Marriage Act gives the Sikh marriage rite legal standing. Separate electorates introduced.
1913	Ghadar Party founded on the American west coast; its newspaper begins publication.
May – Sept 1914	Komagata Maru refused entry at Vancouver, held two months, sent back, and fired on at Budge Budge.
Aug 1914	War begins. Punjab supplies more troops than any other Indian province.
1915	The Ghadar rising is broken. Kartar Singh Sarabha executed at nineteen. Part 12 starts here .

REFERENCE

Glossary

Every hard word used in Part 11, in plain English.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Agricultural tribe	A caste listed by the government under the 1900 Act as entitled to acquire agricultural land. A legal status based on caste.
Arya Samaj	A Hindu reform movement founded in 1875, powerful in Punjab. Rejected idol worship and priestly authority; developed the <i>shuddhi</i> rite.
Bar	The high dry ground between two rivers, above the reach of flooding. The canal colonies were built on the bars.
Canal colony	A district of newly irrigated land settled by government-selected grantees.
Census	The decennial count of population, recording religion and caste among other categories, from 1881.
Ghadar	"Revolt". The revolutionary party founded by Punjabi emigrants in North America in 1913, and its newspaper.
Land settlement	The survey of every field, recording of rights, and fixing of a cash revenue demand for a term of years.
Martial races	The doctrine that some Indian communities were naturally suited to soldiering. Used to justify concentrating recruitment in Punjab, the Frontier and Nepal.
Non-regulation province	A territory governed outside the standard legal codes, with district officers holding combined judicial, revenue and police powers.
Salinity	Salt left near the soil surface when irrigation water evaporates. It sterilises land. Still a major problem in the canal tracts.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Shuddhi	An Arya Samaj rite for bringing converts and their descendants into the Hindu fold.
Singh Sabha	The Sikh reform movement founded in 1873 and 1879, promoting education, Punjabi in Gurmukhi, and a distinct Sikh identity.
Waterlogging	The rise of the water table into the root zone under sustained irrigation without drainage, drowning crops.

ABOUT

About the Author

Lovepreet Singh

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CURRENTLY

Second-year MBA, Panjab University — Business Strategy and Analysis, specialising in Business Intelligence

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Lovepreet Singh is a researcher and writer working toward doctoral research. He writes long-form work on Indian history, society, religion, philosophy, public policy and technology — built from the record, in plain language, with the competing views left in.

His background is not in a history department, and he thinks that is worth saying plainly. He came to this subject the way most people do: from the outside, wanting to understand the place he is from, and finding that the good books were unreadable and the readable books were thin.

What he brought instead was the habit of his own training — the analyst's discipline of asking what the data actually supports, where a claim is really coming from, and which assumptions are doing the quiet work underneath an argument. That discipline runs through every chapter of this series. It is why almost every chapter has a box labelled *The Hidden Assumption*, and it is the part of this work he is most attached to.

The Living Archive

This series belongs to a larger project. The Living Archive is a body of long-form research on history, society, religion, public policy and technology, published openly and free to read at misterlove.in.

- **Plain language.** Hard ideas explained in ordinary words, with nothing left out to make them fit.
- **Evidence first.** Show the thing itself, and be clear about what it can and cannot prove.
- **Competing views.** Where the field disagrees, both sides get their strongest case. Open questions stay open.

A word on sources

This is written for general readers, so it carries no footnotes. It is a synthesis of the published scholarly record rather than new primary research, and it does not claim otherwise. This part rests on an unusually rich archive — settlement reports, census volumes, irrigation and colonisation records, army recruiting handbooks and a large periodical press. Where a claim comes from the administration's own account of itself, that is indicated, because a government describing its motives is a particular kind of source.

Corrections are welcome. If you find an error, or think an argument has been given less than its best case, write to the address above — later editions will say what was changed and who caught it.

WHAT COMES NEXT

Part 12 — Ghadar to Independence

Part 12 runs from 1915 to the eve of Partition. It is the part in which Punjab produces both the most radical anti-colonial politics in India and the province that resisted the demand for Pakistan longest — and then produces the border.

Among the questions it takes on:

- What actually happened at **Jallianwala Bagh** in April 1919, why the crowd was there, and what the official inquiry found?
- How did the **Gurdwara reform movement** and the Akali Dal turn a religious campaign into a mass political force — and what did Nankana Sahib cost?
- Who was **Bhagat Singh** beyond the poster — and what did he actually write?
- What was the **Unionist Party**, how did a cross-communal rural coalition govern Punjab for twenty years, and why did it collapse in 1946?
- How did the demand for **Pakistan** land in a province where no community was a majority everywhere?
- Why did the men who had spent decades keeping Punjab out of communal politics fail in the last eighteen months?



END OF PART 11 OF 14

THE LIVING ARCHIVE · LOVEPREET SINGH · MISTERLOVE.IN

THE LIVING ARCHIVE

A HISTORY OF PUNJAB

PART TWELVE

Ghadar to Independence

1915 – 1947

Rebels who sailed home to die. A garden with one gate. A
boy of twenty-three who wanted to be heard, not saved.
And a province that held itself together for twenty-five
years, then came apart in five months.

WRITTEN BY

Lovepreet Singh

misterlove.in

How to read this part

This is the twelfth part of a fourteen-part history of Punjab. It runs from 1915 to the summer of 1947 — from a failed rebellion by men who had come home from America, to the day it was agreed that Punjab would be cut in two.

It is the shortest stretch of time any part of this series has covered. It is also the most crowded. In thirty-two years Punjab produced a rising, a massacre, a mass religious reform movement, the most famous young revolutionary in modern Indian history, a form of politics nobody else in India managed to build, and then the total collapse of that politics. Almost everything people argue about today, when they argue about Punjab, was set down in these years.

Three rules hold for this part, as they have for every part before it.

Plain language. Short sentences. Ordinary words. Every hard word explained the moment it appears, in a Word Box. Nothing is left out to make the writing simpler. The ideas stay whole; only the wording gets easier.

Evidence first. Where a claim comes from a document, the document is named. Where the evidence is thin, this is said out loud. This part is unusual in one way: much of what we know comes from the government's own paperwork. A government describing why it did something is a particular kind of source, and it is treated as one.

Competing views. Where historians disagree, both sides get their strongest case, in an Argument Box. Where the disagreement has not been settled, it is left unsettled. You are not being steered to a conclusion.

There is one more box you will meet often here, more often than in any earlier part. It is called *The Hidden Assumption*. It stops the story and asks what a claim is quietly taking for granted. This period generates more of those than any other, because so much of what was said at the time — by the British, by every Indian party, and by people writing since — rests on an assumption that was never stated and never tested.

A note on names. Almost every place in this part is now in Pakistan or in India, and some have changed names since. Names are given as they were used at the time, with the modern name in brackets where it helps.

A note on the ending. This part stops in the last week of June 1947, with the decision made and the border not yet drawn. What happened next — the line itself, and the killing and the walking that came with it — is Part 13. That is not squeamishness. It is that the decision and the disaster are two different subjects, and running them together makes it harder to see either one clearly.

Thirty-two years at a glance

Come back to this page whenever you lose your footing. Everything here is explained in full later.

1913

The Ghadar Party is founded by Punjabi migrants on the west coast of North America. Its newspaper begins printing in San Francisco in November.

1914

The *Komagata Maru* is turned away from Canada. The First World War begins. Punjab becomes the main recruiting ground of the Indian Army.

1915

February: the Ghadar rising is betrayed and collapses. The Lahore Conspiracy trials follow. Kartar Singh Sarabha is hanged in November, aged nineteen.

1918

The war ends. Soldiers come home to high prices and no reward. Influenza kills more Punjabis than the war did.

1919

March: the Rowlatt Act. 13 April: the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar. Martial law across central Punjab.

1920

The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and the Akali Dal are founded within a month of each other.

1921

February: the killings at Nankana Sahib. The Gurdwara Reform movement turns into a mass campaign.

1923

The Unionist Party is formed — Muslim, Hindu and Sikh landholders in one party, against the towns.

1925

The Sikh Gurdwaras Act. The reform movement wins, and hands Sikh politics a permanent machine.

1928

Lala Lajpat Rai is beaten at a protest in Lahore and dies weeks later. In December, a police officer is shot in revenge.

1929

April: Bhagat Singh and B. K. Dutt throw a bomb in the Assembly in Delhi and wait to be arrested. September: Jatindra Nath Das dies on hunger strike.

1931

23 March: Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru are hanged in Lahore Jail.

1937

The first elections under the new constitution. The Unionists win Punjab comfortably. Sikandar Hyat Khan becomes Premier.

1940

23 March: the Muslim League passes the Lahore Resolution, in Punjab's own capital.

1942

Sikandar Hyat Khan dies. Khizr Hyat Khan Tiwana takes over a party that is already weakening.

1946

Elections. The Muslim League is the largest party in Punjab but has no majority. A coalition without the League takes office.

1947

2 March: the coalition falls. March: mass killing in the Rawalpindi division. 3 June: partition is announced. 23 June: the Punjab Assembly votes to divide the province.

The Men Who Sailed Back

A rebellion planned in Oregon, printed in San Francisco, and broken in a Punjab village by one man with a notebook.

In the years just before the First World War, several thousand Punjabis were living on the west coast of North America. Most were Sikhs. Most were from the central districts — Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, Amritsar, Ludhiana. Many had been soldiers. They worked in the lumber mills of British Columbia, on the railways, and in the fruit orchards of California.

They had gone for money, and they were earning it. A mill hand in Vancouver could make in a month what a farmhand in Doaba made in six. Land at home was being bought with wages sent from Oregon.

But they had also gone into something they had not expected. They were treated as a race problem. Canada and the United States both moved to shut them out. There were riots against them in Bellingham and in Vancouver. They were told, in law and in the street, that they were not wanted.

What made this unbearable was a comparison. These men were British subjects. Many had worn the King's uniform. They had been told all their lives that the Empire was a family of peoples under one Crown. Then they arrived in another part of that same Empire and were treated as an infestation. And when they complained, the Brit-

ish government did nothing, because doing something would have annoyed a white settler colony that mattered more.

That is the exact point at which a loyal subject becomes a rebel. Not when he is oppressed — he had been oppressed at home too. When he notices that the story he was told about the Empire is not true.

A newspaper called Mutiny

In 1913 a group of these men founded a party in Astoria, Oregon. Sohan Singh Bhakna, a former soldier from Amritsar district, was its first president. Har Dayal, a Delhi-born intellectual who had been at Oxford and had abandoned it, became its secretary and its main writer.

They called it the Ghadar Party, after its newspaper.

WORD BOX — GHADAR

Ghadar (also written *Ghadr*) is Urdu for mutiny, or revolt. The word was not chosen by accident. The British called the great rising of 1857 "the Mutiny", and used the word as an insult. The party picked up the insult and wore it. Calling your newspaper *Mutiny* in 1913 was a way of saying: yes, that is exactly what we are.

The first issue was printed in San Francisco on 1 November 1913, from a house the members called the Yugantar Ashram. It came out in Urdu and Gurmukhi, and later in other languages. It was posted, carried, smuggled and read aloud to men who could not read, in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Manila, Singapore, Rangoon, Fiji, Panama, and across Punjab.

Its message was short enough to repeat from memory. India was poor because it was ruled. The British stayed because Indians served them — as soldiers, as police, as clerks. If those Indians stopped

serving, the whole thing would fall over in a week. Religion was not the point. Reform was not the point. The point was to throw them out, by force, and quickly.

The paper carried the names of the men hanged in earlier risings. It printed the pay of a British officer next to the pay of an Indian sepoy. It ran a standing feature listing what the Empire had taken and what it had given back.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

We have the newspaper. Complete runs of *Ghadar* survive in libraries in India and North America, and the British collected it obsessively themselves — intelligence officers translated it and pasted it into files that are now in the archives in London and Delhi.

This is an unusual luxury. For most rebel movements in history we only have what the state said about them. Here we have what the rebels said about themselves, in their own words, week by week, before they knew how it would end.

The ship

In the spring of 1914 a Singapore-based businessman named Gurdit Singh chartered a Japanese steamship, the *Komagata Maru*, and filled it with passengers bound for Canada. There were 376 of them. Most were Sikhs.

The plan was legal in spirit and pointed in intent. Canada had a rule that immigrants must arrive by continuous journey from their country of origin. There was no continuous shipping route from India to Canada, which was exactly why the rule existed. Gurdit Singh chartered a ship to make one.

The ship reached Vancouver harbour on 23 May 1914. It was not allowed to land. It sat in the harbour for two months while lawyers

argued and food and water ran low. Twenty-four passengers were admitted. The rest were sent back.

The ship returned to India and anchored at Budge Budge, near Calcutta, on 29 September 1914. The government intended to put the passengers straight onto a train to Punjab, where they could be watched. The passengers refused. There was a confrontation, then firing. Around nineteen passengers were killed.

IN REAL TERMS

Two months in a harbour, in sight of a city, not allowed to step onto the dock. Long enough for a baby to be born on board. Long enough for the drinking water to become the main thing anyone talked about.

The distance from the ship to the shore was a few hundred metres — less than a five-minute walk, if walking had been allowed. That gap is the whole story of the voyage.

The *Komagata Maru* did not create Ghadar. It was already three years old in spirit and one year old in print. What the voyage did was turn an argument into an experience. Thousands of people in Punjab now knew somebody who had been on that ship, or had been at the dock, or had been shot at. The newspaper's claim — that the Empire's promise was a lie — had been tested in public and had failed in public.

Coming home to start a war

Then the war began, and Ghadar decided that its moment had arrived. The reasoning was simple. Britain was fighting in Europe. The best British troops had left India. The Indian Army was full of Punjabis. If the Punjabi regiments could be turned, India would be lost to Britain in a month.

So the party told its members to go home and do it. Several thousand did. They sailed from San Francisco, from Manila, from Hong Kong, through the second half of 1914 and into 1915. Many were arrested at the docks in Calcutta the moment they landed, because the government had read the newspaper too and had a list.

The rest reached Punjab and set about organising a rising. They contacted regiments at Ferozepur, Lahore, Rawalpindi and Meerut. They collected weapons. They robbed to fund themselves. They made bombs, badly. The date was fixed for 21 February 1915.

The plan failed completely. A police informer named Kirpal Singh had got inside the organisation. The leaders learned they were being watched and moved the rising forward to 19 February. It made no difference. The government knew about that too. Regiments were disarmed before the day. Arrests began immediately.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS GHADAR A FAILURE?

On the face of it the answer is obvious. It planned a rebellion; the rebellion did not happen; its members were hanged. But historians have disagreed sharply about what that means.

THE CASE THAT IT FAILED

It achieved none of its aims. Not one regiment mutinied. Not one district rose. The organisation was penetrated by a single informer, which suggests it had no serious security. Its leaders misjudged Punjab completely: they assumed that villages full of serving soldiers' families were ready to revolt, when in fact those families were doing well out of the army. Recruitment in Punjab went *up* during the war, not down. Judged as a plan to remove the British in 1915, it was a fantasy.

THE CASE THAT IT MATTERED ANYWAY

Movements are not only judged by whether their plan works. Ghadar put a fully worked-out anti-colonial politics into circulation in Punjab, in Punjabi, for the first time — one that was secular, republican and unbothered by caste or creed. It supplied the language and the martyrs that later movements used. Bhagat Singh's circle read Ghadar literature and held Kartar Singh Sarabha's photograph. It also frightened the government into the repression that produced 1919, which produced everything after that.

WHERE THIS LEAVES US

Both are true and they are not really in conflict. Ghadar failed as an operation and succeeded as a transmission. The honest way to say it is that it lost its war and won its argument, but only after everyone who had made the argument was dead.

The trials

What followed was a set of mass trials at Lahore, held under emergency wartime law by a special tribunal of three judges. There was no jury. There was no appeal.

In the first Lahore Conspiracy Case, 291 men were tried. Forty-two were sentenced to death. More than a hundred were transported for life to the penal settlement in the Andaman Islands. Further cases followed through the war.

WORD BOX — TRANSPORTATION

Transportation for life meant being shipped to a prison colony overseas and never coming back. For Indian political prisoners it usually meant the Cellular Jail in the Andaman Islands, in the Bay of Bengal — a purpose-built prison where men were kept in single cells and worked at oil mills. Prisoners called it *Kala Pani*, the black water.

The best remembered of the condemned was Kartar Singh Sarabha, from a village near Ludhiana. He had gone to California as a student. He came back to organise a rebellion. He was hanged at Lahore Central Jail on 16 November 1915. He was nineteen years old.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Ghadar's whole strategy rested on one unexamined idea: that Punjabi soldiers served the British only because they had not yet been told the truth. Tell them, and they would turn.

This assumed that the soldiers' loyalty was ignorance. It was not. For a peasant family in Ludhiana or Rawalpindi, army service meant cash, a pension, land grants in the new canal districts, and status at home. The soldiers had looked at the deal and taken it — not because they loved the Empire, but because it paid.

The same hidden assumption comes back again and again in this part, and it is worth naming now, because it will keep returning: *the belief that people who do not join your movement have simply not understood it yet*. Ghadar believed it in 1915. Congress believed it about Punjab's Muslim peasants in 1937. The Unionists believed it about their own voters in 1946. Every one of them was wrong in the same way.

REMEMBER THIS

Ghadar was made abroad, by migrants who discovered that being a British subject meant nothing once they left India. It brought back a politics that was secular, republican and violent, and it failed at once because it misread its own homeland.

It matters for what it handed on: a vocabulary, a set of martyrs, and the proof that Punjabis would organise against the Raj. The government drew a conclusion too — that Punjab was dangerous and should be governed with a hard hand. That conclusion led directly to 1919.

CHAPTER TWO

The War and What It Cost

Punjab gave the Empire more soldiers than any other province, and was handed a bill instead of a reward.

While a few thousand Ghadar men were trying to start a mutiny, several hundred thousand other Punjabis were doing the opposite. They were enlisting.

Punjab was already the recruiting heart of the Indian Army before 1914. Part 11 explained why: after 1857 the British had rebuilt the army around a theory that certain communities were natural fighters, and had concentrated recruitment in the north-west. The war turned that arrangement into an industry.

IN REAL TERMS

Punjab held roughly one in every thirteen people in British India. It supplied roughly half of all the combat soldiers India sent to the First World War — somewhere around 360,000 men.

Put it another way. Imagine a country where one state has eight per cent of the people and provides fifty per cent of the soldiers. Now imagine that happening for four years without a break. That was Punjab between 1914 and 1918.

In some districts of the Rawalpindi and Jhelum area, so many men of fighting age were gone that the harvest was being brought in by women, boys and the old.

How the men were found

The Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab through almost the whole war was Sir Michael O'Dwyer, who held the post from 1913 to 1919. He is the second most important British name in this part, and in some ways the more important of the two.

O'Dwyer believed two things firmly. The first was that Punjab's villages were sound and its towns were poisonous — that the trouble in India came from educated city men, lawyers and journalists, and that the peasant was loyal if left alone. The second was that his job was to deliver soldiers.

He delivered them by pushing the demand down through the existing machinery of rural government. District officers were given targets. They passed the targets to tehsildars. Tehsildars passed them to the men who actually ran the villages — the zaildars, the lam-bardars, the sufedposhes — who held their positions and their land grants at the government's pleasure.

WORD BOX — LAMBARDAR, ZAILDAR

A **lambardar** was the government's man in a village: he collected the land revenue and took a cut of it. A **zaildar** was the same idea one level up, over a group of villages. Both were appointed, both were paid in status and land as much as in cash, and both could be removed.

This matters because it explains the recruiting system. The government did not knock on doors. It leaned on the men who already had power in the village, and let them do the knocking.

Formally, enlistment was voluntary. In practice a lambardar told to produce four men produced four men. There were villages where families were told their land claim would suffer, or their well would be reassessed, or their son's case in the revenue court would go badly. There were also villages where the recruiter did not need to say anything at all, because the pay was good and the alternative was a small share of a small holding.

THE ARGUMENT — WERE PUNJAB'S SOLDIERS VOLUNTEERS?

THE CASE THAT THEY WERE

Nobody was conscripted by law. Enlistment carried real rewards: regular cash pay sent home, a pension, and after the war, grants of land in the canal colonies. Families competed for places in favoured regiments. Military service was already a respected career in these districts, with fathers and uncles who had served. Men walked to recruiting depots on their own feet.

THE CASE THAT THEY WERE NOT

The government set district quotas and judged its officers on meeting them. When a state sets a target and hands enforcement to men who control your land, your water and your court cases, the word "voluntary" is doing very little work. Contemporary reports describe recruiting parties camping in villages until numbers were produced. Some districts saw open resistance to recruiters.

WHERE THIS LEAVES US

The honest answer is that both descriptions fit different men, and there is no way to count how many fall in each group. What can be said is that the choice was made inside a structure the family did not control. That is not conscription, and it is not free choice either. It is the ordinary way empires get what they want without admitting they are taking it.

What the province got back

Punjab was told, repeatedly and in public, that this effort would be remembered. Then the war ended.

What arrived instead was a long list of troubles, most of them arriving at once.

Prices had risen sharply during the war and did not come down. Grain, cloth and salt all cost more. Soldiers' remittances had propped up village incomes; when the army began demobilising, that money stopped.

The land revenue demand continued and in places was revised upward. War loans had been raised in the countryside, sometimes with the same gentle pressure that had produced the recruits.

Then, in the autumn of 1918, influenza arrived.

IN REAL TERMS

The influenza pandemic of 1918–19 killed somewhere between twelve and eighteen million people in India. Punjab was among the worst-affected provinces. Estimates for the province run to several hundred thousand dead in a matter of months.

Set that against the province's war dead, which were in the tens of thousands. The disease killed several times more Punjabis in one autumn than four years of fighting had. Villages that had sent men to France and Mesopotamia and got most of them back then buried people at home, faster than they could be counted.

And the men who had served came home to find that nothing about their standing had changed. They had been treated in the army as trusted professionals. They came back to a province where an Indian still stepped off the pavement.

The promise that was not kept

There was also a political promise. In August 1917 the Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montagu, had announced in the House of Commons that British policy was the gradual development of self-governing institutions in India. It was the first time the goal had been stated so plainly.

What that produced, in 1919, was the Government of India Act — a scheme usually called dyarchy.

WORD BOX — DYARCHY

Dyarchy means "rule by two". Under the 1919 reforms, the subjects a provincial government dealt with were split in half. Elected Indian ministers got one set — education, health, local government, agriculture. The British governor kept the other set, and the other set was the one that mattered: police, prisons, land revenue, and finance.

So Indians were given ministries with responsibility and no money, and no control over the men with guns. It was designed to teach responsible government. What it mostly taught was that responsibility without power is a trap.

So the offer on the table at the end of 1918 was: a limited share in government, arriving at some unspecified future date, in exchange for four years of blood, money and grain.

And then, before the reforms were even in place, the government did something else. It decided to keep its wartime emergency powers.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Michael O'Dwyer's entire method rested on a belief he never doubted: that the Punjabi countryside was loyal, and that disloyalty was an urban infection carried by educated men.

The assumption had a practical use. It justified governing through village bosses, ignoring the press, and treating lawyers and students as the only threat. It also flattered the officials who held it, because it meant the people they actually dealt with day to day liked them.

It was wrong in a specific way. The countryside was not loyal; it was *compliant*, which is different. It complied because complying paid, and because the men who could hurt it were on the government's side. Once the paying stopped — high prices, no reward, dead relatives, a revenue demand that did not soften — the compliance had nothing holding it up.

O'Dwyer could not see this coming, because his theory said it could not happen. In April 1919 it happened.

REMEMBER THIS

Punjab carried the Indian Army through the First World War. Around half of India's combat soldiers came from one province with a small fraction of India's people, extracted through a rural machine that made refusal expensive.

The province ended the war with high prices, a heavy revenue demand, hundreds of thousands dead of influenza, demobilised soldiers with nothing to come back to, and a political reform that gave elected Indians everything except power.

That is the ground on which 1919 happened. Jallianwala Bagh is usually told as a story about one general on one afternoon. It is better understood as what happens when a province is squeezed for four years and then sent a bill.

Rowlatt and the Road to the Bagh

A law nobody in India wanted, a protest nobody had tried before, and six days in Amritsar.

During the war the government had ruled by emergency powers. It could arrest without a warrant, hold without trial, and try political cases before judges with no jury and no appeal. This was justified as a wartime necessity. The war ended in November 1918.

In March 1919 the government passed a law that kept those powers in peacetime. Its formal name was the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act. Everyone called it the Rowlatt Act, after the English judge whose committee had recommended it.

It allowed trial of political cases by three judges without a jury and with no right of appeal. It allowed suspects to be held without charge. Every single elected Indian member of the Imperial Legislative Council voted against it. It was passed anyway, by the official majority.

WORD BOX — OFFICIAL MAJORITY

The Imperial Legislative Council had elected Indian members and appointed British officials. The officials were always more numerous, and voted as instructed. So Indian members could debate, amend, protest and vote — and lose every time, by design.

This is why the Rowlatt Act mattered out of proportion to its contents. It demonstrated, in public, that the Indian vote in Indian government was decoration.

A slogan went round the country in three words: *na dalil, na wakil, na appeal* — no argument, no lawyer, no appeal.

Gandhi's new weapon

Mohandas Gandhi had returned from South Africa in 1915 and had so far worked on local causes. The Rowlatt Act was the issue on which he went national. He called for a *hartal* — a general suspension of business — on 6 April 1919, followed by fasting, prayer and non-violent defiance of the law.

WORD BOX — HARTAL, SATYAGRAHA

A **hartal** is a shutdown: shops close, work stops, streets empty. It is a strike by a whole population rather than by one workforce.

Satyagraha is Gandhi's word for his method. It joins *satya* (truth) and *agraha* (holding firmly). It means refusing to obey an unjust law openly, accepting the punishment without resisting, and refusing to injure the person enforcing it. A person doing this is a **satyagrahi**.

The hartal was very widely observed. In most of India it passed off peacefully. In Punjab it did not, and the reason was the ground described in the last chapter: a province wound tight by four years of

extraction, disease and disappointment, governed by a man who believed none of that was happening.

Amritsar, 6 to 12 April

Amritsar observed the hartal completely on 6 April. What was striking to observers, and alarming to officials, was that Hindus and Muslims took part together. There were public meetings where Hindu speakers were invited to address Muslim gatherings and where members of both communities drank from the same cups, in deliberate public breach of custom.

Two local leaders became the focus. Dr Satyapal, a Hindu doctor, and Dr Saifuddin Kitchlew, a Muslim lawyer, had been organising jointly. To the administration this joint organising was the single most threatening fact in Punjab.

On 9 April, the festival of Ram Naumi was celebrated in Amritsar with Muslims joining Hindu processions.

On the morning of 10 April, Satyapal and Kitchlew were summoned to the Deputy Commissioner's house, arrested, and driven out of the district to Dharamsala.

