



Agrarian movement in Punjab, 1906-1909

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Abstract

The country was in the grip of an economic and political crisis. Frequent visitations of famine and appalling mortality from bubonic plague during the last years of the nineteenth century had left their indelible marks. The Land Alienation Act of 1901 prevented the transfer of land from agriculturists to non-agriculturists through sale or mortgage. This act adversely affected quite a large section of society, especially the Hindus and the Sikh peasantry. It is said that the Punjabis did not take much interest in exposing this racist injustice of the British.

Keywords: Land alienation act of 1901, British imperialism, agrarian agitation, Punjab Sikhs, peasants

Introduction

Punjab was not an industrially developed state as Bengal and Bombay. It was the small landholders and peasants^[1] rather than the working class who took the initiative in agitating against the ruthless system of British imperialism. The opening years of the twentieth century in India were marked by a revolutionary^[2] upsurge. The country was in the grip of an economic and political crisis. Frequent visitations of famine and appalling mortality from bubonic plague during the last years of the nineteenth century had left their indelible marks. According to a newspaper report 50,000 human beings fell victim to the disease in a week in the Punjab alone. While the cost of the Russo-Japanese War was half a million lives, in the Punjab one million died in a fortnight^[3]. The antagonism between British bureaucracy and Western-educated Indians had grown, particularly after the withdrawal of the Ilbert Bill in 1884 which had left them disgruntled and frustrated. At this juncture, however, certain developments took place in Europe and Asia which filled the Indian people with a new confidence and hope for the future. The emancipation of the Balkan States from the Ottoman Sultanate, the defeat of the Italian army by the Abyssinians in 1894, and the defeat of Russia at the hands of Japan in 1905 shook the belief of the Indians in the superiority of Western civilization^[4].

The partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon added fuel to the fire. In Punjab, various British government actions like the Land Colonization Act of 1900, the Land Alienation Act of 1901, the Transfer of Property Act, of 1904, and the Punjab Preemption Act, of 1905 created complex reactions from the political leaders. Some thought that it was an attempt to win over Muslim Zamindars at the cost of the Hindu-Banias^[5]. The others considered it to be a blow to the national unity and solidarity. The Land Alienation Act of 1901 prevented the transfer of land from agriculturists to non-agriculturists through sale or mortgage. This act adversely affected quite a large section of society, especially the Hindus and the Sikh peasantry^[6]. It is said that the Punjabis did not take much interest in exposing this racist injustice of the British^[7]. However 1907 the Punjab itself was in the throes of turmoil as Lajpat Rai had to say a year later in 1908 "the only two provinces in which the revolutionary movement established itself to any appreciable extent were *Bengal* and the *Punjab*^[8]." Political awareness which till 1907 was limited only to the urban areas of Amritsar, Ferozpur, Lahore, Sialkot etc., now become widespread and its message could be carried to the villages on the issue of the colonization Bill. This bill proposed to modify the canal colonies tenures and increase the Abiana in the Bari-Doab. The Punjab Government's actions to protect canal Colonies created a situation very feared as a result peasants of the villages became anti-British^[9].

Sir Reginald Craddock said that the "Canal Colonies Bill afforded only a pretext^[10]" The real reason being sympathy with *Bengal* agitators. It cannot be denied that there was resentment against the high-handed policy of *Lord Curzon*. Curzon administration generated great political discontent in the country, the partition of Bengal in 1905 also stirred the people of Punjab who sympathized with their brethren in Bengal^[11] and Punjab could not remain unaffected. Ajit Singh, Sufi Amba Prasad brought a new Journal *Bharat Mata*. They thought that it was a proper time to plan agitation against the British and rouse the masses in the rural Punjab^[12]. The speeches of *Tilak* and *Aurbindo* had influenced the young minds in the Punjab as well^[13]. At a time when anti-British associations were not allowed the press was gagged; public meetings were severely restricted, and even the criticism of the government may cause the severest punishment from government.

