



Colonial Governance in Punjab: The April 1919 Unrest in Amritsar and Kasur

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Article Details:

Received on 29 March, 2026

Accepted on 27 April, 2026

Published on 29 April, 2026

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Abstract

This paper provides a comparative analysis of the April 1919 disturbances in Amritsar and Kasur, concentrating on the differing responses of colonial administrations in each area. It depicts how Amritsar's strong civil-military coordination led to a rapid and dramatic escalation of violence, ending in the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, but Kasur's weaker administrative structure resulted in a slower and less coordinated response. By evaluating these opposing tendencies, the study exposes how local governance influenced the nature, timing, and severity of colonial conflict. Furthermore, it places the Punjab riots in the larger framework of colonial worries tied to "Mutiny" myths, which justified severe military reprisals to maintain power and racial domination. This study fills a vital vacuum in existing scholarship by delving beyond discrete event-focused accounts to identify the complex interplay between administrative systems and violent upheaval, providing a comprehensive understanding of colonial rule during this watershed juncture in South Asian history.

Keywords: Colonial governance, Punjab 1919, Amritsar, Kasur, Administrative structure, State violence, Crisis management



Introduction

In early 1919, the political situation in Punjab was characterised by colonial officials' discomfort and growing public hostility to the Rowlatt Acts. According to scholars, the British government considered Punjab as requiring close supervision, which influenced district officials' responses to tiny indicators of instability (Condos, 2017, pp. 4-7). Protests in April led provincial officials to act rapidly, sometimes with insufficient information and different institutional capabilities. While the situation in Amritsar is widely recorded, the overall response of several districts to the same issue is less recognised (Wagner, 2019, pp. 15-18). Examining these differences reveals information about the day-to-day operations of colonial governance as well as the structural inequities that influenced district-level decision making.

In April 1919, the Amritsar massacre represented a larger issue involving numerous districts, each with its own institutional system. Historians observe that Amritsar had a formalised and integrated chain of command across civil, military, and police institutions, which facilitated faster decision-making (Wagner, 2019). Kasur suffered from a lack of authority and communication, leaving district officers unsure on how to respond to incidents. This exemplifies a larger challenge in colonial administration studies, indicating that, despite the appearance of a centralised state, administrative power in Punjab was unevenly distributed and improvisational in character (Condos, 2017). Understanding these distinctions is essential for explaining why areas with similar levels of discontent behaved so differently.

This study examines the influence of district-level administrative structures on colonial officials' perceptions and responses to the April 1919 insurrection, focusing on the experiences of Amritsar and Kasur. It uses archival information from the Hunter Commission to show how officials in Amritsar relied on a more integrated civil-military-police structure for quick decision-making, which differed dramatically from the scenario in Kasur. According to the Punjab Disturbances Report, responses in Kasur were slower and less consistent due to split power and inconsistent communication, implying that the colonial state's decisiveness varied greatly depending on local administrative systems (Condos, 2017). This approach highlights how crises reveal the underlying strengths and faults of governing systems that appear stable or coherent otherwise.

The study's goal is to show how diverse administrative frameworks influenced district-level reactions during the April 1919 crisis by analysing official testimonies, district records, and contemporary sources, such as Hunter Commission evidence and the Punjab Disturbances Report. This investigation provides a thorough insight of how local officials understood and responded to events as they unfolded (Hunter Commission Report, 1920, Vol. 2; Punjab Disturbances Report, 1919). The study compares the institutional systems of Amritsar and Kasur, concentrating on their impact on response dynamics in colonial Punjab. It begins by outlining the administrative environment before moving on to case studies of the two districts, finally remarking on how these variations highlight the uneven qualities of colonial rule (Condos, 2017). This method allows the study to connect local



administrative practice to broader questions about how the colonial state functioned during times of crisis.

