



Canal colonies: Social and economic impact on colonial Punjab

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Abstract

In the early stages, a general plan was not adopted in the colonization scheme but after surveying the geography of Punjab, they decided to create canal colonies project. They developed nine canal colonies between the Sutlej and Jhelum. The canal colony area was comprised of Lahore, Rawalpindi and Multan division of the Punjab province. There were two types of canal systems that were introduced by the British government. The former were the perennial canals, the water in these canal flowed throughout the year and the latter one was the inundation canal. In this context, it is important to know about the canal colonies system and its impacts on society.

Keywords: canals, migration, fertility, production, prosperity

Introduction

After the annexation, Punjab became a part of the colonial government. The colonial government used the colonies for their personal interests. At the same time, it was the advent of the Industrial Revolution in England. For this industrialization, raw materials were the basic need. Hence, to fulfil their needs they wanted to make Punjab their personal market of raw materials. Trade became considerably easier after opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Due to the opening of the Suez Canal, the distance between England and India decreased considerably. The telegraph system was introduced in India, which allowed for faster and easier communication to access accurate information of demand and supply. A few other reasons further encouraged the colonial government to build several other infrastructures in Punjab like railway network and new metallic roads.

Objective

The British tried to improve the irrigation system after the annexation of Punjab. They put to use the experience they had gained when they were constructing canals in the United Providence and other parts of India. Though the British initially concentrated on the already existing canals like 'the Western Yamuna Canal' which was remodelled in 1873, in the following years, the British commissioned several other canals for the purpose of irrigation throughout Punjab. The main objective of the present study is to understand the canal colonies and their impact on colonial Punjab. This study is based on primary and secondary sources of data.

During those times, Punjab was mostly a dry landmass, only a few pockets of the state received a considerable amount of rainfall. Mostly, west and southeast plains were dry. At that time, Punjab farmers were mostly dependent on rain and a few other traditional methods like well, rehat, chars. They stored rain water in the pond for the following season. Due to the presence of several rivers in Punjab, there were several possibilities of irrigation development through canal networks.

The British were aware of the fact that Punjab had a great potential for growth in the agriculture at the time when they started constructing canals from the rivers. Hence, John Lawrence took certain steps towards the agricultural policy which focused only on increasing the land revenue. The British introduced the system of canal irrigation. They made a plan to develop those areas with the construction of the canal network. For this purpose solely, the government created a public welfare department. The objective was to increase the cultivated area, to prevent famines and to raise the standard of living of the residents and thus to widen the tax base for state revenue. These were mainly the contributing factors that led to the introduction of canal irrigation.

In 1882, the colonial government officially launched the lower Chenab colony. It was the advent of the greatest canal network in the world. After that they continued developing the canal colonies in Punjab. The various canals that came into existence at the hand of the British were the Sir Hind Canal, the Lower Chenab Canal, the Lower Jhelum Canal, the Triple Canal project and the Sutlej Valley Project among others. These were the perennial canals, besides there were also other canals which fall in the inundation category. They took the water from various parts of rivers like Chenab, Indus and Sutlej.

The British faced another problem. There was a scarcity of human resources in canal colonies because the demographic variation was very large in a state like Punjab. The central districts of Punjab were highly populated and western districts were scarcely populated. Hence, they invited farmers from the cognatic districts of Punjab. Capitalists were also invited in canal colonies for the big plots of land.

The colonists chose after considerable care, those who were hard working, tough, and physically fit. They gave priority to those farmers who ploughed fields with the help of their family members. They chose farmers who did not wished to go back their ancestral homes, those who had not mortgaged their land but also did not possess sufficient holdings. They

invited capitalists for big plots of land with open auction to get quick return. They introduced several schemes like civil grant, military grant and horse breeding. A majority of earliest colonizers hailed from the eastern districts of Punjab, chiefly being from Amritsar, Ludhiana, Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, and Gurdaspur.

