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Explained: Why Malerkotla is special for Punjab, and Sikhs

A history of Malerkotla and why the town occupies a special place in Sikh history and the social milieu of present day Punjab.



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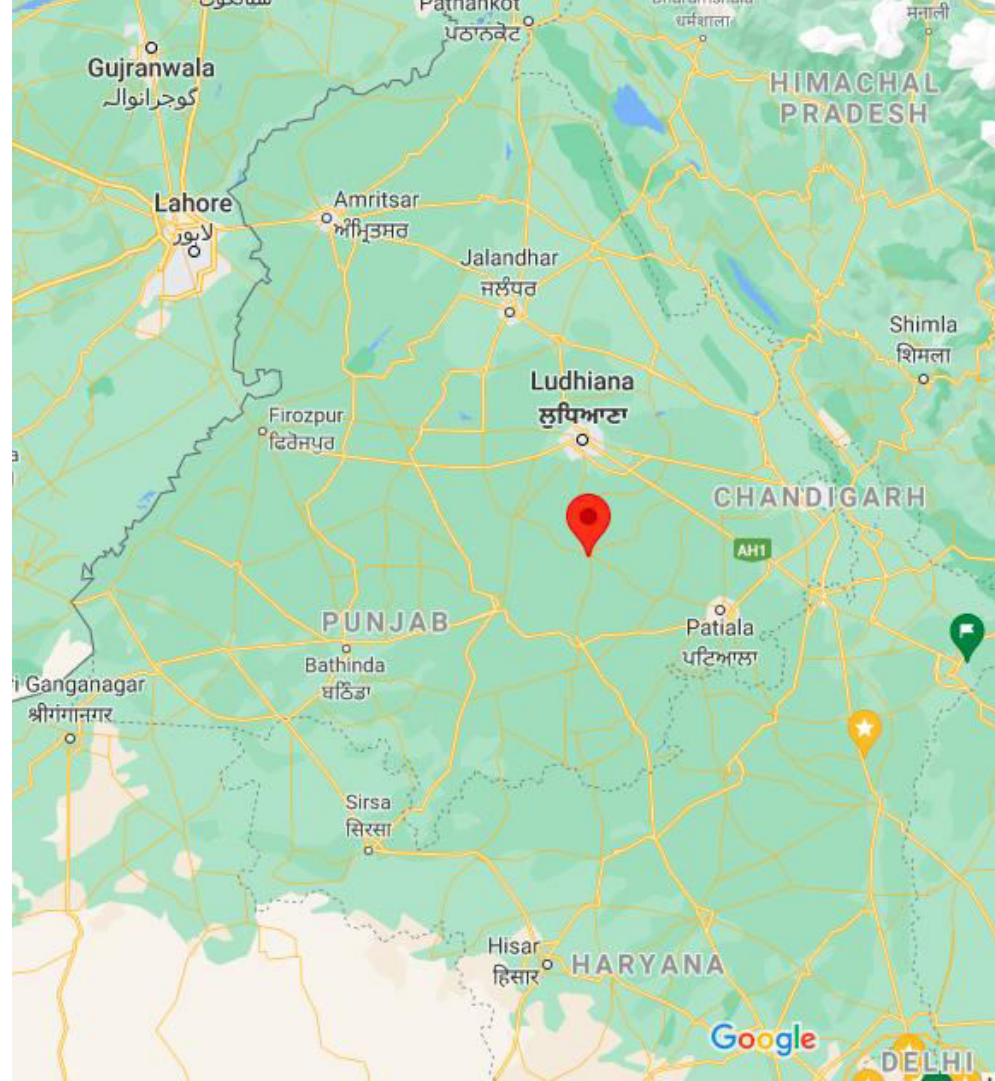
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Explained: The why and how of creating a new district

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- The only Muslim-dominated town of Punjab, Malerkotla, has been in the news recently after Punjab Chief announced on Eid that the former princely state would be the 23rd district of the state.
- Section 5 of the Punjab Land Revenue Act, 1887 says the "State government may, by notification, vary the limits and alter the numbers of tehsils, districts and divisions into which the State is divided."

How are new districts carved?

- The power to create new districts or alter or abolish existing districts rests with the **State governments**.
- This can either be done **through an executive order or by passing a law** in the State Assembly.
- Many States prefer the executive route by simply issuing a notification in the official gazette.

How does it help?

- States argue that smaller districts lead to better administration and governance.
- For example, in 2016, the Assam government issued a notification to upgrade the Majuli sub-division to Majuli district for "administrative expediency".

Are there are any exceptions?

- The State government has been vested with unfettered powers under Section 5 of the Punjab Land Revenue Act, 1887 to create new districts.
- This power is generally held temporarily in abeyance only during active census operations or during the delimitation exercise of Lok Sabha/Vidhan Sabha constituencies.