A large crowd formed and marched towards the Civil Lines — the European quarter — to petition for their release. It was stopped at a railway bridge and fired on. Several people were killed.

The crowd went back into the city and the city broke. Banks were attacked and five Englishmen were killed. The telegraph office and a church were burned. An English schoolteacher, Marcella Sherwood, was pulled off her bicycle in a narrow lane and beaten nearly to death; she was rescued and hidden by Indian neighbours.

By 11 April the violence had spent itself and the city was quiet. On 11 April, Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer arrived from Jalandhar and took military command of Amritsar.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The week of 6–13 April 1919 is documented in unusual detail, because it was investigated twice by bodies that wanted opposite conclusions.

The government appointed the Disorders Inquiry Committee under Lord Hunter, which took sworn evidence from officials, including Dyer himself. The Indian National Congress ran its own inquiry, which took evidence from hundreds of Indian witnesses the official body did not call.

Where the two disagree, they disagree about numbers and about motive. Where they agree — on the sequence of events, on who did what, and on the orders given — we can be confident, because agreement between two hostile inquiries is the strongest kind of evidence there is.

The order

On the morning of 13 April, Dyer had a proclamation read out at points around Amritsar. It banned public gatherings and imposed a curfew. It was announced by drum in perhaps a dozen or so places in a large walled city.

13 April 1919 was Baisakhi.

IN REAL TERMS

Baisakhi is the spring harvest festival and, for Sikhs, the anniversary of the founding of the Khalsa. It is the biggest day in the rural Punjabi year. On that day Amritsar was full of villagers who had come in for the fair and to visit the Golden Temple.

Thousands of the people in the city on 13 April had walked in that morning from villages outside. They had not heard the proclamation, because it had been read out in a city they were not yet in.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Everything the administration did in that week rested on an assumption stated openly by O'Dwyer and never questioned: that Hindu–Muslim cooperation in Amritsar was *artificial*, the work of a few agitators, and would collapse if those agitators were removed.

That assumption is why Satyapal and Kitchlew were arrested. Remove the organisers and the unnatural alliance dissolves.

It produced the opposite. The arrests gave the two communities a shared grievance and a shared march. The administration's model of Punjab told it that pulling out two men would calm the city. The model was wrong, and the city was still burning two days later.

Notice how durable this assumption is. Twenty-eight years later, the same claim — that unity between communities is artificial and division is natural — would be used to argue for partition. It is the same assumption, pointing the other way.

REMEMBER THIS

The Rowlatt Act kept wartime emergency powers in peacetime, over the votes of every elected Indian. It gave Gandhi his first all-India cause and gave Punjab a spark in a province already packed with fuel.

In Amritsar the arrest of two leaders — one Hindu, one Muslim, working together — produced a march, then firing, then a riot in which five Englishmen were killed. By 12 April it was over. On 13 April, with the city already quiet and full of villagers who had come for Baisakhi, a British general arrived with an order banning gatherings and a determination to enforce it.

Jallianwala Bagh

Ten minutes in a walled garden, and an argument about numbers that has lasted a century.

The Jallianwala Bagh was not a garden in any pleasant sense. It was a piece of waste ground of roughly six or seven acres inside the old city of Amritsar, close to the Golden Temple, used for meetings and fairs. Houses backed onto it on all sides. There was a well in it.

The crucial fact about it is the way in and out. It was enclosed by walls and the backs of buildings. The main entrance was a narrow lane, wide enough for a few people abreast.

IN REAL TERMS

Picture a space about the size of four or five football pitches, with a solid wall of buildings all the way round, and one usable door — a passage narrower than a single-lane road.

A space like that is safe when nothing is happening and lethal the moment something is. Everyone inside has to leave through a gap that only a handful can pass at a time.

On the afternoon of 13 April a public meeting was held there in defiance of the ban. Estimates of the crowd vary widely; contemporary figures run from around 6,000 to 20,000 or more. It contained politic-

al listeners, curious onlookers, and a large number of villagers in for the Baisakhi fair who were resting in the shade with their families.

Dyer learned of the meeting and marched to the Bagh with around fifty riflemen, drawn from Gurkha and Baluchi units, and a further group of soldiers armed only with kukris. He also brought two armoured cars mounted with machine guns. The cars could not get through the entrance lane and were left outside.

He entered by the narrow lane, positioned his riflemen on the raised ground just inside it, and gave the order to fire. No warning was given to disperse.

The firing went on for about ten minutes. It stopped when the ammunition was nearly exhausted. Roughly 1,650 rounds were fired.

IN REAL TERMS

1,650 rounds in ten minutes is about three shots every second, without pause, for the length of a song.

The troops were not firing into the air. Dyer stated afterwards that he had directed fire towards the places where the crowd was thickest, including towards the exits as people tried to reach them.

People trying to escape crowded the walls and the lane. Some jumped into the well. The troops then withdrew. No medical assistance was organised, and a curfew was in force that night, which meant families could not go out to look for the wounded until the following day.

The numbers

THE ARGUMENT — HOW MANY DIED AT JALLIANWALA BAGH?

There is no agreed figure, and there never has been. It is worth understanding why.

THE OFFICIAL FIGURE: 379

The Hunter Committee accepted 379 dead and roughly 1,200 wounded, compiled afterwards by the administration from bodies identified and claims made. Its supporters say it is the only count based on named individuals rather than estimate.

THE CONGRESS FIGURE: OVER 1,000

The Congress inquiry concluded the true number was above a thousand. Its case: the official count depended on families coming forward, and under martial law that meant identifying your household as having defied a ban. Many of the dead were villagers whose families were not in the city to claim them.

A MIDDLE POSITION

Some historians point to a count by the Sewa Samiti, a local relief body, which compiled several hundred names, and argue for a figure in the high hundreds — too low for the official number, short of the round thousand.

WHERE THIS LEAVES US

The honest position is that we do not know, and the uncertainty is itself evidence. A state that kills people in a walled space and then does not count them is telling us how it regarded the dead.

Note also what nobody disputes: 1,650 rounds fired into an enclosed crowd at close range, without warning, with the exit blocked.

Martial law

Martial law was formally declared in Amritsar, Lahore and other districts on 15 April, and lasted into June. Under it came public floggings, arrests, aeroplane bombing of a crowd at Gujranwala, and orders designed less to keep order than to humiliate.

The most notorious was the crawling order. In the lane where Marcella Sherwood had been attacked, Dyer ordered that any Indian passing through must do so on hands and knees. It was enforced for about a week. People whose homes were on that lane could not leave except on their bellies.

WORD BOX — MARTIAL LAW

Martial law means the army replaces the ordinary courts and administration. Military officers issue orders that have the force of law and try civilians in summary courts. There is no appeal to the normal legal system while it lasts.

Afterwards

The Hunter Committee reported in 1920. Its majority found that Dyer had acted beyond what the situation required, and criticised his belief that he was producing a moral effect across Punjab rather than dispersing a crowd. Dyer was relieved of his command and retired.

What happened next did more damage than the report. In Britain, the House of Lords passed a motion sympathetic to Dyer. A newspaper fund raised a very large sum for him from public subscription.

IN REAL TERMS

The fund raised for Dyer came to around £26,000. In the money of the time that was a fortune — many times the lifetime earnings of a British working man, and an unimaginable sum to an Indian farm labourer.

The message received in India was not that Britain had punished Dyer. It was that Britain had paid him.

Michael O'Dwyer, who had defended Dyer's action publicly and continued to defend it for the rest of his life, was shot dead in London on 13 March 1940 by Udham Singh, a Punjabi who had been present in Amritsar as a young man in 1919. Udham Singh was hanged in July 1940.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Dyer told the Hunter Committee something remarkable. He said he had not been trying only to disperse that crowd. He had been trying to produce an effect on Punjab as a whole — to make an impression that would prevent trouble everywhere.

Underneath that lies an assumption about what the Raj was. If your job is to police citizens, you use the least force needed on the people in front of you. If your job is to hold down a conquered population, you use whatever force will frighten everyone else. Dyer was not confused about his job. He answered honestly, and his honesty is what damaged him.

The deeper assumption is one the Empire could never say aloud: that British rule in India rested finally on fear, not consent. Dyer said it aloud. That is why officials found him embarrassing rather than incomprehensible.

REMEMBER THIS

On 13 April 1919 troops fired about 1,650 rounds into an enclosed crowd in Amritsar with no warning and the only exit blocked. The official death toll was 379; Congress said over a thousand; nobody counted properly, and that failure is part of the story.

What followed mattered as much: two months of martial law, the crawling order, and then a public fund in Britain for the man responsible.

1919 did not make Punjab nationalist overnight. What it did was destroy the idea that the Raj could be reasoned with as a lawful government. Every movement in the rest of this part begins from that.

The Akali Decade

A campaign to reform temples that accidentally built the most disciplined political machine in Punjab.

The movement that followed 1919 in Punjab was not, at first, a political movement at all. It was an argument about who owned the gurdwaras.

Over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the great Sikh shrines had come under the control of hereditary managers called mahants. Part 10 described how this happened: land grants, endowments and a long period in which nobody had the authority to supervise them. By 1920 many mahants treated the shrines as family property, took the offerings as personal income, and in some cases had drifted far from Sikh practice — keeping idols in the precincts, barring people of low caste, and living in ways that scandalised ordinary worshippers.

WORD BOX — MAHANT, GURDWARA

A **gurdwara** is a Sikh place of worship. The word means "door of the Guru".

A **mahant** was the hereditary custodian of a shrine and its endowment. The position passed down within a family. Crucially, the British legal system recognised mahants as the lawful proprietors, which meant that removing one was not a religious dispute but a challenge to a property right the government was obliged to defend.

That last point decides everything that follows. A reform movement against the mahants was, in law, a movement against the government. The reformers did not choose that fight. The property law chose it for them.

Two organisations in one month

In November 1920 a representative body was formed to manage the shrines: the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, or SGPC. In December 1920 a second body was formed to supply the volunteers who would take the shrines: the Shiromani Akali Dal.

WORD BOX — AKALI, JATHA, MORCHA

Akali means a follower of *Akal*, the Timeless One — God. The name was borrowed from an older warrior tradition.

A **jatha** is a band or a squad — a group of volunteers sent to do something together.

A **morcha** is a front, in the military sense; in Punjabi political usage it means a sustained campaign of confrontation over one issue.

The method was Gandhian in form and Sikh in discipline. A jatha would march to a shrine, unarmed, take an oath not to strike back,

and present itself. It would be beaten, arrested, or both. The next jatha would arrive the following day. Then the next.

Nankana Sahib

On 20 February 1921 a jatha led by Bhai Lachhman Singh entered the gurdwara at Nankana Sahib — the birthplace of Guru Nanak. The mahant, Narain Das, had hired armed men in anticipation. The gates were shut and the jatha was killed inside the compound. Contemporary accounts put the dead at around 130. Bodies were burned.

IN REAL TERMS

Around 130 unarmed men, who had taken an oath not to resist, killed in the compound of the shrine marking the birthplace of the founder of their faith.

If you want to understand why the Gurdwara Reform movement became unstoppable within weeks, that is the whole explanation. No amount of organising could have produced what one morning at Nankana Sahib produced.

Two further campaigns defined the decade. At Guru ka Bagh, near Amritsar, in 1922, jathas were beaten systematically by police over several months while crowds watched and Indian and foreign observers reported it. At Jaito, in the princely state of Nabha, a morcha begun in 1923 ran for years, and a jatha marching there was fired on in February 1924.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The Akali morchas are among the best-documented protest campaigns of the period, for a reason the movement engineered on purpose.

The SGPC kept lists — of jathas sent, of men arrested, of men injured, of money collected. It invited journalists. At Guru ka Bagh the beatings were witnessed by reporters and by the English clergyman C. F. Andrews, whose published account caused an uproar.

This was strategy, not luck. A movement whose entire method is being beaten without hitting back needs the beating to be seen. The record exists because being on the record was the weapon.

The Act, and what it built

The government gave way. The Sikh Gurdwaras Act was passed in 1925. It transferred control of the historic shrines to an elected committee — the SGPC — chosen by a register of Sikh voters.

The movement had won what it asked for. It had also, without quite intending to, created something new.

The SGPC controlled the great shrines. The shrines had enormous incomes from offerings. The SGPC was filled by elections on a Sikh electoral roll. And standing beside it was the Akali Dal, a party with a proven ability to put thousands of disciplined volunteers on the road at short notice.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS THE AKALI MOVEMENT GOOD FOR SIKH POLITICS?

THE CASE THAT IT WAS

It recovered the central institutions of the faith from hereditary owners and put them under community control, which had been the demand of reformers for fifty years. It did so with almost no violence from its own side, and it won. It gave Punjabi Sikhs a mass political education, a national reputation, and an organisation that could act. Nothing else in Punjab in the 1920s achieved as much by peaceful means.

THE CASE THAT IT WAS COSTLY

It fused religious authority and political power in one machine, and tied both to an electorate defined by religion. From 1925 onward, the way to lead Sikhs politically ran through control of their shrines and their money. That made Sikh politics intensely factional, and it locked Sikh political identity into a religious frame at the exact moment when Punjab needed cross-community politics most. Some historians argue this made the Akali Dal structurally unable to join the Unionist bargain described in Chapter Seven.

WHERE THIS LEAVES US

The disagreement is less about facts than about what you are comparing with. Against the alternative of leaving the shrines with the mahants, the movement was plainly a success. Against an imagined Punjab where politics was organised by class or region rather than religion, it was a step away. The second comparison is with something that never existed, which is worth remembering before treating it as a verdict.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Both the reformers and the government assumed the question "who is a Sikh?" had a clear answer, because the Act required one. To hold elections you need a roll. To make a roll you need a definition.

In 1925 that was not obvious at all. Punjabi religious practice was full of households that visited gurdwaras, shrines of Muslim saints and Hindu temples in the same week, and families where one son kept his hair and another did not.

The Act had to draw a hard line through that soft ground. So did the census. So did the separate electorates described in Chapter Seven. The line was necessary for administration, and once drawn it began to feel like a description of reality rather than a decision made for convenience. Much of the politics of the 1940s runs on lines like this one.

REMEMBER THIS

The Gurdwara Reform movement set out to take the Sikh shrines from hereditary managers. Because the law protected those managers, the fight became a fight with the government.

It was won by sending unarmed volunteers to be beaten, in public, repeatedly, until the government gave way in 1925. The killings at Nankana Sahib in 1921 turned it into a mass movement.

The lasting result was not only the Act. It was the SGPC and the Akali Dal — money, shrines, an electoral roll and a volunteer army, all organised around religion. That combination is the third force in every political calculation in Punjab from 1925 to 1947.

Bhagat Singh

A young man who threw a bomb designed not to kill, and used his trial as a printing press.

Bhagat Singh was born in 1907 in Banga, in Lyallpur district, into a family already in politics — an uncle had been imprisoned, his father had been jailed. He was eight when Kartar Singh Sarabha was hanged. He grew up with Ghadar as family history rather than distant news.

He was twelve at the time of Jallianwala Bagh. He joined the non-cooperation movement as a schoolboy, and left it, like many others, when Gandhi called the movement off in 1922 after violence at Chauri Chaura. That withdrawal is important. For a certain kind of young man in Punjab it settled the question of whether Congress methods could work.

The organisation

By the late 1920s he was part of a small revolutionary group that in 1928 renamed itself the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. The middle word was added deliberately.

WORD BOX — SOCIALIST, REPUBLICAN

Republican here means: no king, no viceroy, no princes. Power comes from the people and from nowhere else.

Socialist in the HSRA's usage meant that removing the British was not enough — the land and the factories had to change hands too, or an Indian rich man would simply replace an English one.

Adding that word was a direct criticism of the Congress. It said: your independence would leave the poor exactly where they are.

In October 1928 the Simon Commission — a body sent from Britain to review Indian government, containing no Indians at all — reached Lahore. A protest against it was led by the veteran nationalist Lala Lajpat Rai. Police broke it up with lathis, and Lajpat Rai was struck. He died on 17 November.

The HSRA decided on revenge against the police superintendent held responsible, James Scott. On 17 December 1928 they shot the wrong man: J. P. Saunders, a junior officer.

This is worth stating plainly rather than smoothing over. The most famous action in the group's history before the Assembly bomb was a killing carried out by mistake.

The bomb that was meant to fail

On 8 April 1929, Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt entered the visitors' gallery of the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi and threw two bombs onto the empty benches below, along with printed leaflets. The bombs were low-powered and thrown away from where members were sitting. A few people received minor injuries.

The two men did not run. They stayed, shouting slogans, and waited to be arrested.

The leaflet contained the line the action was built around: that it takes a loud noise to make the deaf hear.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Almost every argument about Bhagat Singh assumes the Assembly bomb was an act of violence that failed to kill. Read it that way and it looks incompetent.

It was not designed to kill. Weak bombs, thrown at empty benches, by men who stayed to be caught. It was designed to produce a trial.

The assumption worth naming is a general one: that political violence is always aimed at the body it is thrown at. Sometimes the target is the audience. Bhagat Singh wanted a courtroom, a newspaper report, and a stage — and he got all three, at the price of his life. Whether that is admirable or appalling is a separate question. It is not, however, a failure.

The trial

He was tried for the Assembly bomb, and then separately for the Saunders killing in the Lahore Conspiracy Case. He used both proceedings as a platform, making statements that were reported across India.

In prison he and his comrades demanded to be treated as political prisoners rather than common criminals, and went on hunger strike. The strike lasted months. Jatindra Nath Das, a fellow prisoner, died on 13 September 1929 on the sixty-third day of his fast. His funeral procession drew enormous crowds.

In October 1930, in jail, Bhagat Singh wrote the essay he is least often quoted on and which he thought most important: an explanation of why he had stopped believing in God. He argued that a man facing execution has every reason to comfort himself with faith, and

that refusing that comfort was the test of whether his beliefs were real.

Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev Thapar and Shivaram Rajguru were hanged in Lahore Central Jail on 23 March 1931. He was twenty-three.

IN REAL TERMS

He was twenty-three at his death, and twenty-one when he threw the bomb. Jatindra Nath Das was twenty-four when he died. Kartar Singh Sarabha, whose photograph Bhagat Singh carried, had been nineteen.

These were not seasoned commanders. They were students, at the age of a final-year undergraduate.

THE ARGUMENT — TERRORIST OR REVOLUTIONARY?

THE CASE THAT THE LABEL "TERRORIST" FITS

He belonged to an organisation that shot a police officer dead in the street, and shot the wrong one. He threw explosives into a legislature. He accepted that killing was a legitimate political tool. Judged by the standard applied to armed groups anywhere, that is what the word describes, and applying a gentler word to people we happen to admire is not analysis.

THE CASE THAT IT DOES NOT

Terrorism, as normally defined, aims at civilians to spread fear. The HSRA targeted state officials, and the one action everyone remembers was engineered to injure nobody. He surrendered rather than escaping, which no clandestine terrorist does, and he used the courtroom rather than the bomb to make his case. Judged by conduct rather than category, he was a revolutionary who used a small amount of violence for publicity and then argued in public.

WHERE THIS LEAVES US

The dispute is partly about the word rather than the man. The facts are not seriously contested: one killing by mistake, one bomb designed not to kill, a surrender, and two years of argument from a cell.

A fairer question is whether the strategy worked. It did not remove the British. It did create a figure that every later Indian movement, from the Congress left to Punjabi communists to modern nationalists, has claimed as its own — which suggests he was right about where the real power lay.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

We have a great deal in his own hand: jail notebooks with his reading lists, letters, the court statements, and the 1930 essay on atheism. We also have the full apparatus of a state trying to convict him, which produced transcripts and evidence files.

One warning. Because he became a symbol, a large quantity of material is attributed to him that he did not write. Slogans and quotations circulate under his name with no source at all. The safe rule is to trust the jail writings and the court record, and to be sceptical of anything that sounds like it was written for a poster.

REMEMBER THIS

Bhagat Singh's politics were republican and socialist, and were aimed as much at the Indian rich as at the British. He believed Congress would win a freedom that changed nothing for the poor.

His central action was a bomb designed not to kill, followed by a voluntary arrest, because he wanted a trial and a hearing rather than a body count. He got both, and was hanged at twenty-three.

He is the point where Punjab's revolutionary tradition — Ghadar, 1919, the beatings of the 1920s — turns into something every later Indian politics wants to inherit. Notice that this is also the last moment in this part when Punjabi politics is organised around something other than religious community.

The Unionist Bargain

For twenty years Punjab ran on a party that put Muslim, Hindu and Sikh landholders on the same side. Nowhere else in India managed it.

Here is the fact that makes Punjab different from every other Indian province between the wars, and it is the fact most often left out.

Punjab was not governed by the Congress. It was not governed by the Muslim League. From the 1920s until 1947 it was governed by a party built on the idea that the important division in Punjab was not between religions at all — it was between the countryside and the town.

Who was on which side

The Unionist Party was founded in 1923. Its architects were Mian Fazl-i-Husain, a Muslim lawyer from Gurdaspur, and Chaudhri Chhotu Ram, a Hindu Jat from Rohtak. Later its outstanding leader was Sir Sikandar Hyat Khan, from a large landholding family in Attock.

Its argument ran like this. The Punjabi peasant — Muslim in the west, Sikh in the centre, Hindu Jat in the south-east — had the same problems everywhere: debt, the moneylender, the price of grain, water rates and land revenue. The moneylender and the grain dealer

were usually urban and usually Hindu; the peasant was Muslim in one district and Sikh in the next.

So a party of cultivators, of all three religions, against the towns and the moneylenders.

WORD BOX — AGRICULTURIST TRIBES

A law of 1900, the Punjab Alienation of Land Act, had divided Punjabis into "agricultural tribes" and everyone else, and barred land from passing from the first group to the second. It was designed to stop peasants losing land to moneylenders.

Its side effect was to create a legal category cutting straight across religion. A Muslim Rajput, a Sikh Jat and a Hindu Jat were all in it; an urban Hindu trader and an urban Muslim shopkeeper were both outside it.

The Unionist Party is, in effect, that legal category turning into a political one. This is what Part 11 meant when it said British land law would shape Punjabi politics for fifty years.

Why it worked

Two further things made the Unionists strong.

The first was the franchise. Under the reforms of 1919 and then the Government of India Act of 1935, the vote was tied to property and to land revenue payment. That weighted the electorate heavily towards landholders and rural districts, and against the towns where Congress was strong.

The second was that the party had something to deliver. Chhotu Ram in particular pushed through laws restricting moneylenders, regulating agricultural markets, and relieving debt. A Unionist MLA could go back to his constituency and point at something.

In the elections of 1937 — the first under the new constitution, and the first real test — the Unionists took about 95 of the 175 seats in the Punjab Assembly. The Congress won 18. The Muslim League won two.

IN REAL TERMS

Two seats. In the province that would later be the whole point of the demand for Pakistan, in a province with a Muslim majority, the Muslim League won two seats out of 175 in 1937.

Hold that number in your head. It is the single best measure of how far Punjab travelled in nine years. In 1937 the League was nothing here. In 1946 it was the largest party in the province.

Sikandar Hyat Khan became Premier of Punjab and governed with a cabinet containing Muslims, Hindus and a Sikh.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Election returns for 1937 and 1946 survive in full — seats, parties, and in many constituencies the vote counts. Assembly debates were recorded and printed. Unionist ministers left correspondence, and the governors sent regular confidential reports to the Viceroy which have since been published.

One limit is worth stating. The electorate was small — a fraction of adults, weighted to property. So the returns tell us what enfranchised Punjab wanted, not what Punjab wanted. When people say the 1946 result proved what Punjabi Muslims believed, that is worth remembering.

The weakness inside it

The Unionist bargain had a flaw that was invisible while things went well.

It was a coalition of landholders. It asked its voters to think of themselves as cultivators first and Muslims, Hindus or Sikhs second. That works while the questions on the table are debt, water and grain prices — questions where the cultivator identity is the useful one.

It stops working the moment the question on the table is: *who will rule when the British leave?* There is no agricultural answer to that question.

WORD BOX — SEPARATE ELECTORATES

From 1909 onward, Muslims voted in **separate electorates**: Muslim voters chose Muslim candidates for seats reserved for Muslims. Later, seats were also reserved for Sikhs.

This meant a Muslim politician in Punjab never needed a single Hindu or Sikh vote, and could not gain one. The Unionists held their alliance together at the level of the Assembly, between elected members. At the level of the voter, the system was already communal.

That gap — cross-community at the top, single-community at the bottom — is the crack the Muslim League would later drive a wedge into.

THE ARGUMENT — WERE THE UNIONISTS A REAL ALTERNATIVE?

THE CASE THAT THEY WERE

They governed a province of nearly thirty million people for a decade without communal breakdown, at a time when politics elsewhere in India was hardening. They passed real laws that helped real farmers. They showed that Punjabis of three religions could sit in one cabinet. If that had held, partition in Punjab would have had no political vehicle.

THE CASE THAT THEY WERE NOT

They were a coalition of the propertied, elected on a narrow franchise, defending an order that suited landlords. They did nothing to build a shared Punjabi identity below the level of the landholding classes, and they depended on the British to keep the constitutional questions off the table. Their unity was an arrangement among elites with common interests, not a movement. Arrangements like that do not survive the question of who inherits the state.

WHERE THIS LEAVES US

What is not in doubt is that it worked for twenty years and then collapsed very fast. The disagreement is about whether it collapsed because of outside pressure — the League, the war, the end of British power — or because it was always shallower than it looked.

Chapter Nine gives the evidence for both readings. Notice as you read it that a thing can be genuinely valuable and structurally fragile at the same time. The Unionist bargain was not a fraud. It was simply built for a set of questions that stopped being the questions.

REMEMBER THIS

Punjab between the wars was governed by the Unionist Party — a cross-community alliance of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh landholders, organised around rural interests against the towns and the moneylenders.

In 1937 the Unionists won about 95 of 175 seats; the Muslim League won two. That number is the baseline for everything in the next two chapters.

The bargain worked because the questions were agricultural. It had no answer to the question of who would inherit power from the British, and the electoral system beneath it was already divided by religion.

Three Communities, Two Futures

Why the demand for Pakistan was announced in Lahore, and why Punjab was the one place it could not be granted cleanly.

On 23 March 1940, the All-India Muslim League met at Minto Park in Lahore and passed the resolution that history remembers as the demand for Pakistan.

It did not use the word. It said that areas where Muslims were in a majority, in the north-west and the east of India, should be grouped to form independent states. It was vague on purpose. Vagueness kept everyone on board.

It is worth pausing on the location. The League passed its founding demand in the capital of a province where, three years earlier, it had won two seats.

The arithmetic that made Punjab impossible

Punjab's population in the 1941 census broke down roughly as follows: Muslims a little over half, Hindus around a third, Sikhs somewhat over a tenth.