The colonial government's allotment policy was often changed from time to time. The three main categories that they came up with were Capitalists, Yeoman and Peasant grantees. The capitalists granted area ordinarily anywhere from six to twenty sq. miles. Yeoman were granted area ordinarily anywhere from two to five sq. miles. Both these categories paid Nazarana in the form of cash and some other charges too. The third category was that of the peasants. This category was further divided into three parts: immigrants, nomads, and hitari. While the immigrants belonged to the congested districts of Central Punjab, the last were the landowners from the Hithar, who suffered a great deal because of the construction of the canal in the name of sailab, tenants and grazing grounds. Besides, they reserved five big plots for the cattle farm approximately amounting to a total area of 15300 acres. These areas were broken down into five plots, two plots in western Punjab and the remaining three plots in Hisar district.

Apart from the allotments, the governments also gave reward grants comprising mainly of two broad categories, namely civil grants and military reward grants. In addition, the government also used to give grants as Jagirs where up to 225 acres were given away with no Nazrana. Moreover, during World War I, more land for such grants were kept aside so as to 'to reserve 75,000 acres of land on the Lower Bari Doab Canal for the purpose of making reward grants on peasant conditions to those who may distinguish themselves in the present war. It was the same in the case of World War II. Army men were rewarded with land allotment in the canal colonies because these soldiers were fighting in different countries of the world under the British flag. For instance, KishanLal Dhaka was a Subedar in army from Rohtak district. He received a reward grant for exemplary performance in the World War I. He got 2.5 murba in Montgomery district. Mostly civilian and military grantees migrated to the canal colonies.

Colonial government made several terms and conditions for all the allotments in canal colonies. It was not easy for farmers to get ownership of land. The terms and conditions were extremely strict. They were supposed to pay the land revenue, water rates and a yearly fee to the government. After the expiry of a fixed term, usually ten years, they were given inalienable proprietary right in the lower Jhelum colony and the grantees in the lower Chenab were given alienable

proprietary rights. Lastly were the yeoman grantees, holding larger areas with occupancy rights. This class of tenants paid 'Nazrana' to the administration. There were also the big lands owners called the capitalist tenants, which held larger areas of land and had the right to purchase proprietary rights in tenancy after lapse of some years. In most cases the government provided a time frame to pay for the total amount of land in instalments with interest of 6¼ percent. Apart from these, there were also tenants on horse breeding or camel maintaining agreements. These animals were bred for the army. There were also civil and military grantees that received land, generally the same size as that of peasant grantees, as a reward for services provided to the state. The civil and military grants had the same terms and conditions as that of the peasants.

In canal colonies, holdings were comparatively larger. Lyallpur was the largest canal colony which was the colony of several rich landlords, who had about 200 to 300 acres each and the yeomen peasants that had at least about 100 acres of land each. But these grants did not become the centre of development. These landlords were not living on these allotments on a permanent basis. They were not interested in farming and they had absolutely no interest in improving the land or putting it to a good use, they invested money in land solely due the lack of investment opportunities. It was a time when land was a symbol of social prestige.

Prior to the establishment of the canal colonies, the area was scarcely populated and the transportation facilities were in primary stages. A great number of people used bullock carts for domestic purpose and horses were used for long distance travelling. The transportation infrastructure was also negligible. The living standards of people were ordinary. This transitional period forced many people to head back home, but when it came to a close, the echoes of the bumper crop that it yielded were seen all over the country. Due to the good facility of irrigation available, there was an increase in production as well. The availability of water also decreased the risk of famine and drought in the canal colonies. The initial success inspired more farmers to settle in the canal colonies. In fact, a few harvests transformed these farmers into people of substance. Moreover, the bumper crops were proof enough of the fertility of the land, hence gradually the inter-state migration began which lasted for over five decades.

Due to the canal colonies, there were several changes in the region. These changes were also seen in demographic trends. In the canal colonies district, there was a rise in population due to immigration from central districts of Punjab. These migrants came from different castes and religions, while their listed occupation varied from owners and dependents.

