

Role of Sir Chhotu Ram in Punjab Politics

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Abstract: *Although Sir Chhotu Ram is known as a 'Deenbandhu' & 'Rehbar-e-Azam' but he was a social reformer and political activist in the era of Punjab politics from 1916-1945. Sir Chhotu Ram, during the period 1916-1919 had established a close personal equation with H. Harcourt the then Deputy Commissioner of the Rohtak. However, Sir Chhotu Ram joined All India Congress Party in 1916 and became the President of Rohtak District, Congress Committee; but he was no longer satisfied with the policies implemented by the Congress for the freedom movement. Therefore, he resigned this political organization and joined 'The Punjab Unionist Party' in 1924 along with all his admirers and followers. He was now well-aware that, if he wanted to be on a wider platform*

of public life, he would have to shed much of his earlier complexion. The present research paper highlights Sir Chhotu Ram's role in Punjab politics from 1916-1945. The paper also focuses some aspects of his political life.

Keywords: Congress Committee, Congressite, Punjab Unionist Party, Assembly Elections, Provincial Autonomy.

Introduction: The fact is that Sir Chhotu Ram started his political career as a Congressite and ended it as a pure and true unionist of Punjab politics. He joined the All India Congress Party in 1916 and became the President of Rohtak District Congress Committee and remained at this office till August 1920. Here it is also noteworthy that Sir

Chhotu Ram was a founder of *Jat Gazettee* in 1916. However, he entered the provincial politics in 1924 and joined the Punjab National Unionist Party established by Faizl-i-Hussain and Lal Chand in 1923. He remained one of the staunchest supporter and pillar of this party till the end of his life. He played a dominant role in Punjab Politics as an active member of this party and he became very popular as a political leader both in Hindu as well as Muslims leaders of the Punjab Unionist Party.

As a Congressman: It was no easy job to be a staunch Congressman, for he was always target of attack at the hands of British bureaucracy. The Congressman were often abused, beaten and even jailed without any solid reason. It was the time of British imperialism and only a few of the Congressmen could dare to oppose the British rule in a conceivable manner. But it was Sir Chhotu Ram's dauntless character that he was made the president of Congress Committee of

Rohtak district in 1916. He worked very hard and soon the Congress in the district became an organization with an impressive following. Though Sir Chhotu Ram was its chief, therefore, the Congress started moving into every rural heart and home in the district.

However, during the time of First World War the Britishers had made many promises of granting provincial autonomy and other rights to the Indians. Moreover, Indian soldiers had fought with remarkable valour crushing the enemy's resistance and they defeated the enemies in the battle field from the side of the Britishers; but after the end of the war they did not fulfill their promises. Therefore, Mahatma Gandhi gave a call to nation on 1st April 1919 for a nationwide movement. Consequent the Punjab was equally disturbed and a big conference was called on the Gaukaran Tank in Rohtak city. Sir Chhotu Ram was a prominent speaker on this occasion, and here the British administration came in for a

blistering attack for its obscurantism. Meanwhile, revolt in Punjab raised by the national activists and the event of Jalianwala Bagh in April 1919 disturbed the whole Punjab region and changed the political scenario of the province.

Meanwhile, the Congress agitated against the Rowlett Act. The Jat dominated area also showed a great deal of participation in this agitation. It was also expected that Sir Chhotu Ram would not only boycott the agitation meeting; but also render service to the government by refuting the false allegations made against the Rowlett Act. But Sir Chhotu Ram not only failed to do so, he actually participated in the meeting organized against the Act. In fact, in a mass meeting held at Rohtak on 11 August 1919, Sir Chhotu Ram advocated the steps taken by the British Administration, therefore, proposed prosecution of Sir Chhotu Ram for his seditious role in the disturbances of Punjab in 1919 was opposed by many congress leaders. Ultimately, Sir Chhotu

Ram had to withdraw from the Congress but no longer; he could not get any supports from the Jat Community. This decline in his defeat in the first election to the Punjab Council from the Jhajjar and Sonapat rural constituency of Rohtak district gave him a great set back as a political leader.

