

Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy (JSSRP)**The Price of Loyalty: Bahawalpur's Accession and the Failure of Federal Trust in Pakistan (1947-1955)****Muhammad Shahzad Aslam¹, Dr. Samia Khalid²**

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One Unit Scheme**Corresponding Author:****Muhammad Shahzad Aslam**Email: jamshahzad64@gmail.com**License:**

Abstract: *This article examines the historical trajectory of the former princely state of Bahawalpur, from its establishment in 1727 through its integration into Pakistan and subsequent dissolution. As a sovereign entity under British suzerainty, Bahawalpur maintained distinct administrative, judicial, and financial systems, functioning as a self-sufficient state with its own mint, army, and governance structures. The state's strategic geographic position along the Sutlej and Indus rivers rendered it a vital buffer zone and defensive bulwark for the Punjab region. Upon Pakistan's creation in 1947, Bahawalpur became the first princely state to accede to the new federation, providing indispensable financial and military support during a critical period of national vulnerability. The 1951 Supplementary Instrument formally elevated Bahawalpur to provincial status, creating a model of cooperative federalism that balanced local autonomy with federal unity. However, the 1955 One Unit scheme and the subsequent 1970 executive merger into Punjab violated explicit political commitments, triggering enduring grievances and restoration movements. The article argues that Bahawalpur's dissolution represents a foundational case of federal betrayal in Pakistan's history, whereby a loyal federating unit was systematically deprived of its distinct identity and autonomous institutions. Contemporary demands for provincial restoration, whether through the historical-administrative Bahawalpur movement or the ethno-lingual Saraiki movement, reflect legitimate responses to this breach of federal trust. The case of Bahawalpur underscores fundamental tensions in Pakistani federalism regarding centre-periphery relations and the treatment of historically autonomous regions.*

Introduction

The former princely state of Bahawalpur was established in 1727 by the Abbasi Daudpotra family, who claimed descent from the Abbasid Caliphs of Baghdad. For 228 years, the state maintained a continuous and distinct identity characterized by internal sovereignty and immense strategic importance within the Indian subcontinent. Geographically, Bahawalpur served as a vital buffer state and a "shortcut channel" between the Indian subcontinent and Afghanistan, stretching for 450 kilometers along the southern

banks of the Sutlej and Indus rivers (Iqbal, 2021). The state's unique landscape, dominated by the Cholistan Desert, acted as a natural defensible hindrance and a "great defence wall" for the Punjab region, checking potential invasions from the east and south (Khan & Malik, 2020). Historically, the state's relationship with the British Crown was formalized through the subsidiary alliance of February 22, 1833, which guaranteed the internal rule of the Nawab while placing external affairs under British suzerainty. Unlike many other regions, Bahawalpur was never completely possessed by the British; it functioned as a sub-authorized state with its own independent judicial system, administrative infrastructure, and even its own mint to cast currency, which remained functional until 1940 (Gilani, 2001). This era of sovereignty allowed the state to develop into one of the richest regions in the subcontinent, possessing its own army and a flourishing agricultural economy based on indigenous irrigation methods. The Nawabs, though autocratic, were seen as patrons of a unique Islamic culture and tradition, laying the groundwork for a prosperous and self-sufficient administrative unit that would later play a pivotal role in the creation of the Pakistani federation. This geopolitical positioning made Bahawalpur more important than Kashmir in some strategic contexts, acting as a Savior of Pakistan both defensibly and economically during the "pinch time" of partition. The state encompassed over 45,588 square kilometres, including the vast Cholistan desert, which covers 10% of the total Punjab province area (Khan & Malik, 2020).

