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Historical Perspective of Kirti Kisan Party and its Politics in colonial Punjab

Abstract

Punjab is known for its resistance against Colonial rule. The Kirti Kisan Lehar(wave) came into Punjab in 1928. It was based upon Gadar movement which revived the party by encouraging militant nationalism in Punjab. The Kirti Kisan Party was a mirror of deliberative condition of peasants, landless and suppressed classes of Punjab. Literally, the word 'Kirti' means 'the toiler'. The party defined a Kirti as a person, who does labor physically with his own hands and does not exploit others. There were a lot of movement in century against the British Raj in India and the Punjab. The most famous movements were Gadar Movement, Satiyaghara Movement, Babar Akali Movement and Kirti Kisan Lehar. By the beginning of the 20th century, peasants and the small farmers in Punjab came into the forefront of public reactions against the British administration because they were under the debt. Repressive policies of the Government towards people in general were also the main reason for their protest. The object of the party was to get free the nation from the British imperialism by using every possible method. The approach led to the search for more effective ways to further struggle against imperialism which later emerged as an agrarian movement in this province. This paper will explore the politics of Kirti Kisan party in colonial Punjab. By focusing the Kirti Kisan party perspective it is an attempt to understand the struggle of Marxists Punjabis for the freedom. It also highlights the impacts of colonialism on the life of common peasant in Punjab.

The word Punjab consists of two Persian words: 'punj' and 'ab'. 'Punjab' means 'five' and 'ab' means 'water' or 'river'. The land in the north-west of the vast Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent is known as the Punjab because therein flow five tributaries of the Indus River, the Jehlum, the Chenab, the Ravi, the Bease and the Satluj. In the days of Rig Veda, the Punjab included all the territory covered by the seven rivers the ' Sapt Sandhu' the rivers of this area known as Vitasia now Jehlum, Asuki now Chenab, Parushni now Ravi, Vipasa Now Beas, Sutdra now Satluj. It was known as 'Sapt Sandhu' or Brahmavarta. In the Mauryan and the Kushan periods, the boundaries of the Punjab extended beyond the Hindukush.

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During the period of the Dehli Sultanate, the frontier of the Punjab or the Lahore province extended up to Peshawar. The early Mughal period, the Punjab extended from river Satluj to the river Indus. At later Punjab divided into two provinces the province of Lahore and Multan and throughout the Mughul period, these arrangements continued to be with the rise of the Sikh power in the Punjab its boundaries were once again recast. In the days of Ranjit Singh, the Lahore kingdom, as it was called extended right up to the Khyber in the west and up to the Satluj in east. In 1849 when the British finally took over the administration of the Punjab they added the Haryana Prant including Hissar, and Delhi to Punjab. In 1901 the disintegration of the Punjab stated. Lord Curzon, the then viceroy of India, separated the border district beyond the Indus from the administrative control of the Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab and placed them in the charge of chief commissioner, directly responsible to the Indian government. In 1912, Delhi was also made independent of the Punjab. Thus the old undivided Punjab has total area of more than one lakh square miles and its population on the eve of partition was more than two crores. After the annexation of Punjab by the British forces in 1849. British government introduced different types of reforms in Punjab especially in agriculture and recruitment. Then first time started different type of Marxist movements in Punjab. Russian revolution has been occurred in 1917, but the Marxist movement in Punjab was started before that socialist revolution. The economic hardship and atrocious laws of the colonial masters created grievances against the authorities. Political temperature had risen in 1907. A large number of public meeting has been held in allover Punjab especially in Lahore, Lyallpur, Raawalpindi and sangla.¹ Lala Lajpat Rai, was one of the main leader of Punjab who was very active at that time to organizing public meetings. Saradra Ajit Singh who was regarded by British as 'the most dangerous and seditious',² was also toured different district of Punjab. On 20th March 1907 a public meeting held in Lyallpur, Lal lajpat Rai, Sardar Ajit Sing and Shahab-ud-Din participated in this meeting. The famous poem of Lala Banke Dayal, Editor of *Jhansail* was presented.

