FAZILKA

A HISTORIC PERSPECTIVE

From Ancient Traditions to Modern Identity

Dr. Navdeep Asija

2026

Fazilka, Punjab, India

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In the memory of my mentor Late Dr. Bhupinder Singh

The historical narratives, interpretations, and compilations presented in this work are based on publicly available historical references, archival records, district gazetteers, oral traditions, research articles, and cultural documentation. Every effort has been made to ensure factual accuracy; however, historical interpretations may vary across sources.

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This book was conceptualized, researched, compiled, and curated by Dr. Navdeep Asija with research, language assistance, formatting support, and editorial inputs provided through artificial intelligence tools developed by OpenAI, including ChatGPT. Final review, compilation, interpretation, and responsibility for the content remain solely with the author.

Photographs & Visual Material

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Preface

Fazilka is more than a border town. It is a land shaped by centuries of movement, trade, faith, resilience, and cultural coexistence. Situated on the historic frontier of Punjab, Fazilka carries within its soil the memories of ancient settlements, Sufi traditions, Sikh heritage, colonial transformation, Partition migrations, and the spirit of people who rebuilt their lives with courage and determination.

This work, 'Fazilka: A Historic Perspective', is an effort to document and present the historical evolution of Fazilka in a structured and accessible form. While many stories of major cities often find space in mainstream historical writing, the histories of frontier towns and districts frequently remain scattered across archives, gazetteers, oral traditions, and fading memories. This book attempts to bring together those fragments into a single narrative.

The journey of researching and compiling this work has been deeply enriching. Historical references from district gazetteers, census records, cultural accounts, archival material, local narratives, and community memories have been carefully studied to understand the transformation of Fazilka across different periods.

Special care has been taken to present the material in a manner that remains informative for researchers while also being readable for students, citizens, and anyone interested in the heritage of Punjab.

I also acknowledge the role of modern technological tools, including artificial intelligence platforms such as ChatGPT by OpenAI, which assisted in organizing research material, refining language, and supporting the compilation process. However, the interpretation, verification, and final presentation of the work remain my own responsibility.

It is hoped that this book will encourage greater appreciation of Fazilka's historical importance and inspire further research into the region's rich cultural and social heritage.

Dr. Navdeep Asija
Fazilka, Punjab
2026

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Fazilka: A Historical Overview

1. Pre-British Era (Ancient to 1840s)

Fazilka's region lies in the historic tract of Bhattiana, a semi-arid plain between the Sutlej and Ghaggar rivers that was home to pastoral clans for centuries[1][2]. Among these were the Wattu (Wattoo) Rajputs, who trace lineage to Raja Junhar and the Bhatti Rajputs of Jaisalmer [3]. The Wattoos, later largely Muslim, held sway on both banks of the Sutlej from the 14th–18th centuries. They converted to Islam during Firoz Shah Tughlaq's reign (14th century) and remained semi-independent, paying nominal homage to the Delhi Sultanate and Mughals [4]. By the 1700s, however, their autonomy was eclipsed by the rising Sikh misl (chiefdoms) of the Sidhu-Barar Jats [5]. Alongside the Wattoos lived the Bodla tribe – a branch of the Wattoos renowned for their piety. The Bodlas claimed descent from Sufi followers of Baba Farid and even asserted lineage from the first caliph Abu Bakr (hence calling themselves "Siddiqi" Shaikhs)[6][7]. Marrying among Wattu Rajputs, the Bodlas were revered as saints and healers, credited with curing snakebites and hydrophobia by exorcism [8][9]. Their influence spread east from Multan into the Fazilka-Sirsa area, where a Bodla chieftain, Mahkum Din, briefly established an independent principality in the 18th century [10]. These interwoven Wattu-Bodla communities gave the region a distinctly syncretic character before colonial times. Contemporary accounts note that many villages around present-day Fazilka were dominated by Muslim families of the Bodla, Watto, Chishti and other clans, as well as Bukhari Syeds, prior to 1947[11]. The name Chishti here likely alludes to followers of the Chishti Sufi order – indeed, village names like Pacca Chishti and Chuhriwala Chishti survive on the map[12], suggesting a legacy of Sufi shrines or settlements in the area.

