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AGRARIAN ECONOMY OF THE PRINCELY STATE OF BAHAWALPUR: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE (1866-1924)

Abstract.

This paper examines the some aspects of the agrarian structure of Bahawalpur State and course of its development under British headed administration. The Agency regime coincided with several developments in the agrarian economy of the region; individualization of land rights, rigorous collection of revenue, extensive canal network and better agricultural production were the chief characteristics of new agrarian frontier. These endeavors not only helped to transform the traditional farming to modern agriculture, but also changed the socio-economic spectrum of the State. The article also traces the State's measures to control over the debt situation. The paper is mainly based on assessment and administration reports, political proceedings and official publications.

Keywords. Economy, social structure, agriculture, irrigation, indebtedness.

I. Introduction

In rural societies, land has always been the base of productive activity. The regional economy of South Asia too, had been deeply connected with the agricultural production. Simultaneously, the barren tracts of less rainfall areas were based on pastoral economy during the 19th century. Such features of economy were existed in original form in the Princely State of Bahawalpur under Punjab Dependency. The State carved out during the disintegration of Mughal dynasty by Abbasid *Daudpotras* from Sind (Gurgani,1890:150). Subsistence agriculture and cattle breeding was pre-occupation of the people. Owing to the less rainfall, people relied for agriculture on flood inundation and well water.

The traditional agricultural system of the great *Mughals* was followed coupled with some indigenous patterns, which *Daudpotras* extracted under their experience in Sind and applied in Bahawalpur region. Particularly, their practices in irrigation, agricultural pursuits and fiscal pattern were greatly influenced by the patterns of Sind (Tahir, 2010: 272). However, the ecology of the State had two diverse features: on one hand, it had 300 miles river frontage, which was a natural boundary line with Multan and D.G. Khan (Report, 1967:75). A large proportion

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of cultivable land along the river bands was covered with thick jungles of tamarisk trees. On the other hand, one-third area of the State was desert, which yielded pastures to the livestock. In a way, the idea of agricultural development was present from the outset.

By the year 1833, the British-Bahawalpur relation laid a profound impact on the economy of Bahawalpur. The opening of navigation in Indus and Sutlej rivers opened the avenues for Bahawalpur to export its surplus produce and domestic manufacturers (Cruz, 1862:92-93). The custom and transit duties became a source of State's income. Subsistence agriculture, pastoralism and traditional irrigation were the distinctive features of pre-Agency economy of the State.

Those features were persisted till the establishment of first Council of Regency, which was formed after the death of the State ruler, Nawab Bahawal Khan Abbasi-IV (1837-1866). At that time, Crown Prince Mohammad Sadiq Khan was a minor. The Council of Regency was a part of political and administrative settlement for native states according to Indian Act 1833 (Lee, 1910: 334). The first Council of Regency remained till 1879. The second and the third Councils of Regency worked from 1899 to 1903 and from 1907 to 1924, respectively. Under the British administrative preview, the State experienced a new agrarian frontier in which agriculture began to be revamped according to the priorities set by the new pattern.

II. Agrarian Social Structure

In the formative decades, there were few appropriate villages existed largely in the cultivated areas in the Western portion of the State (Masson, 1906: 9). The *Daudpotras* came with many branches of their sub-clans, whose chiefs founded proper villages on their concerned lands and gave them their respective names. Afterwards, land was given to individuals or group of individuals belonging to the other tribes. The early villages faced certain common difficulties as those were created from either the forests or the deserted lands with the constant and joint struggle of the people (Olich, 1845: 137). The foundation of villages were a continuous process in Bahawalpur because ample land was available, which continued to be cultivated under colonization scheme till 1947.

The primarily target of the State was to irrigate and cultivate the vast areas of wasteland. Gradually, traditional irrigation sources were developed and small water channels from river were excavated parallel with the foundation of new towns. Jungles were cleared to cultivate the food grains. There was no government-imposed restriction on acquiring land and people could easily attain as much land as they could cultivate. Likewise, there were neither fixed boundaries for their property nor was there a need for them. Loose dividing lines and water channels were natural boundaries.