The movement became widespread and its message could be carried to the villages only after the Government proposed to modify the canal colonies tenures^[14] and increased the water rate in the Bari Doab. This touched off a revolutionary movement in the Punjab which alarmed the authorities. The fact that the Punjab was North West

frontier, made it very important for imperial government. A seeming crack in the structure of this cornerstone of the British empire in India could not but cause anxiety at the highest level. The land was given to the peasants either free or on very nominal rate. They were using it for agriculture, house-building material etc. According to the new bill, it was proposed that the peasant was a mere tenant and the land belonged to the Government. The peasants were, consequently denied the right to cut trees on their land and government restricted the right of the colonizers to make will. Some alleged that the Government planned to convert these lands into forests like Assam, this was told by Wasti's" ^[15]. The Punjab Government wanted to modify the colony as a model farm." The Colonization Bill sought to change the very basis of land relationship in the Punjab and attempted to deprive the farmer who had been uprooted from the districts of the Central Punjab to dig canals and irrigate the barren, but extensive crown wastelands in the Western Punjab.

According to a new settlement in Rawalpindi based on the higher rate of abiana taken from the Bari Doab was increased which further agitated the peasants. Several meetings were held to protest against this proposal of the government. By March 1907, the atmosphere was charged with discontent. The students of Khalsa College Amritsar staged a hostile demonstration at the farewell visit of the outgoing Lieutenant Governor, Sir *Charles Rivaz*. The national press vigorously supported their cause. Meanwhile, violent disturbances took place at Rawalpindi. At a meeting held on 21 April, which started with the soul-stirring poem "*Pagri-Sambhal O Jattan*" (Peasant, look to thy turban-meaning honor) Ajit Singh made a violent attack upon the increase of land revenue and said that the peasants (public) were the real rulers of the country and Deputy Commissioner's, Superintendent of Police etc. were their servants ^[16]." He invited the peasants to stop cultivation until the land revenue was reduced, and said, "The Punjab also has shaken off sleep after *Bengal*" ^[17] He appealed to the people not to lose courage, but to step forward fearlessly, boycott the honorary offices, and exhorted the Hindus and Muslims to unite in love. The Deputy Commissioner issued a notice to Ajit Singh, *Gurdas Ram, Hans Raj, Amolak Ram*, etc, for their radical and anti-British government speech and summoned them to attend an inquiry on 2 May at 11 a.m. this created anger among the people. Due to the fear of public riots, the Deputy Commissioner postponed the hearing regarding the inquiry. The Government arrested some people, who were related to the agitation. The administration trialed those before the magistrate of the spot, but only six were found guilty. The authorities brought 68 persons to trial before a special Magistrate, but only six of them could be convicted ^[18]. The news of the arrests at Rawalpindi spread in the province like wildfire. A protest meeting was organized at the Bharat Mata Society Office, Lahore. After the meeting the angered people started moving towards the Upper Mall when the police tried to stop them and the houses of Europeans there were damaged ^[19]. The crowd of agitators who were shouting slogans like 'Bande-Mataram' refused to disperse. The police, without delay, started cursing the agitators under their horses. Many unarmed innocent people were crushed by the police by baton charge ^[20]."

One of the reasons, why the Government was scared to see the wave of anger among the people was that the Government felt that radicals were going to organize a second uprising on 10 May 1907 on the 50th anniversary of the 1857 uprising ^[21]. British Government agents were reporting about the growing discontent with the government and sympathies with the agitators among the Indian soldiers and officers. Explaining the reason for this, the clerk wrote that the British government suspected that when the revolt was at its peak, the Indian soldiers did not fire on their countrymen ^[22]. Sir Denzil Ibbetson wrote in his minute. "One striking and exceedingly dangerous feature which has been observable everywhere is, that special attention has been paid to the Sikhs and in the case of Lyallpur, to the military pensioners and that special efforts have been made to procure their attendance at meetings, to enlist their sympathies and to inflame their passions".

