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British and Governance in Punjab: 1849-57

Abstract

These sources and authors have talked of the different opinions about the British governance in the Punjab. Some historians like S.S. Thorburn and Andre J. Major claim that they ruled Punjab even-handedly and promoted effective governance. They established different institutions such as education, finance, revenue, army, police, judiciary etc. which helped prolong their rule. An effective administrative setup seems behind their rule and this strategy restored peace in the turbulent Punjab. The condition of law and order disturbed by misgovernance of predecessors of Maharaja Ranjit Singh was countered with the rule of law throughout the Punjab. Many opine that the British ruled over the Punjab oppressively and unjustly. This study finds that British utilized both of the policies according to the situation. Therefore, the history witnessed good governance and bad governance as well in the British Punjab. This article deals with both aspects and proves that the British ensured the writ of the government although they had to adopt oppression and aggression against Punjab.

Key Words: British, Punjab, Governance, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs

The British annexed Punjab to their territories of India¹ by the Proclamation of 29th March 1849 signed between Henry M. Elliot¹ and Maharaja Dalip Singh². It was the 13th dynasty which ruled Punjab (1849-1947) after defeating the Punjabis mainly Sikhs in two British-Sikh Wars.² The British introduced utilitarian rule in newly annexed Punjab.³ On the Governor-General Lord Dalhousie's recommendations, a new executive body "Board of Administration" consisted of both civil and military British officers was introduced in 1849 headed by Henry Lawrence (1806-1857)³ and John Lawrence⁴ (4 March 1811- 27 June 1879) and Charles Mansel (1806-1886) as its members. They all charged with both administrative and judicial powers had to take unanimous decision to implement any administrative policy. Punjab was under the central command of Governor-General Dalhousie. The Board was assisted by the most experienced civil and military officers. A new era of modernity started in Punjab which no other province in India had experienced yet, although the Punjabis were deprived of their language rule and psychological superiority. Dalhousie recruited ideal men to connect Board,⁵ as William Kaye says, "seldom has a brighter galaxy of talent graced any provincial administration".⁴ The reason behind posting these best and experienced officers mainly military from northwestern provinces was to transform this Afghan frontier into futuristic "sword arm of Raj".⁵ British initiated a series of reforms in the land of five rivers spread on an area of 81, 625 square miles with 13 million souls.⁶ It was divided into seven divisions (Lahore, Jhelum, Multan, Layyah, Peshawar, Ci- Sutlej and Trans-Sutlej states) each under a Commissioner and 27 districts each under a Deputy Commissioner. In

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¹ Sir Henry Miers Elliot (1808-1853), the foreign Secretary of Government of India during the period of Governor General Lord Dalhousie (1848-1856).

² The youngest son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh who was ten years old at the time of annexation of Punjab in 1849.

³ Who had already served in Lahore Darbar as Resident from 1846-48.

⁴ John Laird Mair remained Chief Commissioner (1853-1857) and later Viceroy of India (1864-69)

⁵ Some of them were Mr. M.R. Montgomery, Mr. D.F. Macleod, Captain D. Ross, Mr. E. Thornton

districts, Deputy Commissioner was subordinated by European Assistant Commissioner and native extra-Assistant Commissioner. These all had previously served in civil service. The districts were divided into tehsils under native officer Tehsildar assisted by Naib-Tehsildar who settled cases related to the land.⁷ The first challenge was the restoration of law and order in Punjab a land which had experienced anarchy and chaos for a decade after the demise of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1839. During Ranjit Singh's rule, he could not found permanent institutions. soon after his death anarchy started in Punjab⁸, although Maharaja established the best army in Punjab trained by foreign officers. British disbanded the Sikh soldiers who fought against them in the two British-Sikh Wars.⁹ The number of army and police in Punjab territories was extended to 50,000 to maintain peace and enforcement of law and order till village level.¹⁰

The British administration in Panjab worked very hard to gain the confidence of the natives especially the rural population.¹¹ They extracted the resources of the land, improved agriculture by the opening of the roads, canals, railways, telegraph and post offices etc.

Governance under Commissionership

In the middle of these reforms in Punjab under Board, dispute on issuance of jagirs arose between Lawrence and Board of Administration was abolished on 4th February 1853.¹² John Lawrence became the first Chief Commissioner assisted by Montgomery as Judicial Commissioner and George Edmonstone as Financial Commissioner.¹³ Before the advent of British in Punjab, the Panchayat system was offering quick justice to the natives. They rely on matters decided according to Hindu Shastras and Muslim Quranic law.¹⁴ British did not come with the new legislation for the Province. John Lawrence with both commissioners worked hard to draft a code of laws which was later named Punjab civil code of 1854 even made applicable for other non-regulation provinces of India.¹⁵ British established small cause and regular courts were for the civil justice approachable to the people of the Panjab at their doorsteps. They involved the native officers like tehsildar⁶ in the process for the ease and relief of the people in civil cases. The British established a well-organized hierarchy of the courts supervised by the Judicial department. It received the monthly reports of each court at Lahore. Higher authorities reviewed these reports, criticized them if needed and suggested recommendations, which later sent to the concerned officers in districts and divisions.¹⁶