Literature Review

The analysis of British administrative authority in India emphasises its disorganised structure and reliance on district-level institutions, the efficacy of which varies by location. Condos (2017) describes Punjab as a "insecurity state," where authorities increased surveillance and discretionary power in reaction to perceived threats, often using ad hoc measures due to low institutional capacity (pp. 4-7). This approach calls into question the traditional picture of the Raj as a centralised bureaucracy, highlighting the administrative machinery's flaws and anomalies. According to Gilmartin (1994), colonial governance was highly influenced by local circumstances, personal ties, and the distinctive organization of civil, military, and police authority within individual districts. This body of work establishes the foundation for understanding why districts in the same political scenario can behave so differently.

According to research on British India, colonial authority was generally exercised at the district level, rather than through provinces or central administration. Talbot (2007) found considerable disparities amongst Punjab's districts in terms of administrative capabilities, political cultures, and connections between civil, military, and police authorities. These changes were caused by historical disparities in income systems, settlement patterns, and military presence. The findings call into question the concept of a standardised colonial administrative machinery, demonstrating that administration comprised regionally specialised structures that influenced decision-making processes (Gilmartin, 1994). Districts have historically responded differently to comparable political pressures depending on how authority was organised and officials coordinated. This material contributes to understanding why Amritsar and Kasur responded differently during the April 1919 unrest, although being administered by the same provincial government.

According to scholarship on the 1919 Punjab riots, the crisis exposed fundamental inadequacies in colonial governance. According to Collett (2005), British officials perceived disruptions primarily through a security lens, which resulted in quick escalation and the use of force. Wagner (2019) emphasises that crisis decisions were impacted not only by ideology, but also by the district's specific institutional arrangements, particularly the coordination of civil, military, and police authorities (pp. 112-118). These studies argue that state violence in 1919 should not be understood only through imperial glasses, but should also take into account uneven administrative capabilities and the pressures of fast decision-making. This viewpoint is consistent with wider crisis governance theories, which propose that emergencies reveal institutional strengths and flaws, resulting in diverse outcomes within the same political system (Boin et al., 2005, pp. 10-14). This research provides a framework for understanding why the unrest in April 1919 elicited such disparate responses across Punjab's districts.

Amritsar has received more scholarly attention than other districts during the 1919 upheavals, with a focus on the administrative system's impact. Wagner's "Amritsar 1919"



(2019) provides a detailed examination of the civil-military-police hierarchy, focusing on the alignment between Deputy Commissioner Miles Irving, Brigadier General Dyer, and provincial authorities, which resulted in coordinated decision-making. Previous research, most notably Collett's biography of Dyer (2005), has focused on the psychological and institutional elements that influence officials' perceptions of disturbance, particularly the role of military thought in administrative decisions. The emphasis on Amritsar exposes the city's high crime rate and rapid escalation owing to integrated leadership. However, this concentration shows a study gap in neighbouring districts like as Kasur.

Despite vast literature on the Punjab riots, investigations have differed greatly by district, leaving gaps in our understanding of colonial government during crises. Amritsar has been extensively researched, notably in terms of administrative decision-making, civil-military collaboration, and the events leading up to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (Wagner, 2019; Collett, 2005). Despite the acknowledged variations in colonial administration systems across Punjab, Amritsar has been portrayed as representative of the greater provincial experience. This portrayal is based on research (Condos, 2017). Despite the fact that instability has affected localities such as Kasur, official reports and literature provide minimal information, leaving administrative dynamics unexplored. This paucity of coverage obscures how institutional frameworks affected local official actions, hampering understanding of colonial government under strain (Punjab Disturbances Report, 1919). By comparing Amritsar and Kasur, this analysis addresses the gap in knowledge and highlights the diversity of colonial governance often overlooked in broader narratives.

