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

Abstract

Punjab was the hub of the resistance movements during the Colonial times against the British Raj. The Gadares came into Punjab and started a Punjabi magazine named as 'Kirti'. Afterwards, they formulated a party in 1928 known as the Kirti Kisan Party. The main leadership of the Part has consisted of Sohan Singh Josh and M. A. Majid. Kirti Kisan Party represented small landholders, peasants and working class. The Kirti magazine clearly defines the word Kirti 'the toiler', who work physically and do not exploit others by any means. The 20th Century was overwhelmed by the resistance movements against Colonial rulers, in which most popular were Satiyaghara Movement, Babar Akali Movement, Gadar Movement, and Kirti Kisan Lehar. Due to the heavy debt, the initial decades of the 20th Century proved to be more challenging for the peasants and the small farmers of Punjab. So they were more resilient against the British administration. The British tried to repress the people, which resulted in protests from the side of people. The Party aimed to put an end to British Raj through every possible means, which resulted in the adoption of the agrarian movement in Punjab. This paper aims to find out about the Kirti Kisan Party and its politics during colonial Punjab. This paper is an attempt to analyze the struggle of Marxist Punjabis for freedom with the special focus of the Kirti Kisan Party. The paper also highlights colonial impacts on Punjabi peasants.

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 Punjab because therein flow five tributaries of the Indus River, the Jehlum, the Chenab, the Ravi, the Beas and the Satluj. In the days of Rig Veda, 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, Vipas Now Beas, Sutdra now Satluj. It was known as „Sapt Sandhu“ or Brahmavarta. In the Mauryan and the Kushan periods, the boundaries of Punjab extended beyond the Hindukush.

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During the period of the Dehli Sultanate, the frontier of Punjab or the Lahore province extended up to Peshawar. In the early Mughal period, 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 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 the east. In 1849 when the British finally took over the administration of Punjab they added the Haryana including Hissar, and Delhi to Punjab. In 1901 the disintegration of 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 Punjab and placed them in the charge of chief commissioner, directly responsible to the Indian government. In 1912, Delhi was also made independent of Punjab. Thus the old undivided Punjab has a 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. The British government introduced different types of reforms in Punjab, especially in agriculture and recruitment. Then the first time started a different type of Marxist movement in Punjab. The Russian revolution has 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. The political temperature had risen in 1907. A large number of the public meeting has been held in allover Punjab especially in Lahore, Lyallpur, Rawalpindi, and Sangla.¹ Lala Lajpat Rai was one of the main leaders of Punjab who was very active at that time to organize public meetings. Sardar Ajit Singh who was regarded by British as "the most dangerous and seditious"² was also toured different districts 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 Punjab, maintain your dignity)

After this conference peasant of Lyallpur, started a movement Pagari Sambha Jatta. The main leader of this movement was Ajit Singh (uncle of Bhagat Singh). Peasant and liberation moments started all over India and especially in Punjab. After world war first Punjabis experienced a very bitter experience from the British government, this was also the main cause for the formulation of radical and revolutionary parties in Punjab. On the other hand, after the failure of the Gadar movement, most of the Ghadarites started again their political activities under the name of the Kirti Kisan Party. Before making the party comrades of Gadar party decided to start Kirti magazine. Bhai Santukh Singh, Bhag Singh Candian, and karam singh cheema started working on magazines. The name of Magazine was "Kirti" this was published in Punjabi³. Notification of launching this magazine was published in a different newspaper in 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 people as well as by outsiders, as a 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 a 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 the Kirti Kisan Party (KKP). In 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 achieve freedom.
2. Kirti branches should be organized in every district.
3. Support to the Chinese freedom struggle and the Russian revolution should be extended.
4. Smallholding 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

This conference also announced that the next 2nd conference will be held in Lyallpur. In British Punjab, the government was working on divide and rule policy. Particularly the British government wanted to divide the people on the name of religion. But Kirti Kisan Party at that time one of the secular parties. The main objective of this party was to librate India through the socialist revolution. A lot of Muslims 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 religious leaders from Sikhism also showed interest in KKP after the conference. KKP was announced as a party in 1928., that was after the 10th anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. Punjabi was very much impressed by from Russian revolution. Because after the revolution the economic condition of the Russian working class became very good. So, the people of Punjab wanted this type of revolution.

