



Impact of agricultural policy of raj from 1849 to 1900 in Punjab

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Abstract

After the annexation of Punjab, the Colonial Government made new agricultural policies. The economy of Punjab was predominantly agrarian; consequently, these policies played an important role in shaping the society of the coming century. New classes such as money lenders which were originally trading communities emerged. The available sources indicate that the majority of landallottees, who came to Rohtak and a few other divisions belonged to this particular class.

Keywords: class, agrarian, monetary system, raj, economy

Introduction

In 1801, Ranjit Singh proclaimed himself as the maharaja of the state of Punjab and expanded his empire rapidly. He attempted to bring the Cis-Satluj states under his jurisdiction. However, he could not materialize his plans due to the intervention of the Colonial government. Consequently, the Amritsar treaty was signed between Ranjit Singh and the colonial government which ended the expansion of Ranjit Singh's empire further south. Maharaja Ranjit Singh died in 1839, leaving the empire in unstable conditions as his successor failed to control the kingdom effectively. The state of law and order nearly crumbled down to anarchy. Assassinations and murders were rampant whilst Darbar was the centre of conspiracies against the crown. Factions of Dogras, Rajputs and other powerful ministers fought with each other to gain further power. A few Sardars such as Lal Singh and Teja Singh became loyal to the British Colonial Government and were the main conspirators behind the scenes in the British takeover of Punjab.

Post the first Anglo-Sikh War by Bharowal treaty, the British East India Company successfully established its control over the Lahore darbar. King's autonomy was merely an illusion and all the administrative powers resided with the resident appointed by the company and its staff. The East India Company had finally managed to establish its control over Punjab without annexing it to their territory. The regency council was reduced to a dummy status with Maharaja Dalip Singh as its titular head. The control of administration was in hands of the resident and no orders could be executed without his permission.

After the second Anglo-Sikh war, the empire of Punjab was formally annexed to the British territory. This was done at the fort of Lahore on 29 March 1849 when Maharaja Dalip Singh was coerced to sign the document of annexation in the presence of a sizeable court in Sheesh Mahal. To avoid future revolt, Governor General Lord Dalhousie gave a relief of sorts to the chiefs who did not rebel to retain their properties and ranks as an option. He further decided to grant a pension of £50,000 a year to Dalip Singh and who was sent to England

with his mother.

After the British annexed the Sikh kingdom of Punjab in 1849, they started ruling most of the subcontinent from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. The East India Company had transformed itself from tea-trading monopoly to a territorial ruler. It had created a well-established system of political control which was financed entirely by its trade and land revenues.

During the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh more than 90 percent people lived in the villages. A great percentage of people directly or indirectly engaged in agricultural activities because the industrial sector was still in its infancy in Punjab. Every village was independent but residents were dependent on each other. The social composition of most villages was similar as nearly 60 percent people were directly engaged in agriculture. The farmer community was the backbone of village economy. The mercantile community comprised nearly 5 percent of the population, whose occupation was trade which included small shops and other small commercial activities. The remaining population was artisans and menial categories. Barter system was used in everyday life. Jazamani system was a general feature of every village.

The people of Punjab reposed their faith in different religions. In eastern Punjab, the majority of the people believed in Hinduism. In certain districts of Punjab like Amritsar, Ludhiana, Bhatinda, Lahore, Jalandhar laid the cradle of Sikhism. In these districts, a great number of people believed in the Sikhism. In western Punjab, the majority of people believed in Islam.

On 29th March 1849, Lord Dalhousie succeeded in finally gaining control over Punjab. Upon annexation, the administration of Punjab was placed in the hands of an administrative board appointed by Lord Dalhousie. It comprised of three members namely the brother duo of Henry Lawrence and John Lawrence and Charles Mansel. Henry Lawrence was the chairperson of the Board, as post the first Anglo-Sikh war he had worked as the British Resident in Lahore Darbar. He possessed a great amount of experience in the affairs of Punjab and was also popular among the Sikhs.

