

CHHOTU RAM- A SAVIOUR OF PEASANTRY

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Like Mahatma Gandhi Chhotu Ram firmly believed that real India lives in villages. The peasantry constituted the backbone of the nation. However, condition of the peasantry was not good as it was exploited both by the Britishers as well as the local money-lenders: Chhotu Ram almost single handedly became a saviour of the peasantry of his time. Chhotu Ram succeeded in awakening peasantry for their educational, social, economic and political upliftment.

Rising from the modest beginning to an eminent position as a politician of his time, he came to be looked upon as a symbol of uncompromising opposition of the exploitation of rural masses whose total emancipation became his passion.

He had deep concern for the welfare of the down-trodden strata of the society in general and peasantry in particular. In the words of Sir Chhotu Ram, "It is the foremost duty of every patriot to work for betterment of the peasantry and other exploited people."

The undivided Punjab was an agricultural province; agriculture was the mainstay of the people. The erstwhile Punjab consist an area of 148610 square miles in 1941, and formed as it were, a peninsula situated in the north western corner of the British Indian Empire, on its east the united province was situated. The Punjab had mountain and desert along there of its boundaries and these inhospitable tracts offered very few markets of its products. The province being a land locked region, had no natural sea port.¹ The purpose of this paper is to highlight the efforts of Chhotu Ram for the upliftment of peasantry.

Peasantry's scenario in the Erstwhile Punjab

The major portion of Punjab is of plains and contains a deep alluvial soil that is considered fertile in the world for agriculture as it is full of essential mineral constituents.² In this respect the province was singularly blessed and its agriculturists were more fortunate than those of any other parts of India.³ Because of British Government's wrong taxation policy the agriculturist had to bear higher incidence of taxes vis-a-vis urbanites (money lenders and non agriculturists) while the income level was just the reverse. High rate of land revenue and frequent occurrence of famines⁴ excessive litigation⁵, Uncertainty of animal life and high cattle mortality⁶, complicated and costly legal system⁷, extravagance on the occasion of marriages and social customs⁸, small land holdings, illiteracy, ignorance, corruption etc compelled the peasantry to borrow money from the money-lenders who acted like a veritable Shylock made the life of peasantry was miserable. All these obstacles were present in the peasantry life, and the protection of to the moneylenders by Britishers enhanced the

miseries of peasantry a lot. Rural people had the least part in spending of the revenue collected from them as most of that was spent on urbanities.⁹

Perhaps, fragmentation and endless subdivision of the landholdings was responsible for the backwardness of agriculture, and poverty of the cultivators in the province.

TABLE 1.1¹⁰

Size of Holdings	Holdings		Area	
	Number of owners	Percentage of the total	Estimated nos. of Acres cultivated	Percentage of total area cultivated
Below 1 Acres	625400	17.9	313000	1.0
Between 1-3 Acres	908400	25.5	1268000	4.4
Between 3-5 Acres	520000	14.9	1935000	6.6
Between 5-10 Acres	630600	18.0	4400000	15.1
Between 10-15 Acres	288300	8.2	3353000	11.5
Between 15-20 Acres	150100	4.3	2444000	8.4
Between 20-25 Acres	94000	2.7	1967000	6.8
Between 25-50 Acres	168700	4.8	5887000	20.4
50 Acres and above	120900	3.3	7452000	25.7

Table 1.1 tells volumes about the land holdings of the peasants. About 17.9% of the owners of cultivated land in the province possessed less than one acre of such land and the area thus owned was only 1% of the total. About 40.4% of the land owners own from one to less than five acres. Punjab, which seems to have been inarched out by nature as a prosperous agriculture region of India, was incidentally the most indebted province as well.¹¹