Table 1: of immigration in canal colonies from different areas

District	1901-1911		1911-1921			Total for all colonies
	L.C.C.	L.J.C.	L.C.C.	L.J.C.	U.B.D.C.	
Ambala	1724	-	16,483	-	-	2449
Kangra	1594	-	-	-	-	1327
Hoshiarpur	44,234	-	46,356	-	10,749	17,490
Jalandhar	70,847	-	72,692	373	20,067	24,664
Ludhiana	28,306	1663	22,044	347	2128	11,144
Ferozepur	10,813	-	8982	-	6785	17,433

Lahore	28,176	-	26,787	-	15,134	22,229
Amritsar	81,144	6230	70,942	1223	9004	32,665
Gurdaspur	52,701	-	42,621	-	6735	15,952
Sialkot	96,984	29,257	70,502	4471	7320	26,047
Gujrat	25,174	30,049	18,974	7900	2381	21,896
Shahpur	12,367	-	8424	-	3065	-
Mianwali	5856	-	5122	-	3357	4039
Montgomery	68,581	-	64,364	-	-	-
Multan	12,671	-	5945	-	-	-
Kapurthala	8129	-	5257	-	-	-
Patiala	8324	-	5258	-	-	-
Kashmir	3664	1701	2979	658	-	-
Lyalpur	-	-	-	-	14,807	-
Gujranwala	-	12,025	-	2229	2272	-
Jhelum	-	16,168	-	9695	2307	10,865
Jhang	-	20,912	-	4606	10,136	-
Hissar	-	-	-	-	-	3057
Rohtak	-	-	-	-	-	3264
Gurgaon	-	-	-	-	-	2877
Karnal	-	-	-	-	-	1142
Simla	-	-	-	-	-	62
Rawalpindi	-	-	-	-	-	5777
Bahawalpur	-	-	-	-	-	5853
Muzaffarnagarh	-	-	-	-	-	6705
DeraG.Khan	-	-	-	-	-	3460
Total	608,847	141,073	517,878	35,107	141,524	240,398

Source: Agnihotri, Indu, *Agrarian Change in the Canal Colonies: Punjab (1890-1935)*, J.N.U., New Delhi, 1987. (U.T.)

Maximum migration was seen in canal colonies from congested districts such as Amritsar, Sialkot, Gujrat, Jullundur, Jhelum, Hoshiarpur, Ferozpur and Gurdaspur. From the table above it is seen that highest migration was between 1901 and 1930.

In 1931, figures show that migrants to all Canal Colony districts came primarily from Amritsar, Sialkot, Gujrat, Jullundur, Lahore, Jhelum, Hoshiarpur, Ferozpur and Gurdaspur. In these four decades, the population of the Province with colonies as the focal point was seen to have increased by 37% as observed by analysing the 1881 and 1931 census data. Moreover, it was also observed that by 1941, six areas, namely Gujranwala, Sheikhpura, Montgomery, Shahpur, Lyallpur and Jhang, saw the maximum rise in population and three out of these were colonies: Montgomery, Lyallpur and Shahpur.

Conclusion

Canal colonies were also one of the examples of great settlements. The colony towns and villages were well planned. None of the towns was more than twelve miles from a rail road or a market. They had social amenities like schools, dispensaries, cooperative and agricultural staff. This once barren land became an important food producing area. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Junglis all intermixed in these tracts. These newly developed areas brought together men of diverse social position, varying educational qualification, different religions. Representatives of the middle classes and members of agricultural tribes from large land could be found there.

In these colonies and towns, a new type of society began to emerge. Here bonds of education and work supplanted the old caste based bonds. Caste and even religions were thrown together in work, whilst their women living in same blocks,

made new friendships. Consequently, there was a greater political and social awakening in colony towns and villages as compared to other parts of Punjab. These canal colonies were considered to be an ideal model which greatly helped in converting a wasteland into a fertile agricultural land.

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