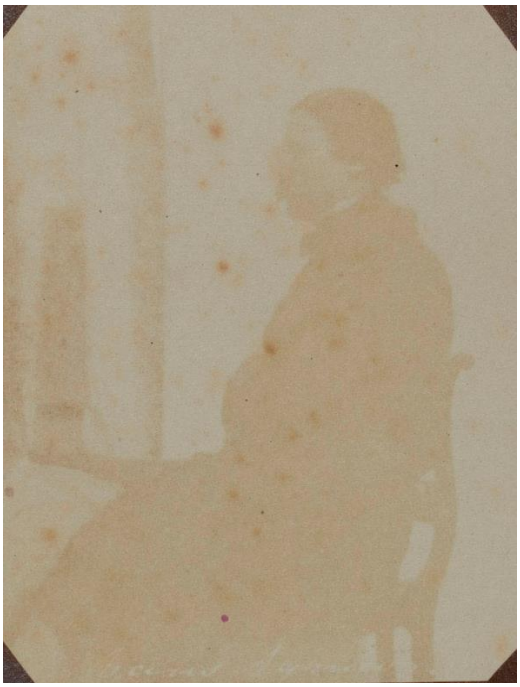
Being on a historical crossroads, the Fazilka region saw notable travelers and evolved spiritual centers. The town of Abohar (now in Fazilka district) appears in medieval records – Ibn Battuta in the 14th century described *Abuhar* as the first town of Hindustan when journeying east from Islamic Multan [13]. He noted a large fort at Abohar, reputedly built by a Rajput Raja, hinting at established settlements and local rulers centuries ago [13]. In Sikh history, this tract was blessed by the visit of Guru Nanak Dev Ji during his western *udasi* (travels). Sikh chronicles recount that Guru Nanak, along with Bhai Mardana, came to a ancient pond shrine called Bad Tirath near village Haripura (in modern Abohar)[14][15]. There, according to lore, a demon was harassing the populace by periodically burning the village. Guru Nanak's presence pacified the demon, who bowed and was instructed to cease his misdeeds and serve the people, attaining salvation thereby [16]. The site – already considered a *tirth* (sacred water) – thus became sanctified in Sikh tradition. A Gurdwara Bad Tirath Sahib now stands at Haripura commemorating Guru Nanak's visit (as well as a later visit by Guru Gobind Singh in 1706)[17][18]. This blending of Sikh, Sufi and local folklore by the 18th century paints a picture of a culturally rich pre-colonial landscape in the Fazilka area.

Politically, before British intervention, the region was a frontier between larger powers. It bordered the Sikh Empire to the northeast, the principality of Bahawalpur across the Sutlej to the west, and Bikaner state to the south. For

much of the early 1800s, the territory around Fazilka was under the Nawab of Bahawalpur, who had become a close British ally. In fact, in 1844 the Nawab of Bahawalpur "gifted" a tract of 29 villages – including the locale of Fazilka – to the British East India Company[19][20]. The transfer, described in Persian as *batariqa-e-tawzu-e-be-takallufana* ("by way of informal courtesy"), reflected Bahawalpur's goodwill towards the British and likely British strategic interest in establishing a foothold on the left bank of the Sutlej [21]. This cession set the stage for the founding of an actual town at Fazilka by the colonial authorities. Prior to that, the area was sparsely populated: local lore suggests it was largely *banjar* (uncultivated scrubland) dotted with a few nomadic hamlets. One such early hamlet was said to be inhabited by a Muslim landowner named Mian Fazil Wattoo, after whom the coming town would eventually be named [22]. Thus, on the eve of British rule, Fazilka existed only in embryonic form – a remote outpost characterized by pastoral tribes, folklore of saints, and strategic significance due to its border location.

2. British Era (1844–1947)

The establishment of Fazilka as a modern town was closely linked with British strategic and commercial interests in the Sutlej frontier during the mid-19th century. Following the Treaty of Amritsar (1809), the British East India Company sought to strengthen trade and communication routes towards Sindh and the Arabian Sea. Initially, the Company requested Maharaja Ranjit Singh for permission to establish a boat pier at Ferozepur on the Sutlej River for transportation towards Karachi Port, but the request was declined.



Mr. Patrick Alexander Vans Agnew (1822-1848) (Photograph by John McCosh, Ferezopore, 1848)

Subsequently, the East India Company deputed Mr. Patrick Vans Alexander Agnew to identify an alternative site downstream of Ferozepur. During his survey in 1844, Agnew identified the horseshoe-shaped freshwater Badha Lake near village Jhangar as a strategically suitable location for establishing a riverine camp and commercial outpost. The Company sanctioned the construction of a bungalow on the southern periphery of the lake, which later became popularly known as "Bangla." This marked the beginning of organized British presence in the area and laid the foundation for the future town of Fazilka.

Mr. Patrick Vans Alexander Agnew later died in 1848 during the political disturbances at Multan associated with the Second Anglo-Sikh War. After this period, the Bangla establishment and the surrounding area came under the supervision of British officer Mr. J. H. Oliver, who played a central role in the planned development of the township.

The establishment of Fazilka as a town is directly tied to British colonial ambitions in the mid-19th century. In 1844, shortly after acquiring the land from Bahawalpur, the East India Company set up a trading post here under the supervision of a British officer, J. H. Oliver [22]. Oliver is regarded as the founder of Fazilka, and he named the nascent settlement after the local notable Mian Fazil Watoo, who had been the proprietor of the land [22][23]. The very name "Fazilka" essentially means "belonging to Fazil" (from *Fazil-ka*) – fulfilling the condition that Fazil's name live on in the town's identity [23]. Initially, Fazilka was little more than a market center and depot, but Oliver and subsequent administrators had a clear plan to develop it. They laid out the town on a gridiron pattern, with broad straight roads intersecting at right angles – a modern layout quite unlike the maze-like streets of older indigenous towns. Fazilka's wide, tree-lined avenues and a central town square (site of the later clock tower) reflected this careful planning. Early British maps even referred to the place as Bangla, meaning "bungalow/encampment", indicating its origin as a planned colonial outpost [24]. Over the years, the town grew in a regular fashion, divided into neat blocks, which impressed visitors as "a well laid-out market town" [25].

