

# Society of South-East Punjab in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

**Dr. Dharamvir Bhardwaj**

Head, Deptt. of History, G. B. College, Rohtak

After the outbreak of 1857, south-east Punjab was separated from the then North-West Province and merged with Punjab. The seven districts formerly part of Delhi Territory were regrouped into two divisions of Delhi and Hissar popularly known as Eastern and Western division respectively. On the other hand the administration of this region along with the entire country was transferred from the East India Company to the Crown. A Viceroy, as a representative of the British Crown and Parliament, started ruling India. On the abolition of Hissar division in 1884 the district of Rohtak was transferred to Delhi Division.

It consisted of four Tehsils, Rohtak, Gohana, Jhajjar and Sampla but in April 1910, the last named tehsil was abolished and its area was divided between Rohtak and Jhajjar tehsils. The Sonapat Tehsil, which had remained attached to the Delhi district since the year 1861, was added to the Rohtak district in Sept. 1912, on the separation of Delhi Territory from the Punjab. The district was then attached to the Ambala division.<sup>1</sup> By the Royal Proclamation at the 1911 Coronation Darbar, Delhi was made the capital of India and Ambala once again became the headquarters of a division. Although this region had changed its names and political boundaries from time to time, its geographical boundaries were more than permanent. The south-eastern part of the Punjab was situated in the north-Western part of India, bounded by Shivalik hills and the river Ghaggar in the north, the river Yamuna in the east, the outcrops of Aravali hills in the south and the Thar desert of the Rajputana in the West. These natural boundaries produced, in more or less, isolated conditions, a distinct culture, a special mode of living and a different linguistic pattern.<sup>2</sup>

Society of this region was overwhelmingly rural. Most of the people lived in villages whose dwellings were clustered together and surrounded by high mud walls for protection. Table-I Urban-rural population in every district of the region in the year 1921.<sup>3</sup>

District		Total Population	Urban	Rural
1.	Hissar	816,810	86,351	730,459
2.	Rohtak	772,272	75,357	696,915
3.	Gurgaon	682,003	60,800	621,203
4.	Karnal	828,726	81,220	747,506
5.	Ambala	681,477	118,426	563,051

It shows that most of the population was living in rural areas and their main occupation was agriculture.

This region was dominated by Hindus and Muslims but Sikhs were in minority. Table-2. Hindu-Muslim population in each and every district of this region in the year 1921, distribution by district number per 10,000.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rohtak District Gazetteer, Vol.II, 1936, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Chandra, Jagdish, Freedom struggle in Haryana, 1919-47. Kurukshetra, 1982, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Census of India, 1921, Vol. XV, Punjab and Delhi, Part II, Table 1, p.2.

<sup>4</sup> Census of India, 1921, Vol. XV, Punjab and Delhi, Part I, p.193.

District	Hindus	Muslim
Hissar	6,713	2,644
Rohtak	8,152	1,619
Gurgaon	6,747	3,180
Karnal	6,917	2,843
Ambala	5,431	3,019

In this region, proportionately, more Muslims were living in urban areas than Hindus. Both Hindus and Muslims were divided by their common system of social discipline, caste, but Hindus caste system created much more rigid divisions than those among Muslims.<sup>5</sup> Every religion was further divided into castes and sub-castes. Among the Hindus the important castes were Jats, Brahmans, Ahirs, Gujars, Rajputs, Arora, Khatri, Aggarwal, Kumhar, Mali, Khatris and Harijans etc., and among Muslims were Jat Rajput, Arora, Julaha, Biloch, Kumar Mochi, Sayad, Meo, Qureshi, Sheikh and Pathan<sup>6</sup> etc. Society was for the most part dominated by land owning castes, such as Jats, Ahirs, Rajputs, Gujars and Meos. The Jats, who were in quite a large number were concentrated in districts of Rohtak, Hissar, Karnal and some parts of Gurgaon. Most of them were Hindus.

The Rajputs<sup>7</sup> both Hindus and Muslims were agriculturalists, but not as good as the Jats and Ahirs, were found almost every where in every district. However, they made good soldiers in the Indian Army.

