

## Role of Sir Chhotu Ram in the Politics of Undivided Punjab

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### **Abstract:**

*It is a well-known fact that Sir Chhotu Ram who is known as Deenbandhu Rehbar-e-Azam and a most popular leader of joint Punjab, began as a Congressite and ended as a true unionist. He joined the All India Congress Party in 1916 and became the president of Rohtak district Congress Committee in the consequent year and remained on this office till August 1920, but he was no longer satisfied with the policy of Congress and he resigned it in August 1920. Meanwhile he also played an active role as active member of Arya Samaj. After some time he entered the provincial politics in 1924 and joined the Punjab National Unionist Party established by Fazi-i-Hussain and Lal Chand in 1923 and he remained one of the staunchest supporter and pillar of the*

*party till his death in 1945. He also started the Urdu weekly ‘Jat Gazette’ in 1916 to awaken the rural masses. Here it is also noteworthy that he gave priority to the political development of Punjab as the first step for the independence of India and he believed in constructive politics. He avoided the politics of confrontation and like other nationalists of his time; his main goal was complete independence. The present research paper highlights Sir Chhotu Ram’s role in Punjab Politics.*

### **Keywords:**

Nationalist, Indian National Congress, Punjab Unionist Party, Secularism, Confrontation, Social Justice, Unionist.

## Introduction:

Sir Chhotu Ram was a staunch supporter of the national unity and integrity. He considered communalism as the bane of his country. Therefore, he united the masses, especially the peasantry, on non-communal, non-sectarian and purely on economic basis. He relentlessly fought against exploitation, ignorance, backwardness, illiteracy, corruption and other social evils, as he considered that a socially backward and illiterate society was prone to communalism. He tried very successfully to awaken and unite the rural masses against any forum of communalism. He also fought and defeated the communal forces of Pakistan with the help of his economic plank of the strength of his rural mass support throughout the province. He remained loyal to the British Government till his death. He knew the fact that the process of Socio-Economic reforms cannot be completed without the help of the government.

Meanwhile, the disturbances prevalent in Punjab of 1919 changed the

political equilibrium of the province support politics. It irritated the Congress against the Rowlett Act. However, Rohtak district was a Jat dominated area and a large number of participation was made by them in this movement but Sir Chhotu Ram did not like this political scenario and he made his statements against the actions taken by the Congress. In fact in a mass meeting held at Rohtak on 11 August 1919 Sir Chhotu Ram advocated that a direct challenge to Punjab Government could create disturbances in the process of economic reforms. That is why; Sir Chhotu Ram withdrawal from the Congress was clearly based on the ideology of operation with the British Government. Consequently, it resulted Sir Chhotu Ram's defeat in the first election to the Punjab Council from the Jhajjar and Sonepat rural constituency of Rohtak district. However, Sir Chhotu Ram was able to acquire his position again in consequent year of 1924 when he was elected Vice Chairman of Rohtak district board and also the Director of Local Cooperative Bank.

**Role of Sir Chhotu Ram as an Educationist:** Sir Chhotu Ram knew the fact that education can bring a drastic change among in rural masses. However, there was a wide spread illiteracy in Punjab, therefore, he emphasized on opening schools in rural areas and providing reservation to the students belonging to the agriculturists families in the professional and technical institutions when Sir Chhotu Ram became the minister for development, he emphasized to allocate a huge amount of budget for education. He also got a resolution passed in Punjab legislative council in 1924 instructing the administration to give special concession to the students of peasantry class. Consequently, there was a remarkable increase in the admission of these students. He opened about 2000 rural libraries and also started many night schools for adults to spread the awareness among rural masses. Moreover, he also enacted the Punjab Primary Education Bill in 1926. In addition to spread of education for general education, Sir Chhotu Ram also laid a considerable emphasis in opening

of some institutions for technical education and female education. He established the Anglo-Sanskrit Jat High School in 1913 and Jat Heroes High School in 1921 in Rohtak district. That is why; he is called a true advocate and champion of female education in Punjab politics.

**Sir Chhotu Ram Role in Socio-Economic Reforms:** Sir Chhotu Ram was very pathetic during the period of his early life; social injustice, democracy and inequality among the society. He had himself experienced the reality of the life of a peasant. He also had come from a rural life that is why he knew the facts very well. Consequently, his rural background prompted him to work for the betterment of the trodden class. He got many legislations passed for bringing about improvement in the life of the peasants. The Regulation of Accounts Act (Punjab Act 1 of 1930), in the year 1930, under which the money lenders were required to maintain their accounts in the prescribed form and furnish yearly and half-yearly statements of accounts

to their debtors regularly. The Punjab Relief of Indebtedness (Act VII) was passed in 1934, which provided relief to the peasantry from indebtedness by amending the law governing the relation between the debtors and the creditors. He got Punjab Debtors Protection Act (Act 11 of 1936) passed and got it amended in 1938 and 1939. He got passed other acts like Punjab Agriculture Produce Marketing Act – 1939, Weights & Measure Acts- 1941, Punjab Sugarcane Act- 1943, Punjab Alienation of Land Act – 1938, which added to agriculturist's prosperity and checked the exploitation of the schedule caste and poor people both rural and urban areas.