Administratively, Fazilka was initially part of the massive Sirsa district (created by the British in Punjab's southwest). In 1884, the Sirsa district was disbanded and Fazilka Tehsil (along with some adjoining villages of Dabwali) was transferred to Ferozepur District [26]. From then on, Fazilka became a sub-divisional headquarters within Ferozepur district. A year later, in December 1885, Fazilka was officially constituted as a municipal committee by the Punjab Government [27]. This new civic status brought developments: municipal officials oversaw public health, bazaars, and basic infrastructure. The colonial government also maintained a small cantonment detachment here due to Fazilka's strategic frontier location. Notably, during the Revolt of 1857, a regiment of native infantry stationed at Fazilka mutinied, inspired by the uprising against the British. However, swift action by local British officers and loyal Punjabi chiefs quelled the revolt before it could spread [28][29]. According to district records, about forty rebel sepoys from the Fazilka contingent were captured and hanged, and order was quickly restored with the help of nearby princely allies and landholders[30][31]. In the aftermath, British authority was entrenched even more firmly, and Fazilka, like the rest of Punjab, benefited from the "settled regime" – with new canals, roads, posts and telegraphs, schools and dispensaries introduced in the late 19th century [32].

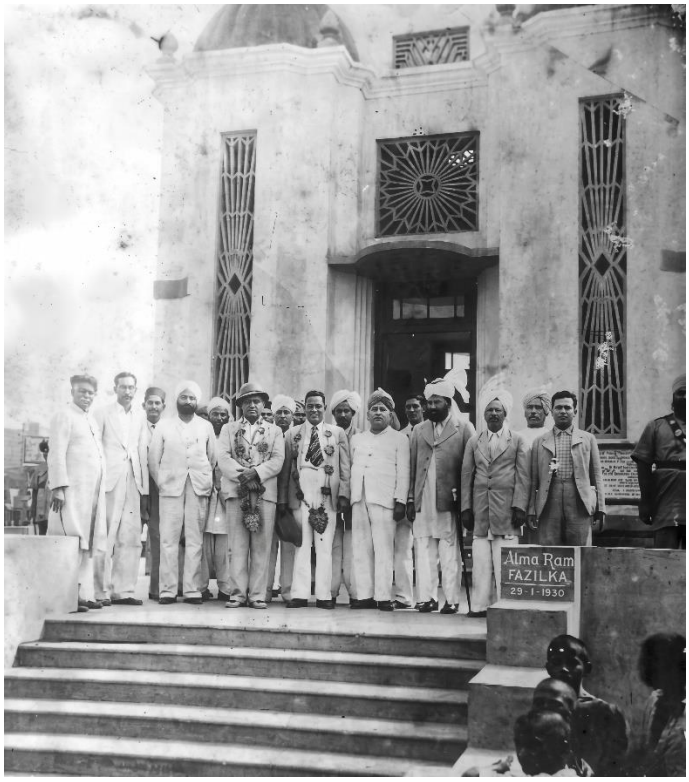
Economically, the British era turned Fazilka into a thriving trade hub. Mr. Oliver envisioned it as a junction for commerce between Punjab, Sindh and Rajasthan [33]. Its location near the Sutlej and on caravan routes to Bikaner and Sindh was advantageous.

The town's expansion accelerated dramatically with the arrival of the railway during the late nineteenth century. As part of the British Empire's broader railway expansion programme following the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897, the Southern Punjab Railway Company opened the historic Delhi–Jind–Bhatinda–Fazilka–Bahawalnagar–Samasata railway line in 1897–98, integrating Fazilka into one of the most important commercial and strategic railway corridors of north-western India. Through Samasata Junction in Bahawalpur State, Fazilka acquired direct rail connectivity with Karachi Port, while eastward links connected the town with Bathinda, Delhi, and the wider railway network of British India. The railway transformed Fazilka from a modest frontier township into a major trade and transport centre. Vast quantities of wool from Bahawalpur, Bikaner, Rajputana, and surrounding desert regions were brought to Fazilka's famous wool mandi and transported onward by rail to textile centres and export markets. The railways also stimulated rapid growth in grain trade, cotton markets, rice milling, warehousing, and urban settlement around the railway station area. Fazilka consequently emerged as an important frontier railhead linking Punjab, Rajasthan, Sindh, and the North-Western regions of the subcontinent. Additional railway expansion during 1905–1906 further strengthened Fazilka's strategic significance by improving connections with Ferozepur and other military and administrative centres of Punjab.

Citizen of Fazilka Welcomed North Western Railway Meter Gauge Rewari-Fazilka Train at Fazilka

Fazilka became the terminus on the Indian side for trains, with a railhead that could funnel goods to and from British India [25]. The railway and new metalled roads (linking Fazilka to Ferozepur, Abohar, Bikaner, etc.) spurred a boom in trade. The town developed a large market (mandi) laid out in a grid of shops and godowns. By the early 20th century, Fazilka gained renown as India's largest wool market [34]. Pastoralists from western Punjab and eastern Bikaner brought huge quantities of raw wool (shorn from sheep grazing in the Thar Desert and Sutlej valley) to Fazilka's wool mandi. Contemporary records note that *before Partition, Fazilka was the biggest wool market in India*, but this was largely due to its pre-1947 hinterland extending across what later became the Indo-Pak border [34]. The wool was baled in Fazilka and sent by rail to textile mills or for export via Karachi. Besides wool, Fazilka's grain market flourished; it was especially known as a paddy (rice) trading center with several rice mills by the 1930s [35].