The State was the sole owner of all land except what had been purchased by the public. Because population was sparse and land was abundant, therefore, the State frequently granted the possession to those who could cultivate it. By spirit, all authority belonged to the prerogative of the ruler, the Nawab. Under Agency, the individualization of land rights was a significant change in the system. The registered rights for peasant proprietorship through civil courts were maintained. A

proprietor held complete rights to transfer, sale, and mortgage their lands (Report, 1875-76: 2).

The wasteland of Cholistan desert was the property of the State, where old semi nomadic communities were thinly scattered. If water available, these lands were given on lease or with proprietary rights under wasteland rules. Customary rights had been established to certain *tobbas*, grazing grounds and *dahrs*. Moreover, wells and tracts with water cuts were also unit of property but owner or his clan never denied drinking water to anyone.

There were two broad categories of land owning classes; big *zamindars* and small peasants or *khudkash*. The class disparity was distinctively prominent in the pattern of land distribution influenced over the power, privileges and social identity. The big *zamindars* were the most privileged class as they were mostly descendents from royal tribes, high rank State officers, and sacred religious tribes. Their role was important to support the political dominance of the Nawab. Moreover, the former warlords were also assumed the status of landlords with extra control over peasants as their war services were abolished.

Furthermore, some influential native officers and immigrants who had permanently settled in the State got large tracts of land. This category of *zamindars* was locally called *dankhani*. They rented out their land to the medium or small sized tenants. The big landowners were responsible to create the absentee landlordism, which was largely prevalent in the old proprietary areas of the State. A positive feature of this class was that they were generally well-organized and utilized the improved varieties of seeds and implements (Assessment Report, 1944: 8). Owing to their resources, they had quick access to the latest techniques in agriculture than the other peasants. Moreover, they consciously withhold innovations to maintain their exploitative influence over share-tenants.

Small peasants were the main force of a self-sufficient village economy, which produced almost all that was required for self-consumption. They occupied the proportion of 53% of the cultivated area (Inquiry Report, 1932:44). Self-peasants were independent in maintaining control over their production for subsistence needs. In fact, variation in the nature of soil and shortage of water were leading factors to handle the independent smallholdings. The average size of holding varied three to four acres in the Western part and ten to twenty-seven acres in Eastern portion. This minute share was mainly due to the inheritance practices under Muhammadan law (Muhammad Din, 2001:293).

Besides the landowning class, tenants and menials were a compulsory segment in the agrarian setup. Tenants were the main work force at land, physically responsible for generating production. There were two main causes of tenancy firstly; they were employed by *zamindars* who had more lands than they could manage. Secondly, the high ranked officer and elite class did not like to cultivate land due to their high social status. The extension in agriculture led to an enhanced demand for tenants all over the State.

There were two diverse pictures in the tenant-owner relationship. The tenants on smallholdings were prosperous however, they had a tendency of fleeing away after obtaining an advance to look out for a wealthier property owner (Report, 1873-

74:153). In fact, tenants were sparse and their demand was acute in the State; so it gave them a strong position. To avoid the vagaries of tenants, small landowner preferred to cultivate their land themselves. On the other hand, tenants on big estates had to suffer enormously as they were subjected to unjustifiable conditions. The main reason of their worst conditions was the absence of tenancy act in the State until 1913 when Bahawalpur State enforced the Punjab Tenancy Act of 1887. This law was a remedy from the ill effects of tenancy specially, it prevented the owner from ejecting the tenants without due notice and from unconditional enhancement of rent (Hassan, 1926:59). However, majority of the tenants were illiterate and ignorant of their rights even after the imposition of Tenancy Act in Bahawalpur. They took a substantial period just to understand it.

The other main class connected with the agricultural activities was menials or *kami* who consisted of artisans and village servants. Artisans were the skilled labour as blacksmiths, potters, weavers, carpenters, *chammars*, and cobblers. While menial servants provided services to all communities including oil crushers, barbers, washmen and *chuhras*. However, in spite of the vital hereditary role in the agrarian economy, the menial class was lowest in social standing neither significant in demographic distribution nor in ownership. They were dependent for social and economic life on dominant tribes and were paid by a share of produce or by fixed allowances. A major improvement in their character was that they were recognized as professional labour and menial staff through Canal Drainage Act of Punjab 1873, enforced in the State in December 1911 (Ibid).

