Agro-Economic Development and Socio-Political Change in Colonial District Multan (1849-1901)

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Abstract  
This research examines the impact of colonial rule on Multan district of the British Punjab (1849-1901). It seeks to examine process of socio-economic development enforced through political control and the policies which were somewhat conflicting. The colonial interests were served by the policy of co-option of the rural elites, which were also the religious elites as Pir, the custodian of the Sufi shrines. The colonial state continuously relied on the policy in which support of local elites was of crucial importance for colonial control in the region. The motives of colonial control gave rise to system of informal alliances with the landed elites. Multan district, essentially agrarian in a sense that land and cattle were the only source of livelihood, environmental factors and scantier economic prospects contributed in the economic and agricultural backwardness of the region. The agricultural indebtedness, growth of money lenders, sale and mortgages of land were the result of economic policies which had its fall out on the district in the form of social dislocation and communal tensions. The business castes were more suited than the agricultural castes to exploit economic opportunities and other changes connected with colonial rule. The effects were a large scale transfer of agricultural land to money lenders in Multan, which undermined the economic and social position of large landlords and their ability to act as important collaborators for the colonial state.

I. Introduction

After the war of 1857, Colonial Administration had decided to use the local elites as a buffer between the people and the Administration. In all its policies, the Administration favored these collaborators. Sayeds and Qurshis were the biggest beneficiaries of such policies (Punjab Report 1866). These elites had been performing the role of local administrators well before the colonial period. These collaborative families and their future generations stood by the colonial management at all times of crises. For example, in the second Anglo-Sikh War 1849 when Multan was annexed (Punjab Administration Report, 1902) and in the political and economic crises of 1857 War. (Haigh and Turner, 1984) With the passage of time their relationship was flourished via the tool of patron client. All the colonial policies like cruel revenue demands, revenue free jagirs (Cust, 1868), Court of Wards Management and Act of Land Alienation 1900
were in the favor of those Jagirdars and Pirs. They were also granted with the posts in local government as zaildar (Settlement Report, 1883) honorary titles and huge grants of land (Punjab General Proc.1860) Therefore, Pathans, Sayeds and Qureshies, were the most beneficiaries for the local level alliances (Punjab Revenue Report, 1866) because they were also calculated fit for cope with any future threat in the frontier locations of Multan.

From the 1860 onwards there was a massive increase in agricultural prices and land values in the Punjab (Punjab’s Report 1892) mainly due to political stability and enormously improved communications and irrigation facilities in the region. (Punjab Report 1884). The increase in agricultural prices and land also led to a speedy growth in agricultural indebtedness. However, when the British recognized that this new development was undermining their system of rule based on the support of the leading landowning groups, they changed their policies, resulting in the 1901 Alienation of Land Act (Singh, 1901) but it became an important motivation to future inter-communal politics with in the region.

Colonial Developments in Rural Multan

The district was basically agrarian. Lands and cattle were the main source of living and its economy was based on agro-production but agriculture was largely dependent upon rivers, canals and wells due to very little rainfall (Punjab Report 1901) and it was also unpredictable thus making the availability of water was crucial to the economic well-being of the district.

The district was divided into three well marked divisions: low laying lands on the rivers, land accessible to canal irrigation and high deserted areas in accessible to canals. The sandiest soil was known as retli (Settlement report, 1899). Towards the South of Multan District land, sandy lands were known as Thal. The sand retained moisture and made ploughing easier. In the southern part of the district, there was sand hills called “Tibpa” where gram, jamaun and melons were grown. Different soils had different degrees of productivity, which was due to the relative thickness of the alternate layers of sand and silt.

The average cropped area per well was only 7 acres in the district. Abi cultivation was insignificant, representing only 3% of the cultivated area in the District where lands were not manure except in drought when they were ploughed with the help of spring water (Settlement Report, 1899). During drought, the peasant could not feed his cattle and when rain would enable him to plough his land; he would have lost his bullocks. Hence insecurity dominated everything as the prosperity of the tract was entirely dependent on rainfall. The low agriculture produce resulted from the primitive system of cultivation. Little ploughing was done and weeding was almost unheard of. The uncertainty of prospects led to haphazard methods of cultivation. The inhabitants suddenly had to move off with their cattle to the higher villages due to floods. By the time wheat crop was ready, the village was deserted (District gazetteer, 1901)

The only important change noticed was the increase in Barani cultivation, particularly in the northern portion of Thal and the southern portion of district. Well irrigation was a costly affair and was mostly carried out in the adjoining area of the high
bank. The dearth of river water and uncertain prospects were enough to compel a landowner to sink a well. For the construction of wells, the landlords had to look towards moneylenders for credit. It apparently seemed an outcome of government policy (Bannerjee, 1982). Wells were dotted at considerable distances.

