

## COMING ALIVE TO POLITICAL EXIGENCIES: MIANWALI 1901-1947

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### ABSTRACT

Mianwali is a region inhabited by various tribes and kinships or biradarries as it is put, in a local parlance. Economic interests and ethnic prejudices had fostered inter-tribal rivalries and stunted mutual harmony and social cohesion. The British saw the protection of this tribal structure as imperative for the consolidation of colonial rule in the region. This Article deals with the process of political mobilization in the Mianwali District. The establishment of the Unionist Party as the sole political organization in the district till 1940, dominated by landed aristocrats of the district. The British had trusted and tried allies who had pro-British orientation in the politics. The study also seeks to enquire ‘whether the politics in Mianwali was centered on the state agency or whether the natives were the active participants in it’? I will also examine the role of Ahrar movement, particularly its impact on the urban people of the district. Until 1940, the League had no political clout that could secure a political niche for it in the district. With the withdrawal of the British support from the Unionists, the League gradually gained strength in the district. The focus will be on, how the rural Pirs and Sajjada Nishins martialled their disciples and through pir-murid network infused anti-government feelings in the district and mobilized rural voters for the League in the name of Islam. As the political setting of Mianwali reflects, the British had well entrenched influence in the region and there was no dissenting voice.

**KEYWORDS:** Unionist Party Colonial, Sajjada Nishin, Muslim League, Punjab

### INTRODUCTION

The support of the local elite to the British was of cardinal importance for the establishment and the smooth functioning of their administration in the Punjab. The major task that the British administrators set for themselves after 1849 was to build an indigenous hierarchy by identifying and winning over local elite to effect and exercise the British control in the Mianwali District. The Punjab’s frontier position made it imperative for the British to devise a comprehensive strategic policy. Such a policy was not only hammered out but also put into effect because the British had trusted and tried allies, in the form of big zamindars who had subsequently come together under the political umbrella of the Unionist Party, a sole political party in the district till 1940. This Article seeks to enquire about the leading landed magnates, dominating the Unionist Party in the district as the collaborators of the British administration. The study also unfolds how Muslim League won rural support in the district in 1945-46 elections and swept the Unionists aside? Why did the rural elite change their loyalties and flocked around League in the closing years of the Raj? The study therefore seeks to explore the role of the rural Pirs and Sajjada Nishins in the district’s politics in mobilizing the rural voters in favour of the League in the general elections of 1945-46. The role of Ahrar movement and its role in Muslim politics will be observed. The study also sheds light on whether the politics in Mianwali was centred on the State agency or the natives were the active participants in it.

## POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF PUNJAB

The structure of the Punjabi rural society was organized around the tribal and kinship networks however religion too had a significant role as a determinant of identity. The Unionist Party drew its strength mostly from the rural Punjab and unequivocally supported by the British authorities. The Party claimed to ensure rural stability by warding off the urban moneylenders.<sup>1</sup> Fazl-e- Hussain and Chhotu Ram made a joint effort to save the landowners from the moneylenders stranglehold. The phenomenal spectre of irrigation projects however could not preclude the calamities like famines and droughts, which kept on plaguing the Punjab, causing agricultural slump. During the First World War, there were artificially high prices. By late 1920s, prices had fallen so low that cultivators were unable to pay their land taxes. A large number of cultivators were caught in a debt.<sup>2</sup> Here it would be pertinent to mention that the British had put down a stipulation that revenue collection would be done in cash instead of kind. By distributing the land and giving cultivators permanent property/ownership rights, the value of agricultural property soared manifold. The demand for the safeguard from moneylenders lay at the heart of 1901 Alienation of Land Act.<sup>3</sup> Fazl-e-Hussain and Chhotu Ram responded to these demands, Consequently the Unionist Party emerged with an agricultural ideology with unequivocal support from the British. Concurrently the informal alliances among the rural magnates glued together to form the Unionist Party in 1923.<sup>4</sup> The party claimed to be non-communal and upholder of the interests of landed class.<sup>5</sup>