Administrative Sovereignty and Governance under the British

Throughout the British Raj, Bahawalpur enjoyed a distinct level of administrative and legal autonomy that set it apart from other princely states. The 1833 treaty ensured that the Nawab remained the supreme authority in internal affairs, free to decide state policy within the limits of signed agreements. The state developed an efficient administrative hierarchy, dividing territory into Nizamats, Kárdáris, and Tahsils to manage its vast lands. This independence was most clearly manifested in the state's separate mint, which struck gold, silver, and copper coins inscribed with the name of the ruler and the state. The judicial system was equally robust, featuring an independent High Court and a Secretariat that functioned without external interference. Under the rule of Nawab Sadiq Muhammad Khan V, the state continued to modernize its infrastructure, laying extensive railway tracks and establishing a network of roads that connected major junctions between Lahore, Karachi, and Quetta. The Sutlej Valley Project, initiated during this period, was a technological marvel involving 4,500 miles of canals that transformed the desert into fertile agricultural land. Despite the British presence, the state's administrative machinery operated with a noted lack of "red-tapism," facilitating rapid progress in education and health. The Nawab's government bore the expenses for students pursuing higher studies abroad and provided free education up to matriculation within the state. This period of self-sufficiency allowed Bahawalpur to satisfy its own financial requirements while also contributing monetarily to the British and eventually to the nascent state of Pakistan. The administrative excellence of the state during this time remains a point of historical pride for the people of the region, who often contrast it with the perceived neglect of the post-merger era (Iqbal, 2021).

Pre-Partition Elite Politics and Political Awakening (1924–1947)

The political landscape of Bahawalpur in the early 20th century was defined by a transition from absolute monarchy toward a more politically conscious populace. This awakening was driven by an educated elite class, many of whom attended prestigious institutions like Atchison College and Aligarh University. Despite the state's internal sovereignty, political activity was strictly regulated. On May 14, 1924, a law was enacted requiring 48 hours of written permission for any public meeting and explicitly forbidding any discussion against British policies or the state administration. However, national

movements like the Khilafat and the Silk Letter Movement permeated the state's borders, inspiring local activists like Maulvi Abdul Aziz and Taj Muhammad Khan Durrani. By 1925, reformist groups such as Moid-ul-Islam and Jamiat-ul-Muslimeen were established to promote Muslim development and counter the influence of the local Hindu community's political displays. In 1932, the Anjuman Khuddam-ud-Din (later "Hezbollah") emerged to advocate for religious and political rights. By the 1940s, the Bahawalpur State Muslim Board became the dominant force, eventually aligning with the All-India Muslim League (AIML) under the leadership of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. This elite class played a crucial role in countering the Khuddam-e-Watan party, which was perceived as being supported by the Congress and advocated for options other than accession to Pakistan. The state's political elite successfully integrated local population sentiments with the broader cause of Pakistan. This period saw a "race" among princely states to join the AIML after Bahawalpur's lead. The Nawab's cordial relationship with Jinnah and the consistent efforts of the elite ensured that the state would ultimately support the Muslim federation (Malik, 2012).

The Landmark Decision of Accession (1947)

Upon the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, the Independence Act granted princely states the freedom to choose their future. Bahawalpur's decision was strategically vital due to its 300-mile border with India and its control over critical river banks. Despite being approached by Pundit Nehru with various incentives to join India, Nawab Sadiq Muhammad Khan V formally acceded to Pakistan on October 3, 1947, and the agreement was signed by Quaid-e-Azam on October 5. Bahawalpur is recognized as the first princely state to join the new federation. The Nawab's decision was motivated by a commitment to the cause of a Muslim state, famously stating, "Bahawalpur is a Muslim State I will accede to Pakistan". This accession was not merely a political formality but a lifeline for the newly born state of Pakistan, which was facing severe financial and administrative crises. The Nawab issued a proclamation accepting the internal autonomy of the state within the Pakistani federation, a status that was initially respected by the central government. The state's integration provided Pakistan with a natural defense hindrance against potential Indian invasion and secured fertile cash-crop regions essential for the country's survival. The smooth transition of Bahawalpur into Pakistan served as a model for other states, though none provided the same level of comprehensive support. This period of accession is remembered as a testament to the Nawab's loyalty and the state's vital contribution to the eternity and sovereignty of Pakistan (Shahab, 1978).