Pagri Sambhal o jatta,

Pagri Sambhal O

(O jat, of the Punjab maintain your dignity)

After this conference peasant of Lyallpur, started a movement Pagari Sambha Jatta. Main leader of this movement was Ajit Singh from (uncle of Bhagat Singh). Peasant and liberation moments started all over the India and especially in Punjab. After the world war first Punjabis experienced a very bitter experience from British government, this was also a main cause for the formulation a radical and revolutionary parties in Punjab. On the other hand after the failure of Ghadar movement most the Ghadarites started again their political activities under the name of Kirti Kisan Party. Before making the party comrades of Ghadar party decided to start Kirti magazine. Bhai Santukh Singh, Bhag Singh Candian and karam singh cheema started working on magazine. The name of Magazine was "Kirti" this was published in Punjabi³. Notification of launching this magazine was published in different news paper of Punjab.

*"A monthly Journal called the Kirti will shortly start publication from Amritsar. The Journal will be the voice of Indian workers living in America and Canada and will be dedicated to the sacred memory of those heroes and martyrs who awakened slating India at the time when the value of the service was for higher than it is now, and whose ideal was regarded by our own people as well as by outsiders, as an absolutely vague dream. The Journal will sympathize with all the workers throughout the world, the entire female sex, and the subjugated the weak and oppressed nations and subjugated India."*⁴

Kirti became very famous magazine in the masses. On 12 April 1927 Sohan Singh Josh and Bagh Singh Candian invited the people in Jallianwala Bagh to formulate Kirti Kisan party (KKP). In this conference this conference followed the resolution as given below:

1. For the freedom of India a strong party of the peasants and workers should be established whose aim would be to achievement the freedom.
2. Kirti branches should be organized in every district.
3. Support to the Chinese freedom struggle and Russian revolution should be extended.
4. Small holding should be exempted from revenue by the Government.
5. Eight-hours days should be fixed for the factory.
6. Sympathy and solidarity with the Cawnpore mill workers who were on strike.⁵

In this conference also announced that next 2nd conference will be held in Lyallpur. In British Punjab, government was working on divide and rule policy. Particularly British government wanted to divide the people on the name of religion. But Kirti Kisan Party at that time one of the secular party. Main objective of this party was to liberated India through socialist revolution. A lot of Muslim also participated in the leadership of KKP, like Mir Abdullah Majid, Shukat Usman, Rafique Ahmad, Ghous Rehman, Fazal Elhi Qurban. On the other hand some of religious leader from Sikhism also showed interest KKP after conference. KKP was announced as a party in 1928., that was after the 10th anniversary of Baloshivik revolution. Punjabi was very much impressed by from Russian revolution. Because after revolution the economic condition of Russian working class was became very good. So, the people of Punjab wanted to this type of revolution.

Second conference of the party has been held in Lyallpur. In this conference Sohan Singh Josh was elected as secretary and M.A. Majid Joint secretary. A sub-committee of five members of Kidar Nath Sehgal, M.A. Majid, Sohan Singh Josh, Gopal Singh qaumi and Hira Singh Drad was constituted to enact rules and regulations⁶.

Philip Spratt⁷ and Bradley⁸ communist from Britain and some other communist like S.A Dange and Kidart Nath Sehgal were also participated in conference. Issues related to peasant and labor like reduction in Tax, land revenue, abolition of *Abiana*, *Malia*, Lack of irrigation water and *chowkidara* were

discussed and decided to start struggle to solve it. On the other hand KKP boycotted Zamindara League of Chhotu Ram. Zamindara league was just working for the land lords and much closed to the establishment. So KKP was decided to organize different other Farmer committees (Kisan Committees) as party front. Lyallpur second conference of KKP was very successful. Lyallpur division actually consisted on small holding of lands. Farmers who belonged to this division have only 12 to 50 acars of land. In city most of the people associated with textile sector as a laborer. This city was very fertile for revolutionary movements. After the second KKP conference in Lyallpur many youth member started working for liberation and socialism in Lyallpur. In Lyallpur demand were made to hold this type of conferences also hold in other cities like Sargodha, Rohtak and Rajasthan and other places.