The Meos<sup>8</sup>, "a Muslim caste of peasants, who occupied an area popularly known as Mewat, parts of Gurgaon district and Alwar and Bharatpur in Rajasthan. The Meos were predominantly agriculturists. They were not good agriculturists such as Ahirs and Jats and were careless and thrifless.<sup>9</sup> Their lands were barren and rocky.

The Meos were converted to Islam from Hinduism. They celebrated Hindu festivals, they had Hindu names. On the occasion of marriage, birth and other ceremonies, Hindu customs and traditions were followed.<sup>10</sup>

The Ahirs<sup>11</sup>, most of them were settled in Gurgaon district. They were exclusively agriculturists.

The Banias<sup>12</sup>, the trading class had a good position in the social hierarchy on the basis of their economic superiority in the society.

The Brahmins were in the Jajmani system in this region.<sup>13</sup> But they were not the leaders of the society in the position of the privileged. They did not as a rule even had the role of teachers. They were rarely erudite, many of them were barely

<sup>5</sup> Robinson, Francis, Separatism Among Indian Muslims : The Politics of the United Provinces, Muslims, 1860-1923, Delhi, 1975, p.28.

<sup>6</sup> Census of India, 1921, Vol. XV, Punjab and Delhi, Part I, Lahore, p.391.

<sup>7</sup> Punjab Administration Report, 1921-22, pp.322-23.

<sup>8</sup> Aggarwal, P.C., "Kinship and Marriage Among the Meos of Rajasthan", in Imtiaz Ahmed (ed.) Family, Kinship and Marriage Among Muslims in India, New Delhi, 1976, p.265.

<sup>9</sup> Darling, M.L., The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt, Oxford University Press, London 1925, p.102.

<sup>10</sup> Aggarwal, P.C., "Kinship and Marriage Among the Meos of Rajasthan", in Imtiaz Ahmed (ed.) Family, Kinship and Marriage Among Muslims in India, New Delhi, 1976 pp.266-67.

<sup>11</sup> Yadav, K.C., Ahirwal Ka Itihas, Delhi, 1967, pp.8-9.

<sup>12</sup> Punjab Administration Report 1921-22, p.332.

<sup>13</sup> Tandon, Prakash, Punjabi Century, London, 1963, pp.75-76.

literate, possessing only a perfunctory knowledge of ritual and knowing just the necessary mantras by heart. The occasions requiring their aid and knowledge were few.<sup>14</sup> Their low status mainly arose from the fact that they not only had to compete with the Muslim Pirs and Sikhs Gurus for religious leadership, but because they also lacked the economic power which the large Hindu temple complexes gave his brethren elsewhere in India.<sup>15</sup> In this region temples were mostly "holes in walls" or "little shrines under pipal or banyan trees", easily demolished and just as quickly set up again. The importance of the Brahmins was therefore limited.<sup>16</sup> In the absence of a powerful Brahmin caste, Hindu social leadership of this region had first rested with the Rajput princes but after power had been smashed by the Mughals, it had devolved on the commercial castes of Khattris, Arora and Banias. During the period of British rule, however, their leadership was in turn challenged by the emergence of a rich Jat peasantry.<sup>17</sup>

The artisan castes, like Lohars, Sunars, Kumhars, and Nais were not in a good position. They helped the villagers in a number of ways and occupied lower position.<sup>18</sup>

Agriculture was the chief profession of the people. About 65 per cent of the population depended on agriculture for their subsistence.<sup>19</sup> Table-3, The total population in each district of the region in the year 1921 engaged in different occupations.<sup>20</sup>

District	Total Population	Engaged in Agriculture	Commerce	Industry	Professions	Others Occupations
1. Hissar	816810	546221	71203	116137	12696	70553
2. Rohtak	772272	488160	65634	162625	12815	43038
3. Gurgaon	682003	439355	61675	117779	11676	51518
4. Karnal	828726	502115	70233	173912	15650	66816
5. Ambala	681477	360023	59747	119157	19026	123524

Thus, it is clear that agriculture was the mainstay of great majority of people of this region. Agriculture depended on rain; when the rain failed there was necessarily widespread distress involving a majority of the people. The famine commission rightly said that "at the root of much of the poverty of the people of India and of the risks to which they are exposed lies the unfortunate circumstance that agriculture forms about the sole occupations of the masses of the population."<sup>21</sup>

The chief agricultural tribes of the region were Jats, Rajputs, Gujars, Rors, Kumhars, Sydedes, Ahirs, Pathans and Meo etc. The Jats and Ahirs were found to be by far the most important.<sup>22</sup> The Syeds, who had important settlement in

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.76

<sup>15</sup> Ian, Talbot, Punjab and the Raj, 1849-1947, New Delhi, 1988, p.26.