The 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 Spratt ⁷ and Bradley ⁸ communists from Britain and some other communists like S.A Dange and Kidart Nath Sehgal also participated in the conference. Issues related to peasant and labor like reduction in Tax, land revenue, the 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. Zamindari league was just working for the landlords and much closed to the establishment. So KKP was decided to organize different other Farmer committees (Kisan Committees) as party front. Lyallpur's second conference of KKP was successful. Lyallpur division consisted of a smallholding of lands. Farmers who belonged to this division have only 12 to 50 acres of land. In the city most of the people associated with the textile sector as a laborer. This city was very fertile for revolutionary movements. After the second KKP conference in Lyallpur, many youth members started working for liberation and socialism in Lyallpur. In Lyallpur, demand was made to hold this type of conference also held in other cities like Sargodha, Rohtak, and Rajasthan and other places.

3rd conference of KKP was held in Rohtak on 10th March 1928. According to Sohan Singh, Josh Jawahar Lal Nehru also participated in conferences and delivered lectures.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 are private property and private ownership in the world.¹⁰”

Party was started working with different groups and worker unions this was the first time that happened in the politics of the left. KKP has also gained fame because of its work in different peasant and worker fronts. When KKP was working in a 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 a different area of Punjab and outside of Punjab like press worker unions, 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 laborers 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 presidentship 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 the textile industry. 31 million working days lost in 1928, through industrial disputes. Trade union numbers and organizations 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 the 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. ¹⁴Most 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, sheweth:

*"That there exists in Russia an organization called the Communist International. The aim of this organization is, by the 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 organized 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 organizations, 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 bodies"*¹⁶.

In the 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 British imperialism which was fund and support by the Russian government. No doubt most of the communist

were involved in this conspiracy but a large number of unionists have no interest in any communist activity they just traded 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 program 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 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 organizations, 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 utilization 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 others 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 were Muzaffar Ahmed and a British comrade Philip Spratt and Sohan Singh josh were the main organizers of the Meerut 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 the revival of the *Panchayat 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 presidentship of M.S. Mangal Singh. The main objective of this conference¹⁹;

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

2. The government should declare the purchase of cotton at a fixed price.
3. Land Revenue should be based on 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 groups who were believed in radical politics also with the party policies. The British government has some intelligence reports regarding the Russian invasion in India. All the communists especially from Punjab will also be supporting the agenda of the USSR. Many Punjabi communists and Ghadarites came back from the USA and Canada to Punjab in these days. Afghanistan chapter of Ghadar Party was also actively working for the 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 program of the Indian Communist Party"²⁰. But party activities did not stop. Comrades organized a public meeting in Nanakana Sahib in which approximately 2000 people participated²¹. In this public meeting, Kirti leaders exposed the dual nature policies of Congress. They also organized protests against Meerut Conspiracy Case in Lahore, Amritsar, and formulated a committee "Rajsi Qaidi Chhuraao"(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 the support of the people for the different areas. Despite several Police restrictions, the party celebrated 1st May (International Labor Day) in 1933 in Lyallpur, Lahore, and Amritsar. Police also continued the 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 areas rather than the 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 the British Government and their activities were banned.²² After the announcement of the ban, mostly communists reorganized themselves under the banner of the "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 "Kirti Lehar" and now this magazine becomes 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's party was a very much famous main village. Kisan committees started to protest against the policies of the British Government. Approximately four thousand peasants were also arrested and jailed in the course of the 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 jail. Party was called off the struggle. The Party organ Kirti lehar also had to suspend its publication in December 1939.

Conclusion

The use of power against the supporters of Kirti Kisan Lehar did not shake the confidence of the freedom fighters. The party essentially was established to resist the repressive attitude and policies of the Raj towards the Indians. Party remained in working till December 1939. Although Kirti Kisan Lehar and the Communist Movement were two very different movements but worked parallel and had a lot of similarities. But mainly both were fighting for freedom from foreign rule. The movement had a deep impact on India and the international level through revolutionary activities. The movement did not only tremble the colonial power in India but it also inspired liberation movements around the world ideologically to functionally. Kirti Kisan Lehar established relations with the other labor movements within India as well as with international labor movements. In the age of de-radicalization, it's not valued to pen down about the revolutionaries and their struggle. Although, in societies without any democratic values or spaces, it's understandable if people do join the armed struggles and consider it the only possible way to be free. The Kirti Kisan Lehar movement reflects the re-birth of the Gadar Party due to its demand for freedom of India and also its international linkages. However, the movement had the deep impacts of the Russian Revolution on its ideology.

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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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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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