

Agricultural Unrest & Beginning of Freedom Movement in British Punjab

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Abstract: Agriculture is considered the backbone of the Indian economy. About 85% of India's population is engaged in agriculture and land tax is the main source of income for the government. In different parts of India, the British government adopted different methods of land tax collection. Their main purpose was to raise more money. In this paper, I will highlight the various agricultural policies adopted by the British government, especially the Land Alienation Act of 1900 C.E, and the Colonization Bill of 1906 C.E and the increased water rates in Bari Doab. I am trying to describe the feeling of anger among the peasantry of Punjab against the British Government which led to the agrarian crisis in Punjab in 1907 C.E and which led to the rapid emergence of agrarian movements in Punjab and India. Took the form of India's war of independence.

Key Words: Mahalbari, Shamalat, Rural Indebtedness, Commercialization of agriculture, Doab.

1. INTRODUCTION :

After the annexation of the Punjab, to the British Indian Empire in 1849 C.E, the practice of Mahalwari system (Bhai-Chara System or Village System) was introduced here to collect land tax. According to this system, the entire village or palace was responsible for land tax collection.¹ Thus the main purpose of the various land tax systems adopted by the British government was to raise as much money as possible and they encouraged the farmers of Punjab as well as India to grow those crops. Which were needed in the British factories and by selling them the farmers got cash.² As we flourished for international trade, it hurt Punjab's rural community and communal harmony, and agriculture began to be commercialized. On the other hand due to different land tax systems and social, religious, economic reasons farmers had to take money from moneylenders on interest as in every case they had to pay land tax to the government in time whether crops were produced or not. Taking advantage of the compulsion, the moneylender class used to impose maximum interest on the gullible farmers and due to various policies adopted by the British government their economic condition started deteriorating day by day and they became indebted and refused to pay land tax by the government. In that case that part of the farmers' land was attached and due to which the farmers started selling or mortgaging their lands to moneylenders. In such a situation the British government passed three agriculture bills. These three agricultural bills added fuel to the fire and which further led to the 1907 agricultural crisis which is described as follows. In 1900 Punjab Land Alienation Act, in 1906 the Doab Bari Bill, and Punjab Land Colonization Bill. The regulations infuriated the ranchers, who felt that the regulations would decrease them to contractors in their own property. This prompted agitation across Punjab, with the British government eventually dropping the three regulations.

2. 1900 C.E. THE LAND ALIENATION ACT :

The Alienation of Punjab Act 1900 C.E was a very important act in the history of Punjab.³ The purpose of passing this Act was to improve the condition of farmers in Punjab. This act also became a model for other governments outside Punjab where moneylenders were sucking the blood of farmers.

¹ Dutt, R. C (1976) The Economic History of India, Vol.I, Indian Reprint, New Delhi,PP.26-28

² Babu, Suresh. Chander .et al. (2014) Food Security,Poverty and Nutrition Policy Analysis,Elsever,pp.63-91

³ Singh, Sudarshan(1991) Punjab da Itihas,Patiala:Publication Bureu Punjabi University,pp 78-87