The British also established civic architecture that still defines Fazilka's townscape. The most iconic structure from this era is the Clock Tower (Ghanta Ghar), built in 1938 by local philanthropist Ram Narain Periwal. Rising about 87 feet with a mix of Mughal-style arches and Victorian clock faces, it became a central landmark [36]. The Wool Market building and the *Lal Haveli* (a redbrick mansion) are other examples of colonial-era architecture that survive. By the 1940s, Fazilka had modest urban amenities – a town hall, a civil hospital, a government high school, and public gardens – reflecting its prosperity under the Raj[37][38].



Inauguration of Fazilka Clock Tower (1939)

Fazilka also played a role in the broader colonial military and administrative network. It did not host a major cantonment (Ferozepur Cantt served that role for the region), but its proximity to the frontier meant it occasionally saw troops movement and bivouacs. The town's loyalty during 1857 earned it some rewards – local elders were given land grants for helping suppress rebels [39]. Administratively, British officers (Assistant Commissioners) were posted in Fazilka to oversee revenue collection and law and order in the tehsil [40][41]. Fazilka's importance was such that when the Punjab Boundary Commission met in 1947, the question of Fazilka's fate was debated: it was a Muslim-majority subdistrict historically part of Bahawalpur, yet economically tied to East Punjab. Bahawalpur's representatives even demanded that Britain return Fazilka to their state once colonial rule ended, citing the 1844 gift agreement[26][42]. Ultimately, however, the boundary award of 1947 allotted Fazilka to India (East Punjab), ensuring the town remained on the Indian side of the new border. At the end of the British era, Fazilka was a prosperous small town – it had grown to about 28,000 residents by 1941[40], was classified as a Class II Municipality, and was regionally famed for its *badha zaar* (big market) and the "Bangla Bazaar" area. In the summer of 1947, the Union Jack was lowered in Fazilka for the last time, as India inched toward independence and Partition, which would profoundly disrupt the town's fortunes.

3. Post-Independence (1947–Present)

The Partition of 1947 was a watershed moment for Fazilka. Overnight, this once-integrated market town found itself a border town at the western extremity of India. The communal violence and population exchange that accompanied Partition did not spare Fazilka. Before 1947, about *50% of Fazilka's population was Muslim* [11] – including virtually all the Watto, Bodla, Chishti and Syed clans that had formed the old elite. In August 1947, as communal riots raged across Punjab, Fazilka's Muslims fled en masse across the new border to Pakistan (many taking shelter in Bahawalnagar and Montgomery districts). All of Fazilka's Muslim families left India in 1947, according to official records [11]. This exodus created a sudden vacuum – entire neighborhoods (mohallas) were abandoned, and the countryside's demography was upended. The famous wool market lost the bulk of its traders and suppliers. In economic terms, Partition "hit the trade very hard," as *a major portion of the supply area (for wool) went to Pakistan and Bikaner (in Rajasthan) gradually captured the remaining trade* [43]. Fazilka's wool arrivals after 1947 fell to barely one-sixth of pre-Partition volumes [43]. Similarly, other trades oriented westwards suffered immediate decline.

Yet, even as old residents departed, waves of refugees arrived from the opposite direction. Hindu and Sikh families uprooted from West Punjab and Sindh were directed to settle in towns like Fazilka. By 1951, the rehabilitation effort had moved *349,767 Hindu and Sikh refugees into Ferozepur District (which then included Fazilka)*[44]. A very large share of these were settled in Fazilka and Abohar tehsils, given their proximity to the border and available lands. In the town, Muslim properties were allotted to incoming refugee families – many of them traders and artisans from cities like Lahore, Montgomery (Sahiwal) and Lyallpur (Faisalabad). The demographic transformation was swift and dramatic: whereas Muslims had formed 45% of the district's populace in 1941 (over 640,000 people)[45], by 1961 they numbered barely 3,300 – about 0.2% – mostly scattered individuals in Moga tehsil[45].

Conversely, the post-Partition census showed Sikhs and Hindus making up roughly 58% and 41% of the population, respectively [46]. In Fazilka tehsil specifically, Hindus became the majority (owing largely to the influx of Hindu trading communities), whereas Sikhs predominated in rural villages as farming communities expanded [47][48]. The town's population, which had dipped slightly in the immediate aftermath of Partition (from ~28,000 in 1941 to ~25,900 in 1951)[40], rebounded strongly as refugees made it their home. By 1961, Fazilka's population climbed to 32,015, a ~23% increase in the 1950s that more than made up for wartime losses [40].

The new residents of Fazilka brought with them determination and enterprise. Many were skilled traders, craftsmen, and professionals from West Punjab. Among them were halwais (sweet-makers) from towns such as Pakpattan, Haveli and Dipalpur, who re-introduced the traditional Sidhi Tosha—originally a Sindhi sweet—giving it a distinct Fazilka style. This syrup-soaked paneer delicacy, elongated in shape, golden fried, and with a crisp exterior and soft center, quickly became a local favorite and is now widely known as Fazilka Tosha. Today, over 45 sweet makers in the city produce it, with famous establishments including Daulat Sweets, Bubber Sweets, and Pakpatania Di Hatti, and its popularity has spread across Punjab.