Bahawalpur as a Financial and Military Pillar of Nascent Pakistan

Immediately after its accession, Bahawalpur emerged as the primary financial and military pillar for the resource-strapped government of Pakistan. The newly formed federation was a "pauper state" inherited with minimal assets, and Bahawalpur's contributions were decisive. The Nawab provided 70 million rupees as a guarantee for the newly issued Pakistani currency and covered the first month's salaries for all federal government departments from the state treasury. Additionally, the state provided 22,000 tons of wheat to address food security and gifted \$52,000 (received from the British for military aid in WWII) directly to Quaid-e-Azam (Yawer, 1989). Militarily, the Bahawalpur State Army, comprising approximately 10,000 highly trained soldiers and 12 units, was integrated into the Pakistan Army. This force, which had received the "Sword of Honour" and "George Cross," significantly enhanced Pakistan's defense power, providing a necessary bulwark along a sensitive border (Abbasi, 1999). The Nawab also donated private property to institutions like the University of the Punjab and King Edward Medical College, and funded the construction of the mosque at Atchison College. These acts of generosity were carried out at a "pinch time" when Pakistan's survival was in question (Shahab, 1980). The state's self-

sufficiency allowed it to satisfy its own requirements while contributing monetarily to the British and then to Pakistan, a feat unmatched by other federating units at the time. Annual contributions for defense continued, with millions of rupees provided for both the national army and border police (Khan & Malik, 2020).

Transition to Provincial Status: The 1951 Supplementary Instrument

A major milestone in Bahawalpur's political trajectory occurred on April 30, 1951, with the signing of the "Supplementary Instrument of Accession". This agreement, signed by Nawab Sadiq Muhammad Khan V and accepted by Governor General Khawaja Nazimuddin, transitioned Bahawalpur from a princely state to a federating province on the same footing as regions like Sindh or Punjab under the Government of India Act of 1935 (Malik, 2011). Under this new status, the Nawab transferred central subjects—such as defence, communications, and foreign affairs—to the federal government, while all other "provincial subjects" continued to be administered by the state. This agreement was unique, as the government clarified that the pattern evolved for Bahawalpur would not necessarily apply to other states due to their varying geopolitical and economic outlooks. Crucially, the state was to be treated as a province in matters of grants and loans, and the Nawab remained the constitutional head. This transition paved the way for democratic reforms, including the 1952 elections for a 49-member Legislative Assembly. The province maintained its own separate Secretariat, Public Service Commission, and High Court, ensuring an autonomous and efficient administrative identity (Javaid, 2009). This period represented the pinnacle of Bahawalpur's political integration into Pakistan, balancing local autonomy with federal loyalty, and was initially hailed as a successful model of cooperative federalism (Malik, 2011).

The Golden Era of Provincial Autonomy (1952–1955)

The era between 1952 and 1955 is often cited as a "golden period" in Bahawalpur's history, characterized by unmatched administrative efficiency and economic prosperity. Following the 1952 elections, Makhdoomzada Syed Hassan Mahmoud became the first elected Chief Minister of the Bahawalpur province. During this time, the provincial government achieved a feat unique in Pakistani history: in the 1954-55 fiscal year, it presented a surplus budget with a net closing balance of over 40 million rupees. At the same time, other provinces, including the Punjab, were operating in deficit, suggesting that the "surplus of the other regions" was being sought to feed deficit areas (Malik, 2011). The state's wealth was largely attributed to the Sutlej Valley Project, which involved the construction of 4,500 miles of canals and the irrigation of vast tracts of land, turning the region into a "huge store of corn". Socially, the government provided free education up to matriculation and offered scholarships for higher studies abroad. The administration was noted for its lack of "red-tapism," allowing for rapid progress in infrastructure, health, and agriculture. The province boasted 20 government hospitals and over 3,200 educational institutions, and it was home to the biggest industrial jail in the subcontinent. This period of self-sufficiency and progress demonstrated the state's capacity to thrive as an autonomous federating unit within the broader framework of Pakistan (Khan & Malik 2020).

