

## COLONIALISING AGRICULTURE: THE BRITISH ECONOMIC POLICIES IN MIANWALI DISTRICT

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### ABSTRACT

The roots of tribalism were deep and ancient in Mianwali. Tribe is a symbol of identity and power of different human groups. This article discusses the colonial policy in the cultural and socio-economic sphere of the district. The study also seeks to shed light on the official indifference vividly demonstrated in the realms of agriculture, and economic development. The study seeks to investigate why it was difficult to open a new agrarian frontier in Mianwali like the canal colony areas? Despite the fact that the district was overwhelmingly agrarian, there was hardly any investment on agriculture. The nexus between the rural magnates as colonial collaborators and the colonial government is also discussed. The colonial interests were served by the policy of co-option of the rural elite. The rural leaders legitimized their authority through the ownership of the vast tracts of land, an insignia of power and prestige and their connection with the British officials. The focus will also be on the colonial economic policies which resulted in the agricultural indebtedness, growth of moneylenders, sale and mortgage of land in the district.

**KEYWORDS:** Agrarian, Indebtedness, Mortgage, Money lending, Tribal

### INTRODUCTION

Ian Talbot and Gilmartin argue that the significance of the Punjab lies in its strong military traditions on which the British could build a strong military.<sup>1</sup> G.S.Grewal argue that British economic policy remained focused on enhancing the agricultural production in the Punjab to extract revenue which was a massive source of income to the state<sup>2</sup>. Ian Talbot also supports the argument that British tried to transform the Punjabi society on the pattern of Victorian ideals by constructing the world's largest irrigation system in the Punjab, transforming the region's arid waste land into world's one of the richest farming area.<sup>3</sup> The social and economic changes and development of canal colonies were crucial for British policy of controlling agricultural wealth. The agricultural wealth and military importance of this province increased its political significance as well. Colonial policy privileged the Punjab's agrarian development at the expense of industrial development. The works of Mridula Mukherjee and Imran Ali give a new dimension to the study of impact of colonialism on the class structure, which was divided into agriculturist and non-agriculturist tribes.

I argue that the indifference of the colonial government towards economic development in the district was due to the fact that Mianwali<sup>4</sup> had, no tangible bearing on the politics and economy of the Punjab. Environmental factors, difficult

<sup>1</sup> Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj 1849-1947*, ( Delhi ; Manohar publications, 1988 ) p.42

<sup>2</sup> J.S Grewal, *Agrarian Production and Colonial policy in Punjab*, p.293.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj 1849-1947*, ( Delhi ; Manohar publications, 1988 ) p.10

<sup>4</sup> Mianwali district is located in the north-west of the Punjab Province and had been most south-westerly district of the Rawalpindi Division of the Punjab. The district comprises of three sub-divisions namely Mianwali, Isakhel and Piplan. Mianwali is a bordering district of the Punjab province and have

terrain made investment not an economically viable proposition for British government. With a predominantly Pathan population, the district served essentially as a military labour market. Economic investment on land and agriculture could have blocked the prospects of recruitment in colonial army.

## THE AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF MIANWALI

Mianwali is essentially tribal and largely agricultural society, substantial number of people still lived on cattle or herd economy.<sup>5</sup> Being on the fringe of Indus, Mianwali is called as the 'Kacchi'. Generally alluvial land and the area around river is called Kacchi. The Kachhi and the riverain tract were sparsely populated particularly in the extreme north owing to the destructive and unpredictable nature of the river flood.<sup>6</sup> The Thal which is located in the south of the district is a sandy desert and makes a part of Bhakkar Tehsil. It is divided into two natural divisions, namely the Thal Kalan and the Daggar. Thal Kalan occupies the whole of the eastern portion of the tract. The tract lying to the west of Thal Kalan is called Dagger.

After the British formally established their administrative control over Mianwali in 1848, the re-demarcation of geographical boundaries of the district was followed by the construction of railways, in 1886. This brought consistent and gradual changes in the demographic pattern of the district, as large number of labourers were employed for the construction of the Mari- Attok Railway. Many people poured into Lower Chenab Canal Colony in pursuit of newly emerging opportunities in the wake of developmental projects undertaken by the government. The census of 1891 shows changes in the demography.