Refugees also re-established other businesses: cloth merchants from Lahore's Anarkali Bazaar set up shop in Fazilka's main market, while arhtiyas (grain commission agents) from Lyallpur revived the grain mandi. Agrarian refugees were allotted farmland under the East Punjab Refugees Rehabilitation Scheme, many taking up cultivation of cotton, wheat, and citrus fruits on land vacated by departing Muslim landlords. This infusion of human capital and skills led to a strong urban and economic revival in Fazilka through the 1950s and 60s.

While the wool trade never regained its pre-Partition prominence, Fazilka adapted by focusing on agricultural markets (grains, cotton) and light industry. The adjacent town of Abohar thrived on canal-irrigated agriculture—by 1960 it was hailed as the "California of India" for its vast kinnow orange orchards and hosted India's largest cotton market. Fazilka town itself emerged as a center for rice milling and cotton ginning. The 1961 District Gazetteer records that within a 20-mile radius of Fazilka and Abohar; enormous quantities of cotton and paddy were being produced and traded, supplying mills in Punjab and beyond. The post-independence decades thus saw Fazilka transform from a Partition-stricken border outpost into a resilient regional market hub, powered by the energy, skills, and enterprise of its new inhabitants.

Living on the Indo-Pak border, however, presented ongoing challenges. Fazilka is barely 10 km from the international boundary at Sadiq/Sulemanki, and during the Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971 the town was on high alert. In the December 1971 war, this sector witnessed one of the fiercest battles. Pakistani forces launched a major offensive towards Fazilka, capturing a bridge on the Sutlej (Beriwala Bridge) and threatening the town's defenses. In response, units of the Indian Army, notably led by Major Narain Singh of 4 Jat Regiment mounted a heroic stand just west of Fazilka [54]. The fighting around Beriwala and the nearby village of Asafwala raged for days. Ultimately, the Pakistani advance was halted, but at great cost – 82 Indian soldiers were martyred in the defense of Fazilka [55]. In the war's aftermath, the local community, along with the Army, established the Asafwala War

Memorial (1972) on the battle site. It enshrines the names, remains of those 82 soldiers, and has become a pilgrimage of patriotic pride. Each year on Vijay Diwas (December 16), a memorial ceremony is held at Asafwala, where residents of Fazilka pay homage to the sacrifices that kept their town free. The border itself remained tense – after 1971 the Sadiq/Sulemanki border crossing near Fazilka was closed indefinitely [56], cutting off what little cross-border movement remained. The once-bustling rail link from Fazilka into Pakistan (toward Samasata) fell into disuse, and for decades, Fazilka was literally the end of the line.

Despite these constraints, Fazilka continued to progress. The government invested in infrastructure to better integrate this far-flung district. Notably, the long-pending demand for a direct railway link to Ferozepur (bypassing the need to route through Bhatinda) was fulfilled in the 21st century. A new Abohar–Fazilka rail line (47 km) was inaugurated in July 2012, greatly shortening the distance by train to Ferozepur and providing an alternate northern rail route [57]. Road connectivity also improved, with National Highway 7 now passing through Fazilka, connecting it to Punjab's heartland and to Rajasthan. In 2011, Fazilka achieved a milestone when it was declared a separate district (carved out of Ferozepur) [27]. It became the 21st district of Punjab, with Fazilka city as the district headquarters – a recognition of its growth in population and economic stature. Around the same time, Fazilka gained a new visual symbol: the Fazilka TV Tower, a 305-metre tall television and FM broadcasting tower erected in 2007[58]. This steel lattice tower – nicknamed the "Fazilka Eiffel Tower" by locals – is one of the tallest man-made structures in India. It boosts telecommunications and media signals across the border belt and stands as a literal high point of the city's skyline.

Today, Fazilka and its surrounding region are known as an agricultural export hub of India. The district's economy is underpinned by fertile irrigated farms yielding grains, cotton, fruits, and vegetables. Fazilka is among Punjab's leaders in cotton production and export [59] – raw cotton and processed cotton from here are shipped to textile markets domestically and abroad. The area also produces significant quantities of pulses (lentils) and oilseeds, and has a growing food processing industry. Meanwhile, paddy (non-basmati rice) from Fazilka's farms contributes to Punjab's rice exports. The presence of agro-industries – cotton ginning mills, rice shellers, oil mills – provides employment and keeps Fazilka's mandis bustling. The cross-border isolation that once hampered trade could diminish in the future: notably, the proposed Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline (TAPI) for natural gas, originating in Turkmenistan, is planned to have its last station on the Indian side at Fazilka [24]. If realized, this would place Fazilka on an international energy corridor, potentially spurring cross-border commerce. In the meantime, Fazilka balances its rustic charm with modern aspirations: cycle rickshaws still ply its grid-plan streets even as new commerce – from rice export companies to software training centers – take root. The story of Fazilka since 1947 is ultimately one of resilience: the town absorbed a massive demographic shock, rebuilt itself through the hard work of its people, endured the pressures of international conflict, and emerged in the 21st century as a proud district capital with a unique heritage and a promising future.