Rabi was the principal harvest watered by the wells (Settlement Report, 1889). Thal grass was used as fodder for cattle. Failure of summer or winter rain meant the loss of a great number of cattle, depriving the well owner of the manure for his crops. (Rent Free Holdings 1852) A very important change in each Tehsil was a sharp decline of Kharif in favor of Rabi. Each of the river rain areas was generally under flood waters during autumn and incapable of producing Kharif crops. Secondly, the strong hot wind blowing in the Thal made cultivation difficult (Settlement Report, 1889).

According to the 1881 census, the number of people engaged in agriculture and pasturism was 69,777. One of the reasons why fewer people took to agriculture was the primordial link of Pathan tribes with Pasturism which was an easy option than agriculture (Punjab Report 1901) Due to environmental factors and difficult terrain, cultivation was a daunting task and people were hard put to live solely on agriculture. When life is a constant struggle with nature, people think for survival and not for development. That type of mind set of the local population was not inherent but developed historically (Interview Gilmartin, 2010). The expansion of wheat and gram cultivation occurred in the portion of Tehsil Kabirwala and Mailsi. At the first regular settlement, area under wheat cultivation was 75% of the whole. The decrease was partly due to the erosion of excellent wheat growing lands in the riverain tract (Revenue Report, 1899).

The average area under gram cultivation was 12% of total area cropped (Report on the land revenue, 1893). Barley was extensively grown in riverain land, and used for fodder. The average area under barley cultivation was 5.2% of the total area cropped (Report on the land revenue, 1893). The major kharif crops were Bajra, Jawar and till. In fact, Thal was not a cotton growing area. Cotton was grown on only one percent of the entire cultivated land (Punjab Report, 1901). The density of population per cultivated square mile decreased from 347 to 249 and again to 231 since the 3rd settlement. Mostly, people migrated to more secure areas as their lands had been washed away by the river. As the cultivation increased enormously, a number of new villages sprang up.

On Barani lands, less ploughing was required. In some villages, where people had been in touch with the farmers of the canal colony districts, better varieties of seeds were brought and used; but generally due to uncertain environmental conditions people were indifferent to improvements (Wilson, 1910). The general improvement in the means of communication and the extension of means of irrigation led to commercialization of agriculture. This brought significant economic well-being in the district. However, it was less apparent among the ordinary cultivating and laboring classes than among the large landholders.

Agricultural wealth and military importance of this province increased its political significance. The British constructed the world’s largest irrigation system in the Punjab, which saw twenty six million acres being watered by canals, thereby transforming the region from a wasteland into one of the world’s richest farming areas (Talbot, 1989).
Revenue generation was the other factor that made the government encourage agricultural production. In order to collect the revenue, the first task was to introduce the system of settlements and assessments. In the first instance, settlement had two aims. The assessment of land revenue and framing the record of rights, soon after the British annexation of the Punjab, area under cultivation began to increase enormously. This was a major reason why the British economic policy remained focused on lands in the Punjab (Grewal, 1988). Colonial policy privileged the Punjab’s agrarian development over its industrial development. With little industry, Zamidars and other investors could invest only in agricultural lands leading to the mushrooming of bankers and moneylenders (Grewal, 1988). They not only in old established towns and administrative centers, but also in the new market towns Mian Channu and Khanawal (Punjab Colonies Report, 1923).