From 1920 to 1947, the urban-rural divide of the Punjabi people had acquired permanent salience, which resonated very explicitly in the agenda and the political stance of the Unionist Party.<sup>6</sup> David Gilmartin states, “The structural foundations of Unionist ideology were rooted not in the protection of class interests of landlords but in the logic of British colonial system itself.”<sup>7</sup> The Unionist ideology was anchored in land alienation act which,. Party was essentially identified with “agriculturalist class” thus inadvertently tied itself to local “communities” or “tribes” cross cutting religious identities.<sup>8</sup> An increasingly large number of unionists associated with “agricultural tribes” dominated the legislative council from 1923 to 1947.<sup>9</sup>

### The Rural Magnates and Politics of Mianwali

The ‘clan’ and ‘tribe’ had considerable significance in the demographic pattern of Mianwali District. The As the political setting of Mianwali reflected, British influence was so pervasive with no dissenting voice in the district. The Unionist Party dominated by the landed aristocrats from Isakhel, Piplan, Kalabagh and Bhakkar was the sole political organization calling shots in the district until 1940. The rest of the tribes like Pathans, Jats and Rajputs were relegated to the very margins of colonial political economy of the district as they did not hold much significance to the colonial interests. Quite conversely however, the tribes in possession of big tracts of land were in ascendant position thus they had been favorably disposed to establish a strong nexus with the British through their leaders. Nawab Amir Muhammad Khan

<sup>1</sup> Tahir,Kamran, *The unfolding crisis in Punjab, mar-Aug1947 ;Key turning points & British responses*, journal of Punjab studies vol.14 Number.2 (U.S.A;University of California,Fall 2007) pp.187-188

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.84

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, P.84

<sup>4</sup> Talbot, *Punjab and Raj*,P.80

<sup>5</sup> Azim, Hussain, *Fazl-e-Hussain, a political biography* (Bombay;Longmans,Green and co ltd,1946) pp.150,379

<sup>6</sup> Ashiq Hussain Batalwi , *Iqbal Ke Aakhri do saal*, (Lahore;Sang-e-Meel Publications,1989)p.47

<sup>7</sup> David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam* (London;I.B.Tauris &co ltd) P.118

<sup>8</sup> Gilmartin, P116

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, Pp.36-37

of Kalabagh and Ata Muhammad Khan joined the Unionist Party as loyal allies of British.<sup>10</sup> Nirwani and Lashari, the Baluch tribes of Bhakkar were politically active.<sup>11</sup> Afzal Khan Dhandla, and another leading zamindar of Bhakkar joined the Unionist Party. The Khawanins of Isa Khel dominated the politics of the region. Khan Bahadur Saifullah Khan also held the position of Parliamentary Secretary in 1926.<sup>12</sup> Khan Bahadur Laddhu Khan of “Darya Khan”, Amir Muhammad Khan from “Nawan Jandan”, Dost Muhammad Khan from “Piplan”, and Malik Muzaffar Khan of “Wan Bhachran” were quite zestful representatives of the Unionist Party.<sup>13</sup> The latter was conferred the title of Khan Sahib by the British in lieu of his war services to the government. He worked as an active recruitment agent in enlisting men in the British Army. All these tribal leaders had influence of their own in their respective constituencies and were elected not on a Party platform but through their power and authority which they had on the people of the area. Like rest of the rural Punjab the politics in Mianwali had a strong pro-British orientation. The foundations of the local politics were rested on the structure of the British rural administration.<sup>14</sup> The period 1930-35 witnessed political convulsion in India. The civil disobedience and Satyagraha campaigns orchestrated by Indian National Congress catapulted India into a political chaos and cataclysm. The organization of Khuda-i-Khidmatgar was founded in North West Frontier; Majlis-i-Ahrar-e-Islam had also sprung into existence in the Punjab.<sup>15</sup> The Shahidganj mosque issue however consigned Ahrars into insignificance.<sup>16</sup> Ahrars strived hard to coalesce rural and urban Muslim political strands but the momentum could not be maintained after 1935 and Ahrar’s threat to the Unionists could not last but for very brief period.<sup>17</sup>