IN REAL TERMS

Round the 1941 figures for undivided Punjab: about 53 in every 100 Punjabis were Muslim, about 30 were Hindu, and about 15 were Sikh.

Now notice two things about those numbers. First, the Muslim majority was real but narrow — nothing like the four-fifths of Sind or the North-West Frontier. Second, that majority was concentrated in the west. In the central districts around Amritsar and Lahore, the three communities were mixed together, village by village.

This is why Punjab could not be handed to either side whole. A province that is 53 per cent one thing has a 47 per cent problem, and in Punjab that 47 per cent lived in the districts with the best land, the biggest cities and the holiest shrines.

The Sikh position

Which brings us to the community with the weakest hand and the strongest attachment to the ground.

Sikhs were about a seventh of Punjab. They were a majority in no district. But they held a share of the land, of the canal colonies and of the army far above their numbers, and the shrines central to their faith — Nankana Sahib, and much else — lay in the western districts where Muslims were the clear majority.

So every available future was bad. A united India left them a small minority in a large country. A Pakistan containing all of Punjab left them a small minority under a Muslim government, with their best land and holiest sites inside it. A divided Punjab split the community itself and left the birthplace of Guru Nanak on the far side of a border.

The Akali Dal, led from the 1930s by Master Tara Singh, tried several answers. The best known was the Azad Punjab scheme of 1943 —

a proposal to redraw Punjab's boundaries so that no community held a majority, forcing all three to share. It attracted little support outside Sikh circles, because it asked Muslims to give up a majority they already had.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Every proposal on the table by 1940 — Congress's, the League's, and the Akalis' — assumed that the right unit of politics was the religious community, and that the question was how to divide power between such communities.

Once everyone accepts that, the argument is only about percentages and boundaries. And an argument about percentages has a logic of its own: it rewards whoever can show the largest, most unified bloc, and it punishes anyone whose supporters are mixed in with someone else's.

The Unionists were the last significant party operating on a different assumption. Their decline is not only a political defeat. It is the moment Punjab loses its only vehicle for a politics not counted by religion — after which there is no longer any way to be counted except as a Muslim, a Hindu or a Sikh.

Sikandar's deal and its price

Sikandar Hyat Khan faced a specific problem. He led a cross-community party, but he was a Muslim leader in a Muslim-majority province at a moment when Jinnah was claiming to speak for all Indian Muslims. If Sikandar refused that claim outright, he risked being painted as a British stooge who had sold out his community.

His answer was the Sikandar–Jinnah Pact of October 1937. Unionist Muslim members would join the Muslim League at the all-India level, while the Unionist Party continued to govern Punjab unchanged.

On paper it cost nothing. In practice it was a slow disaster.

It conceded, in public, that the League spoke for Muslims in national matters. It gave the League a foothold and a membership list in a province where it had none. And it told Punjabi Muslim voters that being Unionist and being League were compatible — so that when the two later came into conflict, choosing the League did not feel like a betrayal.

THE ARGUMENT — COULD PUNJAB HAVE AVOIDED PARTITION?

THE CASE THAT IT COULD

Punjab had a functioning cross-community government until 1947. Its Muslim leadership was hostile to dividing the province, and Sikandar said publicly that he did not want a Pakistan that meant Punjab's break-up. The 1937 result shows the League had almost no organic support here. On this reading, partition was imposed on Punjab by all-India politics, a war, and a British decision to leave in a hurry — not generated by Punjab itself.

THE CASE THAT IT COULD NOT

The cross-community arrangement existed only among elected members and landholding elites. Beneath it, voters had been sorted into separate electorates for forty years and had never once cast a vote across community lines. The Sikh position was unresolvable by any scheme anyone proposed. And the Unionists depended on the British staying — their whole model assumed someone else would answer the sovereignty question. On this reading the collapse was built in, and 1946 merely revealed it.

WHERE THIS LEAVES US

Historians remain genuinely divided, and the split tends to follow a wider disagreement about whether partition was long-prepared or a late accident.

What can be said with confidence is narrower and still important. Punjab was the province with the most to lose from partition and the least communal politics for most of this period. Whatever explains 1947, it cannot be that Punjabis had always been divided, because for twenty years they demonstrably were not.

REMEMBER THIS

The Lahore Resolution of 1940 demanded that Muslim-majority areas be grouped into independent states. It was passed in a province where the League had won two seats in 1937.

Punjab was roughly 53 per cent Muslim, 30 per cent Hindu and 15 per cent Sikh, with the communities most tangled together in the richest central districts. That arithmetic made a clean transfer of the whole province impossible.

Sikhs had no majority anywhere and the most to lose from every option, and never found a scheme anyone else would accept. Sikandar's 1937 pact with Jinnah looked cheap and quietly handed the League the ground it later stood on.

The Ground Gives Way

A second war, a second recruiting drive, and five years in which the Unionist bargain came apart.

In September 1939 the Viceroy declared that India was at war with Germany. He did not consult a single Indian legislature. The Congress ministries in eight provinces resigned in protest.

The Unionists did not resign. Punjab stayed in office, and went back to doing what it had done in 1914.

The sword arm again

Punjab supplied soldiers on an even larger scale than in the first war. Recruitment ran through the same rural machinery, and the money and the land grants flowed the same way. For the Unionist leadership this was not merely loyalty. Wartime spending, procurement of grain at guaranteed prices and soldiers' remittances all flowed into the countryside they represented.

IN REAL TERMS

Punjab again provided a share of the Indian Army far beyond its share of India's people. Hundreds of thousands of Punjabis served in the Second World War.

Consider what that means for the politics of 1946 and 1947. In villages across the province there were now men of fighting age who had been trained to use modern weapons, had served in organised units, and had recently come home. When violence arrived, it did not arrive among people who did not know how to fight.

The war also produced a rival claim on those same soldiers. Indian prisoners captured by the Japanese were recruited into the Indian National Army, which fought alongside Japan under Subhas Chandra Bose. Punjabis were prominent in it. When INA officers were put on public trial in Delhi in 1945, the trials became a nationalist cause across India, including in Punjab.

What changed underneath

Four things eroded the Unionist position between 1939 and 1945.

The Congress vacated the field. By resigning in 1939 and then launching the Quit India movement in 1942, the Congress removed itself from provincial government and got its leadership imprisoned. The Muslim League, which did neither, spent the war years organising freely while its main rival was in jail.

The League got a machine. It built branches, recruited students from Aligarh and Lahore, and worked through rural networks of pirs — the hereditary custodians of Muslim shrines, who had influence over large numbers of followers in western Punjab.

WORD BOX — PIR

A **pir** is a Muslim spiritual guide. In rural western Punjab, pirs of established shrines held hereditary followings, and many were also substantial landholders.

They matter here because they were the one network that could reach Muslim villagers directly, in the language of religious obligation. When significant numbers of pirs came out for the League, the League acquired in a few years what the Unionists had built over a generation.

Sikandar died. He died in December 1942, aged fifty. He was the one Punjabi Muslim politician with the personal standing to hold the cross-community line and manage Jinnah at the same time. He was succeeded by Khizr Hyat Khan Tiwana, a capable man with less authority in his own community.

The argument changed shape. By 1944 the question in Indian politics was no longer what a provincial government should do about debt or water rates. It was what would happen when the British left. The Unionist Party had no position on that, because having one would have split it.

1946

Elections were held in the winter of 1945–46. The League campaigned in Punjab on one question: are you a Muslim, and do you want a Muslim homeland?

The result transformed the province.

PARTY	SEATS (OF 175)
Muslim League	73
Congress	51
Akali Dal (Panthic)	22
Unionist Party	20

IN REAL TERMS

The Unionists went from about 95 seats to 20 in nine years. The League went from 2 to 73.

That is not a swing. That is one political world being replaced by another. And notice the shape of the new Assembly: three blocs, each drawn from one community, and no bloc with a majority.

The League was the largest party and had no majority. So a coalition was formed without it — the remaining Unionists, the Congress and the Akalis — with Khizr Hyat Tiwana as Premier.

This was constitutionally proper and politically explosive. Punjabi Muslims had voted overwhelmingly for the League and were being governed by a ministry the League was excluded from, led by a Muslim the League regarded as a traitor.

The five months

Through late 1946 the League ran an agitation against the Khizr ministry. On 2 March 1947 Khizr resigned. No alternative government could be formed. The Governor took direct control.

The next day, Master Tara Singh appeared outside the Punjab Assembly and made a public declaration against Pakistan. Within days the violence began — not in the mixed central districts, but in the

north-west, in the Rawalpindi division, where Sikhs and Hindus were a small scattered minority among a large Muslim majority.

Thousands were killed in March 1947 in the Rawalpindi, Attock and Jhelum districts. Villages were destroyed. Survivors fled east.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

For March 1947 we have official casualty returns, police reports, and the fortnightly reports the Governor of Punjab sent to the Viceroy, most of which have been published. We also have refugee testimony collected at the time by relief committees, and a large body of oral history recorded much later.

These sources do not agree on numbers, and the official figures are certainly low, because administration in the affected districts had partly stopped functioning. What they agree on is the pattern: organised attacks on minority villages, not spontaneous rioting between neighbours of equal strength.

The March violence matters for a reason often missed. It happened *before* partition was announced. It is not a consequence of the border. It is part of what produced it.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

It is very common to read that Punjab's communities "turned on each other" in 1947, as though a shared temper snapped.

That phrasing hides an assumption: that violence between communities is something that wells up from below, from ordinary people who secretly hated each other all along.

The evidence from March 1947 does not support it. The attacks were organised, often by armed bands, often involving men with military training, in districts where one community heavily outnumbered another. They followed a political collapse at the top — the fall of a ministry and the failure to form another — rather than preceding it.

This does not make ordinary Punjabis innocent; many took part. It does mean the sequence runs downward, from the failure of politics to the killing, and not upward.

REMEMBER THIS

Punjab fought the Second World War for the Empire as it had the first, which kept money flowing to the countryside and put hundreds of thousands of trained men back into its villages.

The Unionists collapsed between 1939 and 1946 because Congress left the field, the League built a rural machine through the pirs, Sikandar died, and the central question changed from agriculture to sovereignty — the one question the Unionist bargain could not answer.

In 1946 the League took 73 seats and the Unionists 20, and a coalition governed without the party most Muslims had voted for. It fell on 2 March 1947. Mass killing began in the Rawalpindi division within days — three months before partition was announced.

The Decision

Five weeks in the summer of 1947, in which Punjab agreed to divide itself and then waited to be told where.

By the spring of 1947 three things were fixed. Britain was leaving, and soon. The Muslim League would not accept a united India. And the Congress and the Akalis would not accept a united Punjab inside Pakistan.

Once those three positions were on the table, the outcome followed almost mechanically. If there was to be a Pakistan, and if Punjab's non-Muslims would not go into it, then Punjab had to be cut.

The logic is worth stating in its own words, because it is the same logic that had been used to demand Pakistan in the first place. The League argued that Muslims could not live as a permanent minority under a Hindu majority. The Congress and the Akalis replied: then neither can Hindus and Sikhs live as a permanent minority under a Muslim majority in Punjab. There was no answer to that which did not divide the province.

3 June

Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy, announced the plan on 3 June 1947. Britain would transfer power in August — far earlier than anyone had expected. India would be divided. And Punjab and Bengal,

the two provinces with large mixed populations, would each be divided too, if their legislators voted for it.

The voting mechanism was ingenious and revealing. The members of the Punjab Legislative Assembly would meet in two separate groups: those from Muslim-majority districts, and those from the rest. If either group voted for partition, Punjab would be partitioned.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Look closely at that rule. It does not ask whether Punjab wants to be divided. It asks each half separately, and division wins if *either* says yes.

Built into the procedure is an assumption that had by then become invisible: that Punjab was not one political community whose collective will mattered, but two communities sharing an administrative box.

A different rule — a simple majority of the whole Assembly, or a referendum of all Punjabis — would very likely have produced a different answer, because the Muslim majority of the province did not want Punjab divided. The rule chosen guaranteed division. It was not neutral machinery. It was the answer, written as a procedure.

The Assembly met on 23 June 1947. The two sections voted separately. The section from the non-Muslim-majority areas voted for partition. That was sufficient. Punjab would be divided.

The man with the pencil

A Boundary Commission was appointed to decide where the line went. Its chairman was Sir Cyril Radcliffe, an English barrister.

He had never been to India. He arrived on 8 July 1947.

IN REAL TERMS

Radcliffe landed in India in the second week of July. Power was to be transferred on 14 and 15 August.

That gave roughly five weeks to divide two provinces containing tens of millions of people, in a country he had never seen, during the monsoon, using census returns and maps.

To put the scale in ordinary terms: he was drawing a border through farmland, canal systems, railway lines, city suburbs and villages where the two communities lived on the same street — at a rate of a district every day or so.

The Punjab Boundary Commission had four other members: two judges nominated by the Muslim League and two by the Congress. They deadlocked on every significant question, exactly as anyone could have predicted, which left the decision to Radcliffe alone.

His instructions were to divide the province on the basis of contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims, while also taking account of "other factors" — which were not defined.

WORD BOX — CONTIGUOUS MAJORITY AREAS

The rule meant: group together neighbouring areas where one community is the majority, and put them on that community's side.

It sounds objective. It is not, for two reasons. First, majority in *what unit*? Counting by district, by tehsil or by village gives different borders. Second, the rule says nothing about canals, roads, railways or which side a city's water supply comes from — and those were exactly what the undefined "other factors" had to cover.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS THE RADCLIFFE LINE UNFAIR?

THE CASE THAT IT WAS COMPROMISED

Critics point to specific decisions, above all the award of the Muslim-majority tehsils of Ferozepur and Gurdaspur to India, which gave India a road route towards Kashmir. Papers published later suggested the Viceroy discussed boundary questions with Radcliffe. On this view the line was politically shaped and then presented as a technical judgment.

THE CASE THAT IT WAS AS FAIR AS POSSIBLE

Defenders argue there was no fair line available. Any border through central Punjab would strand millions. Radcliffe was given contradictory instructions, an impossible deadline and a deadlocked commission. Both sides denounced the award, which is at least consistent with it not favouring either. The disputed decisions can be defended on the "other factors" the terms of reference required him to weigh.

WHERE THIS LEAVES US

The specific allegations remain contested and some of the evidence is indirect. What is not contested is the process: five weeks, no local knowledge, a deadlocked commission, undefined criteria, and a single foreign lawyer with final say.

It is worth separating two questions that usually get merged. Whether Radcliffe was leaned on is disputed. Whether the procedure was a reasonable way to divide a province of thirty million people is not really in dispute at all.

The silence

Radcliffe finished his award before independence. It was not published.

The decision was taken to withhold it until after the transfer of power, so that the new governments would be responsible for what followed. It was made public on 17 August 1947 — two days after independence.

So on 14 and 15 August 1947, millions of people in central Punjab celebrated, or dreaded, an independence whose border they had not been told. Villages did not know which country they were in. Officials did not know which government they served. Families deciding whether to leave were deciding without the one piece of information that mattered.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The June–August 1947 period is documented from the British side in extraordinary detail. The Viceroy's staff kept minutes of meetings, and the transfer-of-power papers were later published in full, in twelve volumes.

This creates a trap worth naming. Because the British record is so rich and so accessible, it is easy to write the story of 1947 as a story of decisions made in Delhi drawing rooms — which is exactly how the people in those rooms saw it.

What survives far less well is what was happening in a village in Gurdaspur that August. That evidence is thinner, later, and mostly oral. Part 13 leans on it heavily, and it will say clearly where it is on soft ground.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Everything in the summer of 1947 assumed one thing: that the population would stay where it was, and that a border would simply place people under a new government.

Nobody planned for mass movement. There was no serious scheme to move people, protect them in transit, or receive them. A single military force, the Punjab Boundary Force, was created for the whole of central Punjab, and it was small.

The assumption was not stupid — it was how borders had usually behaved. It was simply not true of this one, and by March 1947 there was already evidence that it was not true, because people were already fleeing Rawalpindi.

That gap between what was assumed and what was already happening is where Part 13 begins.

REMEMBER THIS

Once Britain agreed to Pakistan and Punjab's Hindus and Sikhs refused to enter it, dividing the province followed automatically. The 3 June plan set the mechanism, and on 23 June the Punjab Assembly, voting in two separate sections, chose partition.

The line was drawn by a British lawyer who had never been to India, in about five weeks, with a deadlocked commission and undefined criteria — and it was kept secret until two days after independence.

The province that had held a cross-community government together for twenty years was cut apart in five months. Nobody planned for anyone to move.

Glossary

Every term explained in this part, gathered in one place.

Agriculturist tribes

A legal category created in 1900, listing communities allowed to buy agricultural land in Punjab. It cut across religion and became the basis of Unionist politics.

Akali

Literally a follower of *Akal*, the Timeless One. Used from 1920 for the volunteers, and then the party, of the Gurdwara Reform movement.

Contiguous majority areas

The main rule given to the Boundary Commission in 1947: group neighbouring areas by which community held the local majority. It depended entirely on which unit you counted in.

Dyarchy

"Rule by two." The 1919 arrangement splitting provincial government between elected Indian ministers, who got the minor subjects, and the British governor, who kept police, revenue and finance.

Ghadar

Urdu for mutiny or revolt. The name of the newspaper founded in San Francisco in 1913 and of the party built around it.

Gurdwara

A Sikh place of worship; literally "door of the Guru".

Hartal

A general shutdown of shops and work, used as a protest by a whole population rather than one workforce.

Jatha

A band or squad of volunteers, sent together to carry out an action. The basic unit of the Akali morchas.

Lambardar

The government's appointed man in a village, responsible for collecting land revenue and paid a share of it. The bottom rung of the machinery that produced army recruits.

Mahant

The hereditary custodian of a shrine and its endowment. British law recognised mahants as proprietors, which turned the Gurdwara Reform movement into a fight with the state.

Martial law

Rule by the army in place of the ordinary courts, with military officers issuing binding orders and trying civilians summarily. Imposed on central Punjab from April 1919.

Morcha

A front, in the military sense; in Punjabi political usage, a sustained campaign of confrontation over a single issue.

Official majority

The arrangement by which appointed British officials always outnumbered elected Indians in the central legislature, so Indian members could never win a vote.

Pir

A Muslim spiritual guide. In rural western Punjab, pirs of established shrines held hereditary followings and often large landholdings, and their support was decisive for the Muslim League in the 1940s.

Satyagraha

Gandhi's method: openly disobeying an unjust law, accepting the punishment, and refusing to injure the person enforcing it. One who does this is a *satyagrahi*.

Separate electorates

A system under which Muslim voters chose Muslim candidates for reserved Muslim seats, and later Sikhs likewise. It meant no Punjabi politician ever needed a vote from another community.

Transportation

A sentence of removal to an overseas prison colony, in practice the Cellular Jail in the Andaman Islands, known to prisoners as *Kala Pani*, the black water.

Zaildar

A government-appointed official over a group of villages, one level above the lambardar. Part of the same rural machinery.

ABOUT

The author, and this series

Lovepreet Singh writes long-form history and research at **misterlove.in**, where this series is published as part of The Living Archive.

He holds a B.Com from Chandigarh University and is in the second year of an MBA at Panjab University, specialising in Business Intelligence. He is the founder of Lovelace, a Certified Ethical Hacker and a self-taught developer, and is working towards doctoral research.

His interest in this particular period is not academic in origin. It is that most Punjabi families carry a version of it — a grandfather in the army, a relative who left a village that is now in another country, a name in a story nobody finishes telling. This series is an attempt to put those fragments back into an order that can be checked.

He can be reached at **lovepreetsinghmk10@gmail.com**, or on Instagram at **@misterlove.in**.

The Living Archive

This series belongs to a larger project. The Living Archive is a body of long-form research on history, society, religion, public policy and

technology, published openly and free to read at misterlove.in. Three rules hold across all of it.

- **Plain language.** Hard ideas explained in ordinary words, with nothing left out to make them fit.
- **Evidence first.** Show the thing itself, and be clear about what it can and cannot prove.
- **Competing views.** Where the field disagrees, both sides get their strongest case. Open questions stay open.

A word on sources

This is written for general readers, so it carries no footnotes. It is a synthesis of the published scholarly record rather than new primary research, and it does not claim otherwise.

This part rests on an archive that is unusually rich and unusually one-sided. The official record — inquiry reports, Assembly debates, election returns, governors' fortnightly letters, and the published transfer-of-power papers — is vast and easy to reach. The record of what ordinary Punjabis thought and did is thinner, and much of it was collected long afterwards. Where a claim rests only on the government's account of itself, that is indicated, because a state explaining its own conduct is a particular kind of source.

Casualty figures in this part are contested almost everywhere they appear. Where no reliable count exists, this is said plainly rather than smoothed over with a confident number.

Corrections are welcome. If you find an error, or think an argument has been given less than its best case, write to the address above — later editions will say what was changed and who caught it.

Part 13 — Partition and Indian Punjab

Part 13 begins on 17 August 1947, the day the border was published, and does not look away from what followed. The Radcliffe Line, the killing, and the largest movement of people in modern history — perhaps ten million, walking in both directions across a province that had been one thing in the spring.

Then it keeps going, because Punjab did. The rebuilding of a truncated province and the resettlement of millions. The Punjabi Suba movement and the reorganisation of 1966. The Green Revolution, and what it gave and cost. The politics of water. The 1980s, 1984, and the decade that followed. And the present — the farmers' protests, the questions about land, water and work that have not gone away.

It is the hardest part of this series to write, because it is the part still being argued about by people who were there.

A History of Punjab — Part 12: Ghadar to Independence (1915–1947).
The Living Archive · misterlove.in

THE LIVING ARCHIVE

PART THIRTEEN OF FOURTEEN

The Complete History of Punjab

Part Thirteen — Partition and Indian Punjab

The line was published two days after freedom. What followed was the largest movement of people in modern history, and a province that had to be built again from half of itself. This part goes from that August to the fields and the arguments of today.

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

Lovepreet Singh

1947 – THE PRESENT

MISTERLOVE.IN

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Where We Left Off

Part 12 ended with a decision taken and a border still secret. This part begins on the morning the secret was published.

Part 12 covered thirty-two years, from 1915 to the summer of 1947. It began with the Ghadar Party, made by Punjabi migrants in North America who discovered that being a British subject meant nothing once they left India. Their rising failed. Their language survived.

It went through the First World War, in which Punjab supplied roughly half of India's combat soldiers while holding about one in thirteen of India's people. It went through 1919 — the Rowlatt Act, the killing at Jallianwala Bagh, and two months of martial law. It went through the Akali morchas of the 1920s, which took the Sikh shrines back from hereditary managers and, almost by accident, built a permanent political machine. It went through Bhagat Singh, hanged at twenty-three.

Then it spent its second half on something that gets left out of most tellings. For twenty years Punjab was not governed by the Congress or by the Muslim League. It was governed by the Unionist Party — Muslim, Hindu and Sikh landholders in one party, organised around the countryside against the towns. In 1937 the Unionists took about 95 of 175 seats. The Muslim League took two.

By 1946 the League had 73 seats and the Unionists 20. The coalition that governed without the League fell on 2 March 1947. Mass killing began in the Rawalpindi division within days — three months before partition was announced. On 23 June the Punjab Assembly, voting in two separate sections, chose to divide the province. A British lawyer who had never been to India was given about five weeks to draw the line.

He finished before independence. The award was not published. On 14 and 15 August 1947, millions of Punjabis in the central districts celebrated or dreaded a freedom whose border they had not been told.

That is where this part opens.

How this book is built

Six kinds of box run through every part of this series. They are the whole method, so it is worth knowing what each one is for before you meet it.

WORD BOX

What it does: explains a hard word the moment it first appears. You never have to hold an unexplained term in your head, and you never have to go hunting in a glossary.

IN REAL TERMS

What it does: turns a number you cannot picture into something you can. Ten million people is a figure. Ten million people is also every single person in a large country getting up and walking, in both directions, in about four months.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

What it does: shows the evidence itself — the census column, the relief camp register, the commission report, the satellite reading of the water table — and says plainly what it can and cannot prove. This part leans on it heavily, because much of what people state confidently about these years rests on counts that were never properly made.

THE ARGUMENT

What it does: sets out a question where serious people disagree. Each side gets a block of its own, with its strongest honest case — not a version built to be knocked down. Then a verdict block says where things stand and what would settle it.

One promise: I am not going to pick a side for you. On the material in this part, that promise matters more than anywhere else in the series.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

What it does: digs out something a claim quietly takes for granted without proving. This is the signature of the series. It is not a disclaimer and it is not a caveat. It is the unexamined thing sitting underneath an argument that everybody is having.

REMEMBER THIS

What it does: closes every chapter with the key points in the plainest words available. If you read only these ten boxes, you would still have the story of this part.

A warning about this part

Everything in Parts 1 to 12 was finished. The people were dead and the arguments about them were arguments between historians.

This part is different. Some of the people in it are alive. Some of the events are inside living memory, and there are families in Punjab today who lost somebody in them. The 1980s are not settled history; they are a wound that different people describe in incompatible ways, and describing them at all is a political act in India right now.

So I will do here what I have done throughout, only more carefully. Where there is a count, I will give it and say who made it. Where there is no reliable count, I will say so instead of choosing a number that suits a story. Where two accounts cannot both be true, both go in an Argument box at full strength, and I will not resolve it for you.

You may find that unsatisfying in a few places. I think it is the only honest way to write these particular seventy-nine years.

What Is In Part 13

Chapter 1 — The Line Made Public

The award of 17 August · Gurdaspur and Ferozepur · what a border cut through · the Boundary Force

Chapter 2 — The Killing

How the violence was organised · the trains · why the numbers are not known · what happened to women

Chapter 3 — The Walking

The foot columns · the camps · the scale of the exchange · what people carried and what they left

Chapter 4 — Building a Province From Half a Province

Land resettlement and the graded cut · PEPSU · a new capital · the refugee economy

Chapter 5 — The Language Question

The Punjabi Suba demand · the census answers of 1951 and 1961 · the 1966 division · what it settled

Chapter 6 — The Green Revolution

The new seeds · tubewells and power · who gained · the bill that arrived later

Chapter 7 — Water

The Indus Waters Treaty · river allocation between states · the Sutlej-Yamuna Link · the ground beneath

Chapter 8 — The Decade That Is Still Being Argued About

Anandpur Sahib · the turn to arms · June 1984 · November 1984 · the years of the security state

Chapter 9 — After

The return of elections · the economy that stopped growing · migration and drugs · caste in modern Punjab · the farm protests

Chapter 10 — An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

Genuinely unknown · Solid

Reference — Timeline · Glossary · About the Author · What comes next

CHAPTER ONE

The Line Made Public

On 17 August 1947 Punjabis were finally told which country they were in. By then a great many of them had already been killed for being in the wrong one.

1.1 — Two days late

India became independent at midnight on 14 August 1947. Pakistan had been created hours earlier. The border between them, in Punjab, was not made public until 17 August.

