

PUNJAB IN IQBAL'S LIFE-TIME

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This Essay attempts to survey the social, political and economic forces at work in the Punjab from 1901—1938 and Iqbal's reaction to men and matters in the Punjab during most of his working life.

During the period under review the population of the Punjab was composed of Muslims (55%), Hindus (35%), located mostly in districts East of the Ravi, and Sikhs (13%). The three communities lived in a state of perpetual conflict in almost all walks of life, religious; economic, political, educational and social. In the rural areas the Muslims formed 57% of the population.

The Peasants' Economic Burden in Iqbal's Time

The Muslims during their rule had treated the Hindus with complete and unbiased justice. In the Punjab while Muslims owned the agricultural land, the Sultans and Mughal Kings had allowed the Hindu money lender²⁵⁶ a monopoly in trade and finance. The economic position of the two communities was thus balanced. This balance was maintained under the Sikh regime.

When the British wrested the Punjab in 1849, they materially changed this economic balance between the Muslim and the Hindu. The Mughal and Sikh Governments had kept a restraint on the power of the moneylender to

²⁵⁶ The main Hindu bania (moneylending) castes were Aggarwal, Khatri and Arora.

extort unreasonably high rate of interest from his debtors. But the British gave a free rein to the Hindu moneylender to extort as much interest from his debtors as he could. The British magistrates zealously Supported the moneylender in recovering his debts, even allowing him to confiscate the property, house, goods, tools and animals of the defaulting debtor. The entire weight of the British power was thus thrown behind the Hindu bania. The poor debtor, mainly Muslim, found himself entirely at the mercy of his creditor. In 1870 when Punjab was in the grip of a severe famine, the moneylender found his golden opportunity to expropriate the houses, lands and animals belonging to the Muslim masses mortgages had been rare in Mughal times, but under the British mortgages of land, houses and golden and silver ornaments appeared in every village and town of the Punjab.

In 1875—78 the total land area under mortgage was 1,65,000 acres. Within ten years it trebled so that in 1884—88, the land area under mortgage to Hindu moneylenders was 3,85,000 acres. In 1868, the number of moneylenders in the Punjab was 53,263. Under British patronage the money lending class proliferated and in 1911 the number of moneylenders rose to 1,93,890.²⁵⁷

At this stage the British grew frightened by the enormous economic power they had themselves put in the hands of the Hindu Moneylender. The British passed what was called the Land Alienation Act (1900) which was put into effect in 1901. The Act debarred the non-agricultural classes from owning land. Land could not be transferred to non-agricultural buyers. Non-agriculturist classes were also debarred from keeping the land in mortgage for more than twenty years.

The British reaped immense advantages from this Act. The peasant proprietor, looking upon the British as his deliverers, became a staunch supporter of British Imperialism. The Act also served the Imperial Policy of

²⁵⁷ These staggering statistics are recorded in M. Darling *The Punjab Peasant*, (London, Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 172-73

"Divide and Rule" by creating a sharp division between urban and rural interests. Henceforth all political, economic and social issues in the Punjab were understood, debated and resolved in rural and urban frame of reference.

And yet the Act did not eliminate the debts of the peasant proprietor. The irony was that the Democles' Sword of debt hung over the heads of even farm labourers and tenants who did not own an inch of land. About 1.25 million of them were under a debt liability of Rs.20 crores. Another 120 crore rupees were owed to the moneylenders by small landowners. The total debt liability of landless peasants and landowners, thus added up to the enormous sum of Rs. 140 crores, out of which a major portion i e. Rs.80 crores was the liability -of Muslims alone.²⁵⁸

The Big Landlords were by and large free of debt. The areas where big Muslim Landlords could be found were Multan, Jhang, Mianwali, Muzaffargarh, Sargodha, Dera Ghezi Khan and Campbellpur. The big Hindu Landholdings were located east of the Ravi in Rohtak, Hissar and Ambala.

