



Role of Sir Chhotu Ram for the Upliftment of Farmers

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Abstract: *India is known as a land of farmers and rural people. The condition of farmers in colonial period however, was not as good as it is in the present times. They were exploited and remained in heavy indebtedness. Sir Chhotu Ram devoted his entire life for the uplifting the poor standards of living of the farmer community, whose condition was significantly miserable during those times due to colonial government policy. Raj always focused on their economic interests and avoiding the problems that emerged due to these policies. He started School on 26th March, 1913 in Rohtak. He joined National Congress in 1916 and worked as President of Rohtak District Congress Committee from 1916 to 1920. He formed the Unionist Party in 1923 which won elections in 1935 forming provincial government in Lahore and he in turn became the Revenue Minister. He also introduced Punjab Relief Indebtedness Act in 1934 and Punjab Debtor's Protection Act in 1936 to save the farmers from exploitation at the hands of money lenders. Sir Chhotu Ram had seen the miserable conditions of farmers while growing up. In this research paper we are going to discuss the role played by Sir Chhotu Ram in uplifting the living standards of Farmers.*

Keywords: *Farmer, Emerging Democracy, Unionist Party, Exploitation and Debtor's Protection Act*

“Practice subordination of the interests of the individual to the interests of the community systematically until it becomes a habit”.
Sir Chhotu Ram

India and Punjab in particular is known for its agricultural, peasant and rural life. The roots of the “Green Revolution” in Punjab and Haryana can in fact be traced to the works and policies of Chhotu Ram. Sir Chhotu Ram was one of the most prominent pre-partition politicians in Punjab and an ideologue of peasantry and a champion of its interests. He was born on 24th November, 1881 in Ghari Sampla in Rohtak district in the present day state of Haryana in a family of farmers. Chhotu Ram became a successful advocate which in turn ensured that he could lead a luxurious life like many other advocates of his time. He could have amassed wealth like many other politicians if he so desired. However, legal practice and politics were to him a path of personal sacrifice and selfless service to the peasantry and downtrodden, and not the pursuit of wealth, power and abuse of authority. During his time as a student, Chhotu Ram became aware of the deeply embedded roots of poverty and helplessness of rural people and of peasantry in particular. A Sanskrit couplet which he had read in Hitopadesh in his school in the year 1897 planted a seed as his mission for life, which was to improve the living standards of the peasantry and downtrodden. The couplet says: “In ordinary course of nature, thousands upon thousands are born every day but he alone is truly born whose birth leads to the elevation of his race”. Thus leaving all personal considerations of his own self and that of his family for comfort, money and power; he directed his time, energy, talent and hard work towards the selfless and



fearless service for uplifting the poverty stricken, debt laden peasantry and the downtrodden. Through his actions he worked for secularism and uniting the nation. Chhotu Ram saw through the anti-agriculturist and anti-labor policy of British rulers who gave complete protection to money-lenders and traders often thus growing their net of exploitation. The irony lied in the fact though the producer of food was the worst-affected. According to Darling, “Bulk of the Punjab cultivators are born in debt, live in debt and die in debt¹”. Illiteracy, frequent famines, traditional rain-fed farming with small and fragmented fields as autumn left, ignorance and extravagance of cultivators on social customs, illegal extortion of money and high handedness of the officials were a few causes responsible for the pitiable condition of peasantry.

Sir Chhotu Ram fought for the emancipation of helpless peasantry and the downtrodden both within the legislative circle and outside of it too. Mostly, scholars assume that the major contribution of Sir Chhotu Ram as a statesman was in the direction of providing fair price for the commodities produced by the peasants. In 1937, he enacted the Punjab Agricultural Produce Marketing Act along with the standardization of the weights & measures and setting up the market committees with power to regulate business that took place within the notified area. He ordained two another Acts: The Punjab Weight and Measures Act of 1941 and The Punjab Sugarcane Act of 1943. The first Act stated that the manufacturer and use of false weight and scales would be a criminal offense. The second Act stated specifically that the income from this Act would be spent on construction of roads leading to Sugarcane factories and providing shelters for the peasant carts. It is noteworthy that in order to give a practical shape to his efforts, 2 non-perennial canals, one each in Rohtak and Hisar District were constructed in 1941-42. The Haveli Project was another landmark in the regime of Sir Chhotu Ram which was completed in 1939. A division was instituted for researching irrigational possibilities in the western part of the province. By 1944, Sir Chhotu Ram had obtained clearance from the ruler of Bilaspur and the Govt. of Sindh. Though, it could not be completed during his life time. However, the Bhakra Dam Project was the most ambitious and the greatest irrigation project undertaken by Sir Chhotu Ram; although he signed the paperwork for this project prior to his death in 1945.