The first major canal, the lower Bari Dab canal was opened in 1861. It irrigated the densely populated districts of Amritsar and Lahore. The lower Jhelum and Chenab canal systems were opened in the 1880s. These canals transformed Jhang, Lyallpur and Shahpur into thriving canal colony regions (Talbot, 2007). In district Multan, the localities in which the canal irrigation was extended were the Multan Government canals including Sidhnai (Multan Report 1901). The Sidhnai Canal Colony was the first large scale irrigation project in the Multan district (Sidhnai Canal Project, 1888). Excavated on the Ravi river between 1883 and 1886, it supplied an area of about 250,000 acres (Imran Ali, 1989). The size of plots ranged between 50 to 90 acres, (Punjab Colony Manual, 1993) which was large compared to the pattern of land allocation in the northern and eastern districts and in colonies like Shahpur and Lyallpur (Ali, 1989). It seems the British in did not want to alter, too radically, the prevalent patterns of land allocation property, while admitting the need for its gradual revision. Of these plots, about half went to settlers from other districts, generally Jats and Rajputs from Amritsar and Gurdaspur (Ali, 1994).

However all these settlements benefitted only the few who bought or obtained these lands as jagirs in newly developed areas in the Doabs. According to a British observer, in a few years, for a depth of thirty miles on both sides of the canal irrigated lands, wells were deserted. The peasants were forced to migrate to the newly irrigated lands to work as farm labors, artisans, and menials. Complaints against the colonial administration were becoming frequent, unnerving the British (Thorburn, 1986).

The government decided to excavate three subsidiary canals Kuranga, Fazal Shah and Abdul Hakim between 1890 and 1891, (Multan Report, 1921) in order to improve the irrigation of these areas. On the other hand, the negative results of the opening of the canals kept surfacing in many areas of the Punjab. In 1899, the Financial Commissioner of the Punjab wrote “the accepted idea is that the reduction of sailab is because of canals. In the South-West, the petitions seemed to be serious. In May 1900, J. Wilson, Settlement Commissioner of the Punjab, admitted that the opening of the canals was, in fact, reverting to the old sample of agriculture and pasturage (Wilson, 1900).

Besides stopping the flow of the rivers which was the main source of the prosperity, we have also given over to colonists from a distance the great stretches of waste land which from time immemorial have formed grazing grounds for the cattle of
the riverian villages, and because the greater advantage of canal irrigation in the uplands
have tempted anyway large numbers of their tenants and thrown their Wells out of work
and their lands of cultivation (Review Report, 1898).

The Government of Punjab seemed more anxious to keep away from the zamindars considering the diminished sailed to the government canals, by giving them a reliable clarification, rather than actually developing the irrigation of the riverian (Wilson, 1900). This resulted in rising discontentment among the Muslim tenants and smaller zamindar community in the last years of the 19th century. Most of them had to leave their villages and moved to the rawa and bar lands in search of employment. Even many of the superior proprietors were worried because they were losing their cultivators who went to the more suitable tracts in the newly irrigated lands. This was the position of some of the most influential sajjada nashins such as the Gardezi and Qureshi families (Punjab Review, 1900).

We would argue that here lies a central inconsistency of the British policy of irrigation in the South-western Punjab. Intensions of creating ‘communities of the best Punjab type’ and rural society in Multan by constructing a new cooperative identity, it had resulted in making the local communities gradually more continuous conscious socially and weakened economically. It also disappointed the same landed classes that it was meant to protect. If this was not sufficient, the stress caused by the movement of people from the riverian to the uplands, was reinforced soon afterwards by the dilemma of rural debt. Even though the situation of the powerful landed families was sheltered by the colonial government with the allocation of the reserved for ‘Landed gentry’, this did not prevent many of these families from getting into debt, including some of Multan's Sayyid and Qureshi families between the late 19th century and the 1920s and their properties were eventually taken under the management of the Court of Wards. (Punjab Court of Wards Report, 1928) Unfortunately, the irrigation projects in West Punjab hardly benefited the native population. They became stranger in their own homelands and were not permitted to contribute to the new agrarian venture (Talbot, 1989).

However the canal colony development played an important role in the British system of rural collaboration. While loyal allies could be rewarded with grants of land, the development could also be used to bypass traditional elites deemed less cooperative. (Darling, 1947) These developments generated employment (Pervaiz and Hassan, 2004). In return, the Punjab extended its loyalty to the British government. As a result of these schemes, a middle class of land owners emerged, who, later on, played a crucial role in the British government of the Punjab as rural collaborators under the umbrella of colonial regional administrators in Multan region.

