

British Role in Caste and Class Politics of Colonial Punjab

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In India, the most significant feature of social structure is the caste system, which is a complex phenomenon. Each caste represents a way of life, which in some respects is quite distinct. Since a long time, the issue of caste is being debated among British missionaries and officials, Indian social reformers and national leaders. This is also an important topic of discussion among the scholars of various disciplines.

Caste may be defined as a system of social stratification characterized by hierarchy, heredity, pursuit of one or few particular occupations, inequality, endogamy, restrictions as to taking food from outsiders, and the notion of purity and pollution associated with hierarchy.¹ Class refers to a group of people in a society who enjoy equal socio-economic status. Undoubtedly, the concept of class is highly important in a social theory, it is being utilized in collating the data in the census reports and in the understanding of the phenomenon of social mobility. Caste and class, the two components of social hierarchy, had assumed such a great importance in the society of Punjab during colonial period that it becomes imperative for a researcher to look into the role and policies drawn by the colonial masters to deal with these two aspects.

After the annexation of Punjab on 29 March 1849, British rule exerted a profound impact on all areas of Punjab's life. Economically, it transformed the Punjab from a poor region into the richest farming area in India; religiously, it inadvertently quickened the processes of revivalism which had begun with collapse of Mughal rule; socially, it conservatively sustained the power of the large landowners; politically, it encouraged cross-communal cooperation amongst the

¹ Vivekanand Jha, 'Caste, Untouchability and Social Justice: Early North Indian Perspective', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 25, No. 11/12, Nov.-Dec., 1997, p. 19.

landowning groups.² The agricultural assets as well as the martial potentiality of Punjab let it assume the political importance which seemed a mismatch with its size. Here the British created an extensive irrigation system by way of constructing canals and bringing water to the fields of Punjab covering as much as twenty-six million acres of land. The Punjab thus was transformed from being a poor agricultural land into one of the fine granaries of India. By 1920s, one third of India's wheat was produced in the province. Punjab also became a recruiting ground for picking up the recruits for British Indian army, as the fine martial quality was available here. It soon assumed the name of 'sword arm' of India towards the end of the nineteenth century and replaced Bombay, Madras and Bengal as the major Centre of recruitment of soldiers.³

Punjabis in large number rendered unswerving loyalty to the British during the revolt of 1857. The people here showed enthusiasm to provide unstinted military support and services to the British at this crucial juncture. The very fact that the 'Punjabisation' of the Indian Army from 1870 onwards, was observed, it was owing to the sincere attitude of the Punjabis as well as the overall stability, which existed in Punjab since 1857. It began to be strongly felt that Punjabis possessed ability to mitigate the fear, which might be posed by Russian invasion on British India. By 1875, the Indian Army was drawing one third of its recruits from the land of Punjab. The proportion had risen to three-fifths in 1914, though the Punjab provided only around one-tenth of British India's total population. Among the recruits generally drawn from ruralites, more than half were Muslims while the rest were, almost equally divided between the Hindus and the Sikhs.

In their enthusiasm to keep on seeking loyal services of particular classes of Punjab the British government intentionally chose to follow, a well thought of policy, which suited their interests well. This is evident from the British policy adopted towards the canal colonies, in the development of which, the British had played an instrumental role. In canal colonies, the British government reserved to themselves the right and prerogative to grant land to the grantees. The government only decided as to who would and on what terms reside in the colonies. It set up an excellent example of how the state intervened, consciously, in the class structure of a region. As many as nine canal colonies were developed in Punjab encompassing all the available lands of

² Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj (1849-1947)*, Manohar Publications, New Delhi, 1988, p. 238.

³ *Ibid.* p. 38.

the *Bari*, *Rachna*, and *Chaj Doabs*. The state's explicit aims for colonization were to relieve areas, especially of central Punjab, of population congestion, to make the efficient agriculturists settle down on land and to improve the quality of land as well as the living standards of its inhabitants. The hidden and the real motivations of the governing authority went well beyond such objectives. A sequence of colonization projects of a large magnitude had far-reaching political and economic considerations. An excellent example of political considerations can be seen in Sohag Para colony. An area of 7,800 acres, amounting to ten per cent of a colony was allotted to a single person, Baba Sir Khem Singh Bedi, who held substantial influence over the Sikh community.⁴

In fact, the British masters never aimed at disrupting existing social structure of Punjab and effecting a social change by way of process of colonization. The policies framed by the British made the social structure more rigid rather than relaxing its rigidity. Their policy of land distribution in canal colonies enabled them to win the loyalty and strengthened the status and authority of influential social groups and classes who in turn became effective props in the hands of the colonial authorities to play with. It is to be observed that the class of "non-agriculturists" including labour class, which formed the landless stratum of the rural population, commonly termed as *kamins*, or "menials," were excluded from possession of the land grants.