### AHRAR’S POPULAR SUPPORT IN THE DISTRICT

Majlis-i-Ahrar was quite active in Mianwali District as it had mustered substantial popular support. Their active involvement started when Nawab of Kalabagh, Amir Muhammad Khan expropriated the properties of Piracha family and banished them from the city. The latter sought help from Ahrars who were always prepared to launch the anti-British movement. They announced to take out procession against Nawab of Kalabagh, Amir Muhammad Khan. The procession reached Kalabagh under the leadership of Ataullah Shah Bukhari.<sup>18</sup> Although the plan could not yield desired results yet it stirred the religious sentiments of people and successfully mobilized the politically inert people of the rural district. The leadership of Ahrar was primarily religious which made it easier to galvanize Muslims around a common cause, the commitment to Islam. A large majority of Niazi pathans of Musa Khel, identified with a tribe of “Bai Niazi” were included in the ranks of Ahrars. Khanqah Sirajia of Kundian had adhered to Deo Bandi persuasion. Hence Maulana Ahmad Khan, the sufi saint of Khanqah, had lent support to the Ahrars.<sup>19</sup> Maulana Jalil Ahmad, Sher Muhammad Zargar and Maulana

<sup>10</sup> M.Akbar.Khan .Sumbal, interviewed on 14 June 2008 , 8.00 pm

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> M.Iqbal .Khan .Sumbal, interviewed on 25 June 2008, 10.30 a.m

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> M.Akbar.Khan .Sumbal, interviewed on 14 June 2008, 8.p.m

<sup>15</sup> David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam*, pp.97-98

<sup>16</sup> Shahidgunj mosque incident flared up in 1935 between Muslims and Sikhs over the demolition of its site in Lahore. Shahid Gunj issue led to a serious riots. It had shaken the very roots of the Unionist party.er “zamindar”. His condemnation of the Ahrar carried considerable weight.For further details see Talbot(Punjab and Raj) & Martial Law to Martial Law.( by Nur Ahmad)

<sup>17</sup> Talbot, *Punjab and Raj* ,P.95

<sup>18</sup> Liaqat Niazi, *Tarikh-i-Mianwali*, (Lahore;Sang-e-Meel, 2003) p.208 Nawab Amir Muhammad Khan belonged to an Awan family based in Kalabagh. He was the son of Nawab Atta Muhammad Khan. He was conferred the title of Khan Bahadur by the British government in 1911. He was given a seat in Provincial Darbari. Nawab Amir Muhammad Khan remained associated with Unionist Party and later in 1940s, he joined league.

<sup>19</sup> Syed Naseer Shah, Interviewed on 30 July 2008 , 8.00 p.m

Ramzan were the prominent persons of the district, joining Majlis-i-Ahrar.<sup>20</sup>

## NON- COMMUNAL POLITICS OF UNIONISTS

Fazl-e-Hussain's non-communal policy remained a big irritant in Fazl-i-Jinnah alliance. Jinnah's political focus was riveted exclusively on the Muslims of the Sub Continent. Conversely the Unionists refused to accept Jinnah's contention which did not accommodate other communities but the Muslims. The Unionists, on the other hand, believed in the homogenous nature of socio-cultural issues.<sup>21</sup> Jinnah wanted that the Muslims should contest elections at the national level unanimously and from a united platform which ought to be none other than Muslim league. However Fazl-e-Hussain thought otherwise.<sup>22</sup> Fazl-e-Hussain believed that since Muslims had a slender majority of 51 percent in the province therefore the Unionist Party needed alliance with non-Muslim factions.<sup>23</sup> Until 1940, Muslim League barely existed in Mianwali District. The Unionist Party won the elections of 1937 hands down. Leaders of the Unionist Party deployed their traditional social and economic network to influence voters. Another factor which worked to the advantage of the Unionist candidates was their close affinity with the British government.<sup>24</sup> The power pattern in the district reflected quite evidently that the personalities had played a decisive role in winning the elections instead of any political agenda or party manifesto. As already demonstrated, the League had no political clout that could secure a political niche for it, among the masses. People in the countryside were hardly acquainted with League. It was imperative for League to acquire a rural base to strengthen its position for the next election.<sup>25</sup>

