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Mazhabi Sikhs in the British Army in Colonial Punjab 1849-1947

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The focus of this paper is the history and process of formation of distinct group identity among the Mazhabi Sikhs of Punjab. Mazhabis are part of the large Dalit community of Punjab sharing their origins among the so called Chuhra community amongst the Hindus. Military recruitment formed an important constitutive element in the formation of Mazhabis social and political identity. Mazhabi Sikhs were prepared by the colonial state for a war economy.

“Punjab is a Sikh majority state. After its re-organization in 1966 (when the Hindi-speaking areas were separated to constitute the new state of Haryana and some of the hill areas were transferred to Himachal Pradesh), the religious composition of the state was radically altered. The Sikhs constitute 63 percent of state’s population at present. Their share in the rural population is higher – about 72 percent. The Dalits or the Scheduled Castes (SCs) have a high proportion of population in the state i.e. 28.3 percent in 1991, which is projected to have increased to over 30 percent in 2001 – the highest among the states in India. Over 80 percent of them live in the rural areas. Punjab’s villages are, therefore, predominantly Sikh and Dalit”.¹

The Scheduled Castes of Punjab are made up of 37 different communities. However, a large majority of them belong to two castes, traditionally known as ‘Chamars’ and ‘Chuharas’. Though, they are currently registered under diverse names (such as Ad Dharmis and Ramdasias in case of Chamars and Mazhabis, Valmikis in case of Chuharas), together they make up for around three fourth of the entire Dalit population of the state.

Within Sikhism, Dalit Sikhs are divided into two segments. The Dalits whose profession is scavenging and cleaning are called Mazhabis and Rangretas. Mazhabis and Rangretas were Chuharas who converted to Sikhism². Mazhabi Sikhs are largely concentrated in the Majha region of Punjab.

The other segment of Dalit Sikhs consists of Ramdasias and Ravidasias. They are Chamars converted to Sikh religion. Religious conversion also changes the caste name. In some cases, a change of religion is also accompanied by a change of occupation.³

The Mazhabis, Rangretas, Ramdasias and Ravidasias are not equal to the Jat Sikhs, Khatri Sikhs, and Arora Sikhs within Sikhism in terms of their status. Their status is even lower than Ramgarhia Sikhs, Ahluwalia Sikhs and Bhabha Sikhs (trader caste). Thus, the position of caste continues to exist among the followers of Guru Nanak as well. Moreover caste hierarchy is also being practiced among the Dalit Sikhs. Ramdasias and Ravidasias Sikhs are considered

¹Puri, Harish, Dalits: in Regional Context, Rawat Publications, New Delhi, 2004, p. 190-191.

²Ibbetson, Denzil, Punjab Castes, Punjab, Languages Department Punjab, 1970, p. 294.

³Ibid, p. 295.

superior to the Mazhabis and Rangreta Sikhs. Although Ramdasias and Ravidasias originated from Chamars, the former considered them superior to the latter.

However, what makes caste discrimination in the Sikh community different from that of the Brahmanical social order is the absence of purity pollution frame of relations. The centre of power in Punjab revolves round the axle of land. Much of the land is owned by the Jat Sikhs. Although scheduled castes in Punjab constitute high a proportion of the population (28.3 %) in comparison to the all India average of 16.32 per cent, yet their share in ownership of land is negligible. They cultivate 0.4 per cent of all the landholdings occupying 0.72 per cent of the total cultivated area of the state.

Dalit Sikhs did not get equal treatment in the Gurudwaras of the upper caste Sikhs. Mazhabis were forbidden to enter the Golden Temple for worship; their offering of Karah Prasad was not accepted and the Sikhs denied them access to public well and other utilities.

The term ‘Mazhabi’ or ‘Mazhbi’ is derived from the time when three Chuhra Hindu rescued the body of Teg Bahadur from the Muslims, after the Guru had been executed at Delhi by Auranzeb. These three sweepers, on their return to Amritsar with the decapitated head, were at once baptized into the Sikh faith by Guru Gobind Singh, who called them ‘Mazhabi’ or ‘faithful’.⁴ Their popularity in the Sikh religion has been established by a rhyme Rangreta Guru Ka Beta (the Rangreta is the son of the Guru). This, at least, is one interpretation of the term. Another is that the Mazhabis were descended from Muslims forcibly or otherwise converted to Sikhism in the time of Ranjit Singh. As the first Chuhra converted to Sikhism had the title ‘Mazhabi’ so were their converted Muslim associates also called the descendents of the Chuhra converts of Gobind Singh sometimes distinguished themselves from their brothers whose conversion to Sikhism had been more recent.⁵ In some districts, especially in Ambala and Ludhiana, certain Mazhabis called themselves ‘Rangreta’s, professing to be socially superior to the other. This term meant “like a Ranger”, that is, like a Muslim Rajput group renowned for its bravery. Until 1900, Mazhabis were not found in large numbers in any particular locality, being scattered in groups of two or three families through the “Jat villages” where they worked as labourers for the Jat owners of the soil.⁶

The evolution of the Company’s army was integrally connected to the development of its Indian empire. In the eighteenth century Royal forces, particularly the navy, were often dispatched to India on lease to the Company to help it out at times of trouble, but this created problems, particularly in the relationship between the King’s army officers and the civilian authorities of the Company. So from very early on there was an attempt to raise a permanent company's army in India.⁷ The tradition of recruiting peasant armies had been developing in North India since the sixteenth century and this created what Dirk Kolff has called a “military labour market”. During the Mughal period, the distinction between this peasant army and the civilian population was

⁴Ethne K. Marengo, *The Transformation of Sikh Society*, New Delhi, Heritage Publishers, 1977, p.131.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cohen Stephen P., 1971. *The Indian Army: Its Contributions to the Development of a Nation*.

never very clearly marked. It was in the eighteenth century that the rulers of some of the North Indian successor states, like the Nawab of Awadh and the Raja of Benaras, refined this recruitment system and raised sophisticated trained peasant armies distanced from the civilian communities.⁸ It was this tradition that the East India Company appropriated as it started recruiting its own army, which came to be known as the Sepoy (from Sipahi or soldier) army. The French had first initiated this tradition of recruiting an Indian army in 1721-1729.