Sir Cyril Radcliffe had finished his work before independence. The decision to hold it back was taken at the top. The reasoning was that if the award came out under British authority, the British would have to police the reaction. If it came out after the handover, the new governments would.

So for three days, in the most mixed districts in Punjab, nobody knew.

IN REAL TERMS

Imagine being told your country becomes independent on Friday, and being told on Sunday which of two new countries your village is in.

Now add this. Deciding wrongly does not mean inconvenience. It means your family may be killed. And you have to decide on Friday.

People guessed. Some guessed from the religion of the local majority. Some guessed from rumour. In several places the local officials guessed too, because they had not been told either, and raised the wrong flag on 15 August and had to take it down again.

1.2 — What the award actually said

The line ran roughly north to south through the middle of Punjab. Lahore went to Pakistan. Amritsar went to India.

Two decisions drew the loudest complaints, and still do.

Gurdaspur. The district had a small Muslim majority overall. Three of its four tehsils went to India; only Shakargarh went to Pakistan.

Ferozepur. The Ferozepur and Zira tehsils had Muslim majorities. Both went to India.

WORD BOX

Tehsil: an administrative unit below a district. A district contains several tehsils. It matters here because the Boundary Commission's rule — put contiguous majority areas on the side of their majority — gives a different border depending on whether you count by district, by tehsil, or by village. Nobody ever specified which.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS THE GURDASPUR DECISION POLITICAL?

Gurdaspur is the single most argued-over stretch of the Radcliffe line, because the only land route from India towards Kashmir at the time ran through it. In October 1947 Kashmir became the subject of a war that has not fully ended.

The case that it was fixed

Gurdaspur had a Muslim majority. Under the stated rule it should have gone to Pakistan. Earlier working maps, including one shown to the parties in early August, apparently placed more of it on the Pakistani side. Mountbatten met Radcliffe privately during the drafting. India's access to Kashmir depended on this award, and India took Kashmir's accession three months later. On this reading the criteria were the cover and the road was the point.

The case that it was not

The award's own reasoning rests on the canal and river system: the Upper Bari Doab Canal irrigated land on both sides, and Radcliffe's terms of reference told him to weigh "other factors" as well as population. Batala and Gurdaspur tehsils have substantial non-Muslim populations, and the district majority was thin. Kashmir's accession was not foreseeable in early August — it followed an invasion nobody had scheduled. Both sides denounced the whole award, which is not what you expect from a fix.

Where things stand: the private meetings are documented; what was said in them is not. Historians remain split, and the split tends to follow what they already think about British conduct in 1947.

What would settle it: a contemporaneous record of Radcliffe's reasoning before and after those meetings. His working papers were destroyed. That is itself a fact worth sitting with.

Why people care so much: because if the line was drawn for a road, then Kashmir — and three wars — began with a pencil, not a principle.

1.3 — What a border cuts

A line on a map of Punjab does not just separate people. Punjab had been engineered.

Part 11 described the canal colonies: a vast irrigation system built by the British across the western districts, turning dry land into the most productive farmland in India. That system was designed as one machine. The line cut it.

Headworks ended up on one side and the fields they watered on the other. The Madhopur headworks on the Ravi went to India; canals it fed ran into Pakistan. The same was true at Ferozepur on the Sutlej. Within months this became a live weapon: in April 1948 India briefly stopped water to canals running into Pakistan. That single act is the direct ancestor of Chapter Seven.

Roads and railways were cut the same way. Lahore and Amritsar are about fifty kilometres apart and had functioned as one economic region for centuries. Lahore lost its hinterland. Amritsar lost its market and became a border town with a dead frontier on two sides.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Almost every account of 1947 assumes that a border sorts people who were already separate. The task is described as "dividing" — as though Punjab were a bag of two kinds of object that could be tipped into two piles.

That assumption is wrong at the level of the village. In central Punjab, communities did not live in blocks. They lived in the same settlements, in occupations that fitted together — a Muslim weaver, a Hindu trader, a Sikh cultivator, all dependent on each other's work.

So the border did not sort a mixture. It *tore* a fabric, and then people had to be moved to make the map true after the fact. Notice the order. The map came first. The population was rearranged to fit it.

This matters for a question people still argue about: was the killing an unfortunate side effect of partition, or was it the method by which partition was carried out? If you assume the communities were already separate, the killing looks like an accident. If you look at where they actually lived, it looks like the mechanism.

1.4 — The force that was meant to hold it

The one preparation made for trouble was the Punjab Boundary Force, set up at the end of July under Major-General Thomas Rees. It had around 50,000 men.

IN REAL TERMS

Fifty thousand soldiers sounds large. Spread it over the twelve districts of central Punjab and you get roughly one soldier for every 300 or 400 people, across an area bigger than Belgium, with no helicopters, few radios and a road system that was being blocked by refugee columns.

Put differently: if the trouble started in more than a handful of places at once, the force could not reach it. It started in hundreds.

The force also had a problem inside it. It was made of units of the old Indian Army, which had just been divided between two countries on religious lines. Soldiers were being asked to police violence against and by their own communities, while their own families were on the move. Some units performed with discipline. Some did not, and there are credible accounts of soldiers taking part.

The Punjab Boundary Force was disbanded on 1 September 1947, about five weeks after it was formed, at the exact moment the violence was at its height. Each new government said it would handle its own side.

REMEMBER THIS

The border was **finished before independence and published two days after it**, so that the new governments, not the British, would face the consequences. For three days the most mixed districts in Punjab did not know which country they were in.

Gurdaspur and Ferozepur are still argued about, because Gurdaspur carried the road towards Kashmir. Radcliffe's working papers were destroyed, so the argument cannot be closed.

The line cut a single engineered irrigation system in half, leaving headworks and fields in different countries. That is where Punjab's water disputes begin.

The only force prepared for trouble was disbanded five weeks after it was formed, just as the killing peaked.

CHAPTER TWO

The Killing

Nobody counted. That is not a gap in the record — it is the central fact about the record, and it shapes every claim made since.

2.1 — It did not start in August

The violence of 1947 is usually dated to August. Part 12 showed that it began in March, in the Rawalpindi division, months before anyone knew there would be a border.

That earlier round matters for understanding what came later. Refugees from Rawalpindi arrived in central and eastern Punjab through the spring, carrying accounts of what had been done to their villages. Some of them were among the men who organised what happened in August, in the other direction.

This is the ugliest mechanism in the whole story and it needs stating plainly. Each round of killing produced witnesses who moved somewhere else, and their arrival supplied both the motive and the manpower for the next round. That is why the violence moved in waves rather than exploding everywhere at once.

2.2 — It was organised

The common phrase is that Punjab "descended into madness". The evidence does not support the picture that phrase creates.

What the record shows, from police reports, army accounts and survivor testimony, is a pattern of armed bands. They had names, leaders and transport. They were often built around men with military training, of whom Punjab had an enormous supply — hundreds of thousands demobilised after the Second World War. On all sides.

They attacked minority settlements, usually at a numerical advantage of many to one. They frequently attacked at the moment a community was most exposed: a village whose men had left, a column on the road, a train.

WORD BOX

Jatha: a band or squad, introduced in Part 12 for the unarmed Akali volunteers of the 1920s. In 1947 the same word was used for armed bands. The word did not change; what it named did.

This is worth noticing, because the vocabulary of the earlier non-violent movement was carried straight into the violence, which is one reason participants could tell themselves it was continuous with something honourable.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Three kinds of evidence, none complete.

Official: police first-information reports, district records, and the daily situation reports of the Punjab Boundary Force. These are contemporaneous, which makes them valuable, but administration in many districts had partly stopped working, and both new governments had reasons to keep numbers down.

Relief: registers from refugee camps and from the Military Evacuation Organisation, recording arrivals, deaths in camp, and people reported missing.

Testimony: a very large body of survivor accounts, most collected decades later. It is rich on what happened in one village and unreliable for totals — people cannot count what they were running from.

What all three agree on is the *pattern*: organised attacks by armed groups on outnumbered populations. What none of them supports is a reliable total.

2.3 — The trains

Trains carried refugees in both directions. They were also the easiest targets in Punjab: a known route, a fixed timetable, hundreds of people packed in with nowhere to go.

Trains were stopped, sometimes with a rail removed, sometimes by men waiting at a station. Attacks on trains killed people in numbers that no village attack could match, and they were reported on both sides, which made them uniquely effective at

producing the next attack.

2.4 — What happened to women

A large part of the violence was directed specifically at women, and it needs to be described rather than gestured at.

Women were abducted in very large numbers, and were killed by attackers. Women were also killed by their own families, and killed themselves, to avoid capture — a fact recorded on all sides, and one that families themselves recounted afterwards as honourable.

IN REAL TERMS

The two governments later ran a joint operation to recover abducted women, under an agreement in 1947 and then an Indian law in 1949. The working estimates used by that operation were in the region of 50,000 Muslim women taken in India and 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women taken in Pakistan.

Those numbers are estimates made by officials for an administrative purpose, not a count. Treat them as an order of magnitude: tens of thousands on each side.

The recovery operation ran for years. It also took women back from households where they had since had children, sometimes against their stated wishes — so it produced a second displacement of its own.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Both governments treated recovery as obviously right, and both used the same reasoning: a woman taken from one community belonged with that community, and returning her restored something.

The assumption underneath is that a woman's community membership is a fact about her that cannot change, and that her own statement about where she wished to live could be overridden by it.

You can see it in the law's structure: it applied to women, not to men; and a woman's testimony that she had chosen to stay was frequently treated as evidence that she was not free rather than as evidence of choice.

I am not telling you the recovery operation was wrong. Many women were being held by force and wanted out. I am pointing at the premise that made it possible not to ask.

2.5 — The number nobody has

THE ARGUMENT — HOW MANY PEOPLE DIED?

Published estimates for deaths in the partition of Punjab range from about 200,000 to about two million. That is a tenfold spread, and it has not narrowed in seventy-five years.

The case for the lower figures

Lower estimates, in the low hundreds of thousands, are built from what can actually be documented: recorded burials and cremations, camp registers, official district returns. Their defenders argue that this is the only method that is a count at all, and that higher figures are arrived at by demographic subtraction, which folds in everyone who died of disease, everyone who was never traced, and everyone who simply settled somewhere unrecorded.

The case for the higher figures

Higher estimates, up to two million, are built by comparing the 1941 census with post-partition population accounting and treating the shortfall as deaths. Their defenders argue that documentation collapsed exactly where killing was worst, that whole villages died with nobody left to report them, and that a method which counts only recorded deaths in a period when recording stopped is guaranteed to undercount.

The middle position

Many historians settle on a range of several hundred thousand to about a million, and treat any single figure as false precision. They note that the demographic method cannot separate the dead from the untraced, and that the documentary method cannot see past the edge of a functioning district office.

Where things stand: there is no agreed figure and there is unlikely ever to be one. The commonly cited ranges rest on incompatible methods, not on better and worse data.

What would settle it: nothing available. The 1951 censuses were taken after the movement was complete, and neither state ran a serious inquiry into the dead. That decision — not to look — was made by both governments, and it was not an oversight.

Why people care so much: because the figure is used to assign blame. A larger number in one direction supports one national story; a larger number in the other supports the opposite. Be suspicious of anyone who states a precise total with confidence, in either direction.

REMEMBER THIS

The violence **began in March 1947**, before the border existed, and moved in waves, because each round produced refugees who carried the motive and the manpower into the next.

It was **organised**, not spontaneous — armed bands, often led by demobilised soldiers, attacking outnumbered populations and trains. On all sides.

Tens of thousands of women were abducted on each side, and a recovery operation later moved many of them again, sometimes against their wishes.

Nobody counted the dead. Estimates run from 200,000 to two million and the gap is a difference of method, not of evidence. Neither government wanted the number known.

CHAPTER THREE

The Walking

In about four months, roughly ten million people crossed Punjab in opposite directions. Almost none of it was planned by anybody.

3.1 — The scale

Partition produced the largest movement of people in modern history. Across the whole of India and Pakistan the figure usually given is between twelve and eighteen million. The great majority of it happened in Punjab, in the second half of 1947.

IN REAL TERMS

Take roughly ten million people. That is more than the population of London. Now make all of them leave, on foot, in both directions, along the same few roads, in about four months, during and after the monsoon.

The largest foot columns — called *kafilas* — ran to tens of thousands of people. One column is recorded at over 400,000, stretching for many kilometres and taking several days to pass a fixed point.

A column moving at walking pace with bullock carts covers perhaps fifteen kilometres a day. From Lahore to Amritsar took under a week. From the far western districts it could take a month.

WORD BOX

Kafila: a caravan or convoy. In 1947 it meant a column of refugees moving on foot with their carts and animals, usually with some armed escort, sometimes military, often not.

Muhajir: Arabic-derived word for migrant, used in Pakistan for those who came from India. It carries a religious echo — the original muhajirun made a migration for faith — which turned a catastrophe into a founding act. India used the plainer word *refugee* and later *displaced person*.

3.2 — Nobody planned this

The most striking administrative fact about 1947 is that no serious scheme existed for population transfer, because officially there was not going to be one.

The working assumption on all sides, stated publicly by Jinnah and by Congress leaders, was that minorities would stay where they were and be protected as citizens. Chapter Ten of Part 12 named this as the hidden assumption of the whole summer.

So there were no reception camps ready, no ration stocks positioned, no transport organised. Everything was improvised after the movement had already started, by administrations that were themselves splitting in two and losing half their staff to the other country.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Refugee movement is far better documented than the deaths, for a mundane reason: people who arrive have to be fed.

Camps kept ration registers. The Military Evacuation Organisation logged convoys and escort numbers. Land resettlement, which is the subject of the next chapter, required every arriving family to file a claim stating what they had left behind — producing millions of individual records that still exist.

This creates a lopsided archive, and it is worth naming. We know a great deal about the people who arrived and very little about the people who did not. The record was built by the act of surviving.

3.3 — The camps

Camps appeared along the routes and around the towns. The largest, at Kurukshetra, held around 300,000 people at its peak — a temporary city with no sanitation built for it, in the middle of a cholera season.

The immediate killers in camps were the ordinary ones: cholera, dysentery, exposure, and hunger. Nobody knows how many died this way either, and these deaths sit inside the disputed totals from the last chapter.

3.4 — What was actually lost

People carried what could be carried. What they left was everything else, and it is worth being concrete about what "everything else" means.

It means standing crops. It means houses, wells, workshops, tools, livestock, and the shop's ledger of who owed what. It means the network of people who bought your work — which is the part that cannot be reissued by any government.

Two cities lost their function overnight. Lahore, the capital of Punjab for centuries and its centre of publishing, law and education, kept its buildings and lost the population that had run half of them. Amritsar kept its shrine and lost its market.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Both states described what happened as an *exchange* of populations. The word is doing heavy work.

An exchange implies two comparable movements that cancel out. It suggests a Muslim family leaving Ludhiana and a Sikh family arriving from Lyallpur are, in the ledger, the same event.

They were not. The land left in east Punjab and the land left in west Punjab were of different quality, different acreage and different value — the western canal colonies were the best-irrigated land in the subcontinent. The urban property differed. The occupations differed.

The word "exchange" also does something quieter. It turns people who were driven out into participants in a transaction, which makes the movement sound agreed. Nobody agreed to it. The next chapter shows what happened when a government had to do the arithmetic that the word "exchange" pretends is already done.

REMEMBER THIS

Roughly ten million people crossed Punjab in about four months, in both directions, mostly on foot. It is the largest movement of people in modern history.

None of it was planned, because every leadership had publicly assumed minorities would stay. Camps, rations and escorts were improvised after the walking had started.

The archive is lopsided: we know about arrivals because arrivals had to be fed. The record was built by surviving.

Calling it an "exchange" hides the fact that what each side left behind was not equivalent — and that nobody agreed to any of it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Building a Province From Half a Province

East Punjab had to settle millions of farmers on land that was smaller and worse than the land they had lost. What it invented to do that was one of the most remarkable pieces of administration in modern India.

4.1 — The arithmetic that would not work

East Punjab received around four and a half million refugees. Most were farming families. Every one of them had left land behind.

The land available to give them was the land left by Muslims who had gone the other way. Two problems appeared immediately.

First, there was less of it. Claims filed by arriving families came to substantially more acreage than existed on the Indian side to hand out.

Second, what existed was worse. The best land in undivided Punjab was in the western canal colonies. That was now in Pakistan.

IN REAL TERMS

Picture a village where forty families arrive, each holding a paper saying they used to own ten acres of well-irrigated land. In the village there are thirty farms of six acres, most of them rain-fed.

You cannot satisfy the papers. You can only decide, in public, how to disappoint everybody in a way they will accept without a riot — while they are exhausted, armed, and have recently seen what people do.

4.2 — The standard acre and the graded cut

The scheme designed to solve this is associated with the officer Tarlok Singh, and it had two ideas in it.

The first was the **standard acre**. Instead of measuring land by area, the scheme measured it by productivity. A fixed yield of produce became the unit. So an acre of top canal-irrigated land in Lyallpur counted as more standard acres than an acre of dry land in Hisar. A claim was converted into standard acres, and an allotment was made in standard acres.

WORD BOX

Standard acre: a unit of land measured by what it produces rather than how big it is. Defined as the area yielding a fixed quantity of grain. Ten poor acres might equal four standard acres; four excellent acres might equal six.

Why it matters: it let one office compare a claim about land in a country it no longer controlled with a farm it could actually hand over.

The second idea was the **graded cut**. Everyone got less than they claimed, but not by the same proportion. Small claims were cut lightly. Large claims were cut heavily — the largest by a very large fraction.

This was deliberate and it was redistributive. A displaced smallholder came out close to whole. A displaced large landlord did not.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS THE RESETTLEMENT A SUCCESS?

Indian resettlement of Punjab refugees is often called one of the great administrative achievements of the twentieth century. It is also called a long injustice. Both descriptions come from serious people.

The case that it succeeded

Millions of destitute families were given land, in a few years, by a new state with no money, using records that had to be reconstructed from claims. There was no mass permanent camp population — unlike several other twentieth-century refugee situations that are unresolved today. Agriculture in east Punjab recovered quickly, which set up everything in Chapter Six. And the graded cut meant the burden fell hardest on those with the most, which is not how such schemes usually go.

The case that it failed people

The scheme dealt in land claims, so it served people who had owned land. Landless labourers, artisans, weavers and menial workers — a very large share of the refugee population, and disproportionately Dalit — had no claim to file and therefore received little or nothing. Urban refugees were handled far worse than rural ones. Verification depended on documents and on local witnesses, which favoured the connected. And large numbers of claims were inflated, which everyone knew.

Where things stand: both are true, and they are about different people. As a scheme for resettling landholders it worked remarkably well. As a scheme for resettling the displaced it left out those who had least to begin with.

What would settle it: a systematic study of what happened to non-claimant refugees. It has never been done at scale, partly because the archive — as Chapter Three noted — was built out of claims, so the people without claims are the ones it cannot see.

4.3 — A state built out of leftovers

East Punjab in 1947 was not a tidy half. Alongside the British province there had been princely states — Patiala, Nabha, Jind, Kapurthala, Faridkot and others — which were not part of British Punjab at all.

In 1948 eight of them were merged into a single unit: the Patiala and East Punjab States Union, PEPSU, with its capital at Patiala. It lasted until 1956, when it was absorbed into Punjab.

WORD BOX

Princely state: a territory ruled by an Indian prince under British paramountcy rather than governed directly by British officials. Punjab had many. Their laws, taxes and police were their own.

PEPSU: Patiala and East Punjab States Union, 1948–1956. Worth remembering because Punjab's borders changed four times in nineteen years — 1947, 1956, 1966, and administratively again with Chandigarh — which is one reason its politics has been unusually preoccupied with territory.

4.4 — A capital with no history

Lahore was gone. East Punjab had no capital city, and it declined to promote an existing town.

Instead it built one. Chandigarh was planned from scratch on farmland at the foot of the Shivaliks. After the American planner originally engaged withdrew following his partner's death, the work passed to the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, with a team including Pierre Jeanneret, Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew. Construction began in the early 1950s.

It is a grid of numbered sectors, each intended to be self-sufficient, with wide roads and heavy concrete public buildings.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Chandigarh was built on an assumption that was never argued for in public, because it did not feel like an assumption at the time: that a city is a machine that can be designed in advance, and that a good design will produce a good social life.

Notice what this rules out. Old Punjabi towns grew around a market, a shrine, a river crossing or a fort. They were dense, mixed, and chaotic, and their form recorded

intention.

Chandigarh has among the highest incomes and best civic amenities in India, so the assumption was not simply wrong. But the city is also frequently described as lacking street life, and its plan has proved poor at absorbing the unplanned — the informal settlements it did not budget for have grown around it rather than in it.

The deeper point applies well beyond one city, and it returns in Chapter Six: *a design optimised for one measurable good tends to be brittle against the things nobody measured.*

There is one more thing about Chandigarh. When Punjab was divided again in 1966, both new states claimed it. It was made a union territory serving as capital to both — a temporary arrangement, still in force sixty years later, and still an active grievance. A city built to give Punjab a fresh start became a permanent dispute.

REMEMBER THIS

East Punjab had to settle about **four and a half million refugees** on land that was smaller in area and poorer in quality than what they had left.

It invented the **standard acre** — land measured by yield, not size — and the **graded cut**, which took a much larger share from big claims than small ones. It worked, and it was genuinely redistributive.

But it was built on land *claims*. The landless, the artisans and the urban poor had nothing to claim and got very little. The archive cannot see them, because the archive is made of claims.

Punjab lost its capital and built one from nothing. Then it was divided again, and the new capital became something both halves are still arguing over.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Language Question

For nineteen years Punjab argued about which language it spoke. What was actually being argued about was who would hold a majority — and both sides knew it.

5.1 — What was being asked for

After 1947, states across India were being reorganised so that each major language had a state where it was the official language. Andhra, Karnataka, Maharashtra and others were made or remade on that principle.

The Akali Dal asked for the same thing for Punjabi: a Punjabi-speaking state, a *Punjabi Suba*, carved out of the larger Punjab that then included the Hindi-speaking south and east.

WORD BOX

Suba: province. **Punjabi Suba:** the demand for a state in which Punjabi was the language of government, courts and schools.

Gurmukhi and Devanagari: two scripts. Punjabi in India is written in Gurmukhi, the script of the Guru Granth Sahib. Hindi is written in Devanagari. Because the script is tied to a scripture, a fight about script is never only about writing.

The demand looked like the ones being granted elsewhere. It was refused for nineteen years.

5.2 — The census answer

The reason given for refusal was that Punjab was not simply a Punjabi-speaking region. The evidence given was the census.

And the census said something extraordinary. In 1951, and again in 1961, very large numbers of Punjabi Hindus recorded their mother tongue as Hindi.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

This is one of the clearest cases in the whole series of a source measuring something other than what it appears to measure.

The census asks for mother tongue and records the answer. It does not verify it. In Punjab in 1951 and 1961 the answer had become a political declaration: organised campaigns, associated with the Arya Samaj and sections of the Hindu press, urged Punjabi Hindus to return Hindi, precisely because the census would be used to decide whether a Punjabi state was justified.

So the census figures are excellent evidence of *what people declared* and poor evidence of what people spoke. Many of those returning Hindi spoke Punjabi at home, in the street and at work.

Keep this in mind whenever anyone cites census language data in South Asia. It records an answer, and an answer can be a vote.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Both sides in this fight accepted a premise without examining it: that one person has one mother tongue, and that a district can therefore be assigned to one language.

In Punjab this was never true. A single household could use Punjabi at home, Hindi or Urdu for correspondence, and Sanskrit or Gurmukhi for prayer. Before 1947 Urdu had been the language of the courts and much of the press across the whole province.

The census form has one box. The reality has several. Once the state requires one answer, people supply one — and then the state treats its own form as a discovery about the population.

Watch this move. It is exactly the same one as the Sikh electoral roll in Part 12, chapter five: an administrative need for a hard line is imposed on soft ground, and the line then starts to look like a description of reality.

5.3 — Why it took nineteen years

The States Reorganisation Commission reported in 1955 and refused the Punjabi Suba, while granting linguistic states elsewhere.

The stated reason was that Punjabi and Hindi were not sufficiently distinct in the region and that the demand lacked general support. The reason most historians point to is different: a Punjabi-speaking state, drawn as proposed, would have a Sikh majority. Every other linguistic state being created had a religious composition nobody had to think about. This one did not.

That is why the demand attracted a suspicion no other state movement faced — that language was a cover for a religious state. Akali leaders denied it, pointing out that they were asking for exactly the principle India had already adopted. Opponents replied that the principle would not have been so attractive if the arithmetic had gone the other way.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS THE PUNJABI SUBA A LANGUAGE DEMAND OR A RELIGIOUS ONE?

The case that it was a language demand

Punjabi is a distinct language with its own literature going back to Baba Farid, as Part 6 showed. India had adopted linguistic reorganisation as national policy and applied it everywhere else. Refusing it in exactly one place, where the language happened to be associated with a minority faith, is the discrimination — not the demand. Akali leaders consistently framed it in the language of parity, and the movement drew Punjabi-speaking support beyond Sikhs.

The case that it was a religious demand in language clothing

The demand was led by an explicitly Sikh party, run from institutions controlled by the SGPC, and mobilised through gurdwaras. Its most committed supporters spoke of it as securing a homeland where Sikhs would not be a permanent minority. The script chosen was the scripture's script. And the strongest evidence is that when the state was finally granted, the boundary drawn was the one that produced the Sikh majority.

Where things stand: most historians accept that both descriptions are accurate and that separating them is artificial. In Punjab, language and religious community had been growing into each other since the census and separate electorates of the colonial period.

What would settle it: nothing, because the question assumes the two motives can be prised apart in the heads of people who did not experience them as separate.

Why people care so much: because if it was a language demand, then nineteen years of refusal was discrimination; and if it was a religious demand, then the refusal was principled. The label decides who was wronged.

5.4 — 1966

The state was granted in 1966, after the war with Pakistan in which Punjab had again been the front line, and following a long campaign that included fasts, mass arrests and one death by self-immolation.

The Punjab Reorganisation Act took effect on 1 November 1966. It produced three things: a smaller Punjab with a Punjabi-speaking, Sikh-majority population; a new state of Haryana in the Hindi-speaking south-east; and hill districts transferred to Himachal Pradesh.

Chandigarh, sitting on the boundary, was made a union territory and shared as capital by Punjab and Haryana. The river waters were not divided along with the land, but administered jointly. Both of those decisions were described as temporary.

Neither has been resolved. Chapter Seven is about the second one.

REMEMBER THIS

India reorganised its states by language everywhere. Punjab asked for the same and was **refused for nineteen years**.

The refusal rested on census figures in which large numbers of **Punjabi Hindus declared Hindi as their mother tongue** — often at the urging of organised campaigns, precisely because the census would decide the question. The census recorded an answer, not a language.