The agrarian structure of Bahawalpur was distinctively a composition of different religions and castes. There was co-existence of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities and all of them were divided into different castes within a territorial framework. The royal tribe the Abbasid had already established a chain of clan areas through their patrilineal kin groups. Afterwards, the other social groups of different tribes formed their regional identities. As regard their territorial organization, in Minchinabad *tehsil*, *Wattus* were the dominant clan. In Khairpur and Hasilpur *tehsils*, *Joyas*, *Daudpotras* and *Chishties* were dominant.

In Bahawalpur, *Channars*, *Qureshis* *Danwanjs*, *Daudpotras*, *Kultarrs* and *Arains* were common. In Ahmadpur East, *Sayyeds*, *Aarbīs*, *Langahs*, *Baloches* *Buhars* and *Naichs*; in Khanpur and Allahabad *Baloches*, *Daudpotras*, *Lars*, *Chachars*, *Machhis* and *Siyals* were prevailed. In *Noushehra* and Ahmadpur Lamma, *Bhuts*, *Baloches*, *Sammās*, and *Machhis* were the major agricultural communities. *Jats* were superior class of agriculturist. The *Arain* were second to *Jats* in agricultural skills particularly in vegetable gardening. The position of both in village economic system was more secure. The *Baloach* and *Kharals* were considered good cultivators while *Daodpotras* the worst (Nasir Ali, 1892:8).

Second major community in the Bahawalpur State was the Hindus belonged to Brahmins and *Aroras*. Brahmins immigrated from Multan and Hissar during the reign of the *Nawab* Bahawal Khan Abbasi II (1772-1809). The *Arora* was basically commercial caste and they involved in trading and was considered originally from lower Sind. They were contractors, moneylenders and State officers. Their share in agriculture was initially marginal but they became owners of thousands of acre of cultivated land through the mortgages or purchases from

the other agricultural entities of the areas. The Hindu landowners were numerically less important but the most industrious and thrifty being a cultivator (Rose, Vol. II, 1911:16-17).

The other important community in Bahawalpur State was Sikh who migrated from Ludhiana, Ferozpur, Amritsar, Patiala, and Nabha (Report,1873-74:12). Sikh *Jats* were considered the finest peasantry in Punjab. They succeeded in raising of crops and good grazing grounds in the deserted areas. This tribal character of agricultural population was modified on the arrival of colonists from Punjab under colonization program in the State.

III. Development in Economy and Agricultural Production

On the eve of the first Agency in Bahawalpur State, the traditional agriculture assumed the position of a regular agrarian system. Large tracts of wasteland, prospectus of artificial irrigation and the absence of other subsidiary means of living except agriculture and pastures provided a remarkable potential for the extension of cultivation. In regard with the increased cultivated land, Agency focused on two parameters; sources of irrigation and population as a source of labour to cultivate the land. Both parameters were coincided together. The establishment of a joint Department of Irrigation and Public Works was the first move towards this end. Mr. Burns and Mr. Bucket were the first Superintendents of Irrigation and Public Works, respectively (Proceedings,1969: 86-89). The native officers *Nazim* and *Kardar* held their former local status.

The fundamental transition under this department was that all controlling and authoritative powers in the canal system were vested in the State and the earlier system in which landholder was individual responsible for canal management, was abolished. However, the improvements undertaken at old canals engaged the *zamindars* by asking them to provide labour under *Chher* system (Burns, 1872:397).

The State spent 1/8th of its average yearly income on irrigation projects, without neglecting other interests (Report, 1875-76:3). With the opening of new canals, the areas were notified for human settlement, which lying waste for thousands of years owing to the scarce rainfall. The first canal *Fordwah*, was the dynamic start of irrigation development in western part of the State. It irrigated 32500 acres of land (Burns, 396). It was the largest inundation canal in the Punjab at the time and the first one in the whole desert of Rajasthan, where initially it looked impossible to run the water.