The process of depriving of debtors of the means of their livelihood in execution decrees was recognized neither in law nor in practice.¹² Every year three of four crore rupees were being spent on litigation alone.¹³ The ratio of money-lenders of Punjab province was four times higher than the country¹⁴. As a result the peasants' total debt in the province was Rs 55 crore in 1918 and it rose to 140 crore in 1930.¹⁵ The Indebtedness of the Punjab peasants' was out of proportion of its percentage of population in the country, while the population of the British Empire in India was 353 millions, that of the British Punjab was 2358 million: Thus the British Punjab had only 7% of the population of British India, but its share of debt exceeded 15% of the total debt.¹⁶ The presence of a high volume at agricultural indebtedness, which was unfortunately for the most part unproductive, checked the improvement in all directions and constituted one of the most serious problems for agricultural economy in Punjab.¹⁷

Land Revenue policy of British of exploitation and Moneylenders were responsible for this

indebtedness The Table clearly shows the picture:

TABLE- 1.2
Total Land Revenue in Rupees.¹⁸

Years	Land Revenue (in crores)	Years	Land Revenue (in crores)
1925-26	5.21	1931-32	4.87
1927-28	5.21	1932-33	4.84
1929-30	5.24	1933-34	5.13
1930-31	4.64	1934-35	4.95

TABLE- 1.3

"Net income per acre of the cultivators of various districts, if the whole land had belonged to them"¹⁹

Districts	Net Income								
	1928-29			1929-30			1930-31		
	Rs.	A.	P.	Rs.	A.	P.	Rs.	A.	P.
Layallpur	53	14	3	44	6	7	11	14	11
Montgomery	42	11	7	32	0	9	9	1	8
Amritsar	64	5	5	27	12	0	7	15	2
Rohtak	31	0	0	18	0	3	13	1	5
Jullunder	38	12	0	23	13	6	11	12	9
Hoshiarpur	20	7	4	31	7	7	20	10	4
Ludhiana	21	3	3	12	4	4	3	7	2

Above tables shows that, despite the fall in prices of agriculture commodities during the great economic depression, the land revenue remains unchanged. In 1937 out of total income of province government (Rs. 11.70 Crore), 9 crore came from the peasantry. This shows that the burden of state expenditure mainly fell on the shoulders of the peasantry.²⁰

Chhotu Ram as a champion of Peasants

Sir Chhotu Ram's role in Punjab Politics during his political career was significantly determined by his emergence as a peasant leader. First he joined congress and was appointed as president of district Congress in 1916.²¹ On the issue of Non Co- operation movement, he left Congress. He said, "for the non payment of land revenue, however small, the farmer could be deprived of all his land and in the auction those would be purchased just on nominal price by the members of money lending classes."²² Thus, in order to arrive at his goal he left congress.

The economic basis of the politics, Chhotu Ram helped in uniting the various agriculturists under the banner of Punjab National Unionist Party, formed in 1923 which found expression in the emergence of solo Unionist Government in the province in 1923 (1923-26) and 1937 (1937-45). In his ideology, the cementing force between different sections of the peasantry was economic interests and not religion.²³ For the awakening of the Zamindars, (a Zamindar is a person who derives the main portion

of his income from land)²⁴ he wrote a long series of 17 articles under the titles "Thagi ke Bazaar Ki Sair" and "Bechara Zamindar." He tried to point out their weaknesses also. For agriculturists he usually quoted a line from Iqbal:-

"Khamosi guftgu hai, baizabani hai zaban meri"²⁵

Chhotu Ram as a legislature tried to root out the past anomalies on the principles of equal distribution of taxes between agriculturists and non-agriculturists, spending provincial revenues on reconstruction and social welfare activities in rural areas. Proportionate to their contribution to the provincial exchequer imposition at further taxes to promote the interest of the masses on those sections of population who are rich and can pay the tax easily so as to cover up the gap between haves and have nots. As an Agriculture minister (28 Sept. 1924 to Dec. 1926) no extraordinary work was done for peasantry by him. But his achievements in social, economical and agrarian spheres were considerable.²⁶ However, he was not nominated as a minister in 1927, yet he was offered the post of Primeminister of Kashmir State. He refused it, because his mission in life was to work for the poor and down-trodden people. Chhotu Ram often used to say "I am not prepared to give up my life-long principles for any material gains and honours."²⁷ He realised very early that education is the only way to remove the backwardness of the peasantry. To enhance the facilities of education, he worked under a well thought-out plan. He enacted the Punjab Primary Education Act 1926 and 1940 and got half fee and full fee concessions in schools for agriculturists and the scheduled caste pupils respectively.²⁸ In 1924, Chhotu Ram represented a bill in the council entitled 'Borrowers' Protection Bill'. According to this bill, every money lender in Punjab had to maintain regular accounts in prescribed book. However, this bill was opposed by urbanities but this bill proved very beneficial for peasantry. As a minister of Agriculture, Chhotu Ram took up the Mandi Hydro Electric Project which was successfully implicated in spite of objections from various quarters.²⁹ In spite of a short term (1924-26) as a minister, Chhotu Ram was always anxious in the Punjab Legislative Council to do something beneficial for the peasantry.