The colonial state had to constantly balance the economic desire to agriculturally develop the Punjab and tie the region into the world economy, with the desire to maintain political stability in a region immensely important to imperial interests. Land became a key factor in defining the legal position of these tribal leaders who were acting as mediators between state and masses. Tribal leadership and land control came to be closely related (Gilmartin, 1988). The British realized that grant of land did not only win loyalties of zaildari families to the state but also closely associated with their local control within the zail system.
Another concern in the choice of grantees in the canal colony areas was that they should be expert agriculturists. The British choice fell on the land holding lineage of the central Punjab. So, the land was allotted to those peasants who were already enjoying land holding social position (Imran, 1997).

The British government approved land grants to the landholders since they were free from debt and had enough capital to cultivate large tracts of land (Imran, 1997). The poorer and landless peasants were not permitted to approach to proprietary rights. “The service caste,” referred to as “Menials” or “Kamis” could find employment and work only as laborers or Tenants in the new canal colony land (Pasha, 1998). Besides, commercial, non-agriculturist groups could also purchase lands at auctions. It was the result of the British policy of land grants to the landholding “agricultural castes”, only the better-off section of Punjabi society benefited which ultimately strengthened the strong upper section of rural society (Imran, 1997).

As discussed earlier, the land became central in defining and legitimizing the position and power of the rural landed class. By the start of the 20th century, there had been an entire overhauling of agrarian structure of Punjab, as agriculture was commercialized, and credit system was introduced which drastically changed the nature of landlord tenant relationship. In this new set up, the role of the tribal leaders was unavoidable and crucial (Imran, 1997).

It is important to understand that in the colonial Punjab, the influential was not the one who only possessed vast tract of land but the one whose influence was in accordance with the ideology of imperial state (Gilmartin, 1988). To make smooth progress of the whole process, the British modified their rule to the region’s settings and constituted their administrative set up around the Punjab’s customary tribal settlement pattern in which tribal leaders were intermediaries.

The formation of the canal colonies was directly linked to the Punjab’s emergence as a main recruitment center for the Indian army (Gilmartin, 1988). To incentivize joining the army, the British announced a policy of awarding land grants to ex-servicemen. In this regard, large areas of Bari Doab canal colony were granted to the ex-army personnel. Therefore canal colonies contributed, in no small measure, to the British war efforts. During the First World War, for example, the Lyallpur canal colony provided wheat, flour and horses for the troops (Talbot, 1989). Since most of the soldiers came from the Punjab, colonization scheme shifted towards military grantees with the outbreak of World War I (Talbot.1989).

The census of 1911 showed that a large number of people migrated to the Lower Chenab canal colony from Multan thereby reducing the number of hands available for agriculture (Punjab Census Report, 1912). The underdeveloped agriculture in Multan convinced many to join army. The local elites competed with each other to make available the cannon fodder for the British Army in lieu of the grants and privileges accorded to them by the state. The assets in irrigation was not thought to be cost effective, keeping in mind the social composition, dryness of the land, the depthness of water level and the typical environment of the region. Investment in such situations
would face huge constraints. Large area of Thal in Multan was populated by pastoralists who lacked the farming skills, needed for the cultivation of cash crops, essential for economic feasibility of the canal colonies.

The increase in production and prices for agricultural led to astronomical rise in land values in the Punjab, including Multan. (Recent Economic Development) The batai rate of 1/3 was still in practice. Some landlords even exacted ½ of it. Rent rate in each village depended on understanding and relation between land lord and tenants. In Thal area, tenants, at times, had to pay only land revenue and got nothing from their crops because of the complexity of working Thal wells. Prior to the revenue settlements introduced by the colonial administration, there was no fixed land revenue.