### Sikandar Hayat and Unionist's Politics

Throughout the years 1937-40, Sikandar Hayat played a leading role in All India Muslim politics as he emerged as the central leader in the Punjab after Fazl-e-Hussain's demise in 1937. The strong Provincial power base of the Unionists was of critical importance to Jinnah. That exactly was the reason, Jinnah settled for the Sikandar-Jinnah Pact of October 1937, which was not favourable to league.<sup>26</sup> Jinnah sought help from Sikandar to create a broader front for the Muslims but pact led to an unending series of squabbles between the two parties.<sup>27</sup> For Sikandar, the Pact served as a shield to contend against Congress which had put forward its political and economic programme in juxtaposition to the Unionist's and challenged their power.<sup>28</sup> Contrari wise Jinnah intended to afford a broader outlook of Muslim Community, which could substantiate his claim of the League as the only representative party of the Muslims of Subcontinent.<sup>29</sup> The pact, subsequently worked towards the consolidation of the League's place in All India Politics.<sup>30</sup> According to Ashiq Batalwi, "The Pact relegated the League to a status of an off-shoot of the Unionist Party and detained it to grow as a mass

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Iftikhar Malik, *Sikandar Hayat Khan, a political biography*, pp.35-36

<sup>22</sup> Nur Ahmad, *From Martial Law to Martial Law*, p.136

<sup>23</sup> Ashiq Batalwi, *Iqbal Ke Aakhri Do Saal*, p.290

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, P.114

<sup>25</sup> Ashiq Batalwi, *Iqbal Ke Aakhri Do Saal*, pp.298-299

<sup>26</sup> Talbot, pp.123-124. Sikandar-Jinnah pact was concluded in 1937 at Know session of league. Under its terms, Sikandar agreed to advise all the Muslim members of the Unionist party to join the League. They would form Punjab Muslim League Assembly Party which would be subject to the rules and regulation of Central and Provincial Parliamentary board of all India Muslim League. In view of agreement, the Provincial Parliamentary board would be reconstituted. The agreement was not to affect the continuation of the existing coalition Ministry which would retain its unionist Party name.

<sup>27</sup> Muhammad Waseem, *politics and the state in Pakistan*, (Islamabad; National institute of Historical & Cultural Research centre of excellence Quaid-e-Azam University 2007) P.68

<sup>28</sup> Ashiq Batalwi, *Iqbal Ke Aakhri Do Saal*, P.461

<sup>29</sup> David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam*, pp. 174-175

<sup>30</sup> Talbot, *Punjab and Raj*, P. 126

organization of Muslims of India and divided Muslims into two segments at a critical time when they were in a dire need of a united platform.”<sup>31</sup>

### World War 2 and Unionist's Support to British

The Unionist Party extended its cooperation and support to the British war efforts. The maximum recruitment in the Punjab's National War Front was made by the local landlord, who not only encouraged army recruitment but most of the time did it forcibly.<sup>32</sup> The Unionist zamindars in Mianwali served the British interest quite obsequiously during the Second World War, many of them served as recruiting officers. Khan Saifullah Khan of Isa Khel was the assistant recruiting officer of the district.<sup>33</sup> Among non-officials, the most successful recruiters were Khan Sahib Malik Laddhu, Khan Sahib Malik Amir and his son Risaldar Malik Muzaffar Khan and Khan Bahadur Abdul Karim Khan of Isa Khel. All of them rendered invaluable service to the British government.<sup>34</sup> Their contribution to the war efforts undermined their popularity in political terms as the government soon withdrew its support from them.<sup>35</sup>

