

## **Variations In Socio - Religious Circumstances Of Ambala Divison (1849-1947)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The paper deals with the process of social and religious changes in relation to urbanization from 1849 to 1947. As social and religious changes are different aspects of one concentrated process of development, it is necessary to examine their growth simultaneously. Urbanization does not merely mean a change in population, area, density etc. Rather this process can be demographic, morphological, ecological, political, economic, social, cultural and psychological simultaneously. When habitation in any territory grows, it grows in several dimensions. In the process of urbanization all or some of these attributes may be found to be more or less prominent, depending on the historical process of a given area.<sup>1</sup>*

**Keywords:** *Changes , Social , Religious , Conditions , Ambala Division*

### **The Society**

A general notion prevails that Ambala Division does not have a distinct socio - religious identity of its own. Historically *as well as culturally*, however, this otherwise popular belief does not stand scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> In British India the earliest report dealing with the religion, language, races, castes and tribes is found in Punjab Ethnography (1883).<sup>3</sup> The information contained in this compilation was based on the Census of Punjab Province, 1881. Subsequently, a portion of the report on the races, castes and tribes was published as Punjab castes in 1916. The castes in this work are divided into priestly and ascetic castes viz Brahmans, Sayyads, Ulma, Christians and Faqirs. The concept of a social class implies social divisions which procedure are a result of the inequalities and differences of men in society, which may be natural or economic.<sup>4</sup> class is a social reality, a vital existing fact and a medium for looking into the entire social structure.<sup>5</sup>

Ambala Division represents a society vertically and horizontally divided by castes and sub-castes. These castes were divided into three categories.<sup>6</sup>

- (i) the upper castes e.g. Brahmans, Sayyad's etc.
- (ii) the middle castes e.g. Ahirs, Rajputs, Jats, Meos etc.
- (iii) the lower castes, chuhras, chamars etc.

Thus, there is no denying the fact that the lives of the people were to a great extent controlled by castes. They determine their upbringing, education, customs, habits, marriage, occupation, dwelling place, type of home etc. The unique feature of the village community with different classes and castes was the harmonious co-operation of the functions of the various class-groups.<sup>7</sup>

As banana trees unfold out more and more layers of leaves, in the same way the Hindu society held out castes and further castes. The caste system was highly undemocratic and oppressive. The caste system was a hierarchical system. Each caste was considered as inferior to those above it and superior to those below it. The status of the caste in this social hierarchy was linked to the status of a person in the caste system. Thus status could not be altered by any thing.<sup>8</sup>

Everyone had his special function assigned to him. The peasant took to the tilling and the harvesting of crops which provided food for the village and the other members of the community. The peasants cultivated land and provided food for the community. The blacksmiths whose services were very important to agriculture and so was more highly remunerated.<sup>9</sup> The duties of Lohar were to repair all agricultural iron implements. The peasant-proprietor supplied the iron: coal was supplied to lohar by the black smith.<sup>10</sup> The kumhars (potters) provided the household utensils, the chamars (cobblers) made the plow hammers and shoes and the sweepers did cleaning work. In short everyone had his contribution to make. The washerman, the barbars, the cowherd, the milkman, the watercarrier, even the beggar-priest, the astrologer, the popular doctor and magicians had their respective roles in the socio-cultural framework.

Thus the entire population consisting of peasants, artisans and menials and other were economically bound together.<sup>11</sup>

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The caste system provided for various functions of social life from priesthood to scavenging. Each group had not only its social status. The occupations, were mostly hereditary. The sanction of religion was used in order to keep the members of the various castes conform to their own caste-rules. On the other hand, there was a barrier were so strict that a man could not marry out side his caste. Each caste retained its own unique features.<sup>12</sup>

### **The People**

In the Amabla Division, among the Hindus, the important castes were Ahirs, Brahamans, Bishnoies, Gujars, Jats, Baniyas, Khattris, Malis, Rajputs, Roras and Harijans. The Sikhs included Jats, Khattris, Aroras, Tarkhans and Harijans among their ranks. Among the Muslims, the Meos formed the bulk of the population, and other caste such as Ranghars, Gujars, Lohars, etc. numbered only a few thousand. In the rural areas where the overwhelming majority of the people of Ambala Division lived the life style was tribal with strong bonds of kinship relations. Despite this diversity of religion and castes there has always been a remarkable communal harmony in Ambala Division.<sup>13</sup>