**Table 1**

Year	Population	Increase (%)
1881	262,266	....
1891	287,026	9.4
1901	301,910	5.2
1911	341,377	13.1

**Source: Gazetteer Mianwali, p.45**

There was no substantial trade and commerce in the district either. The principal exports of the district were sult, alum, iron vessels, wheat, oil seeds, wool and bones.<sup>7</sup> The major imports were iron, cotton piece goods, thread, silk, sugar and timber.<sup>8</sup> The soil of the Indus valley was full of alluvial deposit. The land was classified by people themselves on its productive power.

### Classification of Soil

The classification of soil in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> settlement was based on the source of irrigation and not in accordance with the inherent qualities of the land.<sup>9</sup> In order to stop the rush of water, hard labour was involved to build embankments. The water contained silt coming down from hill side enhanced the out turn.<sup>10</sup> The average cropped area per well was only 7

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common borders with District Kohat, Laki Marwat and D.I.Khan. The district is bounded on the north by the Attok and Kohat Districts, on the west by the Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan, on the south by the tehsil of Leiah, while Jhang, Shahpur districts adjoined it on the East. In 1901 Mianwali was given status of district and separated from NWFP and incorporated in Punjab.

<sup>5</sup> *Punjab Census Report of 1911.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Gazetteer of Mianwali*, p140

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *Assessment Report of Mianwali District, 1932* Mr Naseer Ahmad, Assistant Commissioner Mianwali, p

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

acres in Mianwali and 5 in Isa Khel. Here lands were not manured except in drought when they were ploughed with the help of spring water.

The low agricultural produce could be fairly equated with the primitive system of cultivation. The constant uncertainty of prospects led to haphazard methods of cultivation. The inhabitants suddenly had to move off with their cattle to the higher villages due to floods. By the time wheat crop was ready the village was deserted.<sup>11</sup> In the absence of canals, well irrigation was used which was a costly affair and was mostly carried out in the area adjoining the high bank. Living in a terrain where life was a hard struggle with nature, people developed a mind set not towards development but to survival. The British government did not invest on excavation of canals. There were only private canals owned by landed elite and possessed exclusive rights of proprietorship. Apart from wells, the only source of irrigation were water ways taken out from Kurram River and Kas Umar Khan canals. The management of the canals was completely in the hands of the owners of canal who were khawanins of Isa Khel.<sup>12</sup> Since the settlement of 1928, the management of all the canals was under the supervision of the Tehsildar assisted by a darogha under a system of Tinga.<sup>13</sup> Apart from these canals, some lands in the tehsil got drainage water from hills through hill torrents in addition to local rain fall.<sup>14</sup>

By the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> Century, we saw a complete overhauling of agrarian structure of the Punjab with the development of canal colonies. The creation of Canal Colony was closely linked to the Punjab's emergence as a main recruitment centre of Indian Army.<sup>15</sup> In the larger context of the colonial Punjab one can address the query, why did the British government invested so little on the uplift of agriculture in Mianwali like other Canal Colony Districts.

### **BRITISH COLONIAL POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT OF CANAL COLONIES**

The first major canal---the Lower Bari Doab canal was opened in 1861. It irrigated the densely populated districts of Amritsar and Lahore. The lower Jhelum and Chenab Canal Systems were opened in the 1880s. These canals transformed Jhang, Lyallpur and Shahpur into thriving Canal Colony regions.<sup>16</sup>

The British had many objectives in view while flourishing Canal Colonies. Primarily, it was desired to relieve the pressure of population in the crowded districts of Central Punjab.<sup>17</sup> As a result of Canal Colonies and Colonization, rural inhabitants in most of the south eastern and south western districts of the Punjab moved to the lands protected by canal and free from the dread of famine and droughts.<sup>18</sup> According to the census of 1911, out of the population of 341,377 in the Mianwali District, four percent had been found migrated to Lower Chenab Canal Colony.<sup>19</sup>

In Multan with the completion of Sidhna Canal, a large scale of population immigrated. The rapid flow of migration was from the densely populated Central districts towards Chenab Canal Colonies due to major problems of fragmentation of holdings, increasing rate of indebtedness and limited availability of culturable waste.<sup>20</sup> A sad aspect of

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<sup>11</sup> *Gazetteer*, p 102

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Tinga is a canal labour system, where by the labour required for clearance of canal and maintenance of headworks is supplied by the landlords at the rate of one labourer through out the year for every 500 canals or 63 acres.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.124

<sup>15</sup> Ian Talbot, Punjab and Raj, P.40

<sup>16</sup> Ian Talbot, Punjab and Raj, P.39

<sup>17</sup> Malcolm Darling, The Punjab Peasant, 4<sup>th</sup> edition 1947, P.116