The Punjab Landowner's and the British Officer's Style of Life

The Landowners extracted rents and several kinds of tributes including women from their tenants. The British Government backed the Landowners to the hilt in the recovery of these levies from the poor tiller of the soil. To satisfy the demands of the Landlord and the British Revenue Officer, the peasant worked to the last ounce of his energy, yet neither the landowner nor the British Government did anything to improve the quality of peasants' life by providing schools, dispensaries, sanitation etc. It was a wholly one-sided relationship, where the tenant gave everything and received nothing. While the money flowed from the rural areas, both the landlord and the British

²⁵⁸ Riaz Hussain, Politics of Iqbal, Islamic Book Service, Lahore, 1977, pp. 52-56.

Officer enjoyed in Lahore the most comfortable style of living. The British Officer sent his sons and daughters to public schools in Simla, Missouri or England; the landowner sent his son to Aitcheson and daughter to Queen Mary in Lahore. Both classes maintained deluxe cars and lived in spacious villas.

Developments in Education and Rise of the Middle Class

Towards the close of the 19th century many colleges and universities were founded all over the subcontinent. In the Punjab the first batch of graduates passed out from Government College, Lahore in 1870. The University of the Punjab was founded in 1882. Forman Christian College was established in 1864. The Punjab Public Library was set up in 1888. This same period saw the opening of Islamia College in Lahore. Thus in the early part of the twentieth Century there appeared in towns a sizeable body of well-educated, intelligent and highly articulate middle class which was poised to answer the British in their own tongue in legal, constitutional and economic spheres. The British were bewildered. They began to confer liberally titles of Khan Bahadur and Nawab Sahib on Muslim landlords and Rai Batiadur and Rai Sahib on Hindu land-holders and set them up as countervailing force to the rising middle class in the cities. The British exploited the rural Punjab for Revenue for the civil administration and infantry for the Armed Forces.

Both the landlord and the British were frightened of the Urban middle class (of which Iqbal himself formed a part). The middle class was beginning to grasp the barbarity of the British-Landlord Exploitation and take steps to gain political strength by evolving All India social, educational and political organizations.

Politics of the Punjab

In order to insulate rural Punjab from the influence of the strident middle class the British resolved to keep the province backward in constitutional reforms. Legislative councils were set up in Bombay and Madras in 1861 ; in Bengal in 1863 and U P. in 1866.

Punjab was the last in getting a council in 1897. The council was restricted to nine members nominated by the Governor. The Indian councils Act of 1892 which provided for the enlargement of councils by indirect elections from public and municipal boards was not implemented in the Punjab.

Assam with a population of only 7 million was paired with Punjab (Population 20 million) in the Minto-Morley Scheme (1909), under which thirty member legislatures were set up in both provinces.

The Governor of the Punjab had no executive council till 1920. The first Punjab legislative council under Montague-Chelmsford Reforms (1919) was formed in 1921. Under these

reforms another dastardly blow was dealt to the Muslims. The Muslims had an over-all majority of 55% in the Punjab, but they were allotted only 50% seats in the Legislature. This position was however further reduced by seven representatives from Special Constituencies and nominated members. The Muslims were thus virtually reduced to a minority forming only 45% of the council²⁵⁹.

The council was composed of:

(a) Elected Members

Muslims 35

Sikhs = 15

²⁵⁹ Azim Hussain, *Fazl-i-Hussain*, Longman's Green (Bombay) 1947, pp. 150—153)/See also Riaz Hussain, *Politics of Iqbal*, (Islamic Book Service, Lahore, 1977), pp. 55-56.

Hindus and others = 21

71

(b) Nominated Members

(Official and Non-official) = 23

Total = 94

The Minto-Morley Scheme (1909) had provided that separate constituencies shall be clearly demarcated for every community in the provinces. In 1916 the All India Muslim League and the Indian National Congress concluded an agreement at a joint session at Lucknow (later known as the "Lucknow Pact")

A weightage scheme outlining the mode and quantum of communal representation in the Indian legislative councils was agreed upon by the two parties. Weightage meant that Muslims would forego a percentage of seats in their majority provinces. In return they would get more representation in those provinces where they were in a minority. For instance, according to the Lucknow Pact, Muslims would get 29% seats in Bihar where their population strength was 13% ; 15% in C.P. where they were 4% and so on.²⁶⁰ In their majority provinces, however, the Muslims had to make a great sacrifice.