British continued the criminal law based on codes of Presidencies but with some modifications. They took good care of local customs and sentiments of Punjabis in criminal offences. The mainly involved community in the crimes like dacoity or gang robbery in the areas close to the frontier were the soldiers of disbanded Khalsa army and native tribes. The British dealt iron handedly these serious crimes. The ratio of crime in the east and west of the Sutlej River and the Trans-Indus frontier was less but higher in those territories where different races of people living the southern regions of the Panjab⁷. The concept of secret intelligence service (secret agency) police consisted of local informers and detectives helped to detain the crime effectively.¹⁷ The ratio of criminal and miscellaneous offences during 1854-55 in Punjab was following;¹⁸

Ratio of Crime to Population

Year	Total of Crimes and Miscellaneous Offences	Total Population	Crimes and offences to Population
1854	45,715	12,717,821	1 to 278
1855	41,268	12,717,821	1 to 308

The Chief and the Judicial Commissioners showed keen interest in the functioning of criminal and ordinary offences and the severe punishments were replaced with the penalties of fines.¹⁹ But in the mutiny of 1857, the rebels were blown massacred, no mercy was shown to all the communities involved in it.

British adopted the existing model of Bengal and northwestern provinces for organization of police in Punjab. Punjab was divided into 281 thannas, contained an average 102 villages, 290 square miles, and 45,279 persons. The average strength of civil police to each jurisdiction would be one head police officer and 32 policemen. The British bifurcated police into preventive police with military assistance and detective police with civil assistance. A police officer with full power in his jurisdiction was assisted one or two deputies. In cities, for the security of the people, one watchman was provided to about 520 citizens, but he was paid by the people of the town, the rural constabulary was paid by the villagers. There were 28,879 villages and one constable for each village. The British provided separate constabulary to the agricultural population, one constable to every 242 of agriculturists, and every 2.32 square miles. The division of the police and military according to area and population is as follows;²⁰

Police	Area (Square Miles)	Population	Proportion of total	Of total Police to
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⁶ A native gazetted officer at administrative sub-division of judicial department who was civil judge in small cases

⁷ round Multan and Layyah

			Police to Square Miles	People
Military 12,853 Civil 9,123 City 1,250 Rural 30,000	81,625	12,717,821	1 to 1.53	1 to 2.32

British gave immense importance to education after annexation. They continued functioning of the schools already existed and also opened new central schools were opened for higher education in bigger cities and old ones remained functional.²¹ They introduced a general policy of education for the natives of Punjab in form of “Charles Wood’s dispatch of Education” in 1854, which offered education in both foreign and local languages, training of teachers, education for female, vocational schools, the government’s grants to aid education and a complete hierarchy⁸ for inspection of the whole process.²² The statistics of Schools were collected from the all Districts was as following;²³

Divisions	Indigenous Schools	Scholars	Population	Proportion of Schools to Population	Proportion of Scholars to Population
Cis-Sutlej States	332	3506	2282111	1 to 6873	1 to 659
Trans-Sutlej States	586	6237	2273037	387	364
Lahore	1,270	12753	2117894	1667	166
Jhelum	774	5782	1762488	2277	304
Layyah	No	No	No	No	No
Multan	212	2186	971175	4581	404
Peshawar	198	1128	296364	1496	262

Total: 3372 31592 9110341 2701 288

The British carpeted Panjab with a network of roads. they had spread along the roadway of 3600 miles in the Panjab Proper and Cis and Trans-Sutlej of about 1,629 miles. Dalhousie wanted to complete Grand Trunk line of upper India from Calcutta to Peshawar divided into three sub-divisions-first, from Kurnal to the Sutlej; second, from the Sutlej to Lahore; third, from Lahore to Peshawar. This road was commenced under the Military Board in 1852.

²⁴ For the rapid movement of the troops, railway lines between Multan and Amritsar and Bhtitanda and Lodhran were started. A long road was constructed between Peshawar and Amritsar.²⁵

The British Government imposed tax lightly to the agriculturists contemporary to the Sikhs.²⁶ They paid special attention to improving agriculture in Punjab. The new social engineering changed the fate of Punjab and it became the wheat-producing center of whole India was irrigation works undertaken on an extensive scale by the British. Construction work connected with Bari Doab canal in Punjab was taken in hand. The traditional methods of irrigation used in south-western portions of the Panjab were repaired and extended. Instead of permanent Canals, the inundation channels were excavated and other canals like Khanwa in 1854-55 and Dourana Lungana in 1855-56 was maintained.²⁷ The British did not bring major change in the land tenure system in their first decade of rule in Punjab. They continued with the existing mahalwari system⁹ which was already functional in major areas of U.P., the Central Provinces, but in a modified form in Punjab, which covered 30% of the British India.²⁸

They also modernized the way of cultivating land in Punjab by introducing new varieties of seeds for better yield of cotton, sugarcane, Tobacco, and flax. They discouraged the role of middle man as a supplier of seeds and

⁸ Grants for in education were fixed by the state under certain rules and proper government inspection. John Lawrence appointed Director of Public Instruction, and in each district an inspectors were given responsibility to organize and control education at the level lower than the university.