In the Lower Bari Doab canal colony, however, grant of land was allotted to the landless "depressed classes and criminal tribes," with a total allocation of 20,000 acres of land. It is noteworthy that the depressed classes to whom the land was allotted were either the Christian converts who had become so due to efforts of Christian missionary organisations or those who had been placed under the patronage of an influential Hindu or Muslim personality or under some philanthropic organisations. The other unprivileged class, which received grant of land in this region, was the class of criminal tribe, which comprised of groups officially designated as "criminal and wandering tribes." The purpose of offering them land was that the British efforts hitherto to reform the anti-social habits and mannerisms of such people had completely failed

⁴ For Bedi's family history, see Montgomery District Gazetteer (1933). Vol. A, pp. 107-08; L.H. Griffin and C.F. Massy, *Chiefs and Families of Note in the Punjab*, Vol. II, Government Printing Press, Lahore, 1940, pp. 275-79.

and it was hoped that the attraction of land might help the British to reform their anti-social activities and practices.⁵

By the end of the 19th century, the indebtedness of the peasantry and transfer of landed property to urban moneylenders had become the matters of concern for the British authorities, which were of particular importance in Punjab since the Indian army drew recruits in large numbers from the province. Fearing a rural agitation in the province, the British government attempted to mitigate the problems of rural indebtedness and transfer of land to urban moneylenders. The Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900 was passed and put in practice in June 1901 which created a new category of people viz., “agricultural tribe” and for which the selling or buying of land was restricted. A member of an agricultural tribe could alienate landed property only to another member of the agricultural tribe.

The said British effort was followed by other legislative acts designed to protect agriculturists from inroads of commercial elements and the disruptive impact of market forces. For land distribution after 1900, the government did not need to nominate specific groups, but could simply rule that in each selected district the agricultural castes, and those castes alone, were eligible. Thus, the Act of 1900 served the purpose of not merely confining the land alienation within related caste groups of agriculturists but also making the colonies’ land the basis for inclusion of agricultural owners, and the exclusion of the non-landed stratum of the Punjabi poor.⁶

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the rural and urban politics in the province had developed as a prominent feature. While the communal issues and identities became dominant in the urban politics, common economic interests and tribal loyalties held the sway in the countryside. The spirit of communalism, the religious cohesiveness as well as the political maneuvers leading to mutual differences did not seem to have its conspicuous influence on the villagers. The newspapers, which also helped to stir up animosity, had a little influence in the villages. The countryside’s isolation from communal political influences emanating from the cities was deliberately maintained by the 1919 Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms. They introduced

⁵ Imran Ali, *The Punjab under Imperialism (1885-1947)*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1988, p. 36.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 49.

separate electorates for the urban and rural areas. Only members of the 'agriculturalist' tribes were allowed to stand as candidates for the rural constituencies. Moreover, the small electorate which included just three per cent of the Punjab's population was dominated by the loyalist landowning groups.⁷

A kind of informal political alliance had existed between the landowners and the British government since the annexation of Punjab. In 1923 with formation of Unionist Party it came to be institutionalized. Unionist Party dominated the politics of province between the years 1923 and 1939 thus effecting an important stabilizing influence, helping to sustain social control in rural area as well as to ease communal tension. The agriculturist ideology was behind the formation of Unionist Party that was designed by the Punjab government and its leadership which came from the leading groups of rural collaborators. Through the Unionist party the British continued to exercise the same kind of local political control which they had protected by casual alliances with the leading landlords.

Sikandar Hayat Khan, Fazl-i-Hussain, Sir Chottu Ram were the leading organizers of the Unionist Party. After getting success in council elections of 1923, they took forward three major bills such as the Moneylenders Registration Bill, The Punjab Court Fees (Amendment) Bill and the Punjab (Urban Property) Rent Regulation Bill, which were in the interest of the agriculturists. The Punjab Alienation of Land Amendment Act of 1926 plugged the loopholes discovered by the Punjab High Court in the 1901 legislation. The challenge to the Unionist Party's power in rural areas came from the Akali Dal, Ahrar movement and Kisan Sabha. The reason of protest of the Kisan Sabha was that the Unionist Party represented only the feudal interests, the main aim of the Unionist Party being to strengthen its power by securing the right of feudal landlords.

Indebtedness as well as the depressed prices of the inter-war slump years strengthened an anti-urban bias. Therefore, the agriculturalists showed interest to join hands in the cross-communal grouping of the Punjab Unionist Party. Though peasant unrest as well as the activities of the Kisan Sabha during 1920s and 1930s formed a reality, yet the Unionist Party was in a position to reduce rural opposition to its power and assisted as a loyal pillar of support to the British rule. Unionist Party was worthy for the colonial rule during the period of the Second World War but this was also the time when the party faced a stroke of eventual demise.

⁷ Ian Talbot, *op.cit*, p. 77.

Conclusion

The present study underlines the role of the British Indian Government in politics of caste and class in India, which had the unhealthy effects on polity and society of those times making partition of India inevitable. The proposed study lends one to understand the strong connect between the political and socio-cultural constructs. Both tend to support and complement each other. To unearth the deceptive layer, which covers and carries a number of secrets indicative of politico-social networking comes before everyone as a challenge. In fact, the combination of the two should be progressive in nature, beneficial in all respects and intents to the social health. The proposed theme inspires the present-day Government to frame policies that are best suited to the national interests rather than individual interests. The concerns and issues therefore of the national interest must not be allowed to be politicized endangering the social health of the nation.

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