As a Unionist: After the withdrawal from the Congress, Sir Chhotu Ram joined the Punjab Unionist Party in 1924 and he got himself elected as the vice chairman of the Rohtak District Board and also as the Director of the Local Cooperative Bank. In the second elections to the Punjab Council, he got a success by a majority of 1902 votes, as he was supported by the Unionist Party at all levels. However, Faizl-i-Hussain and Lal Chand had also organized themselves into an Agriculturist Party or the Zamidar Party as it was then known. However, Sir Chhotu Ram had not been able to enter in the Punjab Council in its first election; in this regard in the Jat Gazzete of January 1921 Sir Chhotu Ram remarked:

“We cannot congratulate the government on the appointment of two urban based members as ministers. It is an insult to the rural members who are in a majority. At least one minister should have been appointed from among them”

In 1924, soon after the Punjab Council Elections Sir Chhotu Ram joined the Punjab Unionist Party; but he had been condemned by such a person who was a communalist, urbanite and anti-zamidar and he started as to oppose Sir Chhotu Ram, nevertheless, by 1936 he had several times condemned all similar condemnation of Faizl-i-Hussain as been born out of narrow mindedness and petty jealousy. But in reality the social bases of the two leaders were the same and both were the landlords by profession. Meanwhile, Sir Chhotu Ram was placed the charge of Minister of Agriculture in place of Lalchand who had been unseated as an unsuccessful election petition against him on the charge of corrupt practices. Meanwhile, the new governor Mr. Hailey found it

very difficult to choose Lal Chand's successor. However, he did not consider Sir Chhotu Ram to be very well-known politician. In fact Hailey had been extremely sorry to see Lal Chand go; but at that time, he was determined to keep the agriculturist party in power and Sir Chhotu Ram remained the Agriculture Minister for about 6 month. He also served as the Minister of Education from 1925 to 1927. But after the 3rd election to the Punjab Council, Sir Chhotu Ram was dropped from Ministership in favor of Manoharlal an Urban Hindu who was intellectually superior to Sir Chhotu Ram at that time as claimed by The Tribune.

Meanwhile, the formation of Punjab Ministry on this new principle of communal harmony, affected the Punjab Politics very crucially. The press by and large applauded the Ministerial change and Faizl-i-Hussain also made his displeasure with this decision made by Mr. Hailey. Although Sir Chhotu Ram did not made any complaint on any ground being excluded from the Ministry, he

also faced embarrassment amongst his associates when Mr. Hailey refused to let Sir Chhotu Ram publish a letter in which he (Mr. Hailey) had given some reason for dropping Sir Chhotu Ram from the Ministry. Therefore, Sir Chhotu Ram assumed the role of opposition leader in the Punjab Council under the guidance of Faizl-i-Hussain, who had also been shifted to the Governor's executive council in 1926 as a revenue minister and brought a motion of non-confidence against the Ministry but failed, so far as the Muslim Dominated Unionist Party was concerned Sir Chhotu Ram played a vital role in the party as a leader and retained till Oct. 1936. Although the real head of the party continued to be Faizl-i-Hussain.

Here it is noteworthy that in 1929, Sir Chhotu Ram was nominated as a member of Punjab Reforms Committee to make recommendations of the distribution of seats and formation of new constituency in the Punjab. Therefore, in the consequent

years of 1930 and 1931, Sir Chhotu Ram was also a nominated member of the panel of Chairman of the Legislative Council and a member of the standing committee on financial matters. Meanwhile in Punjab Council elections in 1930, Sir Chhotu Ram's Hindu follower gave the party full support and by 1936 the political position of Sir Chhotu Ram remained very important in the Punjab Unionist Party. Now Faizl-i-Hussain was died in July 1936 and the election of Punjab Council in 1937 was managed by Sir Chhotu Ram, the consequent success of the party was a personal success of Sir Chhotu Ram. The Unionist party won 90 seats out of 190 seats in the Punjab Assembly. Sir Chhotu Ram was also given full credit to strengthen the party after the death of Faizl-i-Hussain. Thus he proved himself a strong leader of the party. He was made the Minister of Development in 1937 and he held this office till 1941. Then in 1941 he was made the Minister of

Revenue which he continued till his death in 1945.

Conclusion: To conclude we can say that Sir Chhotu Ram played a very significant role in the field of Non-Muslim as well as Muslim dominated party in the Punjab politics. However, he started his political journey as a Congressman; but he ended it up as a true and staunch unionist. He also worked for the welfare of trodden people; but due to his participation in agitation against the Rowlett Act in 1919 he had to resign the party and in 1924 he joined the Punjab Unionist Party established by Faizl-i-Hussain and Lal Chand. Most of the scholars assumed the fact that Sir Chhotu Ram is no longer should be assessed less than Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. The fact is that Sir Chhotu Ram is a popular personality both in Hindu's as well as in Muslim community. In essence it can be concluded that Sir Chhotu Ram got many legislation for the improvement of the peasantry class and trodden people. He also played a crucial role to open

schools in Rohtak district and he claimed himself to be a champion of female education.

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