Political vacuum on the Eve of Iqbal's Entry into the Punjab Legislative Council

In the back drop of these economic, educational and constitutional developments, Iqbal entered the Punjab legislative council in November 1926. He found the council dominated by big landowners, who were pet of

²⁶⁰ Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, *The Struggle for Pakistan*, (Karachi University Press, 1965), pp. 46-47.

their British masters. They were naturally conservative in their Political and economic stand-point. In a clash between the urban middle class and rural landowning interests, the feudal lords were always ready to trample under-foot the urban interest. In this they were invariably abetted by the British.

The landowners, shrewd though they were, lacked intellectual sophistication. Ironically, they looked for a leader from among the elite urban middle class. They were lucky to have Sir Mian Fazl-i-Husain, an astute political manipulator, who staunchly believed in maintaining the stranglehold of the British landowner Axis on the Punjab. To this end he founded the Unionist Party. The Party had no existence outside its Secretariat on Davis Road, Lahore. It was a club of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh feudal legislators presided over by Fazl-i-Husain. The Party never wanted, nor had any contacts with rural or urban masses. Parties of all India stature, the Congress or the Muslim League, had no effective organization in the Punjab. On the eve of Iqbal's entry into the council chamber, there was thus a complete political Vacuum in the Punjab. Iqbal's first care was, therefore, to fill this Vacuum. His affiliation with the Muslim League dated back to his Studentship days in London²⁶¹. He now resolved to turn the Muslim League into a party of the masses.

A Political Dilemma

But before he could do that, he had to face the most difficult political dilemma of his life. Iqbal had to decide whether to sit on the Unionist benches in the Assembly or form a separate party of like-minded urban Muslim members. With his characteristic clear-minded-ness, Iqbal found an answer without compromising his cherished principles.

The unionists were committed to support the land alienation Act and Separate Electorates for Muslims. If Iqbal and other like-minded Muslims had formed a Separate bloc, this would have seriously weakened the Unionist

²⁶¹ Riaz Husain, politics of Iqbal, (Islamic Book Service, Lahore, 1977), p. 59.

Party Vis-a-vis the Congress and the Hindu Maha Sabha who were opposed to the land alienation act and separate electorates. Iqbal, therefore, chose the lesser of the two evils and decided to sit on the Unionist benches.

Though he was now technically a member of the Unionist Party, Iqbal had serious ideological differences with the party leader Mian Fazl-i-Husain.

Fazl-i-Husain's main loyalty was to rural feudal lords and the British rulers. Iqbal, on the other hand, wished to serve the interests of the Muslim masses and was vehemently opposed to the exploitation of workers and peasants by the landlords, banias and the British administration. He exasperated Fazl-i-Husain, British civil servants and the landed aristocracy by his forthright views on many vital issues.

The Doctrine of the Imperial ownership of Land

The land policy during the Hindu and Muslim rule in India had been to divide the land into three categories:

(1) Fallow and wasteland was the property of State. This was generally given by way of salary to servants of the Stat.

(2) Crown Land was the property of the Royal Family.

(3) Private Land over which the Proprietors had full rights The State never claimed any proprietary rights over this land. The State, however, levied rates of taxes on this land which varied from age to age.²⁶²

The British radically departed from this Land Policy on the assumption of Power in India. Unlike the Mughals who made India their home, the British viewed India as an alien conquered land. They, therefore, promulgated the theory that all Indian Land was the Property of the British Crown.

²⁶² Romila Thapar, A History of India, (Baltimore, 1966), I, 46.

Iqbal was one of the first men in India and certainly the only man in the Punjab to publically denounce this doctrine of the British. Another iniquity to which Iqbal drew pointed attention was the British land revenue system. Since it made no distinction between a small landholder and an absentee land-lord, Iqbal demanded that land tax should be converted into a graduated income tax. Iqbal's forthright views on land policy met with indignant reaction from Fazl-i-Hussain and his party men. This was natural, because had Iqbal's demands been accepted and implemented, the feudal society of the Punjab would have become egalitarian.