⁹ The unit for Mahalwari system was village. The village land belongs jointly to the village community technically called the body of co-shares. They were jointly responsible for payment of land revenue. If any co-sharer abandons his land it is taken over by the village community as a whole. The village community is owner of village common land including the forest and pastures land.

facilitated farmers through the agents of the Agriculture department. They encouraged the use of manures and fertilizers for the agricultural development.²⁹

The British provided water supply free of charges in order to encourage the peasants for using green manure.³⁰

British unlike their predecessors adopted good behaviour with the people in the barracks. Their wards were kept clean and fairly ventilated. Severe tortures were discouraged by the authorities. Effective measures declined the mortality rate in jails 6.21 per cent in 1854 to 5.07 in 1855.³¹

Punjab and War of Independence 1857

Punjab survived during the war of independence due to the efficient administrative apparatus introduced by the British. When the mutiny broke out in 1857, the deployed number of police and soldiers in Punjab was about 60,000, out of which only 10,000 were white men. John Lawrence was in Rawalpindi but he was in constant contact with the Punjab administration. Montgomery dealt with the situation iron handedly. He disarmed the suspected regiments cantoned in Punjab.³² There was strict mail censorship in mutiny areas. With the outbreak of the mutiny in 1857, strict legislation was in practice; Act. XIV of 1857 empowered the officers to execute the traitors. Additional recruitment of 28,246 men in police was done for the reinforcement.³³

The well-established system of telegraph system in Punjab helped its administration during to communicate well during the mutiny of 1857. The instructions of John Lawrence helped the commissioners to punish the rebelled chiefs and zamindars. The significant factor in restoring Punjab was the assistance of the landed gentry to the British, who avoided to side by the rebels and kept roads open for the movement of troops, provided food and other supplies during the war.³⁴

British recaptured the lost territories in no time. The recovery of Delhi was credited to the exertions of John Lawrence and his officers. He was even awarded a grant of annuity worth £2000 on his Punjab success.³⁵ British administrators elsewhere in India shared much of the ideology of the 'Panjab School' as the result of conservative reaction which followed 1857. Till the eve of independence, the British administration controlled sufficient resources to realize the paternalistic ideals.

Conclusion

Punjab even before its annexation was one of the favourite districts of British India due to its fertile land.³⁶ British changed the land of five rivers a poor region to a rich agrarian Punjab. They governed Punjab and established a new bureaucratic hierarchy. Their biggest challenge of pacifying the Sikhs in the early years after annexation helped them to implement their programme of reforms to Punjab. Punjab experienced the transition from the age of rule of despotism to democracy despite it British could not introduce in it in its real spirit.

The other aspect of British governance was the aggressive policy towards Lahore Darbar and Khalsa army after the second British-Sikh War (1848). The oral history accounts testify their brutal policy towards Punjabis in and after the War of Independence of 1857. The massacre of the mutineers at the end of the war, the mistreatment with the royal family and killing of sons of Bahadur Shah Zafar's sons depicts their oppressive nature of governance. The main policy of their rule was the conquest of other people's lands and goods.³⁷ The idea behind the reforms of roads, canal colonies, railways, telegraph, was actually the introduction of an economic system of penetration and to take control of the markets.³⁸ But the British unlikely her predecessors brought a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia, whatever was their misgovernance.³⁹ The British ideas of science and medicine, better communication and transport systems of the telegraph and the railway, the facility of the surgeon and the sanitary engineer instead of conventional available sources were irrational to the existing system but it benefitted the whole India. But their interference in religious traditions of Hindus law and customs as the ban on "suttee" and killing of female child, the remarriage of the widows, ban on purdah, and the laws for the convictions of high caste Brahmins on capital offences⁴⁰ triggered the local sentiments and caused War of Independence in 1857. The British used modern technology for the fertile land of Punjab and doubled the yield of this region greatly that Dalhousie got full support from the authorities in London. Punjab became one of the provinces for providing raw cotton to Manchester. It became the most profitable activity for British in subcontinent. British revolutionized the economic system, changed the principles of mercantile capitalism to the principles of free trade capitalism. They changed their colonies from exporters of cotton goods to importers of cotton manufacturers.⁴¹

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