The One Unit Scheme and the Forced Merger (1955)

The provincial autonomy of Bahawalpur ended abruptly on October 14, 1955, with the implementation of the "One Unit" scheme. This policy amalgamated all provinces and states in West Pakistan into a single administrative unit to achieve parity with East Pakistan. The Bahawalpur Legislative Assembly did not originally approve this merger (Javaid, 2009). It was eventually accepted only after a moral and political understanding was reached: if the One Unit scheme were ever abolished, Bahawalpur would be restored to its separate provincial status. This merger led to the immediate dissolution of the provincial assembly and ministry in 1954, and the loss of independent institutions like the Secretariat and High

Court (Shahab, 1980). The central government's decision was viewed by many as a way to deny the provinces power-sharing in the federal structure. The merger also meant that Bahawalpur's surplus resources were integrated into the broader West Pakistan administration, leading to the perception that the region's wealth was being used to subsidize less prosperous areas. The transition marked the beginning of a decline in local representation and control over resources, as the state's separate and distinct administrative identity was "devoured" by the larger unit. This act of centralization is often cited as the root cause of the regional grievances that would later boil over into violent restoration movements in the following decades (Javaid, 2009).

The Breach of Trust: 1970 and the Failure of Restoration

When the One Unit scheme was finally abolished on March 30, 1970, the federation failed to honor the 1955 agreement to restore Bahawalpur's provincial status. Instead, through an executive order by General Yahya Khan, Bahawalpur was merged into the Punjab province as an administrative division. This act was described by local leaders as illegal, immoral, and a flagrant breach of federal trust. The decision triggered immediate and widespread resentment across all sections of Bahawalpur society. Protests and demonstrations erupted, and in April 1970, police opened fire on protesters in Bahawalpur, killing at least two people and injuring many more (Hira et al., 2024). Scores of political leaders and activists were detained, and curfew was imposed. Despite this repression, the 1970 General Elections served as a referendum on provincial status; candidates supporting the restoration of the Bahawalpur province received 80 percent of the local vote. Out of 1.03 million votes, over 714,000 were cast for pro-restoration sympathizers. However, the subsequent East Pakistan crisis in 1971 forced proponents of the movement to scale back their demands to avoid appearing unpatriotic during a national emergency. The failure to restore the province in 1970 is viewed as the "ultimate catalyst" for a legacy of regional alienation and persistent demands for administrative autonomy that continue to challenge the Pakistani federation today (Javaid, 2018).

Socio-Economic and Agricultural Regression Post-Merger

Since its merger into Punjab in 1970, Bahawalpur has faced significant socio-economic regression. Once one of the wealthiest and most self-sufficient regions in the subcontinent, it is now considered one of Punjab's poorest areas. Approximately 51 percent of its population lives below the poverty line, the highest percentage in any Punjab region. The health indicators are equally alarming: the infant mortality rate in Bahawalpur stands at 142 per 1,000 births, nearly double the average of 72 per 1,000 in the rest of Punjab. Furthermore, the literacy rate of 34 percent lags significantly behind the provincial average of 57 percent, despite a history of free education and high literary achievement during the Nawab's rule. A primary grievance is the perceived exploitation of agricultural revenue; although Bahawalpur produces 23 percent of the country's cotton and 10 percent of its wheat, residents claim this income is spent elsewhere in Punjab rather than on local infrastructure. Additionally, the Indus Water Treaty (1960) gave control of the Sutlej River—the region's lifeline—to India. Since then, Bahawalpur has rarely received more than 30 percent of its allocated water share from other rivers, leading to severe water shortages for its farmers. The loss of a separate Public Service Commission and Secretariat has also resulted in a negligible quota for local residents in government jobs, fueling a sense of political and economic marginalization (Khan & Malik, 2020).