4. Art, Architecture, and Cultural Heritage

Fazilka's heritage is visible in its architecture, arts, and everyday cultural practices, which reflect a blend of Punjabi traditions and colonial influences. In terms of built heritage, the Clock Tower of Fazilka (Ram Narain Periwal Clock Tower) is the city's crown jewel. Erected in 1938 in the heart of town, this tower exemplifies Indo-British architecture – it features four archway entrances facing the cardinal directions and an octagonal base, blending Mughal-style pointed arches with Victorian brickwork[60][36]. The clock mechanism, imported from London, still chimes out the hours, and the structure (about 87 feet high) remains a focal point for community events. In 2018, the clock tower's 80th anniversary was celebrated with illuminations, and a small museum inside now showcases Fazilka's history [61]. Surrounding the clock tower is the old Bazaar area, where many buildings date to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Strolling through Fazilka's Main Bazaar and Gandhi Chowk, one can spot vintage balconies with intricate jali screens and colonial-era plaques on some buildings. A notable historic building is Radhuvar Bhawan, reputed to be the town's oldest extant residence, which features colonial-era high ceilings and was recently adorned with murals during heritage events [62]. Sadly, some heritage structures have been lost or altered over time, but efforts are underway by local heritage societies to document and preserve what remains.

Beyond the town, Fazilka district harbors other architectural remnants. In Abohar, the ruins of the old Rajput fort (attributed to Raja Abram Chand) can still be seen on the outskirts, though largely eroded by time [13]. There are also several British-period milestones, cemeteries, and canal rest houses across the region – quiet witnesses to history. A unique piece of recent architecture is the Fazilka TV Tower (2007): while utilitarian in purpose, locals often liken its soaring 300-m height to the Eiffel Tower, and it has become a modern landmark visible for miles [63]. In the religious sphere, Fazilka boasts beautifully designed gurdwaras and temples. The Gurdwara Gurusar in Fazilka city, for example, is built entirely of wood – acclaimed as *Punjab's first all-wooden gurdwara*, called Sri Nanak Niwas, inspired by traditional Sikh architecture (its design echoes elements of the famed Hemkunt Sahib)[64][65]. This unique wooden gurdwara was constructed in the 21st century but showcases heritage architectural motifs such as layered *chhatri* domes and intricate latticework. Another important shrine is the Gurdwara Bad Tirath Sahib near Abohar (Haripura), which has a modern marble complex with a sarovar (holy tank) marking the site where Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh visited [18]. The gurdwara's design is classic Sikh style – a square sanctum and dome – yet it sits by an ancient-looking pool said to be the original *tirth*. These sacred places, along with numerous Hindu temples (e.g. an old Shiv temple in Fazilka with frescoes) and a few Sufi dargahs, form an integral part of Fazilka's cultural landscape, marrying architectural beauty with spiritual significance.

In terms of arts and crafts, Fazilka shares much with the broader Malwa region of Punjab, yet has its own distinctions. One of the most celebrated cultural treasures of Fazilka is its folk dance form Jhumar (Jhoomer). Fazilka is known for a particular style of *Jhumar* dance often referred to as the "Sutlej style" Jhumar, propagated by the late Baba Pokhar Singh (1916–2002) [66][67]. Pokhar Singh was a legendary folk dancer (of the Rai Sikh community) whose family migrated from Montgomery (now Sahiwal, Pakistan) during Partition. Settling in Fazilka, he brought with him the *Ravi river* style of Jhumar and adapted it in the new land – hence the dance in Fazilka is

sometimes called Ravi-style but more commonly identified with the Sutlej region [68]. *Jhumar* is performed by men in a circle, dancing with slow, rhythmic grace to the beat of the *dhol*. The Fazilka variant of Jhumar is acclaimed for its subtle footwork and swaying motions that resemble the flow of the Sutlej River. Baba Pokhar Singh's troop performed this dance internationally, and he is fondly remembered as *"Jhumar Pittamah"* (the great patriarch of Jhumar) of Fazilka. To this day, local cultural festivals feature Jhumar performances, complete with traditional Punjabi *bolli* singing and vibrant costumes. Alongside Jhumar, Fazilka's people enjoy other folk dances like Bhangra and Giddha (especially during harvest festival Baisakhi and Teeyan/Teej for women), though these are common across Punjab.

Traditional textile arts thrive in Fazilka's rural environs. Women in Fazilka, many of whom are descendants of refugees who brought the skill from West Punjab, practice the craft of Phulkari – Punjab's famous hand-embroidered shawls with geometric flower motifs –. The bold, intricate Phulkari work (often done on khaddar cloth with floss silk thread) adorns dupattas and shawls that families treasure as heirlooms. Weaving of durries (flat-woven carpets) is another art in villages here; weavers create multi-colored cotton durries with linear designs, a craft encouraged under government handicraft programs. In recent years, workshops on Phulkari and traditional weaving have been held during the Fazilka Heritage Festival, an annual event started in 2012 that celebrates local artisans, folk musicians, and history. This festival typically features exhibitions of antique agricultural tools, photo galleries of Fazilka's past, and live performances ranging from *algoza* (double-flute) music to *naqqal* (folk mimicry). Through such events, the community is actively preserving its intangible heritage.

Fazilka's festivals and culinary traditions also speak to its cultural identity. The town observes all major Punjabi festivals with fervor: Lohri (the winter bonfire festival) is celebrated on a community scale – neighborhoods organize *Lohri* fires where traditional songs are sung and sweets like *rewri* and peanuts are shared. Baisakhi, marking the spring harvest and Sikh New Year, sees spirited fairs (*melas*) in Fazilka and surrounding villages, often at gurdwaras, where troupes perform Bhangra and wrestling competitions are held. The Urs (death anniversary) of local Sufi saints, such as at the Chishti shrine in Pacca Chishti village, is another cultural gathering where qawwali music and communal meals (langar) foster harmony. Fazilka's proximity to Rajasthan means that Navratri/Dussehra and even Gangaur (a Rajasthani spring festival) are observed by some communities, reflecting a blend of cultures.