Understanding the state of mind of the Indian soldiers especially the Sikh soldiers in the British army, Denzil Ibbetson sent a report to the government. "The actual agitation has been virtually confined to districts in which the Sikh element is important at a public meeting in Ferozepur, at which disaffection was openly preached, the men of the Sikh Regiment stationed there were specially invited to attend and several hundred of them acted upon their invitation ^[23]." An article highlighting the condition of the Indian soldiers shows why they were dissatisfied with the British government. A copy of it was with Swarn Singh in England, which was later sent to the Indian government ^[24]. This showed that they had to work for very low wages of only 9 Rs. per month. While the salary of English soldiers was 45 Rs. And the uniform was free. The Indian soldiers were very discontent with this biased policy of the Britishers. The author of this article questioned the Indian soldiers whether they killed their countrymen just to prove their loyalty to their master. While you were paid very little, you would say we ate the salt of the British, so we are loyal. But you do not know the truth about where this salt came from ^[25]. You were content to think yourself loyal to eating salt, while it was tax money paid by your people ^[26]. The British government was alarmed by the wave of people's anger and dissatisfaction. Hindustan press editors Pindi Das and Dina Nath, who were accused of writing this article, were arrested by the government, and sentenced to five years in prison, which further provoked the countrymen against the Britishers ^[27]. The government took strict steps to calm the uprising. About M.A. Stuart Director of Criminal said in his report he wrote "The press has practically no influence at all on the great mass of the people. They cannot read newspapers and do not care to listen to it even if anyone were willing to read out to them ^[28]."

Due to this increased political unrest in Punjab, the government reduced land revenue, abiana, and even withdrew the colonization, Bill. The political situation in the Punjab had become very turbulent. The revolutionaries also began to carry out their meetings secretly to free their arrested comrades.

Ajit Singh and his revolutionary group knew that any movement could not be successful without political awareness in the people and therefore during 1907-1909, they started a political awareness campaign by distributing revolutionary literature through their Journal *Bharat Mata* ^[29]. Taking advantage of the peasants, Ajit Singh incited them against the government in a constitutional manner ^[30].

Ajit Singh's group is not limited to distributing revolutionary literature to the masses. Rather, they had prepared a complete blueprint for an armed rebellion against the government, which came to know from the documents seized during the search of Tikal's printing press at Hoshiarpur in 1909.

According to this plan, the main purpose of the revolutionaries was to intimidate the agents and officers of the British government ^[31]. There is no doubt that this plan could not succeed due to the intelligence of the government, especially the vigilance exercised towards Sikhs.

Despite the strictness of the government, the revolutionaries continued their plan. Seeing the seriousness, perseverance, and strength of the revolutionaries, the government had to use all its might to fail their plan ^[32]. Mentioning this, Ibbetson wrote, "The very sturdiness of the Punjabi which makes him more difficult to move than the Bengali, makes the matter far more serious when he is moved, and if the loyalty of the Jat Sikhs of the Punjab is ever materially shaken, the danger will be greater than any which could arise in Bengal ^[33]." Lajpat Rai wrote that the main reasons for the frustration and tension among the people are the lack of educational opportunities, inequality in the distribution of land ^[34], lack of industries, and unemployment in the province ^[35]. Ibbetson also wrote in his minute, "The active spirits belong almost without exception to the Arya Samaj, a society founded primarily with a religious object, but which in the Punjab at least, has always had a strong political bent ^[36]." The Punjab Government wrote a letter to the Government to inform them about the serious situation in Punjab due to Ajit Singh's anti-government activities. Ajit Singh was a very effective speaker who had addressed many meetings in Lahore. Sufi Amba Prasad who was a journalist also worked as sub-editor of *Hindustan* and later as editor of *Bharat Mata*, supporting him in this ^[37]. The authorities considered him the most dangerous enemy of this whole movement and a bright mind ^[38].

The agrarian stir as well as the movement in 1907 vividly displays that Ajit Singh and his group members played a leading role in arousing anti-British feelings among the peasants, particularly in the western Punjab. The repressive policy of the government that followed the agitation in the Punjab in 1907, gave rise to the revolutionary's activities in the whole Punjab.

The agrarian agitation in the Punjab exploded the myth about the loyalty of the Punjabis, particularly the myth about the Sikhs ^[39], to the disappointment of the authorities and the satisfaction of the national forces. The Sikhs proved their adherence to the national cause as proved by the subsequent events. Giving expression to this new confidence in the Punjab Sikhs, Bipin Chandra Pal said: "On 29 December 1908 in a meeting at Caxton Hall in London, Punjab was not yet dead and he could see in his mind's eye the Sikhs, sword in hand, sacrificing their lives and cry, I have given my head but not my cause, my faith ^[40]." The result of these reasons was the birth of this movement in Punjab

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