The demand was both a language demand and a community demand, and in Punjab those two things had been growing into each other since the colonial census.

Punjab got its state in 1966, minus Haryana and the hills — and with its capital and its river water left unresolved. Both are still unresolved today.

CHAPTER SIX

The Green Revolution

Punjab was asked to feed India, and it did. The bill arrived thirty years later, and it is still being paid.

6.1 — The problem it solved

In the mid-1960s India could not feed itself. Two failed monsoons and a war left the country dependent on imported American wheat, shipment by shipment, in a way that was politically humiliating and strategically dangerous.

The response was a package. Not a single invention — a package, and the package matters more than any part of it.

New seed varieties of wheat, developed in Mexico under Norman Borlaug and adapted at Indian institutions including Punjab Agricultural University at Ludhiana. Chemical fertiliser. Assured irrigation. Guaranteed purchase by the government at an announced price. Rural credit to pay for it all.

WORD BOX

High-yielding variety (HYV): a plant bred to produce far more grain per plant. The key trick was making the plant *shorter*. Tall wheat given lots of fertiliser grows tall and falls over. Short, stiff-stemmed wheat puts the extra growth into grain instead of stalk and stays standing.

Minimum Support Price (MSP): a price announced by the government before sowing, at which it undertakes to buy the crop. It removes price risk. A farmer deciding what to plant knows what it will fetch.

Procurement: the government actually buying that grain, through agencies, and storing it for the public distribution system.

Punjab was chosen to lead because it already had what the package required: canal irrigation from the colonial period, consolidated landholdings, a literate farming population, and — after Chapter Four — a structure of owner-cultivators rather than absentee landlords.

6.2 — What happened

IN REAL TERMS

Punjab is about one and a half per cent of India's land area.

Through the peak decades it supplied, in some years, somewhere between a half and two thirds of all the wheat the central government bought for the national food system, and a very large share of the rice.

Put it in kitchen terms. For decades, a large fraction of the subsidised grain distributed to poor households from Kerala to Assam was grown on a patch of ground smaller than the smallest of several Indian states.

Wheat yields multiplied. Punjab became the highest-income state in India by the 1970s and early 1980s. Villages got electricity, roads, tractors and pucca houses on a scale unmatched elsewhere in the country. India stopped importing food.

By any measure the policy set out to achieve, it succeeded completely.

6.3 — Who gained

Not everyone gained equally, and the pattern of who gained shaped the next twenty years of Punjabi politics.

The package rewarded those who could buy inputs and wait for a harvest. Owner-cultivators with medium and large holdings did best. Farmers with tiny holdings gained less, because the fixed costs of a tubewell and a tractor do not shrink with your acreage.

Agricultural labourers gained real wages, especially at harvest, and Punjab drew in large seasonal migration from Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. But labourers did not gain assets, and the gap between those who owned land and those who worked it

widened in absolute terms even as everyone's income rose.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The entire package assumed that what a farmer maximises is *yield per acre this season*. Every instrument pointed that way: the seed, the price guarantee, the credit, the extension advice, the subsidy on power and fertiliser.

Nothing in the package priced the water, the soil or the next generation's options. Not because anyone decided those did not matter, but because they were not in the equation being solved. The equation being solved was: *India is hungry now*.

Part 1, chapter 8, raised a gap that this series said would return: the gap between what is good for the group and what is good for the person. Here it is, in its most consequential Punjabi form, and it runs in an unexpected direction.

For each individual farmer, sinking a deeper tubewell and growing rice is rational. It is the highest-return use of his land under the prices he faces. For all farmers together, every deeper tubewell lowers the water table for everyone, including him.

Nobody is behaving badly. Every actor is doing the sensible thing. That is precisely what makes it hard to stop — and it is why Chapter Seven is not really a chapter about engineering.

6.4 — The bill

Four costs came due, all of them slowly enough that no single year looked like a crisis.

Water. Rice is not a traditional Punjabi crop. It needs standing water in a state with a semi-arid climate. The water came from the ground, pumped by electricity that was made effectively free from the late 1990s. Chapter Seven takes this up in full.

Soil. Continuous wheat-rice cycling, with heavy fertiliser and little rotation, degraded soil organic matter and produced micronutrient deficiencies that then required more inputs to correct.

Cost. Input prices rose faster over time than the support price. The margin per acre narrowed, so the response was to farm more intensively, which raised input costs again. Farm debt climbed, and rural indebtedness became one of the defining features of Punjabi life from the 1990s.

Lock-in. This is the worst one. The whole apparatus — assured purchase, the mandi system, credit, machinery, the labour calendar — was built around two crops. A farmer who wants to switch faces the fact that only wheat and rice have a guaranteed buyer.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS THE GREEN REVOLUTION GOOD FOR PUNJAB?

The case that it was

It ended famine risk for a country of hundreds of millions and removed India's dependence on foreign food aid, which is not a small thing to weigh against soil chemistry. It made Punjabi villages richer than any others in India for a generation, and that wealth bought schools, health care and migration opportunities whose benefits are still compounding in Punjabi families today. Judging a policy that fed a nation by the problems success later produced is judging it against a world where the alternative was not tried — and the alternative was hunger.

The case that it was not

It converted a renewable advantage into a depleting one. Punjab traded groundwater accumulated over millennia for three decades of income, and the water is not coming back on any human timescale. It locked the state into two crops it cannot easily leave, produced a debt crisis and a suicide crisis among farmers, and left Punjab's per capita income ranking falling steadily from first place. A gain that consumes the asset that produced it is not development; it is liquidation.

Where things stand: almost nobody now disputes either half. The serious disagreement is about attribution — whether the costs were inherent in the technology, or were caused by the *policy design* that followed it: free power, an MSP for only two crops, and no water pricing.

What would settle it: the closest thing to a test is happening now, in states that adopted the same seeds without the same subsidy structure. Their outcomes differ, which is evidence that the design, not the seed, did much of the damage.

Why people care so much: because a farmer in Punjab today is being asked to bear the cost of a policy his father was praised as a patriot for adopting.

REMEMBER THIS

The Green Revolution was a **package**, not a seed: short-stemmed high-yield wheat, fertiliser, assured irrigation, cheap credit, and a guaranteed government price. Punjab led it because it already had the irrigation and the owner-cultivators.

It worked completely on its own terms. Punjab — about **1.5 per cent of India's land** — fed a large share of the national grain system and became the richest state in India.

Every instrument in the package rewarded yield this season. **Nothing priced the water, the soil, or the next generation.**

Each farmer sinking a deeper tubewell is behaving rationally. All of them doing it empties the aquifer under all of them. That is why it is so hard to stop.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Water

Part 1 promised that Punjab's water disputes would keep coming back. This is where they arrive all at once — between two countries, between three states, and between a farmer and the ground under his own field.

7.1 — Between two countries

Partition left the irrigation system of Punjab cut in half, with headworks in India and command areas in Pakistan. In April 1948 India briefly stopped water flowing into canals feeding Pakistani land. Water had been demonstrated as a weapon within eight months of independence.

It took twelve years to settle. The Indus Waters Treaty was signed in 1960, brokered by the World Bank.

Its solution was blunt. Rather than share each river, it divided them. India got the three eastern rivers — the Ravi, the Beas and the Sutlej. Pakistan got the three western ones — the Indus, the Jhelum and the Chenab. Each side could largely do as it liked with its own, subject to limits on what India could do upstream on the western rivers.

IN REAL TERMS

Of the total water in the six rivers, the treaty gave Pakistan roughly eighty per cent and India roughly twenty. That sounds lopsided until you notice the geography: Pakistan's entire agriculture depends on this one system, while India has other river basins.

For Punjab specifically the effect was different and sharper. The three rivers India kept are the three that run through Indian Punjab. So the treaty concentrated India's whole share into the state that had just been reduced to half its size — and then, six years later, that state was divided again.

The treaty has survived three wars and repeated crises. It is routinely described as one of the most durable water-sharing agreements in the world. It achieved that durability by dividing rather than sharing, which is a real lesson and not an entirely comfortable one.

7.2 — Between three states

Chapter Five noted that when Punjab was divided in 1966, the land was divided but the river waters were not. They were placed under central administration and allocated by a series of decisions and tribunals over the following decades.

The dispute that grew out of this concerns the Sutlej-Yamuna Link canal, usually just called the SYL.

WORD BOX

SYL (Sutlej-Yamuna Link): a proposed canal to carry water from the Sutlej system across Punjab to Haryana, giving Haryana access to the share allocated to it after the 1966 division.

Riparian principle: the idea in water law that the states a river actually flows through have first claim on it. It is central to Punjab's case and contested by Haryana's.

An agreement in 1981 fixed allocations and the canal was begun in 1982. It was never completed. Work stopped during the violence of the 1980s, including the killing of engineers on the project. In 2004 the Punjab legislature passed a law terminating its water-sharing agreements. In 2016 the Supreme Court held that law to be unconstitutional. The canal is still not built, and the matter is still live.

THE ARGUMENT — WHO SHOULD GET THE WATER?

Punjab's case

Rivers belong first to the states they flow through, which is the standard riparian principle used almost everywhere else. Haryana is not a riparian state for the Sutlej. Punjab's own water table is collapsing, so transferring water out is not sharing a surplus — it is taking from a state already in deficit. The original allocations were made when Punjab's groundwater was healthy and its cropping pattern was different; applying 1970s numbers to 2020s hydrology is applying a settlement to a world that no longer exists.

Haryana's case

Haryana was part of Punjab until 1966 and contributed to the infrastructure that captures this water. A division of a state divides its assets, and water is an asset. Haryana's allocation was agreed, was confirmed by tribunals, and has been upheld in court. Punjab has simply refused to comply for forty years, which makes the dispute a question of whether a state can ignore judicial decisions it dislikes. And Punjab's groundwater crisis is largely the product of growing rice, a choice Punjab made and continues to make.

Where things stand: legally, Haryana has won repeatedly. Practically, the canal is not built and no government in Punjab could build it and survive. This is a case where the law and the politics have simply stopped speaking to each other.

What would settle it: honestly, a change in what Punjab grows. Nearly every serious analysis concludes that the volume in dispute is smaller than the volume that would be freed by moving a fraction of the rice area to less thirsty crops — which requires assured purchase for those crops, which returns you to Chapter Six.

Why people care so much: because in Punjab this is not experienced as an accounting dispute. It is experienced as a state that was cut down twice being asked to give up one more thing.

7.3 — Between a farmer and the ground

The dispute that will decide Punjab's future is not with Pakistan or Haryana. It is underground.

Punjab has well over a million tubewells. They run on electricity that has been supplied to agriculture free or nearly free since the late 1990s. They pump water from the aquifer under the state to grow a crop that needs standing water in a place with about half the rainfall it requires.

WORD BOX

Aquifer: a layer of underground rock or sand holding water in the spaces between its grains. Think of a very deep sponge under the fields.

Recharge: water soaking down from rain and rivers to refill the sponge. **Over-exploited** is the official term for a block where more is pumped out each year than soaks back in.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Three independent lines of evidence point the same way, which is what makes this one of the few things in this part that is not contested.

Well measurements. India's Central Ground Water Board measures water levels in observation wells and classifies each block. In Punjab the large majority of assessment blocks are classed as over-exploited — a figure that has risen decade on decade.

Pump depth. Farmers' own equipment records the trend. Centrifugal pumps that worked at shallow depths have been replaced across much of central Punjab by submersible pumps set far deeper, at considerable cost. Nobody spends that money for fun.

Satellite gravity data. Since 2002, satellites measuring tiny changes in Earth's gravity have tracked mass loss from north-west India. Losing water from underground makes the ground very slightly less massive. This method knows nothing about Indian politics or crops, and it agrees with the wells.

When a farmer's wallet, a government meter and a satellite all say the same thing, the thing is true.

IN REAL TERMS

Growing one kilogram of rice by flooding takes thousands of litres of water. Punjab produces many millions of tonnes of it a year.

Here is the part that makes people stop. Most of that rice does not stay in Punjab. It goes into the national food system. So Punjab is, in effect, exporting its groundwater to the rest of India — in the form of grain — and getting paid the price of the grain, not the price of the water.

The water is not on the invoice. It has never been on the invoice.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Every arrangement in this chapter — the treaty, the tribunals, the canal, the free

power — assumes that water is a *quantity to be divided*. The disputes are about shares.

That assumption fits a river. A river arrives each year whether or not you argue about it, so the only question is who gets what proportion.

It does not fit an aquifer. An aquifer is a *stock*, not a flow — a fixed inheritance that took thousands of years to fill. You cannot divide it into annual shares, because it is not producing annual anything. You can only decide how fast to spend it.

So Punjab has spent sixty years in a loud argument about surface water shares, conducted in courts and cabinet rooms, while the resource that actually underwrites its agriculture has been drained without any argument at all — because nobody owns it, nobody meters it, and no tribunal has jurisdiction over it.

The argument everyone is having is not about the thing that will decide the outcome.

REMEMBER THIS

The **Indus Waters Treaty of 1960** settled the dispute with Pakistan by dividing the rivers rather than sharing them — three east to India, three west to Pakistan. It has survived three wars.

When Punjab was divided in 1966 the land was split and the **water was not**. The Sutlej-Yamuna Link canal has been unbuilt since 1982. Haryana keeps winning in court; the canal keeps not existing.

The decisive dispute is neither of these. Punjab has over a million tubewells running on free power, pumping an aquifer that took millennia to fill, to grow a crop that needs standing water in a semi-arid state.

Punjab exports its groundwater as rice and is paid for the rice. The water has never been on the invoice.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Decade That Is Still Being Argued About

This is the hardest chapter in this series to write. I am going to set out what is documented, name what is disputed, and refuse to hand you a verdict.

8.1 — How I am going to do this

Everything in this chapter is inside living memory. People who took part are alive. People who lost family are alive. In India today, the words you choose here are read as a declaration of which side you are on.

So I will do three things and no more. State the sequence, which is largely agreed. Give the figures with their sources and their disputes attached. Put the genuine disagreements into Argument boxes at full strength.

What I will not do is tell you who was right. If you want that, this is the wrong book, and I would rather lose you here than pretend to an authority I do not have over events this raw.

8.2 — What was being demanded

The Akali Dal adopted the Anandpur Sahib Resolution in 1973, revising it in 1978. It is the document at the centre of the decade, and almost nobody arguing about it has read it.

Its contents, in plain terms: more powers for states and fewer for the centre, with the centre restricted to defence, foreign affairs, currency and communications; Chandigarh transferred to Punjab; the Punjabi-speaking areas left out in 1966 transferred in; a larger share of river water; a higher share of army recruitment; and recognition of Sikhism's distinct status, including a demand that it not be treated as a branch of Hinduism in law.

THE ARGUMENT — WHAT DID THE ANANDPUR SAHIB RESOLUTION ACTUALLY ASK FOR?

This is a dispute about a text, which makes it unusually tractable — and it was never resolved anyway.

Read as a federal demand

On this reading it is a demand for genuine federalism, of a kind argued for by regional parties in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and elsewhere. It nowhere asks for a separate country. Its language about state powers closely tracks mainstream federalist argument of the period. Several later commissions on centre-state relations took up similar themes. Read plainly, it is a bargaining document about autonomy.

Read as a separatist demand

On this reading, a document leaving the centre only four subjects is asking for a state in all but name, and its religious framing gives it a character no Tamil or Bengali autonomy demand had. Its defenders in the 1980s included people openly calling for separation, and the resolution existed in several versions with contested wording, which allowed different audiences to be told different things.

Where things stand: the plain text supports the federal reading; the political use to which it was put in the 1980s supports the second in part. Historians largely accept that the text is not separatist and that the movement around it came to contain separatists.

What would settle it: agreement on which version is authoritative — which never happened, and by the mid-1980s the argument was no longer about the document.

8.3 — The sequence

In 1982 the Akali Dal launched the Dharam Yudh Morcha, a mass civil-disobedience campaign in the pattern described in Part 12 — jathas courting arrest, in very large numbers.

Alongside it, a separate and increasingly armed current developed, associated with the preacher Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Targeted killings began. Through 1983 the state's authority eroded. President's rule was imposed in October 1983.

Bhindranwale and armed followers took up residence in the Golden Temple complex at Amritsar, fortifying buildings inside it, including the Akal Takht.

WORD BOX

Akal Takht: "throne of the Timeless One", the seat of temporal authority in Sikhism, founded by Guru Hargobind and described in Part 8. It faces the Harmandir Sahib — the Golden Temple — across the pool.

Its meaning is why what happened there is not comparable to a siege of an ordinary building. It is the institution from which the community's collective decisions are announced.

In June 1984 the Indian Army was sent in. Operation Blue Star ran from 1 to 8 June. It used tanks. Bhindranwale was killed. The Akal Takht was extensively destroyed.

The operation took place in the first week of June, when the complex was crowded with pilgrims for the martyrdom anniversary of Guru Arjan.

THE ARGUMENT — HOW MANY PEOPLE DIED IN OPERATION BLUE STAR?

The official account

The government White Paper gave figures in the region of 490 civilians and militants killed, with 83 soldiers dead. Its defenders note it is the only account based on a systematic tally, produced within months, and that army casualty figures — which are high — are not the numbers a government inflates.

The higher estimates

Sikh organisations, several journalists and some later inquiries put the toll far higher, in the thousands. Their case: the complex was full of pilgrims for the anniversary; there was no independent access, since the press was excluded from Punjab and communications were cut before the operation; and bodies were cremated in bulk without individual identification. A count made only by the party conducting the operation, with all observers removed, is not independent evidence.

Where things stand: no independent count exists and the range remains wide. What is not disputed is that a large number of pilgrims with no connection to the militancy were inside and that many were killed.

What would settle it: nothing now. The exclusion of the press and the manner of the cremations removed the evidence at the time, and that has itself become part of the grievance.

On 31 October 1984 Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two of her bodyguards, both Sikhs.

In the days that followed, organised mobs attacked Sikhs, above all in Delhi but also in other cities. Households were identified, often from electoral rolls. Men were killed in the street and burned. Official figures put the Delhi dead at around 2,700; other counts run higher, and there were further deaths elsewhere.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

November 1984 is documented far better than June 1984, and the difference is instructive.

It happened in the capital, in front of journalists and diplomats. Citizens' groups produced detailed reports within weeks, naming localities, times and in some cases individuals. Nine official inquiries followed over three decades, the fullest being the Nanavati Commission which reported in 2005.

Those inquiries established two things that are not seriously contested: that the killing was organised rather than spontaneous, with mobs transported and provided with lists and fuel; and that police in many areas did not intervene.

What has not followed is much prosecution. A handful of convictions have come decades later. The gap between what is documented and what has been prosecuted is, for many Sikh families, the whole point.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The word almost every account reaches for is *riot*. Riot implies a crowd that forms, loses control, and disperses. It implies nobody planned it.

Both June and November 1984 are routinely described using words that carry assumptions of that kind — "riots", "communal frenzy", "the troubles". The same vocabulary was used for 1947 and Chapter Two showed what it hides there.

The evidence in November 1984 shows lists, transport, fuel and a pattern of police inaction. Those are the marks of organisation, not of frenzy. Many Sikh organisations therefore use the word *pogrom*, and several Indian courts have since used language closer to organised violence than to rioting.

I am not asking you to adopt a particular word. I am pointing out that the most common word already contains a conclusion about whether anybody decided.

8.4 — The years after

An accord was signed in July 1985 between Rajiv Gandhi and the Akali leader Harchand Singh Longowal, promising Chandigarh to Punjab and referring the other disputes to commissions. Longowal was assassinated the following month. Chandigarh was not transferred.

What followed was roughly a decade of armed militancy and counter-insurgency. Militant groups killed civilians, officials and each other; bus massacres and bombings killed large numbers of ordinary Punjabis of every community. The state responded with emergency laws, mass detention, and a police campaign that became notorious for extrajudicial killings and disappearances.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The disappearances are documented largely because of one man's work. The human-rights activist Jaswant Singh Khaira examined municipal cremation records in Amritsar district and found large numbers of bodies cremated by police as "unidentified", including people whose families knew exactly who they were.

He was abducted in September 1995 and killed; police officials were later convicted of it. Following his findings, a CBI investigation ordered by the Supreme Court identified over two thousand such cremations in that one district alone.

One district. The scale statewide has never been established, because no comparable exercise was carried out elsewhere.

Elections were held in 1992 with a turnout of around a quarter of voters, most parties boycotting. By the mid-1990s the militancy was over. Normal politics resumed in 1997.

THE ARGUMENT — HOW DID THE MILITANCY END?

It was defeated by the police

On this account the credit belongs to a hard, centralised police campaign that broke the groups' command structures, denied them safe houses, and made membership fatal. Supporters point to how quickly violence fell once the strategy was applied, and argue that a state facing armed groups killing bus passengers had no gentler instrument available.

It lost its people

On this account the movement destroyed its own base. As groups fragmented, they increasingly extorted, killed rivals and killed ordinary Punjabis, including in villages that had sheltered them. Support drained away, and the police campaign succeeded because it was operating in a population that had stopped protecting anyone. Supporters note that repression alone rarely ends insurgencies and often feeds them.

Both, plus exhaustion

A third position holds that after a decade the population simply wanted it to stop, at almost any price — and that the acceptance of the methods used is itself evidence of exhaustion rather than approval.

Where things stand: most analysts accept elements of all three, and the disagreement is about weighting. The reason it matters is that it decides whether the methods used are treated as a template.

What would settle it: a full public accounting of what was done during those years — which has not happened, and its absence is why the argument stays live.

REMEMBER THIS

The **Anandpur Sahib Resolution** read plainly is a demand for federal autonomy, not separation — but the movement around it came to contain people who wanted separation, and both readings had real support.

June 1984: the army entered the Golden Temple complex, killed Bhindranwale and destroyed the Akal Takht, during a crowded anniversary. Casualty figures range from several hundred to thousands and no independent count exists.

November 1984: after Indira Gandhi's assassination, organised mobs killed Sikhs in Delhi and elsewhere — around 2,700 by official count, more by others. Inquiries established organisation and police inaction. Prosecutions have been very few.

A decade of militancy and counter-insurgency followed, with mass killing by armed groups and mass disappearances by the state. Over two thousand secret cremations were confirmed in one district alone.

Almost nothing in this chapter has been settled by a court, a commission or a count. That is not a gap in this book. It is the situation.

CHAPTER NINE

After

Punjab came out of the 1980s peaceful and stopped being rich. This chapter is about the slow problems — the ones with no single event to date them to.

9.1 — The state that stopped growing

In the 1970s and early 1980s Punjab had the highest per capita income of any Indian state. It has since fallen a long way down the table, overtaken by states that were far behind it.

Nothing dramatic caused this. Punjab did not shrink. It grew slowly while others grew fast.

The reason is structural, and Chapter Six laid the ground for it. Punjab's prosperity was built on agriculture, and agriculture cannot go on doubling. Meanwhile the growth in India after 1991 came from manufacturing and services, which concentrated in states with ports, large cities and industrial policy.

IN REAL TERMS

Think of two families. One owns a very good farm; the other opens a workshop. For thirty years the farm family is richer. Then the workshop family's business grows in a way a farm cannot, because you can add a second workshop and you cannot add a second monsoon.

Punjab is the farm family. It did nothing wrong. It ran out of the kind of growth it had.

Punjab's small industrial base — Ludhiana's hosiery and bicycle parts, Jalandhar's sports goods, Batala's machine tools — did not scale as India's economy opened. A landlocked border state with a decade of insurgency behind it was not where investment went in the 1990s.

9.2 — Debt, drugs and departure

Three things get named whenever Punjab's present is discussed, and they are connected.

Debt. The squeeze described in Chapter Six — input costs rising faster than the support price — produced sustained rural indebtedness. Farm suicides became a recognised phenomenon from the 1990s, concentrated among small farmers and agricultural labourers.

Drugs. Punjab has a serious substance problem, involving opioids in particular. It sits on a smuggling route, it has money, and it has large numbers of young men with time.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Be careful with claims about Punjab and drugs. The subject attracts very large round numbers, often quoted as if from a survey — "seventy per cent of Punjabi youth" and similar. That figure and its relatives have no reliable source.

What does exist: household surveys of substance use, treatment-centre admission data, and a 2015 study for the central government which estimated the number of opioid-dependent people in Punjab in the low hundreds of thousands. That is a serious public-health problem in a state of about thirty million. It is not most of the young population.

The inflated version is worth noticing as a phenomenon in itself. It is used politically by everyone, and it makes the actual problem harder to treat by turning a medical condition into a stereotype about a people.

Departure. Emigration from Punjab is old — Part 12 opened with Punjabis in Oregon in 1913. What is new is the scale and the direction of the aspiration. Leaving is now a mainstream plan rather than an adventure, and the money involved has produced an entire industry of agents, language schools and study-visa routes, some legitimate and some not.

9.3 — The thing that gets left out

Part 3 of this series made a promise. It said that Punjab's unusually weak Brahmin presence, and the rejection of caste by the Sant tradition and by the Sikh Gurus, raised a question to be taken up later: *did it work?*

Here is the answer, and it is uncomfortable.

IN REAL TERMS

Punjab has the highest proportion of Scheduled Caste people of any Indian state — around 32 per cent in the 2011 census. Roughly one in three Punjabis.

Land ownership runs the other way. Dalits own only a very small share of Punjab's agricultural land — a few per cent — despite being a third of the population. The great majority of Punjab's farmland is owned by the intermediate cultivating castes, above all Jat Sikhs.

So the state with India's largest proportion of Dalits is also the state where the gap between population share and land share is at its widest.

Chapter Four explained part of the mechanism. Resettlement worked through land claims, and people without land had nothing to claim. The scheme did not discriminate on paper. It did not have to; it simply distributed on the basis of a thing the excluded did not have.

The rest of the mechanism is older. The Gurus rejected caste as a religious principle, and the langar — where everyone eats together, seated on the floor — was the institution built to embody it. Part 8 described its founding.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The common claim is that Sikhism abolished caste. The evidence in front of us is that Punjab has India's largest Dalit population share and one of its sharpest land gaps, along with separate gurdwaras maintained by Dalit Sikh communities in many villages, and separate cremation grounds in some.

People usually reconcile these by saying the doctrine failed. But that reconciliation rests on an assumption worth pulling out: that a religion which rejects a hierarchy in worship is thereby attacking the hierarchy itself.

Caste in Punjab was never mainly a ritual ranking administered by priests — which is exactly why the Brahmin presence was weak. It was a distribution of *land* and of the labour attached to it. The langar attacks ritual separation at the meal. It says nothing about who owns the field the grain came from.

So the honest finding is not that the doctrine failed. It is that the doctrine and the hierarchy were never operating on the same thing. Equality at the meal was achieved and is real; it is one of the most successful institutions of its kind anywhere. Equality in land was not attempted.

This has a wider use. Whenever you are told that a belief system eliminated an inequality, ask which mechanism the inequality actually ran on, and whether the belief system ever touched it.