3. CAUSES OR CIRCUMSTANCES LEADING TO THE PASSING OF THIS ACT DUE TO THE PASSAGE OF 1900 C.E THE LAND ALIENATION ACT :

- (1) Yields were high in Punjab but due to falling prices of food grains farmers became poorer. Whenever they had to marry their children, they had to take loans from moneylenders. Thus in the last few decades of the nineteenth century the Punjabi peasantry had fallen into the trap of bad credit. The moneylenders used to take their land from the farmers in exchange for loans. Gradually most of the land of Punjab was slipping out of the hands of cultivators and passing to non-cultivators. Lenders also charged high interest rates on loans from farmers. Farmers had to pay interest up to 25% and 37%. The moneylenders used to exploit the farmers in every possible way due to irregularities in the accounts. Between 1875–1893 C.E, moneylenders lent to the farmers of the province and seized 1, 79, 000 acres of land from them. 1892-93 C.E Millions of acres of land belonging to farmers of Punjab were mortgaged by moneylenders in 1971 C.E. The transfer of land to non-cultivators could prove dangerous to the British both economically and politically. Therefore, it was necessary to put a stop to the change in the ownership of land.
- (2) A survey conducted by the government revealed that about 15% of agricultural land in Punjab is owned by money lenders and they have become the sole owners of it. About 13% of the remaining farmers' land is mortgaged. Therefore, there was a need in Punjab to pass an Act which would protect the land of the farmers from moneylenders.
- (3) The judges of the Punjab high court had a number of lawsuits against them on the basis of which they had come to realize that the money lenders were enticing the farmers in various ways and seize their lands. The peasants could do nothing for them.
- (4) There was also a political reason for passing this Act. The British politicians were of the view that if the landowners were made mercenaries or they were forced to work for wages then they could pose a political threat to the British government. Official sources said that strong troops are being recruited from Punjab. Therefore, the loyalty of the Punjabis was the only protection of the British government. Secretary of State Mr. Hammilton also wrote to the Governor General of India to pass an Act to protect the landowners of Punjab from moneylenders as he felt the need. Under such circumstances, the Alienation of Land Act was passed in Punjab in 1900 C.E.⁴

4. TERMS OF THE PUNJAB ALIENATION ACT 1900 C.E :

- (1) Farmers could not sell their land to non-farmers even though special permission of Government could be sought for it.
- (2) The mortgaged land held by the cultivators to non-cultivators was declared illegal. They too could not mortgage the land for more than 20 years.
- (3) The non-cultivator could not attach the land of any cultivator.
- (4) Farmers were barred from selling land to non-cultivators in order to implement any decree.⁵

5. THE COLONIZATION BILL OF 1906 AND DOAB BARI BILL :

Due to the three agricultural bills and anti-farmer policies of the British, there was a lot of unrest among the farmers of Punjab and at that time many other problems were also facing the farmers. Due to the frequent famines in Punjab and the continuous increase in land tax by India from 25 to 30 per cent and the Doab water rates were increased by 25 to 30 per cent, the farmers of Punjab started revolting against the British government.⁶

Apart from this, educated youth of Punjab were wandering around unemployed. Industries were scarce in Punjab and the condition of agriculture was deteriorating day by day. Due to which n there they were treated racially. He could only reach the rank of governor as much as possible. He was paid less by the British army and received less other facilities. Due to this the wave of anger against the British government was growing rapidly among the people of Punjab.

At this time the farmers of Punjab Demonstrations were staged all over Punjab against the British Government in 1906 protest of the Land Colonization Bill and the due to high water rates in the Doab. A bill on canal colonies was introduced in the Punjab Legislative Council in 1906.⁷ The bill proposes to impose several restrictions on farmers residing in the

⁴ Randhawa, M.S (1983) A History of Agriculture in India, Vol.III, ICAR New Delhi,P.278

⁵Nijjar, Bakhshish. Singh,(1974)Punjab Under The British Rule 1849-1947,Vol.I, New Delhi: K.B Publications, pp.168-174

⁶ Sharma, Shri.Ram(1971) Punjab in Ferment, Delhi, S. Chand & Co. Pvt. Ltd. p.43

⁷ Ibid,P.57

canal colonies of Jhelum and Chenab. According to the bill, farmers were barred from making wills and farmers could not plant trees on the land.

They could not build a wall on this land. The bill also states that if a protester dies childless during the tenancy period, the government can confiscate the person's land. Similarly, if the collector felt that the protest was violating the law or could not pay the arrears, he could fine the protest and take possession of the protest land. Apart from this, land tax was also increased in many areas and the rate of 'Abiana' was also increased.

The 1907 Punjab unrests were a time of disturbance in the British Indian region of Punjab chiefly around the Colonization charge that was carried out in the area in 1906. This timetable has frequently been known as the start of the opportunity development in Punjab.

Therefore, the people in Punjab under the leadership of leaders like Lala Lajpat Rai, Syed Haider and Ajit Singh started a vigorous agitation. Due to which the Viceroy Lord Minto did not approve the bill on canal colonies but the agitation in Punjab continued.