3rd conference of KKP was held in Rohtak on 10th March 1928. According Sohan Singh Josh Jawahar Lal Nehru also participated in conference and delivered lecture.⁹ Sohan Singh Josh also delivered in this conference he stated as:

“What we want is that the question of private property should be done away with. All crimes are being committed and cases instituted simply because there is private property and private ownership in the world.”¹⁰,

Party was started working with different groups and worker unions this was first time happened in the politics of the left. KKP was also gained fame because of their work in different peasant and worker fronts. When KKP was working in different area of India then the party leadership wanted to change the name of the party from Kirti Kisan party to workers and peasant party. KKP started organizing different unions in different area of Punjab and outside of Punjab like, press worker union, motor driver unions and other small unions. In *Desh Sewak*¹¹ magazine Sohan Singh Josh in his interview he stated the objective of the party.

“To liberate laborer and peasants from every kind of political, economic and social serfdom. It also aimed at organizing laborers and peasant to achieve complete independence from British imperialism and visualized to set up a worker and peasant government i.e. establishment of a Kirti or Bolshevik type of state which would nationalize land, factories, banks and railways and would cancel all debts.”¹²,

KKP continuously working on the public meetings they were organized next conference in Meerut under the president ship of Kidar Nath Seghal of Lahore. Most of the scholars have their views that this conference was the base of Meerut Conspiracy.

In India throughout 1928 and 1929 there was a strong wave of strikes, on the railroads, in ironworks and in the textile industry. 31 million working days lost in 1928, through industrial disputes. Trade union numbers and organization grew rapidly during this period. The British Government initiated a Committee headed by Sir Charles Fawcett. The arrests of prominent trade unionists and socialists were part of the preparation for the issue of the report¹³. Most of the All India Workers and Peasant party members were arrested. The Meerut trial concerns 33

persons (three of them Englishmen), most of them well-known figures in the trade union and working class movement in India. The arrest of these men took place on or about March 20th, 1929, and was accompanied by wholesale raids and house searches. These arrests and raids were made the occasion of imposing military demonstrations in various places throughout British India.¹⁴ Most of the people were well-known officials of trade unions, including the present Assistant Secretary of the All-India Trade Union Congress, the Secretary of the Federation of Trades Unions in Bengal, and practically all the members of the Executive of the largest textile trade union in Bombay. The arrested include also eight members of the All-India Congress Committee (the Executive Committee of the Indian National Congress), and practically every member of the Executive Committee of the recently founded All-India Workers' and Peasants' Party (former Kirti Kisan Party). Attempts are made to justify the present case by denouncing the arrested men as Communists. Undoubtedly, some of them are Communists, as they have themselves openly declared, but many of them have had no connection with the Communist movement. For example, Kishorilal Ghosh, the Secretary of the Bengal T.U. Federation, has never taken part in other than trade union activity. Lester Hutchinson, who was arrested as an afterthought when he took up the task of carrying on some of the trade union and agitation work after the arrest of the others, was a journalist on the Indian Daily Mail and unconnected with the Labor movement. The attack is being made against all those who have been prominently connected with labor or peasant activity of any kind. The Meerut prisoners are being charged under Section 121A of the Indian Penal Code. The charge against the prisoners is of particular interest. The following is the official statement. "The complaint of Mr. R. A. Horton, Officer on Special Duty under the Director, Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, Government of India, showeth:

"That there exists in Russia an organisation called the Communist International. The aim of this organisation is, by creation of armed revolution, to overthrow all the existing forms of Government throughout the world and to replace them by Soviet Republics subordinate to, and controlled by the central Soviet administration in Moscow".¹⁵

In this report intelligence officer also discuss the politics of different front which were organizing by the All India Workers and Peasant Party (AIWPP) like,

"That the said Communist International carries on its work and propaganda through various committees, branches, and organisations, controlled by and subject to itself, e.g., the Executive Committee of the Communist International (E.C.C.I.), and various sub-committees of the same, including a sub-committee concerned with Eastern and Colonial affairs (Colonial Bureau); the Communist Party of Great Britain (C.P.G.B.), which is a section of the Communist International; the Red International of Labour Unions (R.T.L.U.), the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, the League Against Imperialism, the Young Communist League (Y.C.L.) and various other bodies¹⁶."