The British fixed revenue at a certain amount which was not easy to pay for the small land holders of the district. There was a noticeable increase in the wages of labor in the district between 1881 and 1891 (Punjab Material Progress Report, 1892) due to the increased demand for labor in irrigation and railway works throughout the province (Progress Report, 1892). Another reason was the shortage of labor due to migration to the canal colonies. The construction of railways between Punjab and Sindh provided an easy means of export for the surplus of the district which largely increased the prices of the produce (Punjab Report Buildings and Roads, 1899). The rise in prices of land and the agricultural products led to rapid increase in the rural indebtedness (Punjab Material Progress Report, 1892). Under the Land Improvement and Agriculturist Loans Act, (Punjab Code, 1906) fairly big amounts had been advanced for loans to accomplish the requirements of agriculturists. In this regard, few credit and co-operative societies were well managed in the district. Multan was second in the province in which cooperative societies were started in 1904. Four societies were functioning in Thathi Ghalwan, Jalalpur pirwala, Dunyapur and Makhdumpur Paharan. These were financed by the Central Co-operative Bank Multan and Lasuri credit union (Multan Gazetteer, 1925).

Mostly, land holders had to buy cattle from Sindhi traders on credit and the loan had to be returned with huge amount of interest. Moreover, the common land owner would over-spend on marriage and other ceremonies, and also on disputes. As a result he was always in debt (Kamran, 2000). After the annexation of the Punjab, the British redefined the power structure on land. The first thing was the settlement of land between state and peasant. It was based on two purposes: 1-Land revenue assessment which was extracted from the peasantry. 2- Between 1850 and 1860, at the time of first regular settlement, after recording the rights the land revenue became fixed (Multan District Settlement Report, 1901). The main purpose of further settlements was to increase revenue and bring record of rights up to date. This policy made the sale and mortgage of land easier (Punjab Material Progress Report, 1892).

The fixed land revenue management (Final Settlement Report Multan District) created anxiety among the Zaminars. Before the annexation of the Punjab in 1849, transfer of land by mortgage or sale was narrowed by two factors. Punjabis of each religious community and geographical region respected local traditions which restricted land sale to outsiders. The British uplifted these limitations upon the sale of land to outsiders and non-agriculturists. The British distributed the land, gave proprietary rights to the tenants (Punjab Land Administration Report, 1900) which soared the value of land. Along with the extension of roads and railways, the sale and mortgage value of land was...
increasing. Now the agriculturist was confident about some profit beyond his everyday expenditure because of the low revenue assessment.

The expenses of land revenue had also a role in the reduction of the zamindars’ stocks after the harvest, which would compel them to sell their produce at unfavorable prices and borrow the cash from money lenders to pay off the revenue. (Bannerjee) British introduced the system of private property which was one facet of development of colonial capitalism in the Punjab. The crop growing of Egyptian wheat, New Orleans cotton, Tobacco, Marigold turnips and clovers was another step towards export trade production. All these developments connected the Punjab’s rural economy with the world marketplace (Pasha, 1998).

A new group emerged that was associated with trade in agricultural supplies. Their role as village grain dealers and money lenders gave them overriding position to impose cruel terms on cultivators (Bannerjee). Agrarian indebtedness was particularly dangerous in districts such as Multan where the landholding groups were Muslims and the controllers of the capital were predominantly Hindus. This split was characteristic of all of western and south western Punjab Muslim economic grievances might combine with religious animosity to generate communal tension towards a regime whose legal system permitted Hindus to exploit them (Revenue and Agriculture Proceeding, 1891).

The Muslim landed magnates’ ability to assist the administration in time of need was correspondingly weakened (Punjab Government, 1870). The economic difficulties of the large Zamindars of Multan had serious political implications because this class was more predominant in Multan division than anywhere else in the Punjab. For example, Hamid Shah Hardezi, a member of one of the leading Multani families, mortgaged 16, 516 acres for Rs. 250,000 to Rai Mela Ram, a wealthy public works contractor of Lahore, a mortgage which would never be redeemed (Revenue Proceeding, 1891).

However substantial economic development occurred in Multan district after the 1857 War. The commercial classes were ideally placed to benefit from it. As a result, agrarian debt and land alienation to controllers of capital swelled at an ever growing rate. The economic and social position of many outstanding landed families deteriorated, seriously impairing their ability to shore up the imperial government.

As stated above, from the 1860s onwards, the British had been continuously searching for their associates from the middle of the rural population. The Pirs like other rural landholders were affected by the commercialization of agriculture and the spread of irrigation into the Multan district. The Pirs emerged as landholders and political figures as well as spiritual guides. With the rising worth of land, the situation of the pirs moved to change from a position of authority to one of the power. The religious families were motivated to invest increasing sums of money into irrigated land.