Departments were also distributed among the three members of the Board. Henry Lawrence had the responsibilities of political and military affairs. John Lawrence undertook the responsibilities of land revenue and financial departments and Charles Mansel supervised the judicial system. Lord Dalhousie had chosen the best available officers in the region of Punjab for helping the board. These officers were often selected from the army and civil administration. Punjab was a non-regulating state which meant that rules and regulations of any other state were not implemented in the Punjab. The board was bound to give importance to local laws and traditions and frame policies around them. Another prominent feature of the Board of Administration was the division of work and common responsibility simultaneously. The three members of the board were independently responsible for the departments allotted to them but were collectively responsible for the smooth functioning of the whole administrative system in the state.

For the British government, the primary issue was the fact that after the annexation of Punjab the conditions were not in their favour. They had some crucial matters to deal with such as disarming the Sikhs, to establish a new administrative structure and form new policies and rules. However, most importantly they wanted to increase the revenue of the government.

The first change came in the form of administrative restructuring. The geographic area of Punjab was quite large and in order to run the administration effectively the Punjab province was divided into seven divisions or commissionaires in a systematic way. The highest ranking officer of the province committee was called the Commissioner. Each commissioner was further divided into districts. The chief officer of the district was called Deputy Commissioner and was assisted by some additional commissioners. These districts were further divided into tehsils. The tehsil was under the charge of a Tehsildar and a Niabtehsildar. Tehsildar held the power of the revenue and the judiciary services. Tehsils were further divided into the Zails. Every Zail was made up of approximately 10 to 30 villages. These zails were under the control of Zaildars. Zaildar designation was comparatively new for the Punjab local administration. It reflected the importance the British attached to securing the support of the rural notables. The British appointed Zaildar who had influence over the local people. They also acted as an honorary police officer and was in charge of the village police force.

A higher political structure was established by the East India Company to accomplish their interests in the region. The main objective of colonial government lied within the exploitation of colony's people and their resources. The government formulated the economic policies which served the interests of only the colonial government. In the context of Punjab, the role of the government increased significantly in the revenue system due to certain factors such as Punjab being a major producer of raw material in the form of crops. As the region was extremely fertile, the production was in significant quantities and constituted a major supply source for the industries in Britain. This new economic and administrative framework played a significant role in changing and reshaping the social and economic structure of the Punjab society. The combined change occurred in Punjab due to the changes in the

revenue system, agricultural policy and due to creation of canal colonies. Due to these policies we see the emergence of new classes as it stretched the gap between the rich and the poor even more. The people of Punjab went on to face the negative as well as the positive impacts of those policies for the century to come.

While retaining its primary agrarian character, the economy of Punjab did undergo certain significant changes in the early years of the British rule. The new policy introduced the concept of ownership of land to the individuals along with the right to its sale and purchase, fixation of land revenue, commercialization of agriculture, and change in mode of payment of land revenue in cash only within a specific period of time. The other major factors responsible for the change were the construction of canals in Punjab and creation of railway network all over India.

The British took various steps to boost agricultural yield in Punjab as they were well aware of Punjab's capacity as an agricultural state, and a great number of the land revenue payers were farmers. Hence, John Lawrence took certain steps towards agricultural policy which focused solely on increasing land revenue. Since agriculture in Punjab was prone to famines, and a few areas were barren, the British introduced the various systems of irrigation. To tackle both these problems simultaneously, canal systems were introduced in Punjab to improve the conditions of agriculture. They introduced new crops like potato, new seeds of cotton, sugar cane and English fruit and vegetables too. To inspire the farmers, they rewarded those who were ready to experiment. At the same time England was undergoing industrial revolution and the demand for raw material was very high. The company wished to harness the agricultural potential of Punjab to export the raw material to Britain to feed the ever-growing demand of the industry. They introduced new policies like the commercialization of agriculture. Under this policy, agricultural produce including cash crops for sale purpose as well as the economy was made currency-centric contrary to the old barter systems that operated in Punjab before the introduction of these policies. Cultivation of only those crops was encouraged which were required in the industries back in England. Therefore, through land revenue and agricultural policies, conditions were created to fulfil the economic interests of England through the exploitation of agricultural sector of Punjab.