In intelligence report the office of Mr. R. A. Horton, Officer on Special Duty under the Director, Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, Government of India declared that this was a conspiracy against the British imperialism which was funded and supported by Russian government. No doubt most of the communist

were involve in this conspiracy but al large number of unionist have no interest in any communist activity they were just trade u unionist. But in this report Mr. R.A. Horton wrote that;

“That the ultimate objective of the said Communist International is the complete paralysis and overthrow of existing Governments in every country (including India), by means of a general strike and armed uprising. It has outlined a programme or plan of campaign which should be followed for the achievement of this ultimate objective. Among the methods so ordained are:

- a. *The incitement of antagonism between Capital and Labour.*
- b. *The creation of Workers' and Peasants' Parties, Youth Leagues, Unions, etc., ostensibly for the benefit of the members thereof, but in fact for the purpose of propaganda: the domination of such parties by Communists pledged to support the aims of the Communist International and the unification of such bodies under one control subservient to the Communist International.*
- c. *The introduction of fractions or nuclei of such Communists with illegal objects as aforesaid into existing Trade Unions, Nationalist bodies and political and other organisations, with the object of capturing the same or obtaining their support in the interests of the Communist International.*
- d. *The encouragement of strikes, hartals, and agitation.*
- e. *Propaganda by speeches, literature, newspapers, the celebration of anniversaries connected with the Russian Revolution, etc., etc.*
- f. *The utilisation and encouragement of any movements hostile to the Government.”¹⁷*

In this report intelligence officer particularly discuss the Conference of All India Workers and Peasant Party

“That the accused have met and conspired together as aforesaid at various places within and without British India, and amongst other at Meerut, and in pursuance of such conspiracy as aforesaid, the accused formed a Workers and Peasants' Party at Meerut and there held a Conference thereof.”

The main two persons of this conspiracy was Muzaffar Ahmed and a British comrade Philip Sparrt and sohan singh josh were the main organizer of Meeurt Conference. After that case a theatre related to this case was performed in caxton hall by the Manchester street theatre group the Red Megaphones.¹⁸

During these years from 1926 to 29 Kirti's were working on the peasant and laborer revolution. They were organized many trade unions and other fronts. On the other side KKP was struggling for revival of *Panchiyat* system of speedy justice and collection of revenue. Kirti party was interested in economical reforms. On 20th June 1931 all Kisan Sabha collectively organized a conference at Lyallpur under the president ship of M.S. Mangal Singh. Main objective of this conference¹⁹;

1. At least 50% of general remission in land revenue and *Abiana*.

2. Government should declare the purchase of cotton at fixed price.
3. Land Revenue should be on the basis of income.
4. Redaction in *Abiana*, Chahi rate should be abolished.

All India Workers and Peasants Party were believed in armed struggle, so some radical religious group who were believed in radical politics also with the party policies. British government has some intelligence reports regarding Russian invasion in India. All the communist especially from Punjab will also supporting the agenda of USSR. Many Punjabi communist and Ghadarites were come back from USA and Canada to Punjab in these days. Afghanistan chapter of Ghadar Party was also actively working for collection of weapons. On 22nd June 1932 police ransacked the office of KKP to suppress the activities of the party and seized copies of cyclostyled Urdu pamphlet entitled "The programme of the Indian Communist Party"²⁰. But party activities did not stop. Comrades organized a public meeting in Nanakana Sahib in which approximate 2000 people participated²¹. In this public meeting Kirti leaders exposed the dual nature policies of Congress. They also organized protest against Meerut Conspiracy Case in Lahore, Amritsar and formulated a committee "Rajsi Qaidi Chhura" (Committee for the release of political prisoners). They wrote the reports of the political activities and dispatched to the other district and provinces for seeking support of the people for the different areas. Despite several Police restrictions, party celebrated 1st May (international Labor Day) in 1933 in Lyallpur, Lahore and Amritsar. Police also continued expedition to curb the agitation. After the released prisoners of Meerut Conspiracy case Abdul Majid, Sohan Singh Josh and Kedar Nath Sehgal, again joined the party. They decided to revise the party program and focused on some particular area rather than whole province. In September 1934, Punjab Kirti Kisan Party, The Anti-imperialist League, The Naujawan Bharat Sabha, Amritsar Kisan Sabha and Punjab Kisan League were declared illegal by British Government and their activities were banned.²² After the announcement of ban, mostly communists reorganized themselves under the banner of "Punjab Kisan Qarza Committee". After the ban of the party Kirti has to suspend its publication but after 1935 Kirti magazine shifted to Meerut and renamed as "Kirti Lehar" and now this magazine become weekly. It's published in Urdu and Gurmukhi. Kirti Lehar was published regularly till 1939, according to police record 5000 copies per month circulated and hundreds of copies were posted to Ghadar contacts in North and South America, Africa, Malaya, China and Fiji.²³ Kirti leaders in Punjab were started working in Kisan committees and started to organize different public meetings. Now these committees were working on purely peasant issues like water supply for irrigation and different problems of the tenants. Kirti Kisan party was very much famous in main villages. Kisan committees started protest against the policies of British Government. Approximately four thousand peasants were also arrested and jailed in the course of movement. Prominent leaders who were imprisoned were, Baba Sohan Singh Bakana, Bagh Singh Canadian, Ram Singh Majitha and Sardar Ujagar Singh²⁴. World War second has changed the political scenario of the world. KKP has also changed the policies of the party. Party has decided to bring the jathas out of the jail instead of sending them to jail. Party was called off the struggle. The Party organ Kirti Lehar also had to suspend its publication in December 1939.