Having assailed the barbaous Land Policy and the interest of the feudal class, Iqbal now demanded curbs on the vested interests of the elite bureaucracy, composed mainly of the British. The British civil servants drew enormous salaries, and allowances which coupled with Spacious housing facilities, servants, furloughs, pensions and gratuities, gave them a much higher Standard of living than any other comparable class of bureaucracy in the World. Iqbal categorically stated in a speech on the floor of the Punjab Assembly." We spend much more than any other country in the world on the present system of administration."²⁶³ British officials reacted sharply to this Statement and their henchmen on the Assembly floor dismissed out of hand Iqbal's suggestion that large cuts be made in the salaries of the bureaucrats.

Iqbal, however, remained undaunted. In an attack on the combind interest of all the three parasites on the Punjab peasants, namely, the bania, the British official and the feudal landlord, Iqbal suggested imposition of an inheritance tax on all property valued above twenty or thirty thousand rupees. The legislative council, dominated by all the above three classes naturally did not adopt Iqbal's sane suggestion.

Muslim Backwardness in Education

²⁶³ Riaz Hussain, Politics of Iqbal, p. 65.

In the Sphere of education, Muslims were the most depressed community in the Punjab. It must be pointed out, however, that on the whole Punjab was not a very advanced Province in India. The statistics upto 1920 show that on an average only 2.4% out of a population of 20 million were receiving education.

The cause for this, in Iqbal's view was that "the disinterested foreign Government in this country wants to keep the people ignorant."²⁶⁴

The Muslim educational institutions, already poor, were starved of Government Grants-in-aid under a deliberate policy to favour the wealthy Hindu community.

In his Assembly speech on the subject Iqbal quoted statistics to high light the disparity in the treatment meted out to Muslim educational institutions In 1922-23 out of the fifty-two new Schools receiving Government grant-in-aid, only sixteen were Muslim Schools. The financial break down was as follow;;

Year	Total Amount of grants	Share of Muslim Institutions
1922-23	Rs 1, 21, 996/ (Rs one Lakh, twenty one thousand nine hundred and six)	Rs 29,213/- (Rs Twenty Nine thousand two hundred and fourteen)
Year	Total Amount of grants	Share of Muslim Institutions
1927-28	Rs 10,13,154/- (Rs Ten lakh thirteen thousand one	Rs 2,04,330/- (Rs two lakh, four thousand three

²⁶⁴ Riaz Hussain, Politics of Iqbal, p. 65.

	hundred	
	fifty four)	hundred thirty)

During the fiscal year 1928-29 the statistical table showed a more glaring discrimination against the Punjab Muslim community.²⁶⁵

Year	Number and Amount of grants-in-aid
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1928-29	Hindu Schools	Sikh Schools	Muslim Schools	
	13	6	2	
	(Rs 16973/-)	(Rs 9908/-)	(Rs 2200/-)	

An Anglo-Hindu alliance was working against the interests of the Muslims. Politically the Unionist Muslim members of the legislature were dependent for patronage on the all-powerful British bureaucrats and for ministry-making on the support of the Hindu members of the Assembly.

A stark example of the Anglo-Hindu alliance is furnished by Azim Hussain son of Sir Fazl-i-Husain. Azim Hussain reveals that Mahasbha members like Manohar Lal and Dr Gokal Chand Narang were kept in office against the wishes of the Muslim members of the Unionist Party and that the British Governor used the officially nominated members to give majority to the unpopular minister of education Manohar Lal.²⁶⁶

Communal Relations

During the period under review, that is, during Iqbal's working life, communal relations in the Punjab, indeed throughout India, went from bad to worse.

²⁶⁵ See Iqbal's Speech in the Punjab Assembly, 7 March 1930, also Riasat Hussain, Politics of Iqbal, (Islamic Book Service, Lahore, 1977), p. 66.

²⁶⁶ Azim Hussain, Fazl-i-Husain, (Longman's Bombay), p. 165.

In a five year period (1922-27), no less than fourteen major riots involving hundreds of casualties occurred between the Muslim and Hindu-Sikh communities. Iqbal stated on the floor of the House: "We are actually living in a state of civil war..."²⁶⁷ Next day he told the members. "In this country one community is always aiming at the destruction of the other community."²⁶⁸ Under these circumstances Iqbal wondered whether it was desirable to become one nation with the Hindus in the Punjab or in India.

²⁶⁷ Iqbal's Assembly Speech, dated 18 July 1927.

²⁶⁸ Iqbal's Assembly Speech, dated 19 July 1927.