Methodology

This study uses comparative historical technique to examine the reactions of two areas, Amritsar and Kasur, to the events of April 1919. It emphasises how differences in administrative frameworks influenced local government decisions under a shared provincial crisis. To contextualise colonial Punjab's political and institutional frameworks, the study uses official testimony, district records, and contemporary narratives in conjunction with secondary literature. The Hunter Commission Report (1920) and the Punjab Disturbances Report are two key archival documents used, providing insight into each district's administrative circumstances and responses. The Hunter Commission Report provides excellent evidence of the interaction between civil and military officials in Amritsar, whereas the Punjab Disturbances Report provides a fragmented account of Kasur, highlighting issues such as delays and conflicting directions that influenced the reaction. Overall, the analysis demonstrates how Amritsar and Kasur operated under the same provincial administration but with separate institutional dynamics. The study examines the administrative dynamics of 1919 using primary and secondary sources, including works by Condos, Wagner, Talbot, and Gilmartin, to demonstrate the uneven operation of colonial authority in Punjab. Comprehensive studies, such as Wagner's reconstruction of Amritsar, are used to better understand the perceptions of various authorities throughout the crisis. The study adopts a thorough strategy that compares events in Amritsar and Kasur to critically evaluate official assertions and identify trends in administrative conduct. This interpretive method reveals the underlying logics that guide decisions while noting the restrictions caused by uneven access to historical materials,



which affect the depth of research, particularly in Kasur as compared to Amritsar. Despite these obstacles, the comparative technique sheds light on variances in administrative capability and coordination, which are crucial to the article's argument.

Amritsar

In April 1919, Amritsar had a tightly integrated administrative framework that connected civil, military, and police departments and was headed by Deputy Commissioner Miles Irving, allowing for responsive decision-making. The Hunter Committee Report emphasised the city's strategic importance as a major commercial hub, which underlined its vulnerability to political instability, resulting in a clearer chain of command and coordination norms than other districts such as Kasur. The Hunter Report emphasised Kasur's fall into mob violence, highlighting Amritsar's contrasted stability during this time (Disorders Inquiry Committee, 1920). The escalation in Amritsar took place between April 10 and 13, and was sparked by a series of decisions that revealed both the district's integrated administrative structure and officials' growing sense of vulnerability.

On April 10, the summary deportation of local leaders Dr. Kitchlew and Dr. Satyapal sparked the violence (Wagner, 2019, p.105). A mob attempting to petition the Deputy Commissioner was fired on at the railway bridges, resulting in multiple deaths (Wagner, 2019, p. 101). In retribution, the mob killed bank managers A.J.L. Stewart, G.C. Scott, and G.M. Thomson, as well as missionary Marcella Sherwood (Wagner, 2019, pp. 108, 110, 122). This news of protests swiftly escalated, causing Deputy Commissioner Irving and the police superintendent to request military assistance—a move consistent with Amritsar's established pattern of civil-military cooperation (Wagner, 2019). The violence that followed, which included attacks on government installations and the death of countless Europeans, reinforced officials' belief that the situation was beyond their control. Deputy Commissioner Miles Irving lost his cool in Amritsar and essentially gave the military command, saying that "civil law had ceased to operate" (Wagner, 2019, pp. 116, 133).

Brigadier General Dyer's arrival on April 11 indicated a shift toward a more militarised approach, but his actions were impacted by the administrative culture he entered: one that prioritised rapid, unified action and saw disorder through a security-first lens (Collett, 2005, pp. 88–93). Curfews, patrols, and public warnings were sent quickly, demonstrating how Amritsar's well integrated command structure enabled for rapid escalation prior to the events of April 13.

The events of April 13 at Jallianwala Bagh marked the culmination of a decision-making process shaped by Amritsar's integrated administrative system and the security-first assumptions that led officials throughout the crisis. When Brigadier General Dyer learnt of the big gathering in the Bagh, he regarded it as a direct threat to the civil-military command's authority, a perception confirmed by the previous days' violence and discussions with Deputy Commissioner Irving (Wagner, 2019). Dyer's decision to rush to the site with armed men, block the main exit, and shoot without warning reflected both his military perspective and the district's long-standing pattern of rapid, deliberate escalation (Collett, 2005). While the massacre has generally been considered as an exception, the administrative thinking for it—rapid action, unified command, and a focus on deterrence was consistent with the institutional culture that had typified Amritsar's response since 10



April. The catastrophe cannot be understood solely in terms of human judgement; it was caused by a system that encouraged decisive, coercive action when officials perceived a threat to order.