The successful results of *Fordwah* paved the way for the colonization of Cholistan and for other projects in the desert, particularly *Sadqia* twin canal system. The excavation of eastern *Sadqia* canal in 1882 and western *Sadqia* canal in 1889 was a marvelous advancement. After subsequent extension, the former irrigated area of 25000 acres in Cholistan desert and the latter irrigated one million acres of barren land (Dairy,1905:32). This twin canal system contributed enormously to the success of irrigation for desert land of Bahawalpur.

From 1900 onwards, the irrigation was again reorganized along the lines of the system prevalent in the British districts. At that time, there were 26 big canals, 195 branch canals and 24872 distributaries drawn from Sutlej, which fed 729682

million acres of land. From 1866 to 1900, an amount of 25 million rupees had been spent from state account on the irrigation plans (Report, 1899-1900:4). The total area irrigated by the canals increased from just over 34702 acres in 1867 to 765276 acres in 1924. It was equal to the irrigated area of Eastern *Jamna* canal, more than double the Western *Jamna* canal and more than one-third the area irrigated by *Bari Doab* .(Darley,1941:40). This increase was the best proof of the success of the new irrigation system, which was economical and suited to the native idiosyncrasy.

With the extension in irrigation, people from the Punjab settled in the newly irrigated lands. The very first settlers were hardy Sikhs from Punjab districts and Bishnoi Hindus from Rajasthan States. They were self-cultivators and worked wonders in reclining *kalar* and sand dunes. They succeeded to obtain sufficient production from such a minimal quantity of land (Sadiq ul Akhbar, 1967). They had to face great difficulties in the sandy lands even many were died. As Radhika Lal Mehta says ‘ *the memory of their adventures in Cholistan , the difficulties they had to experience and the forbearance exhibited by those sturdy Sikh with white beards and grey eyebrows shall ever remain green in the history of canal construction in the State*’. (Mehta, 1932:13).

The State provided many incentives to attract the outsiders. They were exempted from *timi* tax and were not required to provide the *chher* labour. The complete ownership rights were given to the grantees on the completion of the specific period of terms and conditions. Consequently, immigrants became a part of the mainstream of the State in spite of their different ethnic backgrounds and increased the demographic level in Bahawalpur. They substantially contributed to the economic growth of the State (Sadiq ul Akhbar, 1872).

Subsequently, barren tracts transformed into populous regions and crop production grew phenomenally. The extension in irrigation brought a boost in the production of wheat, cotton and sugarcane. In the second half of 19th century, there was a shift from primitive to systemize methods of agriculture throughout in India (Randhawa,1983:75-76). The new varieties of seeds were adopted all over the country In the initial years of Agency rule, the improved varieties of seeds and new implements at the time were adopted in the State, which raised the quality of yields and generated good returns (Report,1873-74:25-26).

The most noticeable feature in the agriculture under Agency rule was the improvement in the style of cultivation. In place of cultivating large holdings, which were more than their work capacity, now attention was given to cultivate a small area but properly ploughed, manure and sown. This brought more profit than the former case though the slight reduction was seen in the total area. As in 1874-75, in spite of failure of inundation canal, the revenue was more than the previous year due to the high quality of crops. (Report, 1874-75:123).

A fundamental development was the reformation of revenue structure. The major components of this system were the introduction of settlements and records of rights. Land revenue settlements were undertaken to regularize the extraction from agriculture. Surveys were conducted to assess the revenue paying capacity of land (Ibid). The statistical data of individual ownership rights was prepared for each holding and had provided the landowners a clear statement of their rights. The

boundaries of their fields became clear that secured them against any discrepancy and dispute. Moreover, the land rights determined the individualization in property rights, which was a marked shift from collective ownership by complex forms of property (Report,1873-74:149).

The traditional leniency of native rule was also maintained in the revenue collection and revenue rates were generally less than the Punjab rates. Actually, the nature of Agency government in the native states was not extractive like in other provinces of India, where major purpose was to collect the revenue. Instead, here local patterns were dominant because their persistence was a political necessity for the Nawab. In this scenario, moderate rates, remissions on *kharaba* and efforts to clutch the subordinate bureaucracy became the major contributing factor towards the economic advancement. However, the combination of lower officials and landed elites compromised the State efficiency and public interests.