The 1961 law reserving a third of village common land for auction to Scheduled Castes is one of the few instruments aimed at the land question, and enforcing it has produced repeated village-level conflict — most visibly in the Sangrur district campaigns of recent years, where Dalit labourers organised to claim land they were legally entitled to lease.

9.4 — The protest

In September 2020 the Indian Parliament passed three laws changing how agricultural produce could be bought and sold, loosening the role of the regulated market yards and enabling contracts directly with private buyers.

The government's case was that this freed farmers from a restrictive system and would raise incomes through competition. Farmers in Punjab read it as the first step towards ending assured procurement at a support price.

Chapter Six explains why the reaction was so much stronger in Punjab than elsewhere. In most of India, assured procurement barely operates, so removing it changes little. In Punjab it is the entire foundation of the cropping system — the thing that makes wheat and rice worth growing on a shrinking margin.

The protest that followed was one of the largest in modern history. Farmers camped at the borders of Delhi for over a year, through a winter and a pandemic. The laws were repealed in November 2021.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Both sides of the farm-laws argument shared a premise, and neither examined it: that the present cropping system is something to be either defended or opened to competition.

Neither position asked whether wheat and rice on this scale can continue at all. The government's case assumed private buyers would arrive for the same crops. The farmers' case assumed the state would keep buying them.

Chapter Seven contains the reason both may be wrong. The water is going. A system that cannot be sustained does not need to be defended or liberalised. It needs to be changed into something else — and the argument that consumed the country for a year was not about that.

REMEMBER THIS

Punjab went from India's **richest state to the middle of the table** — not by shrinking, but by growing slowly while manufacturing and services grew elsewhere. Agriculture cannot keep doubling.

Debt, opioid dependence and emigration are real and connected. Be sceptical of the enormous round numbers quoted about drugs; the honest figures describe a serious health problem, not a lost generation.

Punjab has **India's highest share of Dalits and one of its widest land gaps**. The langar achieved equality at the meal. Nothing ever attempted equality in the field, because caste here ran on land, not ritual.

The farm-laws protest was so much fiercer in Punjab because assured procurement is the whole foundation here. Both sides argued about who should buy the crop. Neither asked whether the water exists to keep growing it.

CHAPTER TEN

An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

Every part of this series ends here. Two lists: what is genuinely unknown, and what is solid enough to build on.

This part has more in the first list than any other in the series, and the reason is not distance in time. It is the opposite. These events are recent enough that the people who could have counted chose not to, and are still alive to be asked.

10.1 — Genuinely unknown

How many people died in the partition of Punjab. Estimates run from about 200,000 to two million. The gap is a difference of method — documented deaths versus demographic shortfall — not of data quality. Neither government investigated.

How many women were abducted, and what happened to most of them. The working figures of roughly 50,000 and 33,000 were administrative estimates for a recovery operation, not counts. What happened to women who were never recovered, or who were recovered against their wishes, is largely unrecorded.

Whether the Gurdaspur award was politically directed. The meetings happened; their content is unknown; Radcliffe's working papers were destroyed.

What happened to non-claimant refugees. Resettlement records everyone who filed a land claim. The landless, the artisans and the urban poor are largely invisible in the archive, and no systematic study has traced them.

How many people died in Operation Blue Star. No independent count exists. The press was excluded and cremations were carried out in bulk without identification.

The full scale of disappearances during the militancy years. Over two thousand unidentified police cremations were confirmed in Amritsar district. No equivalent examination was made in the rest of Punjab, so the statewide figure is not merely disputed — it has never been sought.

How much groundwater is left. The direction is certain and the rate is roughly known. The total remaining volume, and therefore how long Punjab has, is not, because aquifer thickness and yield vary and have not been mapped in enough detail.

Whether the militancy was ended by policing, by exhaustion, or by its own conduct. All three are argued by serious people and no public accounting has been made.

10.2 — Solid

The sequence of 1947. The award's date, the districts affected, and the disbanding of the Boundary Force on 1 September are all documented and uncontested.

That the violence was organised. Official reports, army records and testimony from every side agree on armed bands, transport, lists and targeting. This is not a matter of interpretation.

That the violence began before partition was announced. The Rawalpindi killings of March 1947 predate the 3 June plan.

The scale of the movement. Roughly ten million people crossed in Punjab. Camp registers, ration records and resettlement claims all support this independently.

The design and effect of the resettlement scheme. The standard acre and the graded cut are fully documented, and the redistributive effect is visible in the allotment records.

That census language figures in 1951 and 1961 recorded declarations, not speech. The campaigns urging Punjabi Hindus to return Hindi are documented in the press of the period.

The results of the Green Revolution. Yields, procurement shares and income data are well recorded and agree.

That Punjab's water table is falling and why. Well measurements, pump-depth expenditure and satellite gravity data agree, and the last of these has no stake in the argument.

That November 1984 was organised and that police did not intervene. Established by multiple official inquiries, whatever word is chosen for it.

That Punjab has India's highest Dalit population share and a very large gap between that share and land ownership. Census and agricultural census data, both routine, both uncontested.

REMEMBER THIS

The largest gaps in this part are **counts of the dead** — in 1947, in June 1984, and during the militancy years. In each case the counting was not attempted, and in each case that decision was made by people who had the power to count.

What is solid is mostly **structure**: what was built, what was allocated, what was grown, what is under the ground. Institutions leave records even when they do not want to.

When someone gives you a confident total for any of the killings in this part, they are telling you which side they are on, not what happened.

REFERENCE

Timeline

Seventy-nine years, in the order they happened.

WHEN	WHAT
March 1947	Mass killing in the Rawalpindi division — before partition is announced.
3 June 1947	Mountbatten announces partition and the mechanism for dividing Punjab.
23 June 1947	The Punjab Assembly, voting in two sections, chooses division.
8 July 1947	Radcliffe arrives in India. He has about five weeks.
14–15 Aug 1947	Independence. The border is not published.
17 Aug 1947	The award is made public.
1 Sept 1947	The Punjab Boundary Force is disbanded as the violence peaks.
1947–48	Roughly ten million people cross Punjab in both directions.
April 1948	India briefly stops canal water flowing into Pakistan.
1948	PEPSU formed from eight princely states.
1949	Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act.
1951, 1961	Censuses in which large numbers of Punjabi Hindus return Hindi as mother tongue.
1952 onward	Chandigarh built to Le Corbusier's plan.
1955	The States Reorganisation Commission refuses the Punjabi Suba.
1956	PEPSU merged into Punjab.

1960	Indus Waters Treaty: three eastern rivers to India, three western to Pakistan.
1 Nov 1966	Punjab divided into Punjab, Haryana and hill districts. Chandigarh and river waters left unresolved.
1966–68	High-yielding wheat spreads across Punjab. The Green Revolution begins in earnest.
1973, 1978	Anandpur Sahib Resolution adopted, then revised.
1981–82	SYL canal agreed and begun. Dharam Yudh Morcha launched.
Oct 1983	President's rule imposed in Punjab.
1–8 June 1984	Operation Blue Star. The Akal Takht destroyed.
31 Oct 1984	Indira Gandhi assassinated. Organised killing of Sikhs follows in Delhi and elsewhere.
July–Aug 1985	The Rajiv–Longowal accord. Longowal assassinated weeks later. Chandigarh not transferred.
1984–1995	Militancy and counter-insurgency. Mass killings by armed groups; mass disappearances by the state.
1995	Jaswant Singh Khalra abducted and killed after documenting secret cremations.
1997	Normal politics resumes. Free power to agriculture follows.
2004, 2016	Punjab terminates its water agreements; the Supreme Court holds this unconstitutional. The canal remains unbuilt.
2011	Census records Punjab's Scheduled Caste share at about 32 per cent, the highest in India.
2020–21	The farm laws, the year-long protest, and the repeal.
Now	Most of Punjab's groundwater blocks are classed as over-exploited.
Part 14	Part 14 starts here — on the other side of the border, and in the countries Punjabis have moved to since.

REFERENCE

Glossary

Every hard word used in this part, in plain English.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Akal Takht	"Throne of the Timeless One." The seat of temporal authority in Sikhism, facing the Golden Temple across the pool. Destroyed in June 1984 and rebuilt.
Aquifer	A layer of underground rock or sand holding water between its grains. A very deep sponge under the fields.
Graded cut	The rule that reduced every land claim, but reduced large claims by a far bigger proportion than small ones.
Gurmukhi	The script Punjabi is written in in India; the script of the Guru Granth Sahib.
HYV	High-yielding variety. A crop bred for far more grain per plant — for wheat, by making the plant shorter so it does not fall over under fertiliser.
Jatha	A band or squad. Used for unarmed Akali volunteers in the 1920s and for armed bands in 1947.
Kafila	A caravan. In 1947, a refugee column moving on foot, sometimes hundreds of thousands strong.
MSP	Minimum Support Price. A price announced before sowing at which the government undertakes to buy the crop.
Muhajir	Migrant. Used in Pakistan for those who came from India, with a religious echo India's word "refugee" does not carry.
Over-exploited	The official classification for an area where more groundwater is pumped out each year than soaks back in.
PEPSU	Patiala and East Punjab States Union, 1948–1956. Eight princely states merged into one unit, later absorbed into Punjab.

Princely state	Territory ruled by an Indian prince under British paramountcy rather than governed directly.
Procurement	The government actually buying grain at the support price, for the national food distribution system.
Recharge	Water soaking down from rain and rivers to refill an aquifer.
Riparian principle	The idea that the states a river flows through have first claim on its water.
Standard acre	Land measured by what it yields rather than how big it is. The unit that made resettlement possible.
Suba	Province. "Punjabi Suba" was the demand for a Punjabi-language state.
SYL	Sutlej-Yamuna Link. The canal agreed in 1981 to carry water to Haryana. Begun in 1982, never completed.
Tehsil	An administrative unit below a district. Which unit you count majorities in changes where a border falls.
Tubewell	A pumped well drawing water from underground. Punjab has over a million.

ABOUT

About the Author

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THE LIVING ARCHIVE · MISTERLOVE.IN

STUDYING	MBA, Panjab University — second year, specialising in Business Intelligence (Business Strategy and Analysis)
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I write long-form history and research at misterlove.in, published openly and free to read.

My interest in this particular part is not academic in origin. Most Punjabi families carry a version of it — a grandfather in the army, a relative who left a village that is now in another country, a name in a story nobody finishes telling. This series is an attempt to put those fragments back into an order that can be checked.

This part was the hardest of the thirteen so far. Everything before it was finished. This one is not, and some of the people in it are still alive.

The Living Archive

This series belongs to a larger project. The Living Archive is a body of long-form research on history, society, religion, public policy and technology. Three rules hold across all of it.

- **Plain language.** Hard ideas explained in ordinary words, with nothing left out to make them fit.
- **Evidence first.** Show the thing itself, and be clear about what it can and cannot prove.
- **Competing views.** Where the field disagrees, both sides get their strongest case. Open questions stay open.

A word on sources

This is written for general readers, so it carries no footnotes. It is a synthesis of the published scholarly record rather than new primary research, and it does not claim otherwise.

This part rests on an archive that is rich and badly balanced. Government material — commission reports, census volumes, tribunal awards, resettlement records, agricultural statistics, groundwater assessments — is abundant and easy to reach. Records of what ordinary Punjabis experienced are thinner, and much of the partition testimony was collected decades later, when memory had already been shaped by everything that came after.

Where a claim rests only on the state's account of itself, I have said so, because a government explaining its own conduct is a particular kind of source. Casualty figures in this part are contested almost everywhere they appear. Where no reliable count exists, I have said that plainly rather than choosing a number that suits a story.

Corrections are welcome. If you find an error, or think an argument has been given less than its best case, write to me at the address above. Later editions will say what was changed and who caught it.

Lovepreet Singh

THE LIVING ARCHIVE · MISTERLOVE.IN

WHAT COMES NEXT

Part 14 — Pakistani Punjab and the Diaspora

The last part of this series crosses the border, and then leaves the subcontinent entirely.

This series has spent thirteen parts on the land between the rivers and, since 1947, mostly on the eastern half of it. The final part corrects that, and then follows Punjabis to the countries they now live in.

The questions Part 14 takes on:

- What happened to **Lahore** — a city that kept its buildings and lost half the people who ran them?
- What was **One Unit**, why did West Pakistan merge its provinces into a single block in 1955, and why was it undone?
- Why does Punjab **dominate Pakistan** — in the army, the bureaucracy and the economy — and what does that domination look like from Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?
- What did **1971** do to a country whose largest province had just watched another one leave?
- Does Pakistani Punjab have the **same water and soil problem** as Indian Punjab, and is it further along?
- Why did Punjabi as a written language **lose ground in Pakistan**, where most Punjabis live?
- How did Punjabis end up in the **United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Australia and the Gulf** — and what did each wave actually leave for?
- What does it mean that some of the loudest arguments about Punjab now happen in **Vancouver, Southall and Melbourne**, among people who have never lived there?
- And the question this whole series has been walking towards: **is there still one Punjab?**

• • •

End of Part 13 of 14

THE LIVING ARCHIVE · LOVEPREET SINGH · MISTERLOVE.IN

THE LIVING ARCHIVE

PART FOURTEEN OF FOURTEEN

The Complete History of Punjab

Part Fourteen — Pakistani Punjab and the Diaspora

Most Punjabis live in Pakistan. Millions more live in Britain, Canada, the United States, Australia and the Gulf. This last part crosses the border, then leaves the subcontinent, and asks whether there is still one Punjab.

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

Lovepreet Singh

1947 – THE PRESENT

MISTERLOVE.IN

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Where We Left Off

Thirteen parts have been about the land between the rivers, and since 1947 almost entirely about the eastern half of it. This part fixes that, and then follows Punjabis out of the subcontinent altogether.

Part 13 covered Indian Punjab from the publication of the Radcliffe line to the present day. It began on 17 August 1947, when Punjabis were finally told which country they were in, two days after independence.

It went through the killing, which was organised rather than mad, and which nobody counted — estimates still range from 200,000 to two million. It went through the walking: roughly ten million people crossing in both directions in about four months, almost none of it planned, because every leadership had publicly assumed minorities would stay.

Then it followed what east Punjab built out of half a province. The standard acre and the graded cut, which resettled millions of farming families and left the landless with nothing to claim. A capital built from scratch at Chandigarh, which both halves then argued over. Nineteen years of refusal over the Punjabi Suba, settled in 1966 by a division that left the capital and the river water unresolved. The Green Revolution, which fed India and spent an aquifer. The 1980s, which are still being argued about and which no court or commission has closed. And a present of falling income rank, debt, emigration, and a water table dropping under the fields.

What Part 13 did not do is look west. That is the gap this part fills, and it is a large one.

IN REAL TERMS

Indian Punjab has roughly 30 million people. Pakistani Punjab has roughly 128 million.

So for every Punjabi in India there are around four in Pakistan. When people say "Punjab" and mean the Indian state, they are naming about a fifth of the Punjabis in the world.

Add several million more in Britain, Canada, the United States, Australia and the Gulf, and the picture changes again. This series has spent thirteen parts on a homeland and one part is now owed to everybody who is not in the smaller half of it.

How this book is built

Six kinds of box run through every part of this series. If you have arrived at the last part first, here is what each one does.

WORD BOX

What it does: explains a hard word the moment it first appears, so you never have to carry an unexplained term or go hunting in a glossary.

IN REAL TERMS

What it does: turns a number you cannot picture into something you can. You have just seen one.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

What it does: shows the evidence itself — the census column, the recruitment register, the remittance figure — and says plainly what it can and cannot prove.

THE ARGUMENT

What it does: sets out a question where serious people disagree. Each side gets its strongest honest case, then a verdict block says where things stand and what would settle it.

The promise, one last time: I am not going to pick a side for you. This part contains arguments that are live in three countries at once, and in one case between two governments. The promise holds anyway.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

What it does: digs out something a claim quietly takes for granted without proving. It is the signature of this series, and this part turns it on the series itself before the end.

REMEMBER THIS

What it does: closes every chapter with the key points in the plainest words available. Read only these and you would still have the story.

A warning about this part

Part 13 warned that its material was inside living memory. This part has a different problem: much of it is inside living *politics*.

Some of what follows is contested between Pakistan's provinces. Some is contested between India and Canada, at the level of expelled diplomats. Some concerns organisations that are legal in one country and banned in another. Writing about any of it invites the reader to check which passport the author holds.

I hold an Indian one. You should know that, and you should read this part with it in mind, particularly Chapters Three, Nine and the Afterword. Where I think my own position is likely to be pulling at me, I have said so in the text rather than hoping you would not notice.

What Is In Part 14

Chapter 1 — The City That Kept Its Buildings

Lahore in 1947 · who left and who arrived · the loss of a professional class · Lahore now

Chapter 2 — One Unit

Why West Pakistan merged its provinces in 1955 · parity · how it was governed · why it was undone in 1970

Chapter 3 — The Sword Arm, Again

Recruitment inherited from the Raj · the army and the bureaucracy · the quota system · how it looks from Sindh and Balochistan

Chapter 4 — 1971

The election nobody honoured · the war · what a country does after losing its majority

Chapter 5 — Water on the Other Side

The replacement works · Mangla and Tarbela · waterlogging and salt · whether Pakistani Punjab is further along

Chapter 6 — The Language That Lost

Urdu as the national language · why Punjabi is not taught to Punjabis · Shahmukhi · the Seraiki question

Chapter 7 — Punjab Inside Pakistan

Lahore as a power centre · Zia and after · the 18th Amendment · the demand for a southern province

Chapter 8 — The Leaving

Britain · Canada · the United States · Australia · the Gulf · what each wave actually left for

Chapter 9 — Punjab Abroad

Remittances · institutions · politics at a distance · memory as inheritance · the second generation

Chapter 10 — An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

Genuinely unknown · Solid

Reference — Timeline · Glossary · About the Author · Afterword: Is there still one Punjab?

CHAPTER ONE

The City That Kept Its Buildings

Lahore came through 1947 with its architecture intact and about a third of its population gone. What a city loses when it loses a class is not visible from the street.

1.1 — What Lahore was

For most of the period covered by Parts 6 to 12, Lahore was Punjab. It was the seat of the Mughal governors, the capital of Ranjit Singh's empire, and then the capital of British Punjab.

By the 1940s it was the intellectual centre of north-west India. Government College and Forman Christian College trained the region's administrators. The University of the Punjab, founded in 1882, was one of the oldest in the subcontinent. The Mall carried the bookshops and the newspapers. Anarkali was the largest bazaar in the province.

It was also thoroughly mixed. In the 1941 census Lahore city was roughly six parts Muslim to four parts Hindu and Sikh — but that proportion understates what the minority was. Hindus and Sikhs owned a very large share of the city's commercial property, ran much of its trade and moneylending, and were heavily represented among its lawyers, doctors, teachers, printers and shopkeepers.

IN REAL TERMS

Picture a city where four people in ten belong to a minority — and where that minority holds most of the shops on the main street, a large share of the surgeries, and a great many of the desks in the courts and the colleges.

Now remove them in a single season. The buildings are still there. Every one of them is empty of the person who knew how to run it.

1.2 — What happened in August

Lahore burned before the border was announced. Fires in the old city through the summer of 1947 destroyed whole mohallas, and the pattern was the one Part 13 described: organised bands, not random crowds.

Almost the entire Hindu and Sikh population left. In their place came refugees from east Punjab — from Amritsar, Ludhiana, Jalandhar and beyond — arriving with nothing.

WORD BOX

Muhajir: migrant, from the Arabic. Used in Pakistan for those who came from India in and after 1947. In Punjab the incoming Punjabi Muslims were absorbed relatively quickly, because they arrived among people who spoke their language and often had kin nearby.

In Sindh it worked differently. Urdu-speaking migrants from north India arrived in a province with a different language, settled mainly in Karachi and Hyderabad, and became a permanent distinct community — the group the word now mainly refers to in Pakistani politics.

That contrast matters, and Chapter Three returns to it: Punjab's refugees became Punjabis; Sindh's became a separate people.

1.3 — Evacuee property

Both new states had to decide what to do with the property of the people who had gone. Both did roughly the same thing: declared it evacuee property, vested it in a custodian, and allotted it against the claims of arrivals.

Part 13 described the eastern version — the standard acre and the graded cut. The western version faced a different arithmetic. West Punjab received fewer refugees than the property left behind could house, because the departing Hindus and Sikhs had owned disproportionately.

The consequence was that allotment in West Punjab, particularly of urban commercial property in Lahore, became one of the great openings for enrichment in early Pakistan. Claims were inflated. Well-connected arrivals did very well. Officials did well. It is one of the origin points of a pattern in Pakistani public life that people have complained about ever since.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Evacuee property is unusually well documented on both sides, because allotment required paperwork — claim forms, verification reports, custodian registers.

It is also documented by complaint. Pakistan's own commissions of inquiry into evacuee property in the 1950s recorded large-scale fraud in the claims process, and the reports survive.

What the record cannot tell you is the counterfactual: how much of the wealth concentration in Lahore's commercial classes traces to 1947 allotments rather than to later business. Nobody has traced it systematically, and the families involved are still prominent, which is one reason nobody has.

1.4 — The slow loss

The dramatic loss in 1947 was of people. The slower loss was of function.

Lahore had been the capital of a province of nearly thirty million and the hub of a region running from Delhi to the Khyber. After 1947 it was the capital of half a province in a new country whose largest city, chief port and first capital was Karachi.

Its hinterland was cut. Amritsar, fifty kilometres away, stopped being a market and became a hostile frontier. The rail lines east went nowhere. The publishing industry, which had served readers across undivided Punjab in Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi and English, lost more than half its market overnight.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Both national stories about 1947 assume that the movement of populations was, at worst, a tragic accompaniment to a political achievement — that the states got what they needed and the people paid for it.

Underneath sits a premise worth naming: that a city is its buildings, its institutions and its land, and that populations are interchangeable inputs which can be swapped without changing what the place can do.

Lahore and Amritsar are the test of that premise, and both fail it. Lahore kept the Mughal fort, the university, the courts, the bazaars and the printing presses, and lost the density of skills that had made them work together. Amritsar kept the Golden Temple and lost the trade that had paid for the city around it.

Neither city was destroyed. Both were *deskilled*, and it took a generation to be visible. Notice that this is not an argument about who suffered more. It is a claim about what kind of thing a city is, and it applies identically on both sides of the line.

1.5 — Lahore now

Lahore today is a very large city — the second largest in Pakistan, with a metropolitan population in the region of thirteen million, larger than the whole of Indian Punjab's urban population.

It is the country's cultural capital in a way Karachi and Islamabad are not: the home of its film and television industry, its literary festivals, its most famous universities, and the political base of the party that has governed Pakistan for much of the last four decades.

It has also become one of the most polluted cities in the world, with winter smog that closes schools. Chapter Five explains part of why — the smog is downstream of what happens in the fields around it, on both sides of a border that air does not observe.

REMEMBER THIS

Lahore was **the capital of Punjab for centuries** and the intellectual centre of north-west India. In 1947 it lost almost its entire Hindu and Sikh population — around four in ten people, holding far more than four-tenths of its commerce and professions.

Refugees from east Punjab replaced them in number. **Evacuee property allotment** in Lahore became one of early Pakistan's great openings for enrichment, and was documented as fraudulent at the time.

Punjab's refugees became Punjabis. Sindh's became muhajirs — a separate people. That difference shapes Pakistani politics to this day.

Neither Lahore nor Amritsar was destroyed. Both were deskilled — they kept their buildings and lost the people who knew how to work them.

CHAPTER TWO

One Unit

For fifteen years West Pakistan abolished its own provinces and became a single block. The reason was arithmetic, and the arithmetic was about Bengal.

2.1 — The problem Pakistan was born with

Pakistan in 1947 was two territories separated by about 1,600 kilometres of India. The western wing held Punjab, Sindh, the North-West Frontier Province and Balochistan. The eastern wing held East Bengal.

The two wings shared a religion and almost nothing else — not language, not diet, not dress, not agriculture, not climate.

IN REAL TERMS

East Bengal held slightly more than half of Pakistan's population — around 55 in every 100 Pakistanis at independence.

So in any system where each vote counts equally, the eastern wing wins every national election on its own, permanently, without needing a single vote from the west.

That single fact is the engine of Pakistani constitutional politics for its first twenty-four years. Nearly everything in this chapter and the next two is an attempt to manage it.

The western wing held the capital, the army, most of the senior bureaucracy inherited from the Raj, and — as Chapter Three will show — Punjab held most of that.

2.2 — Parity

The solution adopted was called parity. East and West Pakistan would each get an equal number of seats in the national legislature, regardless of population.

But parity had a technical problem in the west. The eastern wing was one province. The western wing was four, plus a set of princely states. To hold half the seats as a bloc, the west needed to be a bloc.

So in 1955 the four provinces of the western wing were abolished and merged into a single province called West Pakistan, with its capital at Lahore. This was the One Unit scheme.

WORD BOX

One Unit: the merger of Punjab, Sindh, the North-West Frontier Province, Balochistan and the western princely states into one province, "West Pakistan", in 1955. Undone in 1970.

Parity: the rule giving the eastern and western wings equal representation despite unequal populations. Its effect was to convert a Bengali majority into a tie.

2.3 — How it worked in practice

One Unit was presented as a modernising measure that would dissolve narrow provincial loyalties into a single national identity. Some of its supporters believed that.

What it did in practice was concentrate administration in Lahore, staffed largely by Punjabis and by Urdu-speaking migrants, and remove the institutions through which Sindhis, Baloch and Pashtuns had any separate say.

Sindh lost its provincial assembly, its own budget and the status of Sindhi in administration. Balochistan, whose incorporation had been contested from the beginning, lost what limited autonomy it had.

THE ARGUMENT — WHAT WAS ONE UNIT FOR?

The official case

Pakistan was a new country with weak institutions and strong local identities, and its survival required building a national one. Simplifying four provinces plus princely states into one administration was an efficiency measure as much as a political one, and it removed a layer of feudal princely government that nobody now defends. Parity was the price of keeping one country together, and the alternative to parity was a west wing that would never accept national decisions made without it.

The case that it was Punjabi consolidation

Whatever the stated aim, the effect was to make Lahore the capital of everything west of India and to place the administration of four peoples in the hands of the largest. Provincial identities did not dissolve; they hardened, because they now had a single visible opponent. Sindhi and Baloch nationalism as organised movements largely date from this period. And the argument that parity was needed to hold the country together is undermined by what happened when the country was finally asked to vote as one.

Where things stand: almost nobody defends One Unit today, including in Punjab. The disagreement among historians is about intent — whether Punjabi dominance was the purpose or the by-product of a scheme aimed at Bengal.

What would settle it: nothing decisive. The internal records show officials arguing both ways, which is usually what internal records show.

