

British Policies in Distribution of Grants in Canal Colonies

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The Punjab, a province lying in the north-western part of the British India, which is experienced an extensive and rapid economic growth from the late nineteenth century onward. This came from the development of canal irrigation that is accompanied by a process of migratory settlement in its western parts that is came to be known as the canal colonies. As many as nine canal colonies were developed in Punjab encompassing all the available lands of the *Bari*, *Rachna* and *Chaj Doabs*. These canal colonies were Sidhnai, Sohag Para, Chunnian, Lower Bari Doab, Nili Bar, Jhelum, Chenab, Upper Chenab and Upper Jhelum. The development of these canal colonies resulted from the desire of the British Indian authority to extend cultivation to western *doabs*. This area still had abundance of virgin lands to be cultivated. The irrigation system, which were existed at that time confined to tracts contiguous to rivers. There were evidence regarding former habitations and earthworks in that area which showed the existence of irrigation networks in the past.

Between 1885 and the end of British rule in 1947, the canal-irrigated area in the Punjab, excluding the princely states, increased from under 3,000,000 to around 14,000,000 acres. The great bulk of this increase took place in the canal colonies, which experienced thereby the greatest expansion in agricultural production in any part of South Asia under the British. The vast landed resources thus created in the canal colonies had a profound impact on the economy and society in the Punjab. The colonisation process was moulded by two forces: the state and the social structure. The former was important because it controlled land distribution. The colonies were situated in tracts designated as crown waste lands. This transferred ownership of these areas to the state, and allowed it to dispose of the land according to its discretion. Since the state also controlled the canal system and the water source, agriculture itself became dependent on the will of the ruling authority. The ownership of both land and water gave the central power virtual

control over the means of production, thus greatly enhancing its authority over society.¹ The end product of state policy was the structure of landholding that emerged in the canal colonies. Colonisation had a major impact on people and society in the Punjab, since the manpower for agrarian growth came almost entirely from within the province. Class divisions were not the only foci of socioeconomic differences. The caste system pervaded human consciousness and divided society into groups of superior and inferior status. The superior castes were also economically and politically dominant so that they controlled over means of production as well. Their entrenched power made such groups placed to exploit new agricultural and commercial opportunities.² The extent to which existing inequalities in society led to an unequal sharing of resources is central to a discussion of the importance of the canal colonies to the Punjab. Each canal project had its own distinct colonisation scheme, on the basis of which land was allotted to selected grantees or was otherwise utilised for purposes determined by the government. It is possible to examine the development of each colony and this will be done as briefly as the many variations in colonisation policy and landholding forms allow.

The province was certainly regarded in a favourable light by the British. Not only had the dominant elements of its agrarian hierarchy gone against their countrymen and taken the imperialist side in the struggle of 1857, but they had continued since to be completely loyal to British rule. The Punjab also supplied large numbers of soldiers to the British Indian Army, giving this province a central importance in the political fortunes of imperialism in South Asia. The British believed that their rule, in turn, had brought peace and prosperity to the people of the Punjab, and especially to its agrarian classes. The state had benevolent and paternalistic attitude for those classes whose support was important for the British rule.³ The officially stated aims of the British in the largest project of Chenab Colony were:

1. To relieve the pressure of population upon the land in those districts of the Province where the agricultural population has already reached or is fast approaching the limit which the land available to agriculture can support.

¹ Imran Ali, *The Punjab Under Imperialism (1885-1947)*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1988, p. 10.

² *ibid*, pp. 10-11.

³ *ibid*, p. 13.

2. To colonise the area in question with well-to-do yeomen of the best class of agriculturists, who will cultivate their own holdings with the aid of their families and the usual menials, but as much possible without the aid of tenants, and will constitute healthy agricultural communities of the best Punjab type.⁴

To these may be added a third official objective, concerning an improvement in the standard of rural life. The administration intended to create villages of a type superior in comfort and civilisation to anything which had previously existed in the Punjab.⁵ 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. The British were fully aware that the land distribution won the loyalty of those so rewarded. It also strengthened the status and authority of social groups and classes selected for land grants, so that they in turn could serve more effectively to the British ruling authority. Revenue was another important consideration. As colonisation progressed, military needs emerged as a major factor, often overriding other aspects of governmental policy.⁶

Sidhnai Colony, which was located in Multan District, was the first colonization project of British in the Punjab. It was settled mainly in 1886-1888, and the total allotted area, after further extensions in the 1890s, was around 250,000 acres. For the utilisation of land, the government expressed the wish not to create large properties in which grantees would become mere rentiers, but to allot land to small agriculturists who will cultivate their own holdings.⁷

Official intentions of settling Sidhnai Colony with a strong component of central Punjabis were only partially realised. The distribution of land by districts shows that over 40 percent of land

⁵ Report of the Punjab Colonies Committee, 1907-1908 (IOR: 10[3514]) (hereafter RPCC), ch. 1, para. 16.

⁶ *Opcit*, pp. 13-14.