Integration of agriculture with pastoralism was the significant feature of State's economy, existing from the ancient time. In its infancy, the State devoted same concern to the better growth of livestock as to agricultural production (Olich,148). The pastoral-nomadic mode of existence underwent drastic changes at the onset of Agency and agriculture assumed the first place in State economy. However, owing to the specific ecological environment, the rearing of cattle held much importance in village economy and households (Auj,1991:17). Cattle breeding helped to meet local dairy and meat consumption. Their hides were a significant source of indigenous industry and trade. Therefore, orchards were ample and was a profitable private business. The forest and pastures on crown waste constituted the grazing ground, which were common property.

IV. Indebtedness.

The State's subsisted economy gradually developed and its impact was visible in the increasing income of the cultivators, which also enhanced their expenditures and ultimately brought the curse of indebtedness. Before 1866, agricultural indebtedness in the State was marginal due to *batai* system, which had open distribution of crops. The shift from kind to cash revenue left a margin for debt. With the increasing trend of cultivation, the need for the money required to cope with the agricultural expenditure, also grew. The poor peasants had least opportunities for getting credit. Their sole hope was the moneylender or *bunya*, who was the single credit agency in the rural economy. He usually received material guarantees to illiterate peasants in form of land or in jewels and gave money on a high pitch of interest (Report, 1874-75:2). The interest rate was very high at 25% per annum, which in many cases was more than the actual sum of advance through compound interest. Ultimately, the cultivator veered into devastating condition due to mortgage or had to sell his land in lieu of debt.

This system resulted in extortion of peasants. Mortgagers were almost Hindu moneylenders and a very few wealthy Muslim *zamindar* or State officials. They were able to purchase the protection of ruling power. Actually, moneylender dealt in land as business and disposed it off when favourable prices available. This situation resulted in a substantial increase in the transfer of land ownership to moneylenders. It was so intense that during 1867 to 1901, indebted peasants had to sale 296181 acres of land to moneylenders at a small rate of 3-5-7, whereas 74349

acres were mortgaged. At the same time, it brought about a socio-economic change in the structure of rural society. *Bunya*, who initially held hardly one acre in a thousand, became owners of hundreds of the acres (Muhammad Din, 2001:234).

There were several reasons that why did people borrow money. Debt was actually, a reflection of indolence and incompetence of peasants in Bahawalpur. The majority of creditors were poor Muslim cultivators or few Sikh settlers. The local cultivators generally had large holding that were more than their working capacity. Uncertain inundation supply added their miseries (Report, 1900-1901:6). As Darling analyzed that Muhammadan landowner was indolent and indebted, and devoid of developmental spirit (Darling, 1929:333).

The small landholders and tenants had to borrow money usually to meet the agricultural expenses such as the purchase of cattle and seeds. Apart from their general poverty, the prevailing trend of litigation, mainly to pay fines for the crime of cattle stealing, women abduction, and exorbitant rates of interest were the main factors of their indebtedness. On the other hand, some *zamindars* were also indulged in debt because of their lust for more land, extravagance as well as traditional hospitality (Assessment Report, 1947:36).

The proper organization of agricultural credit system was essential for the sake of agrarian development. The State opened various avenues to facilitate the peasants. Colonel Grey made further developments in 1878 and prepared the proper regulations for agricultural loans. The *takavi* loans on easy terms were a blessing for the cultivators to purchase of cattle, seeds and wells. The first legal attempt of native government to check the excessive interest rates was the 'law of interest and imprisonment in satisfaction of decree' in 1896. The law fixed the interest rate at less than half of the original amount or quantity of debt. Moreover, the rate for pledged items was fixed at 6% however, in case of nonpayment; it could be increased to 24% of debt. This measure seemed to be a security to peasants and minimized their miseries to an extent (Muhammad Din, 238).