### MUSLIM LEAGUE'S ELEVATION IN PUNJAB'S POLITICS

The Muslim League emerged on the political canvass of Mianwali not earlier than 1942.<sup>36</sup> The process of the shifting of loyalties from the Unionist Party to the League is quite vividly seen in the district. Nawab Amir Muhammad Khan of Kalabagh was the first Unionist zamindar who joined the League.<sup>37</sup> The claim for solidarity of the “agricultural tribes” and the welfare of the rural population provided an ideological rationale to the Unionists to rule the Punjab and to maintain the structure of colonial hierarchy of mediation. This ideology helped the Unionists to sweep the polls in the 1937 elections.<sup>38</sup> The leaders of the League believed that it needed to draw support from masses and not from landlord or Zaildar-Lambardar class. To substantiate the Pakistan's demand the League had to undermine the Unionists' influence from the rural hinterland.<sup>39</sup>

In Mianwali District, according to the League's investigation, no Muslim League organization existed until October 1941.<sup>40</sup> The other districts where district branches of the League still had to be set up were Shahpur, Jhelum, Jhang, Gujranwala and Dera Ghazi Khan.<sup>41</sup> It was reported that 7,000 members were enrolled in the Mianwali and Sargodha regions.<sup>42</sup> People in rural areas were more concerned with tribal and economic considerations than with politics. Local factional rivalries and feuds over property impeded the smooth running of political process. In Mianwali, the League was still struggling to acquire a strong base even till the general elections of 1946. The Muslim League was gathering political strength in the district, political meetings espousing the cause of the League had become the order of the day. The movement was inspired by Abdul Sattar Khan Niazi. The Muslim League's initial meetings were held at the residence of Muhammad Ameer Khan Sumbal, who was a Philanthropist and a zamindar of the district. He extended an active support to the League and was appointed as General Secretary of the Muslim League and Maulana Hakim Muhammad Amir Ali

<sup>31</sup> Ashiq Batalwi, *Iqbal Ke Aakhri Do Saal*, P.467

<sup>32</sup> Talbot, *Punjab and Raj*, P.143

<sup>33</sup> *Record of the War Services Of Mianwali District*, D.J.Boyd,Esquire, I.C.S.,Lahore, Civil& Military Gazette Press, 1922, Pp.5-6

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Talbot, *Punjab and Raj*, PP.238-239

<sup>36</sup> *M.Akbar.Khan .Sumbal*, 11 June.2008, 7:30 pm

<sup>37</sup> Liaqat Niazi, *Tarikh-e-Mianwali* , P.207

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, P.145

<sup>39</sup> Talbot , *Punjab and Raj*, pp. 166-167

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, P. 155

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, P160

Shah served as secretary<sup>43</sup>. The most active and mobilized workers were Pir Shah Alam Shah, Akbar Khan (Khankikhel), Hakim Muhammad Azeem Khan (Khankikhel).<sup>44</sup> The Muslim League's message to the people of Mianwali was simple. They were called upon to support the Jinnah in his struggle for Pakistan in the name of Islam. With the lack of political consciousness in the district, religious sentiments could easily be stirred. Religious festivals like Eid were used by the League to promote the social solidarity and political cohesion among Muslims.<sup>45</sup>