<sup>18</sup> Himadri Bannerjee, Agrarian Society of the Punjab, P.27

<sup>19</sup> *Gazetteer Mianwali*, 1915, P.46

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid* P.28

this agricultural development was that the indigenous inhabitants hardly benefited from this project.<sup>21</sup>

The third objective of canal colonies was the supply of horses and mules for the South African War. It was proposed that the land should be given to those who would undertake to maintain horses and camels for breeding purposes.<sup>22</sup> This object had not been dominant in the Mianwali District which was not considered a suitable place for breeding stock. There was a dearth of enterprise in the district. A major incentive behind the new canal colonization was to bring structural changes in social relations to hierarchies between the local populace and government and to dislodge those who were in the forefront of rural leadership and were also a threat to the colonial rule.<sup>23</sup> Canals were also imperative to cultivate a large tract for cotton crop in order to meet a vivid need of cotton in Lancashire's industries.<sup>24</sup>

On the one level the state tried to transform Indian society into commercialization, and linking it to the world economy. But on another level, the state needed the support of the indigenous political hierarchy for its own political control over India.<sup>25</sup> Under the same British policy towards the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century a class of rural elite was produced, intricately linked with the rural administration and exercising their authority among masses.<sup>26</sup>

Land became an instrumental element in defining the legitimate position of these tribal leaders who acted as intermediaries between state and populace.<sup>27</sup>

### **Incompatibility of Agricultural Prospects with the Colonial Ideology**

Mianwali District did not fall in the land grant criterion of the British, as the district did not contain excess numbers that could provide migrants, whereas the barani tracts of north-western Punjab had excess number.<sup>28</sup>

The British government granted land to the landholders since they were free from debt and had sufficient resources to cultivate large tracts of land.<sup>29</sup> The poorer and landless people were not allowed access to proprietary rights. "The service caste", referred to as "menials" or "Kamins" could find employment and work only as labourers or tenants in the new canal colony land.<sup>30</sup> Only the better-off section of Punjabi society benefited which cemented the bond between landed elite and British and a subsequent marginalization of rural poor and landless.<sup>31</sup>

The main interest of the British in the district was the recruitment in army. The landed elite served as recruiting agents in lieu of the grants and privileges accorded to them by the state. Moreover the district's geographical existence too was instrumental in keeping Mianwali quite low in the priority list of the British as it was not politically expedient for the government to squander away its resources on such a far flung area from where the return on the money spent was quite marginal. The investment on irrigation was not thought to be cost effective keeping in mind the soil structure, aridness of the terrain, the depth of water level and the distinctive environment of the region. After the annexation of the Punjab, the British introduced policy of settlement of land. Under this policy, the land was made into a private property which could be owned by independent proprietors.

<sup>21</sup> Himadri Bannerjee, *Agrarian society of the Punjab*, p.31

<sup>22</sup> Darling, *the Punjab Peasant* P.116

<sup>23</sup> Pervaiz Dandal and Saud-Ul-Hassan, *Punjab ka ibtadai Bartanwi Daur*, PP.90-91

<sup>24</sup> Zahid Chaudhry, *Muslim Punjab ka Siyasi Irtiqa*. Vol.5,P.36

<sup>25</sup> David Gilmartin, *Empire And Islam* (London; I.B.Tauris And Co,1988) P.13

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, P.22

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>28</sup> Imran Ali, *Five Punjabi Centuries, Canal colonization and Social Economic Change* (Dehli; Mahohar Publisher 1997, P. 343 .

<sup>29</sup> Mustafa Kamal Pasha, *Colonial political economy*, (Karachi ; Oxford university press, 1998) p.168

<sup>30</sup> Imran Ali, *Five Punjabi Centuries*, p 343.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p.348

### Colonial Policy of Settlement and Its Fallout on the District

The policy of settlement made sale and mortgage of land easier. A wide scale of transfer of land by sale and mortgage set in, thereafter.<sup>32</sup> The British land revenue system caused anxiety among the zamindars. If the mortgager did not redeem his land in a specified time the land was alienated to the moneylender.<sup>33</sup>

Thorburn, the settlement officer of Bannu District reported that the land owning Muslim tribes of the Western districts including Mianwali were generally indebted due to the fixed assessment.<sup>34</sup>