Why people care so much: because if One Unit was Punjabi consolidation, then Pakistan's smaller provinces have a grievance that predates every later one, and every subsequent complaint about Punjabi dominance is a continuation rather than a new claim.

2.4 — Undone

One Unit was dissolved in 1970 by the military government of Yahya Khan. The four provinces were restored. At the same time parity was abandoned, and the coming national election was to be held on the basis of one person, one vote.

That was the first genuinely free national election in Pakistan's history, and its result is the subject of Chapter Four.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Both parity and One Unit rested on an assumption that was never stated as a proposition, because stating it would have been impossible: that a numerical majority which is culturally different from the ruling group is a *problem to be managed* rather than a population to be governed by.

Notice that this is exactly the assumption the Muslim League had spent the 1940s attacking. Its whole case for Pakistan was that a permanent minority cannot be secure under a majority that does not share its culture. Part 12 set that argument out at full strength.

Within eight years the same state had inverted the argument. The Bengali majority was to be balanced, capped and eventually outvoted — for reasons that read, almost word for word, like the case Congress had made against Pakistan.

I am not scoring a point. The mechanism is general and it is worth extracting: *an argument made by a group about its own vulnerability rarely survives that group acquiring a state*. The same could be said, in Part 13, about how independent India handled the demand for a Punjabi state.

REMEMBER THIS

Pakistan began as two wings 1,600 km apart, and **the eastern wing held the majority of the population**. Every constitutional device of the first two decades was a response to that.

Parity gave each wing equal seats, converting a Bengali majority into a tie. **One Unit**, in 1955, merged the four western provinces into a single province with its capital at Lahore, so the west could act as a bloc.

Its effect was to concentrate administration in Punjabi and Urdu-speaking hands and strip Sindh and Balochistan of separate institutions. Sindhi and Baloch nationalism as organised movements largely date from this period.

Pakistan was founded on the argument that a permanent minority cannot be safe under a different majority. Within eight years it was managing a majority it did not want to be governed by.

CHAPTER THREE

The Sword Arm, Again

The British built an army out of a few Punjabi districts. Pakistan inherited it, and has been governed by it, directly or indirectly, for much of its existence.

3.1 — What was inherited

Part 11 described the martial-races policy: after 1857 the British rebuilt the Indian Army around a theory that certain communities were natural soldiers, and concentrated recruitment in the north-west. Part 12 showed the result — Punjab supplying roughly half of India's combat soldiers in the First World War.

When the army was divided in 1947, Pakistan received a share of the units. But the recruitment *catchment* did not divide evenly, because it had never been spread evenly in the first place. The heaviest-recruited districts of undivided Punjab were in the north-west — Rawalpindi, Jhelum, Attock, Chakwal — and those went to Pakistan.

IN REAL TERMS

Historically, a very large majority of the Pakistan Army's soldiers came from Punjab, with a further significant share from the Pashtun districts next door. Figures around three-quarters Punjabi were commonly cited for much of the twentieth century.

Concentrate it further. Within Punjab, recruitment clustered in a handful of districts on the Potohar plateau, north of the Salt Range — an area with a small fraction of Pakistan's population supplying a strikingly large share of its soldiers.

The army has recruited more broadly in recent decades, and the proportions have moved. But an institution's character is set by who filled it for its first fifty years.

WORD BOX

Potohar (or Pothohar): the plateau region of northern Punjab around Rawalpindi, Jhelum, Chakwal and Attock. Dry, broken country, historically poor farmland.

That last point is the explanation, not the ethnicity. Where land yields little, a salaried job with a pension is worth more, and a district that sends soldiers for three generations develops the networks and the expectations that keep sending them. The British called this a martial race. It is better described as a labour market.

3.2 — The bureaucracy

The same inheritance ran through the civil service. Pakistan received a small number of senior Indian Civil Service officers, and the recruitment base for the service that replaced it was concentrated in Punjab and among Urdu-speaking migrants.

Pakistan responded, from the 1940s onward, with a quota system for federal employment, allocating shares of posts by province.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The federal quota is public policy, published and precise, which makes this one of the few claims in this part that needs no estimation.

Under the long-standing formula, a small share of federal posts is filled on open merit, and the remainder is distributed by province. Punjab's share is set at 50 per cent, Sindh's at 19, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's at about 11.5, Balochistan's at 6, with smaller allocations for the remaining territories.

Two things follow, and they point in opposite directions. Punjab's formal share is close to its population share, so the quota is not on its face a Punjabi privilege — it was designed to *cap* Punjab and protect smaller provinces. But a formula that guarantees the largest province half of the federal state, permanently, also guarantees that the federal state will feel Punjabi to everybody else.

3.3 — What this looks like from elsewhere

Here is where I have to be careful, and I said in the front matter that I would flag it.

An Indian writing about Punjabi dominance in Pakistan is writing about a rival state's internal fault line, and there is a well-worn Indian habit of doing that with enthusiasm. So I will report the complaint as those making it put it, note what the other side says, and leave it.

The complaint, made in Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, runs like this. The army is Punjabi. The bureaucracy is half Punjabi by rule. The largest share of federal development spending goes to Punjab. Water from the Indus is allocated in a way Sindh disputes. Gas from Balochistan heats Punjabi homes while Balochistan remains the poorest province. And when provinces have objected, the response has often been military.

The reply from Punjab, and from the federal government, runs like this. Punjab has more than half the country's people, so of course it has most of the soldiers, most of the officials, most of the seats and most of the spending — that is what proportion means, and a quota that caps Punjab at 50 per cent actually gives it less than its share. Punjab pays the largest share of tax. And treating a majority's ordinary weight as a conspiracy is how federations fall apart.

THE ARGUMENT — IS PAKISTAN A PUNJABI STATE?

The case that it is

Dominance is not only about numbers; it is about whether the institutions of the state are experienced as belonging to one group. The army — the most powerful institution in the country — was built from a handful of Punjabi districts and has ruled directly for roughly half of Pakistan's existence. The national language is not the language of any province's majority, but it is the language of the migrant community that allied with Punjab in the capital. One Unit made this structural. Every province that has objected has faced force. That pattern is not what proportion produces.

The case that it is not

Punjab holds slightly over half the population and slightly over half the National Assembly. Its formal quota share is below its population share. Punjab is not a bloc: it contains bitter internal divisions, including the Seraiki south's own case against Lahore, which Chapter Seven covers. Military rule has never been a Punjabi project — Pakistan's most consequential dictator came to power against a Punjabi prime minister, and Punjab has produced the country's largest civilian opposition to army rule. Calling a majority a dominator is a way of arguing that its votes should count less.

Where things stand: both descriptions capture something real, and they answer different questions. On formal representation, Punjab's share is roughly proportional. On institutional character — who staffs the army, whose city is the political centre, whose objections have historically been costless to ignore — the smaller provinces' complaint has substance.

What would settle it: nothing settles a dispute of this kind, but the practical test is what happens under the 18th Amendment devolution described in Chapter Seven. If provinces genuinely control their own revenue and administration, the complaint should shrink. If it does not shrink, that is evidence.

Why people care so much: because Pakistan has already lost one wing over exactly this question, and everybody involved knows it.

REMEMBER THIS

Pakistan inherited the **martial-races recruitment machine** described in Parts 11 and 12, and inherited the districts it recruited from — the dry Potohar plateau of northern Punjab.

That was never about ethnicity. Poor land makes a salaried job with a pension valuable, and three generations of it builds a pipeline. The British called it a martial race. It was a labour market.

Federal jobs are allocated by a published quota. **Punjab's share is 50 per cent** — designed to cap Punjab, and also guaranteeing the federal state will feel Punjabi to everyone else.

Punjab's formal weight is roughly proportional to its population. The complaint from Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is not about the arithmetic — it is about which institutions can ignore them at no cost.

CHAPTER FOUR

1971

Pakistan held one free election, did not accept the result, and lost the majority of its own population. Punjab has never fully reckoned with its part in it.

4.1 — The election

In December 1970 Pakistan voted, for the first time, on one person one vote, with the provinces restored and parity abandoned.

The result was exactly what the arithmetic in Chapter Two predicted. The Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and standing on a programme of Bengali autonomy, won an outright majority of the National Assembly — almost entirely from East Pakistan. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party won the largest share in the west, above all in Punjab and Sindh.

IN REAL TERMS

The Awami League won a majority in a house of just over 300 seats without contesting seriously in the west at all. The PPP won a large bloc in the west and almost nothing in the east.

So the country had produced two regional victories and one national winner, and the national winner was the one the army and the western politicians did not want.

The rule everyone had just agreed to said the Awami League should form the government. Nobody in the west was willing to say it out loud.

The Assembly was postponed. Negotiations failed. On 25 March 1971 the army launched an operation in East Pakistan.

4.2 — The war

What followed was nine months of mass violence, a Bengali armed resistance, a refugee flow into India in the millions, Indian intervention in December, and the surrender of the Pakistani forces in Dhaka on 16 December 1971. East Pakistan became Bangladesh.

THE ARGUMENT — WHAT HAPPENED IN EAST PAKISTAN IN 1971?

This is the most bitterly contested casualty dispute in South Asia, and I am going to handle it the way Part 13 handled 1947 and 1984: give the range, name the methods, and refuse to pick.

The Bangladeshi account

Three million people were killed and around 200,000 women raped, in a campaign that deliberately targeted Bengali intellectuals, Hindus and Awami League supporters. This figure has been official in Bangladesh since 1972 and is embedded in its national memory and its law. Its defenders point to the systematic character of the killings, the specific targeting of the professional class, and the scale of the refugee flow — around ten million people crossing into India — as corroboration that the violence was extreme and general.

The Pakistani official account

The Hamoodur Rahman Commission, appointed by Pakistan itself, produced figures in the region of 26,000 dead. Its defenders note it is the only inquiry with access to the military's own records and testimony, and that it was highly critical of the army's conduct and leadership — not a whitewash.

Independent estimates

Many scholars working outside both states put the toll somewhere between several hundred thousand and a million or more, arguing that three million is not supported by demographic evidence while 26,000 is far too low to be consistent with the refugee flows, the eyewitness record and the pattern of destruction.

Where things stand: the range is enormous and the two official figures differ by more than a hundredfold. What is not seriously disputed by scholars is that the violence was large-scale, that it included systematic sexual violence, and that it targeted particular groups rather than being general combat.

What would settle it: nothing available. No agreed count was attempted at the time, and both states have a settled national position that makes revising it politically impossible.

Why people care so much: because the number is the foundation of one country's founding story and the accusation against another's army. Notice this is the same structure as the disputes in Part 13. The pattern across this whole series is consistent: *where a killing is politically foundational, nobody counts, and the absence of a count is not an accident.*

4.3 — What Punjab has done with it

Here is what is distinctive about 1971 from a Punjabi point of view, and it is the reason this chapter is in a history of Punjab at all.

The army that fought in East Pakistan was recruited overwhelmingly from Punjab and the districts next to it. The political leadership that refused to hand power to the election winner was based in Punjab and Sindh. The war was fought in the name of national unity by an institution that one province largely staffed.

And in Pakistani public memory, 1971 is remembered mainly as a defeat inflicted by India, with the Indian intervention placed at the centre and the nine months before it placed at the edge. The Hamoodur Rahman Commission report — Pakistan's own inquiry — was not published for nearly three decades, and reached the public only after it leaked.

Pakistani writers, journalists and historians have made this criticism themselves, repeatedly and at some cost. I am reporting their argument, not supplying an Indian one.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The suppression of the Hamoodur Rahman report is itself the best-documented fact here: a commission appointed by a government, reporting to that government, and then withheld from the public for around thirty years.

That tells you something reliable without needing to resolve the casualty figures. A state that publishes an inquiry is willing to be judged by it. A state that buries one for a generation has read it.

Be careful about the reverse inference, though. Suppression proves discomfort. It does not, by itself, establish any particular number.

REMEMBER THIS

In Pakistan's first free election, in 1970, the **Awami League won an outright national majority** almost entirely from East Pakistan. The Assembly was postponed rather than seated.

The army operation from March 1971 led to nine months of mass violence, around ten million refugees into India, Indian intervention, and the creation of Bangladesh in December.

Casualty estimates run from about **26,000 in Pakistan's own inquiry to three million in Bangladesh's official account**, with independent scholars mostly between. Nobody counted.

The army was largely Punjabi, the leadership that refused the result was western, and Pakistan's own commission of inquiry was kept from the public for about thirty years.

CHAPTER FIVE

Water on the Other Side

Part 13 left Indian Punjab pumping an aquifer dry. The western half has the same crops, more water, and a different way of ruining land.

5.1 — What the treaty required Pakistan to build

Part 13 covered the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 from the Indian side: three eastern rivers to India, three western rivers to Pakistan. Here is the western consequence.

Pakistani Punjab's canal colonies had been fed partly by the Ravi and the Sutlej. Under the treaty those rivers were now India's to use. So Pakistan had to replace that water from the western rivers, and to do it Pakistan had to build.

The treaty came with funding for exactly that. Two very large dams followed — Mangla on the Jhelum, completed in 1967, and Tarbela on the Indus, completed in 1976 — along with a system of link canals carrying water eastward from the western rivers into the areas the eastern rivers used to serve.

IN REAL TERMS

Think of it as replumbing a country. Punjab's irrigation had been built over sixty years to carry water from where it fell to where it was needed. The treaty cut off two of the taps, so Pakistan built a set of canals running *across* the natural drainage to move water from the remaining taps into the old pipes.

Tarbela is one of the largest earth-filled dams ever constructed. Mangla flooded a substantial area of the Mirpur district — and Chapter Eight will show that this single fact explains a large part of who lives in Bradford and Birmingham today.

5.2 — The Pakistani Green Revolution

The package described in Part 13 — short-stemmed high-yielding wheat, fertiliser, assured irrigation, tubewells, credit — arrived in Pakistani Punjab at essentially the same time and for the same reason.

The results were also similar. Wheat output rose sharply. Punjab became the province that fed the country. Pakistani Punjab today produces the large majority of Pakistan's wheat on a share of its land, and is the centre of its rice, cotton and sugarcane as well.

The distribution of gains differed in one important way, and it comes from Part 13's Chapter Four. East Punjab's land resettlement had broken up very large holdings through the graded cut. West Punjab's had not. Pakistani Punjab entered the Green Revolution with a landholding structure still containing large estates, so the benefits of tubewells, tractors and credit concentrated further up.

5.3 — A different way to ruin land

Indian Punjab's problem, as Part 13 set out, is that the water table is falling. Pakistani Punjab's classic problem is the opposite, and it is older.

WORD BOX

Waterlogging: when irrigation puts more water into the ground than drains away, the water table rises until it reaches the root zone and the plants drown.

Salinity: all water carries dissolved salt. When water sits near the surface in a hot climate it evaporates and leaves the salt behind. Do this for decades and a white crust forms, and the field stops growing anything.

These are the two failure modes of large canal irrigation in a dry country, and British Punjab was warned about them in the nineteenth century.

Pakistan has fought this since the 1960s with drainage programmes and with tubewells used to pump the water table down. Large areas of Punjab and Sindh have been affected, and substantial acreage has gone out of production or lost yield.

Two further pressures have arrived since. The heavy use of tubewells has, in parts of Pakistani Punjab, produced falling water tables of the Indian kind alongside the waterlogging of the older kind — sometimes in the same province. And the rivers themselves are fed by Himalayan glaciers whose behaviour is changing.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Every water institution in this series — the colonial canal department, the Indus Waters Treaty, the inter-state tribunals of Part 13, the replacement works of this chapter — assumes that water problems are solved by *moving water*. Build a canal, sign a share, sink a well.

That assumption is so deep that it is invisible. It is the reason a treaty that divided rivers between two countries was accompanied by money to build dams, rather than by anything at all about what would be grown with the result.

Look at what both Punjabs actually produce. Rice and sugarcane in a semi-arid climate on one side; rice, sugarcane and cotton on the other. These are the thirstiest crops available, grown in one of the drier inhabited regions on earth, in both countries, under different governments, different ideologies and different treaties.

Neither state has ever seriously attempted the other lever — changing the crop. The engineering lever is visible, fundable and attributable to a politician. The cropping lever requires telling millions of farmers to grow something with no guaranteed buyer.

So the same mistake is being made on both sides of a border by two states that agree on almost nothing else. That is a strong sign the cause is structural rather than national.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Cross-border comparison is unusually reliable here, because the two states publish agricultural statistics for their own purposes and neither is designed to be compared with the other.

Satellite measurement, as Part 13 noted, does not care about borders at all. The same gravity data that shows groundwater loss in north-west India covers the Indus basin as a whole, and the whole basin shows depletion.

The clearest shared evidence, though, is one you can see from an aeroplane in November: the smoke. Rice stubble is burned after harvest on both sides of the border, and the resulting smog settles over Lahore and Amritsar and Delhi together. Air does not stop at Wagah, and the fact that both capitals blame each other every winter is a good illustration of how little the border helps.

REMEMBER THIS

The Indus Waters Treaty gave Pakistan the western rivers and the money to **replumb the country** — Mangla in 1967, Tarbela in 1976, and link canals moving water east into the areas the Ravi and Sutlej used to serve.

Pakistani Punjab ran the same Green Revolution package as Indian Punjab, but on a landholding structure that had never been broken up by a graded cut — so the gains concentrated further up.

Its classic problem is the **opposite** of Indian Punjab's: waterlogging and salt from a rising water table, not a falling one. In places it now has both.

Both Punjabs grow the thirstiest crops available in one of the drier places on earth. Neither state has ever seriously tried the one lever that would work, because moving water is fundable and changing crops is not.

CHAPTER SIX

The Language That Lost

Punjabi is the mother tongue of more Pakistanis than any other language. It is not taught in Pakistani schools. Punjabis themselves decided that.

6.1 — The numbers

Punjabi is the largest mother tongue in Pakistan. In recent census returns it has been given by around 37 to 39 per cent of the population, well ahead of Pashto, Sindhi and Seraiki. Urdu, the national language, is the mother tongue of well under a tenth.

IN REAL TERMS

Out of every hundred Pakistanis, roughly 38 grow up speaking Punjabi and roughly 7 grow up speaking Urdu.

Schooling in Punjab is in Urdu and English. A Punjabi child is educated in a language spoken at home by about one family in fourteen, and is not taught to read or write the language spoken by his own.

Compare Sindh, where Sindhi is a compulsory school subject and a medium of instruction. Sindhi has fewer speakers than Punjabi and far more institutional protection.

6.2 — Why Urdu

Urdu was chosen as the national language at independence for a reason that made sense at the time. It was associated with Muslim identity across north India, it was the language of the Muslim League's leadership and of the migrants, and — crucially — it was nobody's provincial majority language.

That last point was the attraction. A national language belonging to no province could not be accused of favouring one.

It did not work out that way in the east, where the attempt to impose Urdu on Bengali speakers produced the language movement of 1952, deaths in Dhaka, and the first serious crack in the country. That story belongs to Bangladesh, but Chapter Two explains why it began.

6.3 — Why Punjabis went along with it

What needs explaining is not why Urdu was chosen. It is why Punjab — the largest province, with the largest language, and with most of the army and half the bureaucracy — accepted a national language that was not its own, and then declined to teach its own at all.

Several reasons are usually given, and they compound.

Punjabi Muslim elites had used Urdu and Persian for writing for a long time; Part 12 noted that Urdu was the language of the courts and much of the press in British Punjab. Punjabi was the language of the home, the field and the song, not of the ledger.

Punjabi's main written tradition in the Indian half is in Gurmukhi, the script of the Sikh scripture, which after 1947 made written Punjabi feel to many Pakistani Punjabis like a religiously marked thing belonging to somebody else.

WORD BOX

Shahmukhi: the Perso-Arabic script used to write Punjabi in Pakistan. It is the older of the two scripts for Punjabi in continuous literary use — Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah and Sultan Bahu were written in it.

Gurmukhi: the script used for Punjabi in India, and the script of the Guru Granth Sahib.

One language, two scripts, and speakers on each side who cannot read the other's books. Two people can talk to each other fluently and be unable to exchange a letter.

And there was a straightforward incentive. Punjab already held the army and the bureaucracy. Pressing a Punjabi language claim would have cost it the moral position it needed to hold the federation together — and would have given Sindh, Balochistan and the Frontier a much sharper argument against Punjabi dominance than the one Chapter Three described.

THE ARGUMENT — WHY DID PUNJABI LOSE GROUND WHERE MOST PUNJABIS LIVE?

It was suppressed

Punjabi-language activists argue the state deliberately marginalised the largest language of the country: no medium of instruction, minimal official patronage, no requirement in public examinations, and a persistent framing of Punjabi as rustic and of Urdu as refined. A language kept out of school for three generations does not decline by accident.

It was traded

Others argue nobody had to suppress it, because the Punjabi elite gave it up voluntarily in exchange for something worth more. Urdu was the currency of the federal state Punjab dominated. Adopting it cost Punjabis nothing they valued and bought them the leadership of a country. On this reading Punjabi did not lose; it was spent.

It never was a written language for most people

A third position holds that the premise is wrong. Punjabi was overwhelmingly oral for most of its speakers, everywhere, including in India before 1947. What happened after independence is that India built a written Punjabi through the state, and Pakistan did not. The difference is not decline in the west but construction in the east.

Where things stand: the third reading is the most defensible about the past and the first is the most defensible about the present. Whatever the starting point, a language whose speakers are schooled entirely in two other languages is losing ground now.

What would settle it: the outcome of the current Punjabi-language campaigns in Pakistan. There is a real movement — publishers, a small body of new literature, court petitions for Punjabi as a medium of instruction. Whether it succeeds is a live test.

Why people care so much: because in India, Punjabi is the marker of a religious minority's identity, and in Pakistan it is the marker of a majority's provincialism. The same language carries opposite political weight on either side of one border.

6.4 — The other language in Punjab

There is a further complication inside Pakistani Punjab. The southern districts — Multan, Bahawalpur, Dera Ghazi Khan and around — speak Seraiki, which around a tenth or more of Pakistanis give as their mother tongue.

Whether Seraiki is a separate language or a dialect of Punjabi is disputed, and the dispute is not really linguistic. Recognising Seraiki as a language supports the demand for a separate southern province, which Chapter Seven takes up. Denying it supports keeping Punjab whole.

You have met this exact structure before. In Part 13, whether Punjabi was distinct from Hindi decided whether a Punjabi state was justified, and the census answer became a political declaration. The same mechanism is now running in the other Punjab, one level down.

REMEMBER THIS

Punjabi is Pakistan's largest mother tongue — around 38 in every 100 people — and it is not a medium of instruction anywhere in Punjab. Urdu, the national language, is the mother tongue of about 7 in 100.

Urdu was chosen precisely because it belonged to no province. In the east that produced the Bengali language movement and the first crack in the country.

Punjabi elites accepted it, partly from habit, partly because written Punjabi in Gurmukhi felt like somebody else's, and partly because **pressing a language claim would have cost Punjab the neutrality it needed to run the federation.**

One language, two scripts. Two Punjabis can talk fluently and be unable to read each other's books.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Punjab Inside Pakistan

The province that is accused of running the country is also the province where the country's civilian politics has been fought hardest — and it has its own internal south.

7.1 — Lahore as a political centre

Pakistan's capital moved from Karachi to Islamabad in the 1960s. Its political centre of gravity, in the civilian sense, moved to Lahore.

Punjab holds more than half the seats in the National Assembly. No party has formed a national government without winning Punjab. That single sentence explains a great deal of Pakistani political behaviour, including behaviour that looks irrational from outside.

7.2 — Zia, and what came after

The military government of General Zia-ul-Haq, from 1977 to 1988, matters here for two reasons.

The first is the programme of Islamisation — changes to law, to education and to the courts whose effects are still being argued about across Pakistan.

The second is local and specific. Zia's government cultivated a new urban Punjabi commercial and industrial class as a political base, in deliberate contrast to the landed families who had dominated before. Out of that came the political career of Nawaz Sharif, a Lahore industrialist, and the party that has governed Punjab for most of the period since.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The claim that a military government built a civilian party as a counterweight is the sort of thing that is often asserted and rarely evidenced. Here it is unusually well supported.

The mechanisms were public policy: privatisation of nationalised industries back to business families, local-government elections in 1979 that created a new tier of politicians outside the old landed structure, and the appointment of provincial ministers from that new group.

Be careful with the strong version of the claim, though. That a government created the conditions for a political class to rise is documented. That it intended the specific outcome — a party that would later fight the army repeatedly — is not, and the later conflict is evidence against it.

The pattern since has been a repeating cycle: a Punjab-based civilian government, growing friction with the military, removal by coup or by court, and return. It has run three or four times depending on how you count.

7.3 — Devolution

The 18th Amendment to Pakistan's constitution, passed in 2010, was the most significant redistribution of power to the provinces in the country's history. It abolished a list of subjects reserved to the centre, moved education, health and much else to provincial control, and increased the provincial share of federal revenue.

WORD BOX

18th Amendment: a 2010 constitutional change devolving substantial powers and money from Pakistan's federal government to its four provinces.

It is the practical test named in Chapter Three's Argument box. If the complaint about Punjabi dominance is really about federal centralisation, devolution should reduce it. If it is about who runs the army and the security state — which the amendment did not touch — devolution will not.

The evidence so far cuts both ways. Provincial governments do now control budgets and services that were previously federal, and Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have used that. But the amendment has been under continuous pressure from federal governments and from the military, and the institutions the smaller provinces complain about most were left where they were.

7.4 — Punjab's own south

The province that other provinces call dominant contains a dominance argument of its own.

Southern Punjab — the Seraiki-speaking districts around Multan, Bahawalpur and Dera Ghazi Khan — is markedly poorer than the north and centre. It has lower literacy, worse health indicators, and less industry. Bahawalpur was a separate princely state until 1955, and there is a movement to restore it as a province.

The case made in the south is the same case, one level down, that Sindh makes against Islamabad: the money, the offices and the attention concentrate at the centre, and the centre here is Lahore.

THE ARGUMENT — SHOULD PUNJAB BE DIVIDED?

The case for a southern province

Punjab has more people than most countries. A province of that size cannot be administered responsively from one city several hundred kilometres away, and the development figures show it is not being. Every party in Pakistan has promised a southern province at some point, which suggests the case is accepted even by those who do not act on it. Smaller provinces would also reduce the structural imbalance the whole federation complains about, since Punjab's weight is the root of it.

The case against

Opponents argue the demand is a vehicle for a small group of southern landed politicians seeking their own ministries rather than a popular movement, and note how reliably it appears before elections and vanishes after. They dispute that Seraiki is a separate language, arguing that a province built on a contested linguistic claim invites the same demand in every other district. And they point out that dividing Punjab does not obviously help Sindh or Balochistan — it changes the number of provinces, not who runs the army.

Where things stand: the development gap is not disputed by anyone. Nothing has been done, across every government of every party, for decades.

What would settle it: a serious attempt at either remedy — a province, or a genuine southern development programme with money attached. Neither has been tried, which is itself informative.