### General Elections 1946 and Electoral Politics

The 1946 election ushered in an era when the League was undergoing evolution.<sup>46</sup> The League emerged as determined and aggressive mass organization. According to Gilmartin, "The demand for Pakistan was a demand less for the transformation of Punjabi society than for a new moral and ideological foundation for the State."<sup>47</sup> Despite the League's religious appeals to rural masses, the League still stood dissociated from the power structure. But the Landlords and Pir's ingress in to League changed the scenario. The Islamic propaganda helped link the secular leadership of League with the landlord—Pirs of the Punjab and kindled the religious sentiments.<sup>48</sup> Unionist stalwarts, Pirs and Sajjada Nishins's influence embedded in rural society were felt vital to the League's ascendancy in rural region. The most tenable reason for the League's broad political base in rural Punjab and its success in election was the incorporation of factional leaders and Pirs in to League's ranks.<sup>49</sup> In the district Mianwali, a large majority of population was disciple of Sajjada Nishin of Sial Sharif, Hazrat Khawaja Zia-ud-din. Malik Muzaffar Khan of Wan Bhachran was a close ally of colonial masters and was also awarded the title of Khan Bahadur. He was denounced by his Pir as he was tied with colonial administration and threatened him that he would cease to be the part of his *silsila*. Malik Muzaffar had to return the title and honorary designation in British Army to avoid the displeasure of his Pir.<sup>50</sup> Pirs marshalled their disciples and through Pir-Murid network infused anti-government feelings. In Mianwali the political leadership was solely in the hands of Khawanins of Isakhel. Khan Bahadur Saifullah Khan and Nawab Ghulam Qadir Khan were the members of legislative assemblies' prior to 1946 elections.<sup>51</sup> In the elections of 1946, Abdul Sattar Khan contested election from village Kundal tehsil Isakhel as a Muslim League candidate against Khaliq Dad Khan of the Unionist Party from the Mianwali south. Amir Abdullah Khan of Piplan contested as Unionist against Amir Abdullah Rokhari of Muslim League. Abdul Sattar Khan and Amir Abdullah Khan of Piplan won the election and joined the Punjab Legislative Assembly.<sup>52</sup> The League moved from political insignificance in 1937 to a position of strength in 1946 securing 75 out of 86 Muslim seats. The League emerged as single largest party in the Punjab legislative assembly.<sup>53</sup> Hence the Pakistan movement shattered the ideological foundation on which British government was linked with Punjabi society.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Liaqat Niazi, *Tarikh-e-Mianwali*, P.209

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, P.224

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, pp.224-225

<sup>46</sup> Talbot, *Punjab and Raj*, p.215

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, P.212

<sup>48</sup> Waseem, *Politics and the State in Pakistan*, p.69

<sup>49</sup> Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam*, P.213

<sup>50</sup> Liaqat Niazi, *Tarikh-e-Mianwali*, P.206

<sup>51</sup> Amir Abdullah Khan Rokhari, *Main Aur Mera Pakistan* (Lahore; Jang Publishers, 1989) P.62

<sup>52</sup> *Report on the General Elections to the Punjab Legislative Assembly (1945-46)* (Lahore; Superintendent Government Printing Press, 1946)

<sup>53</sup> Tahir Kamran, *Unfolding Crisis*, pp.188-89

<sup>54</sup> Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam*, p.225

## CONCLUSIONS

To build an indigenous hierarchy by winning over local elite was considered essential in order to exercise the administrative control in Mianwali after 1849. The British identified their allies in the form of big zamindars who integrated themselves under the political umbrella of the Unionist Party. The structure of Punjabi rural society was organized around kinship and tribal groups or *biradari* systems. The influence of these rural magnates embedded in rural society was crucial for the British political order, which was utilized to keep all nationalist movements in the district under check. People in the district were politically inert; the movements with religious orientation could successfully galvanize them around a common cause rather than to invoke political consciousness. As a result Majlis-e-Ahrar and Khaksar had mustered substantial popular support in the district. Politics in Mianwali had a pro-British orientation and was centered on district administration. The Unionist Party was the sole political party in the district. Unionist leaders deployed their traditional social and economic network to mobilize the voters in the elections of 1937. However the Unionist Party lost its credibility in rural society due to rifts in the internal ranks after the second World War(1939-1945). The League had no political clout in the district till 1942, took advantage of this cleavage. The League moved from political insignificance to the position of unassailable strength in 1946 elections. The political loyalties underwent change and the Unionist stalwarts and rural pirs joined the League. The secular leadership of the League got a religious dimension.

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