Role of Central government

- The Centre has no role to play in the alteration of districts or creation of new ones. States are free to decide.
- The Home Ministry comes into the picture when a State wants to change the name of a district or a railway station. For this a request is sent to other departments and agencies such as the Ministry of Earth Sciences, Intelligence Bureau, Department of Posts, Geographical Survey of India Sciences and the Railway Ministry seeking clearance. A no-objection certificate may be issued after examining their replies.

What has been the trend?

- According to the 2011 Census, there were 593 districts in the country. The Census results showed that between 2001-2011, as many as 46 districts were created by States.
- Though the 2021 Census is yet to happen, Know India, a website run by the Government of India, says currently there are 718 districts in the country.
- The surge in number is also due to bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh into A.P and Telangana in 2014.

About former princely state Malerkotla

- Historically, Malerkotla owes its foundations in the 15th century to **Sufi saint Sheikh Sadrauddin Sadar-i-Jahan**, also known as Haider Sheikh.
- The initial beginnings were humble with the **settlement being called 'Maler'** which was bestowed by the Behlol Lodhi to the Sheikh whose lineage too was Afghan.
- **'Kotla'**, meaning Fortress, was added later in 17th century with a collection of villages which formed a jagir.

- This jagir was awarded to Bayzid Khan, a descendant of Haider Sheikh, by Mughal Emperor Shah Jehan.
- Bayzid Khan supported Aurangzeb against his brother Dara Shikoh and thus gained favour with the emperor and added permanency to the rule of his family.
- A hereditary succession began thereafter. After the decline of the Mughal empire, Malerkotla's rulers exercised greater independence and during invasion of India by Ahmad Shah Abdali from Afghanistan, they aligned with him.

How were the relations of Malerkotla with neighbouring states?

- After Maharaja Ranjit Singh consolidated his rule in Northern Punjab in the early 19th century, Malerkotla aligned itself with the neighbouring Sikh states like Patiala, Nabha and Jind which too were feeling threatened by Maharaja Ranjit Singh's consolidation of the Sikh empire.
- These cis-Sutlej states **accepted British protection in 1809** and were free from interference from the Sikh Maharaja.

- Malerkotla continued under the British protection and the alliance with the neighbouring Sikh states till 1947 when it became the only Muslim majority Sikh state in East Punjab.
- After the dissolution of the princely states in 1948, **Malerkotla joined the new state of PEPSU** or Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU).
- PEPSU itself was dissolved in 1954 and Malerkotla became a part of Punjab.

Background of the special status of Malerkotla with the Sikh community?

- Sher Mohammad Khan was the **Nawab of Malerkotla** at the time and though a supporter of Aurangzeb and his lieutenants who governed Punjab at the time, he is said to have expressed his anguish at the **bricking alive of two young sons of Guru Gobind Singh**, Zorawar Singh (aged nine years) and Fateh Singh (aged seven years), by the Subedar of Sirhind Wazir Khan in 1705.

- The '**Haa da Naara**' or cry for justice was made by Sher Mohammad Khan before Wazir Khan when the order to brick the two young boys was pronounced.
- This incident has been narrated over the years and has attained an image of tolerance of the Nawab towards the two young Sahibzadas and given placed Malerkotla a special place in the Sikh narrative.

- After the death of Guru Gobind Singh, when his follower Banda Singh Bahadur sacked Sirhind and razed it to the ground, he spared Malerkotla while there could be other reasons as well for this act of Banda Bahadur.

After the 'Haa Da Naara' episode?

- Even after this episode, the Malerkotla rulers continued their affinity with the Mughal rulers.
- Once the suzerainty of the Mughals was on the decline, they aligned with the Afghan invader Ahmed Shah Abdali.
- Nawab Jamal Khan of Malerkotla fought against rulers of Patiala and also against Abdali before joining hands with him.

- His successor Nawab Bhikam Shah is said to have fought on the side of Abdali's forces in a battle against the Sikhs in 1762 which is known as 'Wadda Ghallugara' or the Great Holocaust where tens and thousands of Sikhs were killed.
- In 1769, a treaty of friendship was signed with Raja Amar Singh of Patiala by the then Nawab of Malerkotla.
- Thereafter the Patiala princely state was often to the aid of Malerkotla especially in 1795 when Sahib Singh Bedi, a descendant of first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak Dev, attacked Malerkotla over the issue of cow slaughter.

- However, the **Namdhari (a sect of Sikhs) massacre of 1872 in Malerkotla** is an important incident in the historical annals of the town.
- The Namdhari followers — some accounts say there were rogue followers — attacked the town. Certain accounts say the attack was to cause loot and plunder while others say a Namdhari woman had been raped in Malerkotla. It is believed that the British Agent who administered Malerkotla at the time, as the Nawab was a minor, was merciless in exacting revenge and killed 69 Namdharis, including women and children.

How did Malerkotla escape the killings and riots of partition in 1947?

- Despite the odd communal trouble in the town, the general atmosphere in Malerkotla remained congenial.
- Communal tension in the days leading to Partition remained under control despite there being a general breakdown of law and order in the neighbouring princely states.
- While Patiala, Nabha and Jind territories saw large scale killings, Malerkotla remained free from it.

Thank you 🌞

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