The colonial administration's reaction in Amritsar was affected by "information panic," which was marked by ambiguity and fragmentary news mediated via historical trauma (Wagner, 2019). When General Dyer arrived, he saw stories of violence as indication of a larger, unified rebellion rather than isolated disruptions (Wagner, 2019). Miles Irving and Michael O'Dwyer, for example, saw these events as a second "mutiny," prompting them to prioritise military actions over civil administration (Wagner, 2019).

Following the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Amritsar's authorities moved quickly to establish control and interpret the events, utilising an administrative framework that stressed need, deterrence, and order restoration. Brigadier General Dyer employed strict martial methods like curfews, patrols, and public floggings, claiming that only unwavering discipline could prevent such riots (Collett, 2005). In his contact with Lahore, Deputy Commissioner Irving supported this tactic, characterising the killing as a decisive step that had stabilised the district and averted what he called a "rebellion" (Hunter Commission Report, 1920, Vol. 2). Rapid escalation and unified command were considered as signs of administrative competency in this integrated civil-military structure, which influenced decision-making throughout the crisis. These explanations were not natural. By the time the Hunter Commission began its investigation, Amritsar officials had already created a compelling story portraying the killing as both unavoidable and successful. This incident highlighted how institutional culture influenced both the actions taken and the excuses given.

Kasur Case Study

Kasur, which is located 40 miles south of Amritsar, saw violence shortly after the Amritsar riots. Rioters robbed the railway station and targeted British passengers in transit (Wagner, 2019, p.137). Most notably, the crowd in Kasur murdered two British officers on a passing train, mirroring the targeted deaths of Europeans in Amritsar (Wagner, 2019, p.137). Kasur had a considerably less integrated administrative framework than Amritsar in April 1919, with police, military, and civil officials failing to coordinate. Khan Sahib Sayyid Muhammad Zafar Ali, the Deputy Commissioner, was in charge of a district with limited military presence and a smaller police force with less experience dealing with extensive unrest (Punjab Disturbances Report, 1919). Although, Kasur lacked Amritsar's established communication lines, resulting in delayed and erratic information flow between authorities. Because of this institutional dispersion, early indicators of opposition were misinterpreted: Kasur's authorities resorted to ad hoc judgements, impromptu patrols, and delayed calls for aid rather than responding through a single command structure. Because of these institutional shortcomings, the district's response to the April 12 violence was less coordinated and chaotic than that of Amritsar (Amjad, 2026).

Communication breakdowns among local officials and police slowed the reaction to disturbance, leading in reliance on second-hand information and isolated decision-making. This instability resulted in the fast use of force, which was deemed necessary following military entry and was compounded by a lack of coordination. Following the disturbances, Kasur officials struggled to provide a uniform account of the events, showing



persistent fragmentation and confusion. Their narratives, which alternated between various excuses for the violence, underlined the challenges posed by weak institutional frameworks, emphasising the negative influence of administrative disorder on both action and story. Officials described the violence as a reluctant necessity during the Hunter Commission's assessment, but their testimonies indicated the chaotic, poorly organised response that characterised their handling of the crisis (Punjab Disturbances Report, 1919; Amjad, 2026).