A new credit group emerged who were connected with trade in agricultural commodities. They advanced credits to buy seeds at exorbitant rate of returns.<sup>35</sup> Their twin role as village grain dealers and money lenders gave them dominant status to impose harsh terms on cultivators.<sup>36</sup> It was estimated that 80% of the owners, 20% of the occupancy tenants and 10% of the tenant-at-will were indebted.<sup>37</sup> Its immediate impact was that Punjabi zamindars were deprived of their ancestral land holdings which might result in rural revolt.<sup>38</sup> Late nineteenth century crisis of indebtedness among Punjabi landholders precipitated the passage of alienation of land act in 1900, which had its fall out on the economy of the district. Under this act, the British fixed a certain amount of revenue which was difficult for the small land holders of the district to pay.<sup>39</sup>

### LAND ALIENATION ACT, AGRICULTURAL INDEBTEDNESS AND GROWTH OF MONEYLENDERS

The act aimed at permitting the permanent alienation of the land between members of agricultural tribes while sale by agriculturists to non-agricultural tribes was virtually prohibited. The maximum period of usufructury mortgage was fixed at twenty years. The aim of legislation was to curb the growing influence of moneylenders. The act divided the population into agriculturist and non-agriculturist tribes.<sup>40</sup> The impact and effectiveness of the act can be observed in the light of colonial policy toward the enactment of this act.<sup>41</sup>

According to 2<sup>nd</sup> Settlement Report of the district, the total area mortgaged to sahuakar increased from 1.7 to 2.9 percent. With the large increase in cultivation the percentage of cultivated mortgaged area had risen from 3.1 to 9.6.<sup>42</sup> This was so because the sahuakar was inclined to take cultivated land on mortgage. The mortgage to other tribes increased very little. On the whole 6 percent of area was mortgaged.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.26 Prior to the annexation of Punjab in 1849, transfer of land by mortgage or sale was limited by two factors--- the laws of pre-emption or communal land holding and the low sale value of agricultural property. Punjabis of each religious community and geographical area valued local customs restricting land sale to outsiders. Panchayat guarded the sale of land to person out side the community, especially in the western Punjab there were strong sentiments against this step. The British removed these checks upon the sale of land to outsiders and non agriculturists. British distributed the land, gave proprietary rights to the tenants which soared the value of land. Along with the extension of roads and railways, the sale and mortgage value of land was rising. Now the agriculturist was hopeful about some profit beyond his expenses because of the low revenue assessment.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p.29

<sup>34</sup> Himadri Bannerjee, Agrarian society of the Punjab, p.87

<sup>35</sup> Mustafa kamal, Colonial political economy, p.169

<sup>36</sup> Himadri Bannerjee, Agrarian Society of the Punjab, p.114

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.108

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p 119

<sup>39</sup> Irfan Habib, Indian Economy, 1858, -1914, (New Delhi; Tulika Books, 2006) p. 77

<sup>40</sup> Mridula Mukherjee, Colonializing Agriculture, p 169

<sup>41</sup> David Gilmartin, Empire and Islam, p 28

<sup>42</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Settlement Report Mianwali, 1908, p.13

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

Table 2

Period	To Agriculturists	To Non-Agriculturists	Percentage of Total Area	Percentage of Cultivated Area
2 <sup>nd</sup> Settlement	7.1	9.7	16.8	25.3
3 <sup>rd</sup> Settlement	11.0	2.5	13.5	15.6
1930-31	12.6	1.9	14.5	15.9

Source: Assessment Report 1932, Mianwali. P.18

Though the total mortgage area decreased from 1906-07 to 1928, it had increased again by 1% because of bad season.<sup>44</sup> Since the 3<sup>rd</sup> settlement, 13396 acres had been sold for Rs 2707998. Out of this area only 532 acres had been alienated in favour of non agriculturists, mainly Hindus. The transfers were mainly confined to the villages of 'Wanbhachran, Shadia and Chorwala, owing to the financial difficulties of the 'Maliks' of that area.<sup>45</sup>

Some facts of interests are tabulated here.