As Chhotu Ram was not nominated for ministry in 1927, he preferred to lead the Unionist party and serve the interest of the peasantry. In 1928, 1930 and 1931 he also acted as nominated member and chairman at legislative council.

During 1928-31 he was a member of Standing Committee on Finance.³⁰ Under the reforms of 1935 there was a radical change in the political scenario in India. In 1937 election, National Unionist Party under the leadership of Chhotu Ram won 102 Seats out of 175 in the Legislative Assembly of the province. Chhotu Ram became Development Minister of Punjab and was later converted to Revenue Minister in 1941. Being an active member of council he got enacted various Agrarian laws:

1. The Punjab Regulation of the Accounts Act of 1930:-

Under this act, moneylenders were required to maintain their accounts in the prescribed form

and furnishing of six monthly statements in respect of loans to the debtors. Violating the provisions of this act would amount to the loss at interest wholly or in part and also of the cost of suits.³¹

2. The Punjab Relief of Indebtedness Act VII of 1934:-

This bill made provision that the interest on loan could not exceed the principal. The debtor stood discharged of the loan if he had paid the creditor twice the amount that he borrowed. It saved the debtors from a loan of about Rs. 200 lacs.³² However Chhotu Ram was not satisfied with the Punjab Relief of Indebtedness Act 1934 because some of the vital clauses were dropped by the local Government as the requisite prior sanction for introducing them, from the Government of India, had not been obtained so in 1936 he enacted the Punjab debtor protection Act.

3. The Punjab Debtor Protection Act II of 1936:-

The Act drafted and piloted by non official member of the council. Chhotu Ram, on March 31, 1936 and was passed on April 16, 1936.³³ This act checked the attachment of the execution of a court decree of the land on which a farmer and his family survives i.e. standing crops, standing tree, dwelling, bullock cart; 1/3 output at food grains and cattle's etc.

4. The Punjab Registration of Money Lenders Act III of 1938:-

It directed all moneylenders, agriculturists or non agriculturists to get registered except those landlords who lent money to their tenants for husbandry. They are directed to get license from the District Collector and Loan entries could be made only in the register certified by the Government and they could charge only the regulated rate of interest. The registration and license could be cancelled for reasons clearly stated in section 6 of the act.³⁴ Chhotu Ram supported the act as " The registration of Money-lenders Act, will do immense good to poor debtors by crippling money-lenders in the matter at their wily dishonest tricks." This measurement was not aimed at honest moneylenders but against those dishonest and unscrupulous people who thrived on the blood of poor peasants and workers including deprived classes³⁵

5. The Punjab Restitution of Mortgaged lands Act IV of 1938 :-

The important measure of Chhotu Ram was in the direction of releasing the peasants' mortgaged lands. To check this he got the Restitution of Mortgaged Lands Act IV of 1938 enacted.³⁶

This act provided for the restitution on those lands that had been mortgaged before June 8, 1901 free of cost, to the rightful owners. The Act benefited 3.65lakhs mortgages and immediately took possession at 8.35 acres at land which had been mortgaged for a mere 4.13 lakhs.³⁷