In the case of Land Revenue, the British replaced the existing system with their own. Maharaja Ranjit Singh adopted different methods of assessment of land revenue. In the 'batai system' assessment was made after the harvesting of crop. 'Kankaut system' is another example which was introduced in 1824. In this method assessment was made on standing crop. Apart from these, a few other methods were also used to collect the land revenue. They obtained a fix part of crop in the form of produce. However, during famines and droughts the land revenue was decreased and the farmers were not bound to give land revenue in the form of cash. These methods like any other had both positive and negative aspects. However, the colonial government's land revenue was imposed in the form of fixed cash assessment, which was paid annually and did not depend on the crop and its yield. It brought hardships specifically for people who were not able to

save over the year, Hence in places, especially in riverside and rain deficit regions assessment was done by cash acreage rate so that the revenue could fluctuate as per the crop yield. In the latter case, at the time frame when the prices were low, one-sixth portion of the gross produce was taken as the fair standard of the assessment. However, over the years this changed too as the rules for assessment came in 1873. From that point on, the revenue was assessed on the net produce rather than the gross assets in a way that people were to pay 'one-half of the estimated value of the net produce ordinarily received by the landlord in money or in kind'. The taxes paid in cash in the form of rent were direct and without feud but in cases of kind-rents, it was a bit tricky as it was estimated after an elaborate and uncertain calculation of the prices and yield, etc.

The change in economic and social processes started from this revenue policy. Earlier, the land revenue was paid in the form of grains, a part from their crop produce but under the British rule they were coerced to pay in cash. Unlike before, now they sold their crops to the moneylenders for cash, which they deposited in the form of land revenue. As the moneylenders used to buy the crops of the peasants at low prices, rendering them unable to pay the revenue completely, in time the trend of borrowing began to take shape. Left with limited funds, the farmers were forced to borrow money from the money-lenders in order to pay the revenues. However, as the rates of produce remained low over the years, the borrowing continued and as a result a great number of the agricultural fields ultimately became the property of the money-lenders since farmers were unable to repay the loan and went bankrupt. The same scenario can be observed in the case of raw materials. The raw material was purchased at extremely low prices as everyone was encouraged to grow the same crop. This created a glut of supply against demand and prices of cash crops continued to fall over a period of time. As a result of the aforementioned factors, farmers were not able to sustain themselves and paying the rent was out of question.

The Government controlled the tenants through legislation and formulated rule and regulation like the unrestricted right to buy and sell land. The settlement officers conferred the 'occupancy tenancy right' to those resident cultivators who had been holding the same job for twelve years and for non-residents the decided time period was twenty years. This new principal of 'occupancy tenancy' right was a novelty in Punjab as the peasant proprietors were not willing to accept it. They wanted to recognize the occupancy rights of the tenants as well. In the early days of the English rule, the price of agricultural produce was low and labour workers were also scarce so the proprietors were happy to get cultivators to share their burden of revenue demand.

A few other factors also impacted the relation between various sections of the village society. Learning from previous experiences, the British administrators lowered their revenue demand and fixed it for a long time period. This meant that the agricultural surplus would now be a part of farmers' income. Increase in the means of communication gave a market to this agricultural surplus. As a result, the market value of produce steadily increased with increased demand and there was an incentive to bring more land under cultivation.

Objective

The primary objective of the present study is to understand the structural changes in colonial Punjab. The new colonial government made extensive changes mainly in the agricultural system of Punjab which further drastically changed the socio-economic structure of the society. This study is mainly based on information from primary as well as secondary source of data.

Conclusion

Concluding, we can say that due to these British policies and the transformed economic structure of the society, several problems were created within the society. Some major elements which were affected were the increase in the price of agricultural produce and acquiring land of a saleable quality. In these conditions the right to transfer gained importance. Land was now a marketable asset which could be pledged, transferred or sold. The moneylenders now began to lend money with land as security. Indebtedness began to increase and so did alienation of the land. The social and economic restraints that had kept the moneylenders in check now began to wither away. Investment in land was becoming heavily profitable. The moneylenders began to grasp the opportunities to acquire land.

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