A key element of Fazilka's heritage is its cuisine, which has evolved with inputs from migrating communities. The city has gained fame for a few signature foods. First among them is the Fazilka Tosha – a unique sweet delight. *Tosha* is a elongated gulab-jamun-like sweet, golden fried and dipped in sugar syrup, with a slightly crisp outside and soft center. It was introduced by a family from Pakpattan (as mentioned earlier) and has since become synonymous with Fazilka – visitors often carry boxes of Fazilka Tosha as gifts. Equally, renowned are Fazilka's "Kachoris", named after a popular local vendor. A kachori is a deep-fried pastry filled with spiced lentil mash, and in Fazilka, these are served hot with tangy tamarind chutney. What makes the local kachoris special is, as one food blogger noted, *the recipe that their great-grandfather brought from Pakpattan during Partition* [69][70] – essentially, it's a preserved family recipe that migrated and found new life here. Another traditional fare is Vanga, which refers to

eggplant (brinjals) in the local dialect – Fazilka has a cherished dish called *Vangey di sabzi*, a spicy preparation of local aubergines often stuffed or cooked with tomatoes and served with bajra roti. This dish likely has roots in the Sindhi/Bahawalpuri cuisine brought by refugees (as "vangan" is the Sindhi word for eggplant). Alongside these, Fazilka's streets are brimming with Punjabi classics: one can find vendors selling kachha chivda (raw gram snacks), chaat and golgappas, and the city's halwais excel in milk sweets like rabri and barfi. The culinary heritage is thus a composite – part traditional Malwa (with staples like maize bread and sarson-saag in winter), part refugee innovation (Pakistani-inspired snacks and sweets), and wholly loved by its people. Fazilka's food culture, handicrafts, dances, and historic architecture together create a vibrant tapestry of heritage that the locals are deeply proud of and which they strive to conserve for future generations.

5. Migration and Demographic Change (Post-1947)

The partition-induced migration of 1947 was the single most defining demographic event in Fazilka's recorded history. Prior to Partition, the population of Fazilka and its vicinity was a mix of religious and ethnic groups characteristic of western Punjab: Muslims (including Wattu Rajputs, Bodlas, Muslim Jat farmers, and trading families) lived alongside Sikhs and Hindus (primarily Arora/Khatri traders and Malwai Sikh peasants). The census of 1941 for the then-Ferozepur district showed roughly *45% of the population was Muslim* [45]. In Fazilka town, Muslims constituted half the residents, and they dominated many surrounding rural communities. All this changed abruptly in August 1947. With the announcement of the Radcliffe Line boundary, Fazilka was allotted to India. In the communal turmoil that ensued, nearly all Muslim inhabitants of Fazilka region migrated to Pakistan [11] – a journey often fraught with violence and loss. Many fled just across the border into Bahawalpur state or Montgomery (Sahiwal) district, which are adjacent to Fazilka. Villages on the Indian side were left desolate; for instance, several "Chishti" and "Bodla" villages in Fazilka tehsil were entirely emptied of their original people. The out-migration was essentially *"en bloc"*, as described by contemporary accounts [45]. This was part of the larger transfer of populations during Partition that saw about 14 million people uprooted across Punjab and Bengal.

Simultaneously, a massive in-migration of Sikh and Hindu refugees into Fazilka took place. Trains and caravans of displaced families started arriving in late 1947. Many of these refugees were originally from areas not far away – *e.g.* the districts of Lahore, Montgomery, Multan, Bahawalpur, and even Sindh, which all ended up in Pakistan. In the first few years after Partition, the Indian administration systematically allocated abandoned properties and agricultural lands to these newcomers. The scale of this resettlement can be gleaned from census data: by 1951, Ferozepur district's population included 277,677 persons born in what became Pakistan (17.1% of the total) [71], essentially recent immigrants who had arrived post-Partition. An even higher number – *349,767 Hindu and Sikh refugees* is recorded as having been *settled in the district by 1951* [44], indicating some families had newborns in transit or soon after arrival. In Fazilka town, the immediate effect was a slight population dip (due to the initial outflow of Muslims). The town's population in 1951 was about 25,934, which was ~8% lower than in 1941[40]. Nevertheless, as refugee families settled and reproduced, the population quickly bounced back, reaching 32,015 by 1961 [40] –

marking a robust growth. In fact, Fazilka's population in 1961 was higher than it had ever been, reflecting successful refugee integration.

The social fabric of Fazilka underwent profound change with this influx. Entire new neighborhoods (often called "refugee colonies" or *abas*) were formed in and around Fazilka town to house the migrants. These included areas like *New Fazilka* and *Bhagat Nagar*, populated largely by refugees. The migrants brought diversity – there were Punjabi Hindus (Aroras, Khatris, Brahmins, etc.), Sikhs from different backgrounds (rural Jat Sikhs, urban trading Sikhs), and even some Sindhi Hindu families who preferred to settle in Punjab rather than farther in India. Linguistically, while most spoke Punjabi, there were dialectical differences: many new residents spoke Multani (Saraiki) or a Bahawalpuri dialect of Punjabi, which gradually mixed with the local Malwai Punjabi. This led to a slight dialect amalgam in Fazilka over subsequent generations, with loanwords and intonations from west Punjab enriching the local speech. Culturally, the refugees carried with them their folk memories, cuisine, and traditions (as described in section 4), which they integrated with the existing culture.