### Statistics of Sales of Land

Table 3

Period	To Agriculturists	To Non-Agriculturists	Total Area	Cultivated Area
Before 2 <sup>nd</sup> Settlement	4.8	1.7	6.5	9.1
From 2 <sup>nd</sup> to 3 <sup>rd</sup> settlement	8.4	1.4	9.8	9.5
Since 3 <sup>rd</sup> Settlement	2.5	1	2.6	3.2

Source: Assessment Report of Mianwali District 1932, P.18

The mortgage debt by 1932 amounted to Rs 5880807 at the 3<sup>rd</sup> settlement, it was 43,82896 and works out to be Rs 128 per cultivated acre of the mortgaged area.<sup>46</sup> The main causes of this huge debt were two. One was the Barani cultivation and the other was thriftless-ness of the people. In such tough hours, money lender was the only best alternative who could only stand for intelligence and thrift.<sup>47</sup>

The British tried to control the land alienation through legislation, considering that legislation would raise the value of agricultural land and would stop the transfer of land from cultivators to urban financiers. Against the British expectations this control over transfer of land turned out to be transitory and new type of mortgage 'Benami' was introduced.<sup>48</sup> The act created a new class of agriculturist moneylenders who had conducted their business on harsher terms. Large land holders gained ownership of land and landless cultivators were reduced to the status of tenants.<sup>49</sup> The act divided Hindus and Muslims along the communal lines, it bred antagonism and the government was accused of fostering "divide and rule" policy.<sup>50</sup> In order to protect agriculturists from the trap of moneylenders, the government set up cooperative societies in the Punjab.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Assessment Report Mianwali, 1932, p. 18

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.20

<sup>48</sup> Tahir Kamran, p 50, In Benami transaction money lender got the land of debtor alienated in the name of some friend belonging to agriculturist cast later executed a bond in favor of money lender for the amount of load in question. The agriculturist remained the nominal owner of the land but the man who arranged for cultivation and tenancy was the money lender itself.

<sup>49</sup> David Gilmartin, Empire and Islam, p 33

<sup>50</sup> Tahir Kamran, p 44

<sup>51</sup> Mridula Mukharjee, colonializing Agriculture, p.178

## Development of Cooperative Societies

Under the cooperative act, passed in 1904, the cooperatives had to lend money on reasonable rates. The total amount of loan advanced under land improvement loans act 1883 and the agricultural loans act of 1884, were so small that their effect on agricultural credit was nominal.<sup>52</sup>

Norman G Barrier maintained that the credit societies largely failed because they were dominated by land lords, who secured loans on favourable terms.<sup>53</sup> Money was embezzled and heavy arrears of payments liquidated the societies.<sup>54</sup>

The progress of movement was slow in Mianwali and only four societies could be registered till 1918.<sup>55</sup> During the second stage between 1919 to 1929, 469 societies of different kinds were set up. The period saw the birth of the Central Cooperative Bank which could alone cater for the economic needs of the whole district.<sup>56</sup> The period of expansion of credit societies in the district was followed by economic depression. The prices fell and recovery of loans became quite difficult. Most of the loans were advanced with essential investigation consequently there were major set backs in the recovery of loans.<sup>57</sup> To expose cooperation, a modern economic venture to the peasantry of the district who was living under medieval conditions was a real hazard. The predominantly unbusiness-like environment easily deadened all efforts for self-reliance and thrift.<sup>58</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Mianwali was agrarian region with agriculture and herd economy being main sources of subsistence. The development of infra structure gave a marginal impetus to commercial agriculture. The socio-economic spheres of district vividly reflected the official indifference which substantiated the perception that Mianwali had no economic and political significance on British agenda. There was hardly any investment on agriculture in Mianwali when the British engineered substantial economic development in the rest of the Punjab. The most notable were Canal Colonies which had transformed the complexion of the central Punjab. The investment on Mianwali District was not considered cost effective as it was not likely to yield desirable output. Hence the agricultural prospects were not in consonance with the British ideology which believed that investment must yield economic benefits. The soil structure, aridness of the terrain, the depth of water level and uncertain environmental conditions made it really difficult to think in terms of investing any big amount of capital in Mianwali.

A class of landowners was developed in the district who asserted their authority on people through land. The district did not have thrifty zamindars who had agricultural ingenuity. The district also did not have vast tracts of fertile land vis a vis other districts in the Central Punjab. Nevertheless the economic policies of the British government like land settlement, introduction of private property and development of cash nexus between state and peasantry, had its fallout on the district. Land revenue system accelerated the rate of land alienation and sale and mortgage of land in the district exacerbated the economic distress of people.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid , p.179

<sup>53</sup> Barrier cited in Tahir Kamran, p.51

<sup>54</sup> Darling, *The Punjab Peasant*, pp 232-33

<sup>55</sup> Up dated Gazetteer, Mianwali 1979, p.157

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p.158

<sup>58</sup> Mukarjee, pp 181-182



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