6. The Punjab Agricultural Produce Market Act of IX 1939:-

This Act was aimed at putting an end to the existing malpractices in the *Mandies*.³⁸ The farmers were exploited by the Merchants and *Aadties* as they are not given appropriate rates for their produce. In support of the act, Chhotu Ram said, " I may point out that if the Zamindars begin to get even two Annas in a Rupee more than do now for their produce, the total additional income which

will accrue to those people who are engaged in agriculture whether they are Zamindars, Tenants or Partners of agricultural labourers, will be no less than 10 crore, for agricultural produce of all sorts worth 80 crore of Rupees is sold in every year by agriculturists.³⁹ This act was passed to ensure proper returns to farmers and it was made mandatory on the part of traders to keep proper account of sale and purchase of agricultural produce.

7. The Punjab Relief of Indebtedness (Amendment) Act XII of 1940:-

Under this Act, Debt Conciliation Boards were constituted at District Headquarter for settling debts of long standing duration in order to save both the creditors and debtors from litigation and such cases were not allowed to be taken to civil courts. In thirties 58% of the holdings measured 18 acres each and those paying Rs 5 or the much desired peasants welfare fund Act was legislated unanimously in 1942. By 1944 Rs. 1.5 crore had already accumulated under this head and for future the Government promised to contribute Rs 55 lac annually. By 1942 loans worth Rupees 1400 lac were settled at an interest of 7.5% per annum for secured loan and 12.5% for unsecured loan.⁴⁰

8. The Punjab Weights, And Measurement Act XII of 1941:-

This Act aimed at ensuring proper weights and measure in the markets and *mandies*.⁴¹ This Act was to curb and punish those traders who used underweight or overweight measurement units. Government found that 66% traders were using such units to exploits the farmers. At the end of a public speech Chhotu Ram used to say "The Bania who under weights is sucking the blood of the farmers. To protect them from his clutches and to struggle for their economic and social improvement is my endeavour."⁴²

This Act, besides other things, provided for the maintenance of standard weights and measures.⁴³ This Act checked the fraudulent weights used by traders.

Other Acts:-

In order to divide the burden of taxation equally between peasantry and traders, the Punjab General Sales Tax Act 1941 was passed by which imposed tax on the sale of goods in towns and cities. The Punjab Sugarcane Commandment Act 1943⁴⁴ was enacted. This Act provided that the income from tax levied on the agriculturists by the sugar cane mills would be spent on improving roads leading to sugar factories and to provide shelters for the agriculturists and their carts.

Thus, we can say that due to Chhotu Ram and Unionist Party's efforts the condition of peasantry rose up and thus by 1942 the Punjab Cultivator has become the lowest land rate payer in the whole country.⁴⁵

Irrigation Facilities:-

In his efforts to make the agriculturists self sufficient, Chhotu Ram gave practical shape to the Kharif Canals Extension Scheme (1940)⁴⁶. Two nonparallel canals, one each for Rohtak and Hissar districts (1941-42) were dug.⁴⁷ A division was instituted (during 1943-44) for finding irrigational

possibilities in the western parts at the province.⁴⁸ New schemes of tubewell irrigation and lift irrigation from Western Jamna canal were taken in hand.⁴⁹ The Bhakra Hydro Electric Project was instituted in 1939. By 1944 Chhotu Ram had obtained clearance from the ruler of Bilashpur and the Government of Sind.⁵⁰ On 8 January, 1945 in Shakti Bhawan (Lahore). Chhotu Ram signed the Bhakra Dam Scheme as Revenue Minister. This was his last signature of life, the next day he breathed last.⁵¹ Chhotu Ram thundered in the Punjab Legislative Assembly, "There are some people who say that I am suffering from a mania of helping the Zamindars, and that I am the enemy of the urban people. That is wrong as the Zamindars are down-trodden and poor. No one knows the plight of the Zamindars as much as I do. I love them passionately and want earnestly to help them."⁵²

Thus Chhotu Ram was a great peasant leader and a man of the masses. He held the view that the over all progress of the country depends upon a considerable extent of the well-being of the farmers and rural workers. Chhotu Ram was undoubtedly one of the great champions of the poor peasants of his times.

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