Contemporary Identity Politics: Bahawalpur vs. Saraiki Movements

The sense of deprivation in the region has given birth to two distinct but sometimes overlapping political movements: the Bahawalpur Province Movement and the Saraiki Province Movement. The Bahawalpur movement is primarily based on the demand for the reinstatement of the 1951

administrative unit and the restoration of historical provincial status as promised in 1955. It is not strictly an ethno-lingual movement but one based on historical agreements and administrative restoration (Sandhu, 2015). In contrast, the Saraiki movement, which gained momentum in the 1960s and 70s, seeks a larger province for all Saraiki speakers, comprising the divisions of Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, and Bahawalpur. While both movements share a sense of alienation from "Takht-e-Lahore" (the Throne of Lahore), they are often viewed as hurdles to one another. In Bahawalpur, the majority still supports a separate Bahawalpur Province over a unified Saraiki province, fearing that the latter would further dilute their historical and administrative identity. The creation of the Bahawalpur Awami Party in 2011 by Nawab Salahuddin Abbasi reinvigorated the demand for restoration. These movements represent a significant challenge to Pakistani federalism, as the state struggles to balance the demands of ethno-lingual identities with those based on historical-administrative legacies (Abbasi & Kalhor, 2022).

Conclusion

The dissolution of Bahawalpur State represents a foundational case of federal betrayal in Pakistan's political history. For 228 years, the Abbasi rulers cultivated a self-sufficient, administratively sophisticated entity that was never colonized outright by the British. The state's contribution to Pakistan's survival in 1947 cannot be overstated: at a moment when the new federation had almost no financial or military resources, Bahawalpur acted as a lifeline. The Nawab's decision to accede was not coerced but freely given, rooted in a genuine commitment to a Muslim homeland. This loyalty was later reciprocated not with honor but with absorption and erasure. The 1951 Supplementary Instrument appeared to perfect the balance between local autonomy and federal unity, making Bahawalpur a model of cooperative federalism. Yet within four years, the One Unit scheme dissolved that model without the provincial assembly's original consent, and the subsequent 1970 decision to merge Bahawalpur into Punjab—in direct violation of the 1955 moral and political promise—institutionalized a breach of trust that reverberates today. The socio-economic consequences of this forced merger are not accidental but structural. A region that once presented surplus budgets, exported agricultural abundance, and educated its citizens freely now ranks among Pakistan's most impoverished. The 51 percent poverty rate, the 142 per 1,000 infant mortality and the 34 percent literacy rate are not signs of natural decline but of systematic resource extraction and political neglect. Bahawalpur continues to produce 23 percent of Pakistan's cotton and 10 percent of its wheat, yet its own farmers face chronic water shortages because control of the Sutlej River was ceded to India in 1960 and subsequent water allocations rarely exceed 30 percent of entitlements. The loss of a separate Public Service Commission and Secretariat has eliminated local quotas in government employment, effectively barring Bahawalpur's capable population from decision-making roles in administration. In essence, the region was asked to sacrifice its sovereignty for the nation's survival, only to be punished for its own prosperity. The contemporary restoration movements—both the historical-administrative Bahawalpur Province Movement and the ethno-lingual Saraiki movement—represent legitimate responses to a federal failure. Pakistani federalism was never designed to treat its most loyal federating unit as a disposable resource pool. The state's persistent refusal to revisit the 1970 merger, despite overwhelming local electoral support (80 percent in 1970), suggests a deeper pathology in center-periphery relations. If the federation continues to ignore the 1955 agreement's violation, it normalizes the principle that executive orders can override signed political commitments. For Bahawalpur, restoration is not merely a demand for historical justice; it is a test of whether Pakistan's federation can learn from its own history of broken promises. Without addressing this foundational breach, any claim

to a just, equitable federal system remains incomplete. The lesson of Bahawalpur (1727–1955) is that sovereignty voluntarily surrendered in trust must never be unilaterally extinguished; to do so is to convert a partner into a colony, and a patriot into a supplicant.

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