Thus, Sir Chhotu Ram provided relief to peasantry and he made special efforts for the progress of agriculture and rural society. He started the Jat Gazette, a weekly newspaper in 1916. He explained that its main objective was to discover the means for the betterment of rural community and to create unity amongst readers and furthermore, to represent legitimate rights of the rural people. Sir Chhotu Ram further suggested that the British Government should frame more legislation for the welfare of peasantry class.

- **Agrarian Acts.** Excessive land revenue and rigidity in its collection was one of the main reasons for the distress and indebtedness of peasantry, who had to sell not only their lands but also their cattle and ornaments too in order to pay off their land revenue². The Punjab Land Revenue (amendment) Act 1928 which received Governor General’s consent in Feb. 1929 provided substantial relief to land owners and also fixed 40 years as the period of settlement. By 1938, the land revenue rates in Punjab were the lowest in the country. Another important legislation was the Reinstatement of Land Mortgaged Act of 1938 which was amended in 1939, 1940 and 1943 to put an end to benami (fictitious)

¹ M.L. Darling- *Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt*, P. 34

² P.L.C.D.- Vol. XXIII, 21/03/1933 P. 671



transactions³. This Act protected the peasantry from the agriculturist money-lenders. The Act also provided for restitution of land mortgaged before June 8, 1901 free of cost to the real owners. Accordingly, 3.65 lakhs land mortgagors got back 8.35 lakh acres of their mortgaged land for Rs. 413 lakhs without any charges.

Punjab Regulation of Accounts Act, 1930 which required the maintenance of a regular record of loan and furnishing of six months statements of accounts in request of the loan to the debtor. The Punjab Relief of Indebtedness Act 1934 stated that the interest on a loan could not exceed the principal amount. The debtor stood discharged of the loan liability if he had paid the creditor an amount twice the principal. It saved the debtors from a loan of Rs. 200 lakhs. The Punjab Debtor Protection Act, 1936 prohibited attachment of in the execution of a court decree the land on which the debtor and his family depended, standing crops, standing trees, dwellings, one third output of food grains, bullock cart, milk providing cattle etc. The Punjab Registration of Money Lender's Act 1938 compelled all moneylenders (except land owners who lent money to their tenants for the purposes of agriculture) to get themselves registered and obtain licenses from the District Collector. Furthermore, loan entries could be made only in the register certified by the Government and they could charge only the regulated rate of interest. Unlicensed money-lenders were debarred from the claim of getting loan repayment. Under the Punjab Relief of Indebtedness (Amendment) Act XII, 1940, Debt Conciliation Boards were established at District headquarters for settling debts of long standing duration in order to save both the creditors and debtors from litigation. For this purpose an interest of 7.5 per cent per annum was allowed for secured loans and of 12.5 per cent for unsecured loans. Rs. 1400 lakhs were settled at these rates in 1942.

One of the primary causes of economic instability of peasantry was fragmented land holdings. For instance, in a village of Central Punjab, 584 owners used to cultivate 16,000 fields. To remove the hurdles of countless boundaries, irrigation channels and supervision, the Punjab Consolidation of Holdings Act 1936 and its amendments in 1940 and 1945 were passed and cooperation department was entrusted with the job of consolidation of holdings. Another Agrarian Act for the benefits of tillers of agricultural land was the Punjab Tenancy (Amendment) Act IX, 1939. Another reason for economic instability of peasantry was the prevalence of malpractices in marketplace. The Punjab Agricultural Produced Markets Act IX, 1941 were passed to ensure proper returns to the farmers. These were fiercely attacked by traders and hartals were held for long time periods. Their implementation led to the establishment of regulated marketing system in the State. In order to divide the burden of taxation equally amongst agriculturists and traders, the Punjab General Sales Tax Act, 1941 was passed which imposed tax on the sale of goods in cities and towns. The Punjab Trade Employee's Act 1941 made it compulsory for all traders, shopkeepers, businessmen, industrialists to observe one day's holiday in a week. This in turn, provided relief to all workers employed in the industry and the trade without affecting the business. The vested interests of money-lenders, traders and political opponents raised hue and cry against many of these legislations and questioned the legal validity of State Legislature passing these legislations with an imminent threat that the matter would be taken to the Federal Court to declare them ultra vires. It was Chhotu Ram who explained the real purpose of the agrarian bills to the masses and replied constructively to the criticism of his

³ P.L.A.D.- Vol. XXII, 5/3/1940, P. 134; also Vol. XV, 31/1/1941, P. 603



opponents who referred to them as black acts. Chhotu Ram made extensive use of press, public platform and floor of legislature whilst displaying grim resolve and tremendous force in his rebuttals to the opponents of the Golden Acts. To ensure a mass acceptance and support of these legislations Chhotu Ram organized rural conferences in several districts of Punjab and received tremendous respect everywhere from rural classes. According to the Governor of Punjab, “Chhotu Ram was the most effective champion of the agrarian policy of the Unionist Ministry⁴.”