Sardar Ajit Singh and his associates were prominent leaders of the revolutionary movement in the Punjab. In 1907 C.E they founded the "Anjuman-e-Mahiban-e-Watan",⁸ a secret revolutionary organization in Lahore, which came to be known as the "Bharat Mata Society" These meetings were presided over by Sardar Bhagat Singh's uncle Ajit Singh. He told the farmers not to cultivate till the government reduced the water rates. He said that the farmers are the owners of the land. The other young revolutionarie members of the society were Lal Chand Falak, Sufi Amba Prasad, Sardar Kishan Singh, Din Dayal Banke, Sardar Sarwan Singh, Kartar singh kesar, Ghasita Ram, Pindi Das, Bhai Parmanand, Balmukand and Zia-ul-Haq. Because it was a secret society, only trustworthy people were made its members. Its aim was to prepare the youth for revolution and to make the country independent from foreign rule. He secretly appealed to Indian soldiers and police personnel to resign and join the freedom movement, although he was unsuccessful. Boycotting government courts was also part of his agenda. He preached revolution through violent means and tried to reach out to revolutionaries in other parts of the country, He wrote and published many books and arranged for the dissemination of the revolutionary literature in the cities and villages. Some of his most important works related to revolutionary literature were:

"Hindustan Mein Angreji Hakumat" by Sardar Ajit Sing, "Baaghi Masseh" by Sufi Amba Prasad, "Gadar" by Swaran Singh, "Komein kis Tarah Zinda Rehti Hai" by Sardar Krishan Singh and Swaran Singh, and "Ungli Pakad ke Pohncha Pakda" by Ajit singh Etc⁹. Revolutionary ideas were also propagated through newspapers called Hindustan and Punjabi.

1907 C.E Under the leadership of Lala Lajpat Rai, Sardar Ajit Singh and Syed Haider Raza, there was a vigorous agitation against the British rule in almost all the Punjabs, known as the Peasant Movement or Krishi Movement. The main reason for this was the growing dissatisfaction among the farmers of Punjab with the policies and actions of the British Government. October 1906 The Canal Colonization Bill was introduced in the Punjab Legislative Council in 1971, according to which it was proposed to impose various unreasonable restrictions on the settled farmers in the canal colonies of Jhelum and Chenab.

The first of the fights was coordinated in the Chenab Colony, which should be the most impacted by this bill. The primary dissent saw different associations submitting memoranda to the public authority to review their complaints, yet the public authority neglected to pay any regard to these reports. This tumult was trailed by a dissent at Lyallpur.

At the same time the levy was increased in Rawalpindi district and the rate of abiana (irrigation-tax) was increased in Bari Doab canal areas (Amritsar, Gurdaspur and Lahore districts). Urban nationalists and journalists turned out in large numbers. From 1st March to 1st May 1907 C.E, a total of 26 Jalsa's were held in Punjab and each Jalsa was attended by people from 2000 to 5000. Among the speakers at these meetings were Lala Lajpat Rai, Sardar Ajit Singh, Lal Chand Falak Pindi Das, Kishan Singh, Ghasita Ram, Duni Chand, Sufi Amba Prasad, Hans Raj Sahni, Ghulam Qadir, Syed Haider Raza and Ilahi Bakhsh. Are descriptive. At the beginning of the 'Jalsa' at Lyallpur, a poem by Banke Dayal, editor of 'Jhang Sial', was recited, entitled 'Pagari Sambal O Jatta' ¹⁰(meaning farmer, protect your honor). This poem

⁸ Ibid, P.48

⁹ Ray, M.Rai (1973) Agrarian Movement in The Punjab 1906-09, The Role of Lala Lajpat Rai and Sardar Ajit Singh, Punjab History Conference 8th session, Punjab Historical studies Department, Punjabi University, Patiala, P.137

¹⁰ Loc.cit Sharma, Shri.Ram, P.74

became popular among the farmers of Punjab and became a kind of national anthem. The movement later became popularly known as the 'Pagdi Sambhal Jatta movement'

1907 C.E Sardar Ajit Singh emerged as a revolutionary leader due to his active participation in the movement. He gave enthusiastic speeches in the meetings held at various places in his speeches, he slammed the Colonization Bill and other actions of the foreign government and appealed to the farmers not to pay the increased taxes to the government. They said strongly

"The land of India belongs to the Indians and the British have no right to it. 300 million Indians can easily defeat the British and drive them out of India," he said. "The police and the army Golden Jubilee of the 1857 C.E uprising, a revolt against the British would break out somewhere in the Punjab on 10 may 1907 C.E."¹¹