Crucially, the migrants were the agents of economic rejuvenation. They tilled the land with zeal, often improving agricultural productivity by adopting better irrigation and cropping practices in the canal colonies. Many had entrepreneurial skills – for example, cloth merchants from Shahiwal reopened the textile wholesale trade, and grain merchants from Lyallpur revived grain markets. The government provided some support in the form of loans, but it was largely the refugees' own resilience that turned Fazilka's fortunes. Within a decade, the once-deserted bazaars were bustling again, now under new ownership. The vacant mosques were repurposed (some became public buildings or were dismantled; a few surviving ones are now protected heritage sites). In villages, new Sikh farmers from east Punjab (some from as far as Ludhiana or Jalandhar who did not get land in their crowded home areas) were settled on lands of Muslim evacuees. As a result, the rural demographics saw a stronger Sikh presence than before, while towns skewed more Hindu. By 1961, in Ferozepur/Fazilka region, Sikhs formed ~58% and Hindus ~41% of the population, a near-complete reversal from pre-Partition religious proportions [46].

This demographic transformation also had political and administrative repercussions. The newly settled population pushed for improvements in local governance and civic amenities, having come from more developed parts of pre-Partition India. Schools, clinics, and markets were established or expanded. Many refugees, being educated, took up roles in local government, business associations, and social organizations, thereby integrating into leadership positions in the community. Over time, the distinction between "refugee" and "original" inhabitants blurred – through intermarriages, shared community life, and the passage of decades, they forged a common Fazilkian identity.

By the late 20th century, Fazilka's demographic story was one of stability. Natural growth increased the population, which crossed 70,000 by the 2011 census. The religious and ethnic makeup has remained largely as set in the 1950s: a Sikh-Hindu majority with only a very small Muslim minority (mostly post-1947 migrants from other parts of India or a few families who trickled back). The district continues to show a slightly higher Hindu proportion in urban areas and higher Sikh proportion in rural areas, echoing the 1961 observation that in Fazilka towns Hindus

were more numerous while Sikhs dominated villages [48]. Another demographic trend has been out-migration of youth in recent decades – many young people move to larger cities or abroad (Canada, UK, etc.) seeking opportunities, a pattern common in Punjab. Nevertheless, Fazilka's population exchange of 1947 remains a defining chapter – the town and district as they exist today were essentially reborn from that crucible. It stands as a testament to the adaptive resilience of human communities: from the trauma of Partition, a new society was knitted together in Fazilka, one which took the strength of its diverse newcomers and used it to revive and even enhance the region's prosperity in the generations that followed.

Timeline of Fazilka: Key Historical Events

- **14th Century** – Guru Nanak Dev Ji visits *Bad Tirath* (Haripura, Abohar).
- **14th Century (1340s)** – Ibn Battuta describes *Abohar* as a fortified town at the frontier of Hindustan.
- **1706** – Guru Gobind Singh Ji visits *Bad Tirath* (Haripura) during his travels.
- **1809** – Treaty of Amritsar: Sutlej region placed under British influence.
- **1844** – Agnew surveys Badha Lake and establishes the Bangla camp/bungalow
- **1846** – Agnew dies during the Multan events of the Second Anglo-Sikh War
- After Agnew's death – Fazilka founded by Mr. J.H. Oliver, named after Mian Fazil Wattoo; East India Company acquires 29 villages from Nawab of Bahawalpur.
- **1846–1850s** – Fazilka develops as planned market town
- **1857** – Mutiny of native troops at Fazilka during Revolt of 1857; quickly suppressed.
- **1884** – Fazilka Tehsil transferred from Sirsa to Ferozepur district.
- **1885 (10 December)** – Fazilka Municipal Committee constituted.
- **1938** – Ram Narain Periwal Clock Tower constructed in central Fazilka.
- **1941** – Population of Fazilka recorded at ~28,000.
- **1947** – Partition of India: Muslim population migrates to Pakistan; Hindu and Sikh refugees from West Punjab resettle in Fazilka.
- **1951** – Population dips to 25,934; large-scale refugee rehabilitation underway.
- **1960** – Abohar hailed as the "California of India" for kinnow orange orchards and cotton trade.
- **1961** – Population rebounds to 32,015; Fazilka known for rice mills and cotton ginning factories.
- **1965** – Indo-Pak War: Fazilka faces border tensions.
- **1971 (Dec.)** – Battle of Fazilka during Indo-Pak War; 82 Indian soldiers martyred; *Asafwala War Memorial* established.
- **2007** – Fazilka TV Tower (305m) constructed; India's second tallest man-made structure.
- **2011 (27 July)** – Fazilka declared the 21st district of Punjab.
- **2012 (16 July)** – Abohar–Fazilka rail line inaugurated, improving regional connectivity.

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FAZILKA

A HISTORIC PERSPECTIVE

From Ancient Traditions to Modern Identity

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it is the memory of its people, the rhythm
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