Ritual Humiliation and Colonial Power in Amritsar and Kasur

Following the 1919 riots, British officials in Amritsar and Kasur did more than merely punish people; they humiliated and controlled them in ways that exceeded regular justice. These punishments were meticulously devised to crush people's spirits and remind everyone who had true power. The purpose was to demonstrate supremacy through public acts of cruelty and intimidation, rather than fairness and law. One of the most disturbing examples was General Dyer's "Crawling Order" in Amritsar. People were forced to crawl on all fours down the street after a British missionary was attacked. This was more than simply a punishment; it was a way to disgrace and denigrate everyone, including those who lived there, such as a blind beggar or slaves, who were beaten if they did not comply exactly. The message was clear: no one was beyond the colonial authorities' control, no matter how fragile (Wagner, 2019).

The "Salaaming Order" required Indians to bow low to any Englishman they encountered. If they did not bow swiftly or properly, they were forced to bow repeatedly for hours in the blazing heat. This brutal ceremony demonstrated who was "superior" and who had to submit, diminishing people's dignity in the most public and obvious way (Wagner, 2019). Lawyers, the educated leaders of the community, were regarded particularly brutally. They were formerly valued for their education and prestige, but now they are forced into menial labour, subjected to cruel public floggings, and are frequently tied to intimidate others. This was intended to quiet people who sparked resistance and cripple any organised opposition. Martial law took over the legal system, and fair trials were replaced with forced confessions and unjust sentences, depriving lawyers and the people they served of justice (Wagner, 2019). Kasur endured comparable atrocities, such as public floggings and even aeroplane bombings. These atrocities demonstrated how far colonial rulers will go to destroy any sign of revolt and maintain control through fear and violence (Wagner, 2019).

These punishments were not random or unintentional. They were part of a terrible policy in which the British acted as severe parents, claiming to be "teaching" Indians how to behave. But it was actually about demonstrating complete control—breaking apart communities, stifling voices, and imprinting the land and people with the realities of colonialism.

Simply put, what happened in Amritsar and Kasur was about more than law and order. It was all about power using humiliation and violence to control people's bodies, minds, and lives. These crimes serve as a reminder of how deeply violence may be ingrained in control systems, as well as the importance of remembering the human cost of history's darkest events.

Conclusion



The events of April 1919 in Amritsar and Kasur provide a strong and complex critique of colonial state violence, exposing it as a fragmented and institutionally contingent phenomena rather than a unified exercise of imperial intent. While Amritsar's linked civil-military machinery allowed for rapid, coordinated, and violent repression, as exemplified by the "Crawling Order" and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Kasur's fractured and reactive administrative system generated a strikingly different, spontaneous response. This divergence calls into question entrenched narratives that focus solely on Amritsar as an emblem of colonial brutality, and it forces us to acknowledge the critical role of local administrative cultures, institutional capacities, and crisis management frameworks in shaping the character and scope of state violence.

Such an analysis goes beyond reductive explanations based merely on racial ideology or imperial dominance, focusing instead on how violence was mediated by the interaction of organisational structures and personal discretion within colonial rule. The employment of "fanciful punishments" and extra-legal tactics to humiliate and re-establish racial hierarchies reveals a governing style that prioritised exemplary force over legal norms—an expression not just of power, but also of institutional instability and disputed authority. By putting Kasur into the historical foreground alongside Amritsar, we acquire a more nuanced picture of how colonial violence was unevenly dispersed and rationalised across Punjab.

Looking ahead, this multifaceted understanding of colonial violence has important implications for modern assessments of state power and crises management. It highlights the hazards that arise when institutional capability is uneven and administrative cultures tolerate or encourage discretionary, extra-legal violence as a technique of control. These factors not only perpetuate inequities, but they also undermine the legitimacy and robustness of governing structures. As a result, efforts to create responsible, transparent, and coherent institutions must be alert to the ways in which fragmented authority and discretionary violence might resurface, particularly during times of political instability or crisis. The 1919 Punjab unrest thus serves as both a historical case study and a cautionary exemplar: state violence is deeply embedded in the institutional architectures that mediate power, necessitating that any pursuit of justice and governance reform address these underlying structural dimensions in order to prevent such tragedies from occurring again.

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