Why people care so much: because if Punjab's own south can be neglected by Lahore, then "Punjabi dominance" is not really about Punjabis. It is about who holds a capital. That reading is uncomfortable for everybody in the argument.

REMEMBER THIS

Punjab holds more than half the National Assembly. **No party has formed a national government without winning Punjab**, and much of Pakistani political behaviour follows from that one fact.

Zia's government built up an urban Punjabi business class as a counterweight to the old landed families. The party that came out of it has governed Punjab for most of the time since, and has repeatedly fought the institution that created the opening.

The **18th Amendment of 2010** devolved real power and money to the provinces — but left the army and the security state untouched, which is what the smaller provinces complain about.

Punjab has its own neglected south. If Lahore can neglect Multan, then the complaint about Punjabi dominance may really be a complaint about capitals.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Leaving

Punjabis have been leaving for over a century. Each wave left for a different reason, and the reason shaped what the community abroad became.

8.1 — The first wave, and the wall

Part 12 opened with Punjabis on the west coast of North America before the First World War — mill hands in British Columbia, farm labour in California, the men who founded the Ghadar Party.

That wave was stopped deliberately. Canada's continuous-journey rule produced the *Komagata Maru*. The United States passed a barred-zone immigration act in 1917, and in 1923 its Supreme Court held that Indians were not legally white and could therefore be denied citizenship — a ruling that stripped naturalisation from men who already had it. Australia's immigration policy from 1901 excluded non-Europeans outright.

IN REAL TERMS

One consequence is a piece of history most people have never heard of. Punjabi men in California's Imperial Valley could not bring wives from India and could not marry white women under the anti-miscegenation laws of the time.

Many married Mexican women, who were legally classifiable in a way that permitted it. The result was several hundred Punjabi-Mexican families, with children named things like Maria Singh, farming in southern California.

That community exists because of the precise shape of three separate racist laws. It is the clearest illustration you will find of how migration is formed by what the destination forbids, not only by what the origin lacks.

8.2 — Britain

The large movement began after 1947 and accelerated through the 1950s and 1960s, into a Britain short of industrial labour and still granting the right of entry to Commonwealth citizens.

Punjabis from both sides of the new border went. Sikhs and Hindus from Indian Punjab concentrated in Southall, in the West Midlands and in parts of the north. Muslims from Pakistani Punjab concentrated in the textile towns of Yorkshire and Lancashire and in Birmingham.

Two specific pushes matter, and both have been mentioned earlier in this book.

The first is partition itself: families displaced in 1947, having already lost one home, were more willing to move again.

The second is Mangla. As Chapter Five noted, the dam built under the Indus Waters Treaty flooded a large area of the Mirpur district in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, displacing something in the order of a hundred thousand people. Compensation and work vouchers were arranged, and a very large share of Britain's Pakistani population traces to that one displacement.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Migration chains are visible in an unusual way: they show up as extreme geographic concentration at both ends.

A large proportion of British Pakistanis trace to a small number of districts in and around Mirpur. A large proportion of British Sikhs trace to the Doaba region — Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, Kapurthala, Nawanshahr — rather than to Punjab generally.

That is not what you would see if people were leaving a country. It is what you see when the first arrivals sponsor relatives, who sponsor relatives. Migration runs along family lines, not national ones — which is why entire villages in Doaba have their remittance economy in one British postcode.

8.3 — Canada, the United States, Australia

The barriers came down in a cluster. Canada moved to a points system in the 1960s. The United States replaced its national-origins quotas in 1965. Australia dismantled its exclusion policy through the 1960s and formally ended it in the early 1970s.

The result is that most of the Punjabi presence in these countries is not a continuation of the Ghadar-era community. It is a second beginning, after a gap of forty years.

Canada now has one of the largest Punjabi populations outside South Asia, concentrated in British Columbia and around Toronto. Punjabi is among the most widely spoken languages in the country, and Punjabi Canadians are heavily represented in federal politics.

The United States has a Sikh farming community in California's Central Valley dating to the earliest wave, and much larger professional migration since 1965.

Australia has seen the fastest recent growth of any of them, driven mainly by students and skilled migration since the 2000s. Punjabi has been among the fastest-growing languages recorded in Australian censuses.

The Gulf is different in kind and larger in number. Labour migration from Pakistani Punjab to Saudi Arabia and the Emirates from the 1970s onward involves millions of workers on temporary contracts with no path to settlement. It produces the remittances but not the communities.

WORD BOX

Remittance: money sent home by someone working abroad.

Chain migration: the process by which one migrant sponsors relatives, who sponsor relatives, producing communities drawn from a handful of villages rather than a whole country.

8.4 — What each wave left for

It is worth being precise about this, because "poverty" is the lazy answer and it is mostly wrong.

The Ghadar-era migrants were not the poorest Punjabis. They were men with enough capital to buy a passage, usually from landholding families in Doaba, looking to add to what they had.

The British wave was labour migration into a specific shortage, plus the Mirpur displacement.

The post-1965 waves to North America were substantially professional — doctors, engineers, academics — which is why the American Punjabi community's class profile differs so sharply from the British one.

The current wave from Indian Punjab is different again, and Part 13 described the conditions producing it: farm margins narrowing, debt rising, few jobs outside agriculture, income rank falling. It moves largely through the student-visa route, and it is expensive. A family sells or mortgages land to send a child.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Almost every discussion of emigration from Punjab today assumes it is a symptom — that people leave because things are bad, and that if things improved they would stay.

The evidence in this chapter does not fit that cleanly. Punjab was the richest state in India during the decades when emigration to Britain and Canada was building fastest. The families who leave now are mostly not the poorest; they are the ones who can raise the fee. Leaving requires capital, so it correlates with having some.

What emigration from Punjab actually tracks is not poverty but the *gap between expectation and local opportunity*. That gap is widest for people who are educated, have some assets and can see no path locally — which is exactly who leaves.

This matters for policy, because the two readings give opposite advice. If emigration is a poverty symptom, raising incomes reduces it. If it is an expectations gap, raising incomes and education without creating matching local opportunity *increases* it — which is roughly what happened in Punjab for forty years.

REMEMBER THIS

The first wave, before 1914, was **deliberately stopped** — by Canada's continuous-journey rule, a US barred zone and a 1923 ruling that Indians were not legally white, and by Australian exclusion. The Punjabi-Mexican families of California exist because of the exact shape of those laws.

The British wave was post-war labour migration plus one specific displacement: **Mangla Dam**, built under the Indus Waters Treaty, which is why so much of British Pakistani Britain traces to Mirpur.

Migration runs along **family chains, not national ones**. That is why British Sikhs come overwhelmingly from Doaba and not from Punjab generally.

Emigration from Punjab has never tracked poverty. It tracks the gap between what people expect and what is available at home — which is why it rose while Punjab was India's richest state.

CHAPTER NINE

Punjab Abroad

A diaspora is not a copy of a homeland kept somewhere else. It becomes its own thing, and then sends that thing back.

9.1 — Money

The most measurable effect of the diaspora is cash. India is the world's largest recipient of remittances; Pakistan receives a very large sum relative to the size of its economy, and for years remittances have exceeded its export earnings.

IN REAL TERMS

In Pakistan, money sent home by workers abroad has repeatedly been worth more than everything the country sells overseas. The Gulf labour migration described in Chapter Eight is the largest single source.

At the village level in Doaba, in Indian Punjab, the effect is visible from the road: large houses, many of them locked and empty, built with money from Britain or Canada by families who no longer live there.

Those houses are a good symbol of what remittances do and do not do. They raise consumption, they pay for weddings, land and education, and they very rarely build a business. Money arriving as a gift behaves differently from money arriving as investment.

9.2 — Institutions

Wherever Punjabis have settled in numbers, the same institutions appear: a gurdwara or a mosque, then a community association, then a language class, then a newspaper or radio station, then a political organisation.

The gurdwara abroad has taken on a broader role than at home. It runs the langar, but it also functions as a welfare office, an employment exchange, a legal-advice service and a meeting hall.

Part 12 described how control of gurdwaras and their money became the machine of Sikh politics in Punjab after 1925. The same mechanism operates abroad. Gurdwara committee elections in Southall, Surrey or Brampton are contested seriously, because whoever holds the committee holds a budget, a building and a platform.

9.3 — Politics at a distance

This is the part I said in the front matter I would flag, so here is the flag. I am Indian. On this subject an Indian writer has a default position available, and I am going to try not to take it.

Part 13 covered the 1980s in Indian Punjab: the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, June 1984, November 1984, a decade of militancy and counter-insurgency, and the fact that almost none of it has been settled by any court, commission or count.

Those events landed differently abroad. In Punjab, the 1990s brought exhaustion and then a return to ordinary politics. In the diaspora there was no exhaustion, because there had been no daily violence to be exhausted by — and there were no consequences for continuing to talk about it.

So the argument that ended in Punjab did not end in Vancouver, Southall or Yuba City. It continued, in a form shaped by three things: the memory of 1984 as an unpunished crime, the absence of any Indian legal reckoning to point at, and the safety of a country where saying so was legal.

Two hard facts have to sit next to each other here.

The first is that diaspora money and organisation supported armed groups in Punjab during the militancy, and that the deadliest act of terrorism in Canadian history — the bombing of an Air India flight in 1985, which killed 329 people, most of them Canadians — was planned in Canada by Sikh militants. Only one person was ever convicted, and the failure of that prosecution is a live grievance in Canada.

The second is that the Indian state's own conduct in Punjab in that decade included mass disappearances that its own investigators partly confirmed, and that almost nobody has been prosecuted for those either.

Both of those are true. Neither cancels the other, and any account that mentions only one of them is doing politics rather than history.

THE ARGUMENT — WHAT IS DIASPORA KHALISTAN ACTIVISM NOW?

Referendum campaigns organised among Sikh diaspora communities in several countries, and the diplomatic crisis between India and Canada that followed allegations about the killing of a Canadian citizen in 2023, have made this a live dispute between governments, not only between commentators.

The Indian government's position

These campaigns are the residue of a violent separatist movement that was defeated in Punjab and has no support there — which the last several state elections demonstrate. They are sustained by a small number of organisations abroad, some with a documented history of violence, operating freely because host countries treat the matter as free expression. India argues that a country that would not tolerate such organising against itself should not tolerate it against a partner.

The activists' position

Campaigners argue that a non-binding referendum is speech, not violence, and that the correct response to a political demand is to defeat it politically rather than to have it suppressed abroad. They point to the absence of accountability for 1984 and for the disappearances as the reason the grievance persists, and argue that pressure on foreign governments to silence them is itself evidence of the character they are describing.

The host countries' position

Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia have generally held that advocating for a political outcome, including secession, is lawful speech, while violence, intimidation and foreign interference are not — and have found themselves criticised by all sides for where they draw that line.

Where things stand: the specific allegations exchanged between India and Canada are subject to ongoing legal and diplomatic process, and I am not in a position to adjudicate them and neither is anyone writing outside a courtroom.

What is not in dispute: that support for separation in Punjab itself is very low, that the grievance about 1984 has never been legally resolved, and that a referendum held among people who do not live in the territory has no legal effect anywhere.

Why people care so much: because for India it is a question of sovereignty and of a defeated insurgency being kept alive from outside; and for many diaspora Sikhs it is a question of whether a community may talk about what happened to it. Those two framings do not meet.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Almost everyone arguing about diaspora politics — in every direction — assumes that the diaspora is a *version* of the homeland: an extension of it, speaking for it, or betraying it.

The evidence does not support that. A diaspora community is a separate society with its own history. British Sikhs went through the 1970s and 1980s in Britain — through racism, through Southall, through their own generational fights — not in Punjab. Their politics was formed by those events as much as by 1984.

Once you drop the assumption, two puzzles dissolve. Why is separatism stronger abroad than at home? Because it is not the same movement in two places; it is one movement in Punjab that ended, and a different movement abroad, built on memory and grievance, that did not. And why does the homeland find it so annoying? Because a group claiming to speak for you, whose costs you would bear and whose decisions you do not make, is annoying in every context.

This cuts against diaspora claims to represent Punjab. It also cuts against the Indian habit of treating diaspora Sikhs as Punjabis who have gone wrong, rather than as Canadians and Britons with their own politics.

9.4 — The second and third generation

The children and grandchildren of migrants are the largest part of the diaspora now, and they are not migrants.

They mostly do not read Punjabi in either script. Many speak it only at home and imperfectly. Their politics is largely the politics of the country they live in.

What they have kept is uneven and interesting. Food, weddings and music have travelled best — bhangra was rebuilt in Britain in the 1980s into something that then travelled back to Punjab and changed the music there. Religion has held better than language. Caste has survived remarkably well, including separate gurdwaras abroad along the lines Part 13 described in Punjab's villages.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Diaspora language retention is measurable, because several destination countries ask about home language in their censuses.

The pattern is consistent across Britain, Canada and Australia and matches what is found for other migrant languages: strong retention in the first generation, partial in the second, and sharp decline in the third unless there is institutional support — schooling, media, or a religious requirement to read the language.

Punjabi has one unusual advantage: the Sikh scripture is in Punjabi and is read liturgically, which supports Gurmukhi literacy abroad in a way that has no equivalent for Pakistani Punjabi families, whose religious language is Arabic and whose national language is Urdu.

The result is odd and worth stating. Written Punjabi may survive better in Birmingham than in Lahore.

REMEMBER THIS

Remittances are the most measurable effect — in Pakistan repeatedly worth more than all exports. They raise consumption and rarely build businesses.

The **gurdwara abroad** does more than the gurdwara at home: welfare, jobs, legal advice, a hall. Which is why committee elections are fought hard — the machine described in Part 12 operates in Southall and Surrey too.

The 1980s argument ended in Punjab and did not end abroad, because abroad there was no exhaustion and no cost. **Diaspora money supported armed groups; the 1985 Air India bombing killed 329 people and was planned in Canada; and India's own conduct in Punjab has gone equally unprosecuted.** All three are true.

A diaspora is not a version of the homeland. It is a separate society with its own history — which is why separatism is stronger abroad than at home, and why the homeland finds it so irritating.

CHAPTER TEN

An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

The last of these lists. Two columns, as always — and then a third thought about the series itself.

10.1 — Genuinely unknown

How many people died in East Pakistan in 1971. Pakistan's own commission said around 26,000. Bangladesh's official figure is three million. Independent scholars mostly fall between and closer to the lower end of the upper range. No count was attempted at the time, and both states now have positions they cannot revise.

How much of Lahore's commercial wealth traces to 1947 evacuee allotments. The fraud was documented at the time. The tracing has never been done, and the families are still prominent.

The true composition of the Pakistan Army today. Historical figures for Punjabi predominance are widely cited but rest on old data. The army does not publish a provincial breakdown, so current claims in either direction are estimates.

Whether Seraiki is a separate language. Linguists differ, and the question has no purely linguistic answer, because the criteria for language versus dialect are themselves disputed. What is certain is that the answer is being decided politically.

How much groundwater is left in the Indus basin. The direction is certain on both sides of the border. The remaining volume is not mapped in enough detail in either country.

The size of the Punjabi diaspora. Nobody counts Punjabis as such. Destination censuses record country of birth, or ethnicity, or language, and each gives a different figure. Estimates in the range of several million are common and none of them is a count.

What Punjabi language retention will look like in the fourth generation abroad.

Too early. The third generation is only now becoming adult in Britain and Canada.

10.2 — Solid

The demographic imbalance that shaped Pakistan's first two decades. East Bengal held the majority. Parity and One Unit were responses to it. All documented in the constitutional record.

That the Awami League won a national majority in 1970 and was not seated.

Election results and the postponement are matters of public record.

The federal quota shares. Published policy: 50 per cent Punjab, 19 Sindh, about 11.5 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 6 Balochistan, plus smaller allocations and an open-merit share.

Language shares in Pakistan. Census returns consistently put Punjabi first at around 38 per cent and Urdu well under a tenth, with Punjabi absent as a medium of instruction.

The replacement works built under the Indus Waters Treaty. Mangla, Tarbela and the link canals, with dates and the Mirpur displacement, are fully documented.

Waterlogging and salinity in Pakistani Punjab. Measured, mapped and the subject of state drainage programmes since the 1960s.

The migration chains. Doaba to Britain, Mirpur to the Yorkshire and Midlands towns. Visible at both ends in census geography.

The legal barriers of the first wave. The continuous-journey rule, the 1917 barred zone, the 1923 US ruling and Australian exclusion are all statute and case law.

That the Air India bombing of 1985 killed 329 people and was planned in Canada. Established in court, and the subject of a Canadian public inquiry.

That support for separation within Indian Punjab is very low. Repeated state elections, on high turnout, with no separatist party of consequence.

10.3 — And one about this series

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Fourteen parts of this book have assumed something I have never argued for: that **Punjab is a thing with a continuous story**, running from plate tectonics in Part 1 to a farm protest in Part 13, which can be told as one narrative.

Part 1 flagged a version of this — that talking about "Punjab being invaded" treats a region as though it were a person who was there the whole time. I raised it and then wrote thirteen more parts as if it were fine.

It is not obviously fine. The Punjab of the Harappans, of the Rigveda, of Ranjit Singh, of the canal colonies, and of two separate provinces in two hostile states are not the same object. They share a piece of ground and a set of rivers. Almost nothing else runs all the way through — not language, not religion, not population, not borders, not economy.

So why does the story feel continuous? Partly because rivers really do persist and really do shape what can be done on the land. Partly because each generation inherits what the last one built. And partly — this is the uncomfortable part — because I chose to write it as one story, and a narrative shape imposed on the material will always find material to fit it.

I do not think that makes the series wrong. I think it makes it a *choice*, and you should know it was made. The alternative history — fourteen parts arguing that Punjab is a convenient label for unrelated things that happened in the same place — would also have been defensible, and would have been much harder to read.

The Afterword takes this up properly, because it turns out to be the same question as the one the series has been walking towards.

REMEMBER THIS

The largest gaps here are the familiar kind: **counts of the dead in 1971**, the composition of an army that publishes nothing, and the size of a diaspora nobody counts as such.

What is solid is the same category as in every other part: **structure**. Constitutions, quotas, census returns, dams, statutes and court judgments. Institutions leave records.

And one assumption this series has been running on for fourteen parts: that Punjab is one continuous thing. It is a choice, not a finding — and now you know it was made.

REFERENCE

Timeline

The western half, and the leaving, in the order they happened.

WHEN	WHAT
1901	Australia's immigration policy excludes non-Europeans.
1908–14	Canada's continuous-journey rule; the <i>Komagata Maru</i> turned away (Part 12).
1917, 1923	The US barred zone; the Supreme Court rules Indians are not legally white and may be denied citizenship.
1947	Lahore loses almost its entire Hindu and Sikh population. Refugees arrive from east Punjab.
1948–50s	Evacuee property allotment in West Punjab; documented large-scale fraud.
1952	The Bengali language movement in Dhaka, after the attempt to impose Urdu.
1955	One Unit: the four western provinces merged into "West Pakistan", capital Lahore.
1950s–60s	Labour migration to Britain. Southall, the West Midlands, the Yorkshire and Lancashire towns.
1960	Indus Waters Treaty. Pakistan gets the western rivers and funding for replacement works.
1965–67	US immigration reform; Canadian points system. Mangla Dam completed, displacing much of Mirpur.
1966–70	High-yielding wheat spreads through Pakistani Punjab.
1970	One Unit dissolved; parity abandoned. The Awami League wins a national majority and is not seated.
1971	The army operation, the war, and the creation of Bangladesh in December.

WHEN	WHAT
1972–74	Hamoodur Rahman Commission reports. Not published for around three decades.
1973	Australia formally ends its exclusion policy.
1976	Tarbela Dam completed.
1977–88	Zia-ul-Haq. Islamisation, and the rise of an urban Punjabi business class in politics.
1970s onward	Gulf labour migration from Pakistani Punjab. Remittances begin to exceed export earnings.
1984	June and November in India (Part 13). The diaspora's politics changes permanently.
1985	The Air India bombing kills 329 people. Planned in Canada.
1990s	Militancy ends in Punjab. It does not end abroad.
2000s	Rapid growth of Punjabi migration to Australia, largely through study routes.
2010	The 18th Amendment devolves substantial power and revenue to Pakistan's provinces.
2020s	Punjabi among the fastest-growing languages recorded in Australia and among the most spoken in Canada.
2023	A diplomatic crisis between India and Canada over allegations concerning a killing on Canadian soil.
Now	Roughly 128 million Punjabis in Pakistan, 30 million in India, several million elsewhere.
The end	This is where the series stops. Not where the story does.

REFERENCE

Glossary

Every hard word used in this part, in plain English.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
18th Amendment	Pakistan's 2010 constitutional change devolving substantial powers and revenue to the provinces. It did not touch the army.
Chain migration	Migrants sponsoring relatives, who sponsor relatives — producing communities drawn from a few villages rather than a whole country.
Evacuee property	Property left behind by those who fled in 1947, vested in a state custodian and allotted against the claims of arrivals.
Gurmukhi	The script used for Punjabi in India, and the script of the Guru Granth Sahib.
Muhajir	Migrant. In Pakistan, those who came from India in 1947. In Punjab they were absorbed; in Sindh they became a distinct community.
One Unit	The 1955 merger of Punjab, Sindh, the North-West Frontier Province and Balochistan into a single province, "West Pakistan". Undone in 1970.
Parity	The rule giving East and West Pakistan equal representation despite unequal populations. It turned a Bengali majority into a tie.
Potohar	The dry plateau of northern Punjab — Rawalpindi, Jhelum, Chakwal, Attock — historically the heaviest army recruiting ground.
Remittance	Money sent home by someone working abroad.
Salinity	Salt left behind when irrigation water sitting near the surface evaporates. Eventually the field stops growing anything.
Seraiki	The language or dialect of southern Punjab, around Multan and Bahawalpur. Whether it is separate from Punjabi is disputed, and the dispute is political.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Shahmukhi	The Perso-Arabic script used to write Punjabi in Pakistan. Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah were written in it.
Waterlogging	When irrigation raises the water table into the root zone and the plants drown. The opposite failure to Indian Punjab's.

ABOUT

About the Author

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I write long-form history and research at misterlove.in, published openly and free to read.

This series began because most Punjabi families carry a version of this history in fragments — a grandfather in the army, a relative who left a village that is now in another country, a name in a story nobody finishes telling. Fourteen parts later I am not sure the fragments fit together as neatly as I assumed when I started. Chapter 10.3 says why.

Writing the last part was the strangest. Thirteen parts were about a place I live in. This one is mostly about places I have never been, written about people who have a better claim to the subject than I do.

The Living Archive

This series belongs to a larger project. The Living Archive is a body of long-form research on history, society, religion, public policy and technology. Three rules hold across all of it.

- **Plain language.** Hard ideas explained in ordinary words, with nothing left out to make them fit.
- **Evidence first.** Show the thing itself, and be clear about what it can and cannot prove.
- **Competing views.** Where the field disagrees, both sides get their strongest case. Open questions stay open.

A word on sources

This is written for general readers, so it carries no footnotes. It is a synthesis of the published scholarly record rather than new primary research, and it does not claim otherwise.

This part has a source problem the others did not. Much of the best work on Pakistani Punjab is in Urdu and Punjabi and has not been translated. Much of the diaspora scholarship is scattered across the sociology of four different countries. And the material on 1971 and on diaspora politics is written almost entirely by people with a position, which is not a criticism — it is what happens when a subject matters.

Where a claim rests only on a state's account of itself, I have said so. Where figures are contested I have given the range and named the method rather than choosing a number that suits a story. Where my own nationality is likely to be pulling at the writing, I have flagged it in the text instead of hoping it would not show.

Corrections are welcome, and for this part especially. If you find an error, or think an argument has been given less than its best case, write to me at the address above. Later editions will say what was changed and who caught it.

Lovepreet Singh

AFTERWORD

Is There Still One Punjab?

The question this series has been walking towards for fourteen parts. I owe you an answer, and it is not a tidy one.

Here is the case that there is not.

The two Punjabs have been separate for nearly eighty years, which is longer than most of the political arrangements this series has covered lasted. They use different scripts and cannot read each other. They belong to states that have fought four wars. Their farmers have opposite water problems. One is majority Muslim and one is majority Sikh, and each has a minority the other does not. Their capitals face away from each other. A Punjabi in Lahore and a Punjabi in Ludhiana are more likely to have visited London than each other's city.

Add the diaspora and it gets worse for continuity. A third-generation Punjabi in Brampton or Bradford may not speak the language, has never seen the rivers, and holds a politics formed by Canadian or British events.

Now the case that there is.

The rivers are still there and still decide what can be grown. Both Punjabs grow the same thirstiest-possible crops and are ruining their land in complementary ways, under different governments who agree on nothing. Both are agricultural heartlands whose national governments depend on them for food and treat them accordingly. Both send their young people abroad in numbers, and to the same cities. The songs travel. The food travels. Bhangra was rebuilt in Britain and went back to both Punjabs.

And the biggest one: they share everything up to 1947, which is thirteen of the fourteen parts of this book.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

The question "is there still one Punjab?" assumes that the answer is a fact about the world waiting to be discovered — that if you gathered enough evidence about language, religion, borders and crops you could settle it.

I do not think that is what kind of question it is. Every candidate criterion gives a different answer. By language, mostly yes. By script, no. By state, no. By river basin, yes. By religion, no. By diet and music, largely yes. By political community, definitively no.

So the honest position is that "one Punjab" is not a discovery but a *decision about which criterion matters* — and people choose the criterion that gives them the answer they need. Nationalists on both sides choose the state. Language activists choose the language. The people who want a shared past choose the rivers.

This is the last hidden assumption in fourteen parts, and it is the one that has been underneath the whole series. I have named it rather than resolved it, because resolving it would require me to pick a criterion, and picking a criterion is the thing I promised in Part 1 that I would not do for you.

What I will say is smaller and I think defensible.

There is one Punjab in the sense that the same ground, the same rivers and the same inherited habits keep producing recognisably similar problems on both sides of a hostile border — and that neither state has solved them, in exactly parallel ways, for exactly parallel reasons.

There is not one Punjab in any sense that gives anybody the right to speak for the whole of it. Not Lahore, not Chandigarh, not a referendum in Surrey, and not this book.

The rivers were here before all of it. Part 1 started with them, and they are the only thing in this entire series that has been present in every part. That is not a mystical claim. It is a drainage basin. But it is the one continuous thing there is, and if you want a definition of Punjab that survives fourteen parts, it is the only one I can offer you honestly.

Five rivers, one plain, and everybody who has ever had to live off it. That is the whole subject. Everything else in these fourteen parts is what people did about it.

Thank you for reading. If you have got this far, you have read something close to a quarter of a million words about a piece of ground, and you now know more about it than most people who live on it. Do something useful with that — starting with being sceptical of the next person who tells you confidently what Punjab is.

. . .

End of Part 14 of 14 — the series is complete

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