The three main religious communities, the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh have been living in harmony in the Ambala Division. This helped in fostering a sense of unity and cultural homogeneity among the three communities both in rural and urban areas. The contemporary evidences show that from the socio-cultural point of view both the major communities were so strongly blended and intermingled that they could hardly be distinguished from one another. For example, the Muslims and Rajputs followed social, cultural and ritualisitic customs of the Hindus. This is evident from the exchange of religious practice and rituals. The Muslims and Rajputs. avoided Sagotra (same gotra) marriage, retained the brahman purohits who gave them protection thread (Raksha Bandhan) and the barley seeding to be worn in the turban on Dushera, festival.<sup>14</sup> It was difficult to distinguish with Muslim Gujjars from their Hindu counterparts. Their women wore Hindu garments (Ghagra) avoided the same gotra in marriage and employed Brahman purohits in most of their social and religious ceremonies.<sup>15</sup>

Both the communities worshipped the common village deities. Women in general played an important part in this respect. Muslim womens also made offering to Hindu Goddesses like Sitla Mata, a goddesses who was worship for the well being of children. She

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would feed Brahman priests. Similarly, a Hindu woman would regularly make offerings at the shrines of Muslim saints on every Thursday and at the time of marriage in the family.<sup>16</sup>

Even where the population was almost wholly Muslim, the Hindus and Muslims lived there as good neighbours. Though every Muslim village had its mosque, acknowledge Shariah and solemnized marriages accordingly to the holy Quran, Brahamans were frequently employed as Agents for arranging betrothals and for other such purposes. The same was the condition in the Hindu villages where the Hindus lived peacefully with the Muslim minority.

Religion always held a dominant position in every sphere of life of the people and deeply influenced the social activities of the various classes in diverse ways.<sup>17</sup> In rural India, the relationship between the different caste groups in a village took a particular form. The essential artisan and servicing classes were paid annually in grain at harvest. In some parts of India, the artisans and servicing castes were also provided with free food, clothing, fodder and a residential site. On such occasions as birth, marriage and death these castes performed extra duties, for which they were paid a customary sum of money and some gifts in kind. This kind of relationship was found all over India and was called by different names. However we can say that in traditional socio-economic life of India, various types of services were performed to earn livelihood. As agriculture was the main source of livelihood, there existed some complex socio- economic relations with farmers. When services were provided dues were paid in kind and cash in lieu of them.

During period of study under consideration, the people of the Ambala Division had been living in villages. The rural society of Ambala Division was a agricultural society. The farmer was the axis of socio - economic life in the region. The family in Haryana was a well-organized unit during the period under study. The institution of joint family was the norm. All its members lived under one roof. The head of the family was called Grithapati. He was a kind and affectionate person but if occasion demanded he would behave harshly. There was a great deal of mutual understanding among various members of the family. The elders were respected by youngsters.<sup>18</sup>

The joint family responsibilities like marriage and house hold affairs were shouldered by one and all. The members cooperated with each other in situation like illness, financial crises, depression etc. They felt no pains in getting over the problems together.<sup>19</sup> The Joint

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Family was popular mainly among the peasants. The peasants, however, had joint estates and, therefore, had joint families. Various families formed a khandan and various khandans formed a thoka or thola and every village had more than one thoka or thola. All the thokas put together, formed the village community. The basis of these co-operative bodies were the peasant proprietors among them.<sup>20</sup>

In Ambala district, the labour was wedded to the kharif crops of cotton and makki and rabi crops, sugarcane, tobacco and poppy. Daily labourers were entertained for two or three days. The rates of their wages varied according to the amount of work the labour was able to perform. The daily labour wages ranged from two annas to four annas.<sup>21</sup>

At reaping time hired labourers were also required but they were not paid in money, they received a load or bundle of the crop they had cut. There was no specialized work force that worked in the fields as labour. The labour was drawn from the lower castes and the indigent population. This kind of employment at the most never extended longer than one month at a time. At other times, when not engaged in field labour, these men were working in the town as colliers or perhaps in leather work or weaving.