He also made a lot of efforts to bring water to the thirsty field of the Punjab especially the South-Eastern areas. In his efforts to make the agriculturist self-dependent, Sir Chhotu Ram gave practical safe to the Kharif Canals Extension Scheme -1940. It is the fact that the two non-perennial canals were dug in his time; one for Rohtak and one for Hisar district in 1941-42. He also

signed on the Haveli Project which completed in 1939. A division was also instituted during 1943-44 for finding irrigation possibilities in the western part of the province. As a result of Sir Chhotu Ram's effort in the field of irrigation, a raise in irrigation facilities was observed.

By 1944, he also had obtained clearance from the Rural of Bilaspur and the Government of Sindh for bundh irrigation in Gurgaon district and a new scheme of tubewell irregation though it could not be materialized in his life time. Sir Chhotu Ram also worked on Bakhra Dam Project which was the most ambitious and remarkable project of his life. He had signed on the file of approval of this project on 08 Jan. 1945, one day before his death.

Sir Chhotu Ram had a great faith that agriculture alone could not provide employment to the rural masses. Therefore, he emphasized on the setting up of industries in the rural and urban areas. He especially advocated establishing the small cottage industries in the rural areas. He declared that

unless something is done to industrialize the Punjab, we can't have that measure of prosperity in the province which we require for enabling the people living in rural areas with a decent and comfortable life. Therefore, to mitigate the suffering of the agriculturist on account of the high rate of land revenue he put up as well as supported a large number of measures. His fundamental argument for supporting all such measures was that the state had no right to claim for itself larger share in the produce from the land than in the case of other taxes, since land belonged to the tiller and not to the state. In order to put an end to the exploitation and backwardness of the peasantry class, he advocated the equal representation of the rural people in the elected bodies, government services and educational institutions.

**Sir Chhotu Ram as Unionist:** The fact is that Sir Chhotu Ram resigned from the Congress and joined the Punjab Unionist party in 1924. However, Sir Chhotu Ram is regarded as the actual cofounder of this party and in March 1923 he

entered the Punjab Council and took the place of Lalchand as the Minister of Agriculture in the consequent years. He remained the minister of agriculture for about 6 months and served as the Minister of Education from 1925 to 1927 but after the third elections to the Punjab Council, Sir Chhotu Ram was dropped from the Ministership in favour of Manohar Lal, who was intellectually superior to him. Moreover, by introducing communal principle at the Ministerial level, he also weakened forces of existing non-communal political parties like Congress. He also successfully brought about a situation in Punjab in which Hindu would have a little but important connection with all India Politics.

We can't ignore the fact that the formation of Punjab Ministry on this new principle was the main contribution of Sir Chhotu Ram. The press by enlarge applauded the ministerial change made by Fazl-i-Hussain made his displeasure clear that Sir Chhotu Ram did not complain any of personal bitterness on

account of being excluded from the ministry. So far as the Muslim dominated party was concerned, Sir Chhotu Ram gave his full support in 1926 elections and it increased the reputation of Sir Chhotu Ram in the party. That is why, in January 1926, he was elected as leader of the Unionist Party which he retained till Oct. 1936. In the years of 1928, 1930 and 1931 he was also nominated a member of the panel of Chairman of the Legislative Council and a member of committee on finance. Nevertheless, the deteriorating relationship among the Unionist Muslims had ended up by 1936 in giving Sir Chhotu Ram the much desired leveraged and consequently Sir Chhotu Ram became one of the signatory of the party w.e.f. 17 May 1937 between the two fractions of Sikander Hayat Khan and Sahub-ud-Din.

Meanwhile, after the death of Fazl-i-Hussain in July 1936, the elections of 1936 were managed by Sir Chhotu Ram the consequent success of the Unionist Party in these elections was the

personal success of Sir Chhotu Ram. For this success, Sir Chhotu Ram was knighted in 1936. The Unionist Party got victory on 90 seats out of 179 seats in the Punjab Assembly. Sir Chhotu Ram was also given a credit for forcing the Congress to remain exclusively urban Hindu in the complexion. Apart from this Sir Chhotu Ram also supplied to the pre-dominantly Muslims and big landlord ridden Unionist Party the massive following of the comparatively small land owners of the Haryana region; thus the party got a durable support from the rural areas of Haryana. Consequently, Sir Chhotu Ram was made the Minister of Development in 1937 to 1941. Further, in 1941 he was made the Minister of Revenue and he continued in this office till his death in 1945. After the death of Sikander Hayat Khan in Dec. 1942, Sir Chhotu Ram declined to contest for the leadership of the Unionist Party. He was fully aware of the fact that the Unionist Muslims and the communal situation in Punjab would not accept him as a leader of the party for a long time.

**Conclusion:** To conclude the debate we can say that Sir Chhotu Ram was a true advocate of trodden people. He got many legislations passed to bring the change in the life of the trodden people of urban as well as rural areas. He also emphasized to establish education institution and he was known true champion of female education. He also revealed the motto of Unionist Party as to establish socialism. Actually Sir Chhotu Ram was in favour of socio-economic change of the rural masses. It was his political saga city that enabled him to regard a difficult period of transitions in agriculture reforms with the help of British Government. As a result of his efforts land revenue was reduced to a maximum of 25 percent of the previous settlement. He also opposed the evil of untouchability and he himself participated in many community meals arranged by untouchables. Thus, he brought a radical change in the society and he used modern idioms for the socio-economic and political uplift of the trodden people. That is why; Sir Chhotu

Ram is also known as a social reformer as well as political reformer of British era in India.

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