The growing debt among cultivators had worst effect of the transfer of land to commercial castes. It was resulted the dispassion of peasantry from their ancestral holdings. This remained to be a major problem not only for Bahawalpur but also for the Punjab, where debt was a more common phenomenon. More than 80% of the rural population of Punjab was involved in debt (Darling, 246). Its root cause was the absence of any legislation for land alienation. To overcome the debt dilemma and to shore up the land owning classes, the Punjab government formulated the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900. Its major contribution was the restriction on the transfer of land to professional moneylenders and alienation was allowed only within related agricultural castes. A schedule of agricultural and non-agricultural castes was drawn and land transfers were held valid according to this schedule (Singh, 1945:248).

This Act was introduced in the State in 1910 with the same consequences as in Punjab. The Act prevented the commercial classes from acquiring the land owned by agricultural classes. The buy and sale of land was also limited to agricultural classes (Islam, 1995:272). In this regard, several discrepancies were also found and some groups manipulated their caste identity in order to claim an affiliation to

be registered in the agricultural tribes. The Act failed to achieve the desired objectives and moneylenders sustained in the land market after the enforcement of Act as well. They acquired land in the overlapping of legislation by legally purchase and mortgage (Settlement Report, 1930:7).

In order to remedy this problem, the cooperative department was set up as a sort of semi lending official source in Punjab in 1904. In Bahawalpur, the Cooperative Societies were introduced in 1914, with the staff consisting of only one Superintendent. These provided assistance in the purchase of seeds, implements and cattle. Initially, it did not receive a warm welcome because people were doubtful about the potency of new department. The moneylenders considered this a menace to their hereditary profession. Therefore, the State established the Central Bank and contributed a loan of Rs. 50000. The agricultural societies were 162 in number and comprised 15451 members. The societies issued the loan of 61328 rupees in their very first year (Report, 1915-16:58).

Over the time, a sufficient proportion of people joined the societies as member. The membership in Bahawalpur was more than the Punjab. It was 23 per thousand of the population in Bahawalpur, while in Punjab it was 11 per thousand. The main feature of societies in Bahawalpur was that their members held very low average of loan, which was Rs. 10, whereas in Punjab, average loan per member was Rs.97. Moreover, per member cost was four *anna* and four *pie*, against one rupee and eight *annas* in Punjab. Mr. Calvert, the Registrar of the Cooperative Societies declared the satisfactory conditions of working this department (Report Societies, 5).

Table No. 2 presents a sketch of the increasing ratio of debt for different years. The debt situation was more acute during the late nineteenth century and the ratio of mortgage was lower down while sale of land going up in the early twentieth century. However, the boost in sale and mortgage was controlled with the emergence of cooperative societies and it was decreased almost fifty percent. Because, majority of the peasants were illiterate so government combined the societies with education and engaged schoolteachers as secretaries to inform the illiterate about the benefits of the system. With the advent of society's movement, the miseries of cultivators became low but did not vanish. It paved the way for further remedies to control the indebtedness and remained a significant institution in the forthcoming years.

Table: 2. The Area under Sale and Mortgage in Acres.

Year	Sale	Mortgage
1880-81 to 1889-90	237187	34124
1890-91 to 1899-1900	257153	61408
1900-01	20274	6224
1904-05	26000	5916
1909-10	30894	7344
1914-15	49206	7560
1919-20	13573	5755

Sources: The Administration and Revenue Reports of the concerned years.

V. Conclusion

In the period under study, the economy of the State was subsistent oriented. Under Agency, the economy of the State began to be reshaped. Agricultural development in Bahawalpur was achieved with the collaborative efforts of native elites and British officers. The region of hot climate, sandy lands and with less resources succeeded not only in providing the main humane needs of foods to its subjects but also supplying the surplus to the deficit areas of India. It was possible owing to an organized structure, proper utilization of available resources and a balance system of resource distribution. All these components stimulated a pure agricultural environment, which in the subsequent years paved the way for market-oriented economy.

There seemed a strong relationship between agriculture structure and existing social conditions, which directly influenced the agriculture production. Furthermore, the extension of canal irrigation strengthened the local economy and caused a change in the socio-economic makeup of the State. Latter, the Punjab government planned to settle the agricultural communities on the wastelands in the province by canal colonization. In this regard, the large tracts of crown land were colonized with the agriculturists from the Punjab districts and changed the demographic index of the State. Consequently, the nomadic outlook of the society of Bahawalpur was converted into agrarian manifestation.

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