The person responsible for keeping a watch in the fields received 3 or 4 rupees a month and was given food in return of his services. Normally, a single person was responsible for keeping a watch on 50 bighas. The region witnessed some important changes as a direct consequence of the revolt of 1857. The colonial government and dispensation, even if it brings about or indirectly leads to progress and development, is basically imperialistic in nature. The people of Ambala had a direct experience of the inequities of imperial rulers. As a punitive measure against the people for having participated in the uprising of 1857. The region was separated for the North-West Province. However, the general Social and religious life of The Ambala Division did not witness a sudden transformation. The British were not interested in interfering in the religious life of people.

Dalhousie (1848-55), the Governor General of India, annexed Punjab to the Empire of Her Majesty, the Queen of England on 29 March 1849. It was a matter of pride for Dalhousie as Punjab was a fertile country. Dalhousie had added a coveted jewel in the queens crown. This new assets would boost the economic fortunes of the Empire. The prolong process of colonial exploitative, practices began in Punjab and cultivated with a consequence of oppression and resistance. There was limit to which the people could be subjected to

economic exploitation and finally time came when people rose in revolt. The consciousness of rights was also a result of education, urbanization, industries and growth of roads which were helpful in the overall development.<sup>22</sup>

Most of the Hindus in urban areas followed traditional Hindu beliefs and practices like the Sanatan Dharma. They believed in Shiva, Vishnu, Hanuman, Rama and Krishna. There were several social service organizations which functioned on a voluntary bases with the support of the government and public at large. The most important among them in Ambala Division was the Arya Samaj.

### **Arya Samaj**

Arya Samaj was founded in India by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in Bombay in 1875, but the headquarters of the Samaj were shifted to Lahore in 1877. Arya Samaj played a very important role in the history of the Ambala Division. Arya Samaj played a great role in removing backwardness in the farming community of the Ambala Division, especially the Jats.<sup>23</sup> As far as the Ambala Division is concerned, it was revivalist and aggressive in nature, it attacked the worn out and old fashioned religious practices based on ignorance and superstition in an effort to eliminate meaningless ceremonies. The organization established a number of Branches both in urban and rural area of the Ambala Division.

As a result, the people of Ambala, were influenced and became politically awakened and enlightened. They started having organizations of their own, first at the local and then at the national level.

Under the impact of western education and socio-cultural movements like Arya Samaj, Sanatam Dharam Sabha, etc. the entire regional witnessed winds of reform. The Arya Samaj and the Sanatan Dharma Sabha also worked a great deal to remove the backwardness of the people and made, at least some of them, politically awakened. As a result, a small group of educated persons came up to take active interest in national politics.

During World War I (1914-18) people of Ambala Division helped the British in their war efforts in two ways, first, by providing recruits and secondly, by contributing money towards the war fund. The peasant communities joined the army in large numbers.<sup>24</sup>

Roughly speaking, the Ambala Division provided a little less than half of the total recruitment from Punjab.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in terms of contribution of money, the businessmen, contractors, and landlords made contributions to the war loans.<sup>26</sup>

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During the First World War efforts of the Rohtak District in supplying manpower to the army and making substantial contributions to various funds placed it among the first five districts (Hisar, Rohtak, Karnal, Gurgaon and Ambala) of the Ambala Division province. Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy made a special visit to Rohtak as a mark of appreciation. Ambala Division began to gain importance by collaboration rather than by conflict with the government.

In contribution of money, the businessmen, contractors and landlords played their part significantly. They made substantial contributions to the war loans.

It shows that the British were greatly helped by the peasants and the upper middle classes of landlords at that time. But what did the British government do for them after the war was over? The peasants who had given their blood to win the war suffered a good deal after the war.