Conclusion

The coercive attitude of the government could not melt the confidence and spirit of the freedom fighters. Party carried on their work very well till December 1939. The cause behind the genesis of these movements was primarily the oppressive policies of the British Government towards the Indians at all levels. Kirti Kisan Lehar shared many things with the Communist movement yet the two remained distinct and worked parallel to each other for most of the time. However, these movements as a whole display many drastically similar features. But the main thing these were all anti-British, for the ultimate aim of them was to get India free from British by every possible way. This movement not only performed revolutionary activities in India but also shook the British Empire with its anti-British radicalism at the international level. The anti- British, anti-colonial movements in other countries exerted a formidable influence upon the ideology and functioning of this movement. Kirti Kisan Lehar not only had relations with the other labor movements in India, but also maintained in intimate relations with the movements active across the abroad. Most of the members of this movement are from outside India. This is why it is termed as the reincarnation of the Gadar party. The Russian revolution extorted a formidable influence upon the ideological stance of this movement.

In the era of de radicalization, it's out fashion to write about the revolutionaries. But in those societies where have no democratic space it is obvious for the people to join the armed struggle, because this also a way to get the freedom.

Notes & References

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- ² Home Department (Political-Deposit), Government of India, proceeding, August, 1907, No.3.
- ³ Bhagwan Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab* (1926-47), p.66.
- ⁴ *Proceedings Home Political*, No. 235/1926 (N.A.I.).
- ⁵ Sohan Singh Josh, *My Tryst With Secularism-An Autobiography*, pp.117-118.
- ⁶ The Kirti, May 1928; see also Sohan Singh Josh; *My Tryst with Secularism-an autobiography*, p.117.
- ⁷ Philip Spratt (26 September 1902 – 8 March 1971) was a British writer and intellectual. Initially a communist sent by the British arm of the [Communist International \(Comintern\)](#), based in Moscow, to spread Communism in India, he subsequently became a friend and colleague of [M.N. Roy](#), founder of the Communist parties in [Mexico](#) and India.
- ⁸ Benjamin Francis Bradley (1898-1957) was a communist metalworker, born in Walthamstow, who was sent to India to promote militant trade unionism in 1927 and sentenced in the infamous Meerut Conspiracy Trial five years later.
- ⁹ Sohan Singh Josh; *My Tryst with Secularism-an autobiography*, p.120
- ¹⁰ Meerut conspiracy Case papers, Sr.no,149,Exhibit No. p.1468(1) p. 742 (N.A.I)
- ¹¹ *Desh Sewak* was a secular democratic weekly Published from Jalandhar.
- ¹² Subodh Roy (ed.), *Communism in India: Unpublished Documents (1925-34)*, Ganasahitya Prakash, Calcutta, 1972, P.240.
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- ¹⁶ <https://web.archive.org/web/20080303235748/http://www.wcml.org.uk/internat/meerut1.htm>
- ¹⁷ Ibid
- ¹⁸ Sixteen year old Jimmy Miller and some unemployed friends organized a street theatre group to spread the communist word.
- ¹⁹ *The Tribune*, June, 23, 1931.
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- ²¹ *Proceeding Home Political*, No. 18/06/1932.
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- ²⁴ *The kirti lehar*, 20 August, 1939