As the position of the pirs as zamindars became solidified, their relationship with the tenets changed, from spiritual leadership to that of economic power (Punjab Administration Report of Estates, 1915-1961). The most serious signal of religious change in the district became noticeable in the 1880s, when relationship between religious communities became extremely tense. In 1880 and 1881, serious riots broke out
in Multan city (Punjab Home Proceeding, 1881). Of course, communal violence was not new to Multan and to the rest of the Punjab. However, the peculiarity of these events was the attendance of the Pir at the middle of the stage. Even more important was the fact that pir emerged as the personification of a common Muslim identity vis-à-vis a violent Hindu community, whereas earlier they had shunned this role largely because of the popular religious culture of the shrines which involved both Muslims and Hindus. Paradoxically, if the colonial management had been trying to build a sort of joint identity, joint spirit, or ‘community of interest’ in Multan, this had now happened, but in religious symbolical terms.

The conflicts emerged, initially, as enmity between the representatives of the two most important holy places in Multan city: the Makhudum Qureshi, guardian of the two dargahs of Bahawal Haq and Rukin-i-Alam and the Mahant of Prahladpuri (Disturbance at Mooltan, 1881). Although the actual conflict took place between July 1880 and October 1881, its basis was innate in the post-war settlement that had taken place in Multan after the annexation by the British. During the siege of the city, in 1848-49, (India Secret Proceeding, 1849) the buildings had been badly destroyed. Therefore, after the war, Makhudum Qureshi had asked for consent to repair the two shrines and for the government to assist financially. The former request was considered, while the latter was refused. At the same time, the mahant of the nearby temple, Narian Das, had addressed a parallel request to colonial management (Punjab Government Home Proceeding, 1881). This aggravated the hostility of the Makhudum. The final decision of the British authorities was to allow them to rebuild both the edifices ‘to the condition in which they were in the time of Maha Raja Ranjit Singh.’ This unclear statement would create a series of serious conflicts not only in Multan region but also in the rest of the Punjab (General Department Proceeding, 1880).

After thirty years the mahant of the temple sought the British permission to build a pinnacle over the temple, according to the total height of the mandir. This request was also forcefully opposed by the Makhudum. The concluding decision by the colonial management was in support of conciliation that in fact left both parties discontented and irritated, as facts would have confirmed later. (Punjab Home, 1881) Both complained to have been mistreated by the authorities and there is no doubt that all this formed the background of new and serious riots of new weeks later. In April 1881, the controversy in Mutton, which acquired a new, and more symbolic, significance with a question concerning the selling of beef meat in Multan, which provoked serious incidents between Hindus and Muslims, with injuries and damages to various mosques and Hindu temples.

II. Conclusion

This research finds out that the colonial management brought about a revolution in the irrigation system in the last quarter of the 19th century which rendered the waste land of Multan was cultivatable but agriculture was remained under developed. Through colonization schemes the government carried out massive social engineering which resulted into settlement of agricultural immigrants and grants of colony lands. Through the improvement in the communication system its agriculture economy was linked with world economy and surplus produce was exported. The irrigation system was intensified the drive to commercialization of production for extra regional and international market. Loyalism was secured in the colony areas by land grants to martial casts. Despite the
disturbance of 1881, the loyalism of key elites remained intact. The martial self-interests coincided with those of the colonial administration. This was internalized by section of Multani society has helped them maintain’ traditional’ lifestyle encoded by the notion of izzat. It was not the last novelty that those Muslim collaborators to have a loan from Bania to maintain lavish style for social and political prominence.

We would argue by reviewing all this processes, that the Pirs acting as leaders of community is to be placed in a context where the Pirs actually act not only as spiritual ‘alter-ego’ of the king, but actually as ‘little kings’, as their titles Makhdum, Gaddi-nashin clearly indicated. In the comparison between different figures of holy men, therefore, the Pirs of Multan never resembled the purely spiritual sufi saint of other regions of the Muslim world. The tradition of leadership can help us to explain their readiness to take part in political struggles against any perceived threats. We emphasized the role of the Pirs as a mobilizing figure for the formation of a community. But jagirdars were installed by the British government to control local population for their vested interest.

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