There was no re-employment and the rising prices hit them very hard. In the post-war years the rising prices hit the people very hard.<sup>27</sup> Prices of grains were almost doubled after the war. Similarly, other necessities also became costly. The price of salt was four times what it had been in 1914.<sup>28</sup> Then the area was hit by natural calamities of floods and epidemics like plague and influenza.<sup>29</sup>

Epidemics caused greater destruction in Gurgaon and Rohtak districts. In Gurgaon nearly 63,071 persons died, whereas in Rohtak the number of deaths was estimated at 30,000.<sup>30</sup> The rural people, who helped the British government during the war, were not treated well. Conversely, the princes, landlords and businessmen were given inams, jagirs, and titles for their services.<sup>31</sup> They were, therefore, happy with the Government. The rural peasant castes like Jats, Ahirs, Gujars, Rajputts and Rors had also been loyal to the British Government before and during the war. They thought that after the war was over government would reward them. But Government did nothing for them by way of relief to them. This made them think that the British Government was a selfish and dishonest.<sup>32</sup>

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The Brahmanas and Banias had already joined the congress movement. Almost all classes of people in Ambala Division were dissatisfied with the Government. People from Ambala Division made strenuous efforts to spread the message of Gandhiji to every nook and corner of the region. In Ambala Division, especially among the Jats of Rohtak and Hissar the Arya Samaj was very popular; many people joined the freedom movement. Gandhiji asked his countrymen to observe hartal on 30 March, 1919, observe fast, offer prayers, and hold meetings and pass resolutions against the `black law.` The people of Ambala Division took the message seriously and observed hartals from 30 March to 6 April 1919.

In Khilafat movement was launched 1920. The Muslims in Ambala Division had great sympathy for the Khilafat. They waged *jihad* (Religious war) against the British. Ambala, Karnal, Rohtak Hissar became the main centres of the Jihad. Hundreds of people came forward and joined the movement under their leaders who belonged to different classes. Most of them came from urban centres.

In August 1920 Gandhiji, spelt out the programme to make the Non-cooperation movement a success. The movement became popular in the Ambala Division. Murlidhar and his friends Duni Chand and Abdul Ghaffar Khan chalked out the programme of boycotting foreign goods in Ambala. Shri Ram Sharma of Rohtak also boycotted foreign goods. On 4 Feb 1922, a violent tragedy took place at Chauri Chaura as the agitators of the non-cooperation movement burnt alive 23 policemen there. Gandhiji withdrew the movement. Another powerful movement was the Civil disobedience movement. In Rohtak district, leaders proceeded to defy salt law. Like Rohtak, Gurgaon was also active. The next to catch the contagion was Hissar. The salt laws were torn into a hundred pieces at Ambala too. Similarly, salt was prepared at Karnal and Thanesar also by satyagrahis from the Ambala Division in 1930-31.<sup>33</sup>

On 3 September 1939, Britain declared war on Germany. India was at once engaged in a deadly strife. The congress resented the way India was dragged into war. Several leaders of the Ambala Division like Murlidhar (Hissar), Maru Singh (Rohtak) Mange Ram Vats (Rohtak) Yusuf (Gurgaon) Jyoti Prasad (Ambal) and Jagadish Chander (Karnal) were arrested. Gandhiji tried his best to impress upon the government to see the reason but all in vain. The Mahatma therefore, launched an All-India Satyagraha movement on 17 October, 1940. The Individual satyagraha was conducted with great success.<sup>34</sup>

There were communal riots at various places to which Ambala Division was no exception. The communal situation became serious at Rohtak, Hissar, Ambala and Gurgaon.<sup>35</sup> The troops, however, brought the situation under control<sup>36</sup> but not in Gurgaon, where it worsened and became out of control. The district was declared a dangerously disturbed area under section 3 of the Punjab Disturbed Areas Act, 1947 by a Government notification.<sup>37</sup> This declaration gave extra-ordinary powers to civil and military authorities in the area.<sup>38</sup> But in spite of this the riots could not be controlled. There was a lot of bloodshed; hundreds of Hindus and Muslims lost their lives and property worth lakhs of rupees perished.

At the time of partition of Punjab an unprecedented movement took place in 1947. A large number of Muslims left the region of the Ambala Division and an equal number of people migrated from Pakistan to settle for the most part in the towns and villages of the Ambala Division with changed political boundaries.<sup>39</sup> The organisation of the Ambala Division was fragmented on religious, caste and communal basis and they were highly conservative. Region remained economically backward, socially conservative and traditional in life style. In the absence of industrial technology, the only important Agency for social change was the spread of education which incidentally never became popular.

Thus it can be said that the politico-administrative unit of the Ambala Division was witnessed to a large numbers of socio-cultural and political transformations in the process of its evolution. It remained a centre of historical changes. Moreover, it was a microcosm of the larger and macroscopic processes under the British rule.

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