⁷ FC to DCs of Lahore, Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Hoshiarpur, and SOs of Jullundur and Ferozepur, 7 August 1885; in "Sidhnai Canal," BOR H/251/3 KW, p. 23, See also *PCM*, p.4.

was allotted to men from the home district, Multan. Colonists from Lahore and Amritsar districts did participate substantially in the allotment, and together obtained as much land as the Multanis. Districts in the central Punjab more distant from Sidhnai Colony, such as Jullundur, Ferozepur, and Hoshiarpur, supplied for fewer settlers. The distribution of land by castes for Sidhnai, reveals a pattern that was to recur in later colonies. This was the virtual monopoly over colony land of castes that ranked high in economic position and social status. The land was allotted to dominant castes: to groups that already enjoyed a landholding status in their home districts. The non-landed rural poor, belonging to the service and menial castes, did not figure in land distribution.

In Sohag Para Colony the government wished to choose men of the best agricultural stock, and of a reliable and law-abiding disposition. That this again resulted in the selection of members of dominant landholding castes. The most marked feature was the large area allotted to Jat Sikhs: 30,000 acres or 38% percent of total allotted area. The average size of their shareholdings, at around sixty acres, was also substantially larger than the average for the other peasant castes, such as the Arains, Kambohs, and Mahtams. The Khatri Sikhs were kinsmen and followers of Baba Sir Khem Singh Bedi, to whom the large personal grant of 7,800 acres was allotted in the colony. Their large units per shareholder also reveal their rentier and landlord rather than self-cultivating role.

Chunian Colony was unique in that its peasant colonists belonged to the district, Lahore, in which it was itself situated. Lahore had sufficient surplus population to absorb the area available in this colony, and grantees were drawn largely from riverin villages along the Ravi and Sutlej, which were suffering most from population congestion. The colony was settled in two stages, known as the southern and northern blocks. In the former, the great majority of grants were once again allotted to colonists who belonged to hereditary castes of agricultural owners, chiefly Jats, Kambohs, and Arains. Landless elements were not considered for colony grants.

In Chenab Colony there were three types of grants, distinct in both size and tenurial status. According to their official designations, they were called peasant, yeomen, and capitalist grnts. Chenab colony requires a more detailed consideration of the social and geographical origins of the grantees of land. The basic distinction between immigrant and indigenous grantees continued in this colony, the former receiving 64.6 percent and the latter 35.4 percent of total allotted area.

In selecting the districts from which immigrant peasant colonists were to be obtained, the state adhered to its two principal objectives for Chenab colony; to provide relief from population congestion, and to procure the most skilled agriculturists. The choice of the central Punjab as a supply area for grantees was also influenced by the fact that it was the homeland of the Sikh population, with its strong representation in military service and its previous history of political volatility. The central region contained, as well, strong Muslim and Hindu Jat lineages, whose political support and revenue contributions were also important to the state. Colonisation not only brought new resources to such groups, but it also relieved the tensions of overpopulation. It was an effective means of avoiding instability in rural society.

In Jhelum colony, the basis for allotting grants changed from agricultural skill and population pressure to the possession of a suitable mare, the social composition of the grantees remained confined to landholding groups. The horse-breeding grantees could come from none other than the agricultural castes, and indeed as owners of horses they belonged to the more advantaged sections of this stratum. The social origins of the military grantees in Chenab and Jhelum colonies were also limited along castes lines. Ex-soldiers obtained around 80,000 acres in each of the two colonies, and the recipients had to belong to the agricultural castes.⁸ Soldiers who came from non-agricultural castes were ineligible for these grants. The areas to which these military grantees belonged also tended to be the districts that supplied civilian grantees in these colonies: that is, the well-tired central regions of the province and to a lesser extent the north-western districts.

Lower Bari Doab Colony contained several types of grants designed to serve purposes other than military ones. Both political and developmental considerations served as the motivation behind a large number of such tenures. Under the former could be classed grants such as those to the landed gentry, to the landholding peasantry, and to the dressed classes and criminal tribes; and under the latter, grants allotted under a variety of tenurial conditions such as cattle breeding, seed farming, and cotton growing. Certain types of grants were neither military nor developmental in nature but were motivated by political considerations. The allocation of almost 60,000 acres to the landed gentry was intended for members of leading rural families. The landed gentry grants were intended to strengthen old and influential families that had retained their hereditary

⁸ PRAP(G), July 1904, No, 39; and *PCM*, P. 104.

influence and prestige among the rural population but that, unless assisted, were likely, the British feared, to suffer economic decline. This colony also contained grants for the non-landed poor, a class from whom land in the canal colonies had hitherto been withheld.

Upper Chenab and Upper Jhelum colonies entailed between them the allotment of 120,000 acres, though the canals that fed them irrigated an even larger area of proprietary land. In contrast to the developmental claims of a political nature were amply met in Nili Bar Colony. The most prominent expression of this was, of course the peasant grants. These tenures were reserved, as in other colonies, for the landholding peasantry of the Punjab, so that in this project too the landless stratum was excluded. The more liberal social and regional basis for the selection of ex-soldiers was continued in Nili Bar Colony, where 75,000 acres were reserved for them. The peasant grants in the perennially irrigated area of the colony were confined, as in other colonies, to the agricultural castes. Peasant grantees were also drawn from tracts suffering from population congestion. This colony constituted the final phase of agricultural colonisation in the Punjab. It reemphasised the political and extractive themes in colonisation policy, and demonstrated the conscious developmental initiatives were very weak, if not altogether absent.

Conclusion

In terms of population densities, as well, the canal colonies had a profound impact on demographic levels in the western Punjab. The main purpose of British was to fulfil their desired interest. They distributed land on the basis that grantees must provide enough support their imperial rule.

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