Punjabi, India and Hindustan etc. Newspapers supported the agitation and criticized the anti-farmer policy of the government. The editors of all these newspapers were arrested and their newspapers were shut down. People raised their voices against many more arrests from them and riots broke out from Rawalpindi to Lahore. Sikh soldiers in the Indian Army expressed sympathy with their peasant brothers in the Punjab. The government feared that on the eve of the 1857 C.E. In a letter to Viceroy Lord Minto, Ibetson, the Governor-General of the Punjab, described the situation in the Punjab as "dangerous". He wrote that a new wind was blowing in the hearts of the people of Punjab. Demanded the use of the powers of Regulation III]. Lord Mint died on May 7, 1818. Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh were ordered to be deported under the Rangleation III] but the Viceroy did not approve the passage of the Punjab Colonization Bill. Nunalala Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh were arrested on June 2 and sent to Mondaly (Burma). The government raided Tilak Pace in Hoshiarpur and seized a large amount of secret literature. Thus in 1907 C.E. The movement was brought under control. But the suppression of the arrests of Lala Lajpat Rai and Sardar Ajit Singh, instead of weakening the revolutionary movement in the Punjab, strengthened it. The government, realizing its mistake, released the two popular leaders in November 1907. News of the arrest of their two beloved leaders spread not only in Punjab but in the whole of India and protests and 'Dharnas' were staged at various places to release these leaders which made Lord Minto think that these two leaders the arrest warrant was wrong. Therefore, he not only ordered the release of these two leaders but also exercised his veto power. November 1907 He also called for the abolition of the Colonization Bill to be enacted into law, adding that it would remove many flaws in the bill as well as reduce water rates.¹²

Ajit Singh and his associates now sought to establish a revolutionary society in every major city of the Punjab. Revolutionaries often visit Ajit Singh's house in Lahore, which shows that the revolutionaries of Punjab and Bengal

There is coordination in On 22 November 1908, the Lyallpur police superintendent and his entourage were assassinated. July 1, 1909 Madan Lal Dhingra, a young man from Amritsar, assassinated Sir William Curzon Wiley, the political secretary of Lord Marley in London, for the crime for which Madan Lal was hanged on 16 August. December 22, 1909 a bomb had exploded at the house of Sykes, a deputy collector in Ambala, injuring one of his servants. 1910-11 C.E No significant or sensational incident took place in Punjab in 1971. One of the reasons for this was that Ajit Singh along with some of his associates (Sufi Amba Prasad Zia-ul-Haq etc.) left India and went to Iran and then to Turkey, France and Switzerland where he met Shyamji Krishna Verma, Madam Kama Virinder Nath Chattapadhyay etc. He met Indian revolutionaries and also made contacts with various revolutionaries of the world

Through the efforts of Lala Hardial and Rash Behari Bose, a revolutionary party was formed in Delhi with prominent members like Amir Chand, Dina Nath, Oudh Bihari, and Bal-Mukand etc. Rash Behari Bose died in December 1912. A conspiracy was hatched to assassinate Lord Harding, the Governor-General and Viceroy of India, on the occasion of Delhi Darbar. A bomb was hurled at the Viceroy near Chandni Chowk in Delhi. The viceroy survived, but his bodyguard was wounded and died shortly afterwards. Police arrested 13 persons in connection with the incident and prosecuted them (Delhi conspiracy case). The court convicted four of them - Amir Chand, Oudh Bihage, Bal-Mukand and Basant Kumar - and charged them A reward of Rs 5.5 lakh was announced for the arrest of Rash Behari Bose but he could not be arrested.

6. CONCLUSION :

The peasantry who had hitherto been loyal to the British government turned against the government. This movement is no longer confined to Punjab but has spread to India as the main occupation of a large number of people in India was

¹¹ op.cit p.136

¹² Ibid.p.72



agriculture. This posed a threat to the British government as well. This movement started creating political awakening in Punjab and they started taking to the streets for their rights. This gave birth too many movements in Punjab and India such as Ghadr, Babbar Akali, Naujwan Bharat Sabha, Kirti-Kisan Party. It was this movement that shook the roots of the British government and paved the way for independence.

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