It was renewed by Lord Clive after the defeat of the Bengal Nawab in 1757. This Sepoy army was to be trained and disciplined according to European military standards and commanded by European officers in the battlefield.

It was in the Punjab that the British experimented with and created an “new agrarian frontier” through its massive irrigation works that opened huge tracts of land in the arid western districts leading to large scale migration to and settlement of the so-called new canal colonies.⁹ And by the second half of the nineteenth century, following the extraordinary events of 1857, the Punjab became the popularly acclaimed “sword arm of the Raj”, maintaining an intimate association with the military by serving as the principal recruiting ground of the Indian Army for more than half a century, from the late 1880s to the end of colonial rule in 1947. Its contribution of military manpower to the colonial armed forces during this period was unmatched by any other province in colonial India, at the turn of the nineteenth century, more than half the combatants of the army were drawn from the province and up to the outbreak of the second world war, the Punjabi element of the Indian Army never fell below sixty percent. The dominance of the Punjabis in the respective arms of the army was far more significant. On the eve of the First World War, Punjabis accounted for 66% in the artillery and 45% in the infantry.¹⁰ These figures indicate the highest rate of military participation ratio from a particular province ever experienced in colonial India, suggesting that the army was likely to have exerted an unusually dominant influence in the social, economic and political development of the Punjab.

It would, of course, be erroneous to suggest that the militarization of Punjabi state and society emerged essentially out of the demands of colonial rule. The military theme has always featured prominently in the region's pre-colonial history. Strategically situated at the North Western fringe of the Indo-Gangetic plains, at the frontier where the Indian subcontinent leads in Central Asia, the Punjab had for centuries functioned as the “rout zone, connecting the areas of Peshawar and over the Hindu Kush into Afghanistan with the cultural political centers around Delhi and Agra” and the gateway for the overland movements of the traders and invaders into India.

“The military theme persisted into the nineteenth century, when, after a century of turbulence and semi anarchy caused by warring bands battling for territorial control in the wake of the weakening and eventual collapse of the Mughal Empire, the Punjab was galvanized into

⁸ Alavi Seema. 1995. *The Sepoys and the Company : Tradition and Transition in Northern India, 1770-1830*. Delhi ; Oxford University Press.

⁹ Ali Imran, *The Punjab Under Imperialism: 1885 – 1947*, Delhi, 1989.

¹⁰ Annual Caste Returns showing class composition of the Indian Army on 1 January 1910. IOR:L/MIL/14/226.

militarized state under the Sikh ruler, Maharajah Ranjit Singh”.¹¹ “The Sikh kingdom of a classical example of “ a regional Indianfiscal military state” in which resources generated by a centralized authority were largely devoted to maintaining its military machinery”.¹² Upon his death in 1839, however, Ranjit Singh’s empire disintegrated and the Punjab once again fell quickly into the all familiar pattern of disastrous internal strife. The ensuing unrest in the Punjab prompted the British, who were concerned about the security at the North-Westernborders of Indian empire, to annex the region after two successive military campaigns against the Sikhs in 1845 and 1848.

A number of crucial elements need to be addressed if the wider impact of the military factor in the colonial history of South Asia is to be understood. First, the part played by the military in the processes of conquest and construction of the empire in India require deeper analysis. The establishment of the British dominion in India from the battle of Plassy in 1757 to the annexation of the Punjab a century later came on the back of a series of successful military campaigns, fought mainly by colonial armed forces comprising of mainly Indian regiments led by British officers.

The outbreak and eventual suppression of the military mutiny that turned into a political revolt was a timely reminder that imperial supremacy and dominance in India rested primarily on military power, of which the army was the key instrument.

One of the most distinctive features of Punjab’s colonial experience was its close and sustained relationship with the military. In the aftermath of the 1857 Revolt, the established military labour market in North- Central India the mainstay of Bengal Army gradually gave way to an alternative, but equally established, military labour market in North Western India, centered on the old Sikh empire in the Punjab. By the 1880s, with the Great Game in vogue and the martial races doctrine dominating recruiting policies, the Punjab province became the principal recruiting ground of the Indian Army.

Despite this long and pervasive entrenchment of the military, with its evident social, economic and political ramifications in the province, there are still major gaps in the understanding of the role played by the military in the development of the Punjab, particularly while under colonial rule. While the existing literature on the colonial history of the Punjabreadily acknowledge the imperial military requirements had weighed heavily on the political and economic development of the province, the extent and process by which the province had become militarized from the late nineteenth century onwards has not been sufficiently explored.¹³

Although the position of the Punjab as the main recruiting ground for the Indian Amy is generally well known, much less, however, is understood about the actual nature of the military labour market in the Punjab. What was the size of this market in the Punjab, and who were recruited and from where? How was the recruitment actually carried out and what motivated so

¹¹ Grewal J.S.,*The Sikhs of the Punjab*, Cambridge, 1990,pp.99-115.

¹² D.A. Low, ‘ Pakistan and India: Political Legacies from the Colonial Past’ , in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 25 (2), 2003, p.262.

¹³ Talbot Ian, *Punjab and the Raj 1849-1947*, New Delhi, 1988.

called military classes amongst the Punjabis to take up military service with the British? How was this military labour market then provided for? One of the most distinctive features of Punjab's colonial experience was its close and sustained relationship with the military.

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