Agriculture development works: Chhotu Ram and his party took numerous steps for the development of agriculture, irrigational facilities and industries and for the development of Punjab economy as a whole and of the peasantry in particular. Remissions of land revenue and water rates in the time of failure of crops were ordered; taccavi loan was given on more liberal scale; a network of land mortgage banks and co-operative credit societies was created for helping to release agriculturist’s land mortgaged with money-lenders and to issue loans on easy terms. Peasant’s welfare fund started for the reclamation of waste land was started by Government. Seed farms were set up at Tehsil level to develop new varieties of various crops, better agricultural implements and improved seeds were made available to farmers; furthermore, proper attention was given to improve the breeds of livestock. A large number of Veterinary Hospitals and dispensaries were inaugurated, fruit cultivation was promoted, nurseries were started and fruit preservation was encouraged to improve income of farmers. Panchayat Boards were revived to arbitrate disputes among agriculturists to save them from indebtedness. The removal of oppressive burdens coupled with provision of additional facilities greatly promoted agriculture.

Irrigation development works: Chhotu Ram made concerted efforts in improving irrigation facilities as well as in rationalizing irrigational dues; furthermore he streamlined the working of the irrigation department of the province for the service of farmers. He wished to enact a number of minor and major irrigational projects starting from the implementation of tubewell irrigation schemes, non-perennial canals⁵. He wanted to put an end to famines from south east Punjab (now Haryana) which was the most underdeveloped region at the time. To provide immediate relief he gave practical shape to Kharif Extension Canal Scheme in 1940⁶ providing irrigation to 3.5 lakh acres of land in Kharif season. He reinstated in Gurgaon the bund (embankment) irrigation in 1943 which had been deteriorated during the preceding quinquennium by being placed under the charge of irrigation department. In spite of Governments apathy towards the Bhakra Dam Project, Chhotu Ram did not let the project disappear. Due to him, surveys connected with Bhakra Dam Scheme were completed and the project was reviewed with a viewpoint of generating hydro- electric power from it. To settle the dispute between the Governments of Sind and Punjab, Chhotu Ram managed to compensate the Sind Government in 1944 by paying them Rs. 2 crores. However, due to Sir Chhotu Ram’s efforts Bhakra Dam might have been delayed changed in scope. Two more schemes formulated in 1943 to bring water from Western Yamuna Canal by boring a two mile long tunnel through the Delhi Hills and bring water of Toshi & Giri

⁴ Letter 5/1/1939, Punjab to India, Linlithgow papers

⁵ Y. Shastri- *Khastriya Jatiyon Ka Uthanopatan (Hindi Haridwar, 1956)*, P. 628

⁶ *P.L.A.D., Vol. XII, 5/3/1940, P. 132*

Rivers of Sirmur State by constructing dam on them, however this project did not see the light of day during his life time. Chhotu Ram's irrigational work did not confine only to south eastern districts of the Province. It was mainly due to his efforts that projects like Haveli Project in 1939 and Thal Project in 1942 were completed. Once again, due to the efforts of Chhotu Ram, a scheme was initiated to raise water levels of wells in Doaba in 1941 and a small canal was dug in Pind Dadu Khan area in 1942. Thus, irrigational improvements during Chhotu Ram's period not only resulted in agricultural development but also provided a great stimulus to trade and industry in the province.

Conclusion: Sir Chhotu Ram remains an unforgettable leader of the people who is remembered whenever weak conditions of poor peasants are discussed. Born in a farmer family, he visualized the problems of the farmers of the Undivided Punjab. He played different roles at different stages of life as a lawyer, as a publisher, as a legislator and as a minister to name a few. However, his main contribution was in his championing the cause of the peasant and the down-trodden. Chhotu Ram is mainly remembered in implementing numerous acts like the Golden Agrarian Acts, Punjab Revenue Act, Relief of Indebtedness Act, Debtor Protection Act, Registration of Moneylenders Act, Agricultural Produce Market Act, General Sales Tax etc. which he framed and enacted to put an end to the exploitation of the peasantry. He also resigned from his role in congress only for the sake of betterment of the peasant. Chhotu Ram's fame and dominance in the pre-independence Punjab for nearly a quarter of a century is widely recognized. He was well aware of the prevailing Indebtedness, exploitation, illiteracy and ignorance of rural people especially that of peasants. Posthumously he gained substantial respect and fame from his followers. For his work and services in uplifting the peasants, he was given the title of Rehbar-i-Azam -a great protector.

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