<sup>16</sup> Tandon, Prakash, Punjabi Century, London, 1963, pp. 76-77.

<sup>17</sup> Talbot, Ian, op.cit., p.27.

<sup>18</sup> Punjab Administration Report, 1921-22, pp.333-34. N.M.M.L. New Delhi.

<sup>19</sup> Census of India, 1921, Vol. XV, Punjab and Delhi, Part I, p.375.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp.375-76.

<sup>21</sup> Saini, B.S., The Social and Economic History of the Punjab, 1901-1939. Delhi, 1975, p.34.

<sup>22</sup> Karnal District Gazetteer, Lahore, 1918, p.81.

various parts of the region, were for the most part rent receivers and were not usually successful cultivators. The majority of Hindus were Jat peasants in this region.

The Land Alienation Act of 1901, denied the status of agricultural tribes to village artisans and menials and hence they were automatically debarred from acquiring lands.<sup>23</sup> By the Act, they could not own or acquire land. Most of these menials worked as agricultural labourer. The village menials the churas, chamars, dhobis, nais, kumhars, julahas and dhanaks, generally offered the largest recruits to this group. In the rural society, these menials when working as agricultural labourers did not constitute a 'separate class'.<sup>24</sup> In fact, when they were not employed as field labour, they earned their livelihood by weaving cloth, making shoes, iron work, pottery and bricks of the small old fashioned type, wood work, oil-pressing, articles of rough jewellery and mending and selling baskets. They were indissolubly bound up with the village community. Payment for work was done usually in kind, as prescribed by custom.<sup>25</sup>

Agricultural work was generally done by oxen, but male buffaloes were yoked in carts and some time were used for plough. The main crops were wheat, rice, gram, barley, maize, jawar and pulses. Wheat and rice was produced in well irrigated places. In Karnal district, 20 per cent of area was under wheat and 18 percent under pulses; in Ambala district, 27 percent of area was under wheat and 8 per cent under pulses; in Gurgaon district, 7 percent of area was under wheat and 17 percent under pulses; and in Rohtak district 10 percent of area was under wheat and 20 percent under pulses.<sup>26</sup>

The grain generally used was mixture of wheat, barely and gram or any two of them in the hot weather and jawar, bajra, maize<sup>27</sup> used in cold weather, was the ordinary food of the agricultural population. Industrial development in this region was very poor. In Ambala district, there were 3 flour mills, six connected with cotton and three printing press and a glass factory.<sup>28</sup> In Karnal district 18 percent of the total population in 1901 was engaged in special industries, the most important being cotton, ginning, brass, darri-weaving, dying, glass blowing, brass and copper manufacturer and leather processing.<sup>29</sup>

The region had varied climate, physical appearance, soil, rainfall and geographical position, so agriculture was not equally prosperous throughout the province. This partly accounted for the wide variations in the economic conditions of the rural proprietors from region to region. In central and north-west Punjab the zamindars were comparatively better off than those in dry, rainless parts of south-east Punjab. In the absence of permanent and reliable means of irrigation, regular cultivation in this region depended on the rainfall. The fear of drought, famine and scarcity loomed throughout the year, and life was a struggle.

In the canal colonies, the larger grantees were not self-cultivators. They commonly rented their lands to sub-tenants, normally on half-batai rates. The larger grants in the canal colonies, those above fifty acres in size, were allotted to the landlord class, who did not personally cultivate the land, and held land in only one village as well as those who wholly owned several villages. The motive of the British for making grants to landlords remained political; The State on their help in maintaining political control and authority.

The landlords also provided official and semi-official functionaries at the level of both single villages and groups of villages, and this ensured the stability of British rule in the Punjab. This partnership found political expression in the Punjab Unionist Party, which continued to dominate the province till the final months of the British rule.

But in the south-east Punjab, the landholdings were not as big in as in the rest of the region, and most part of the land was cultivated by cultivators themselves. In rest of the Punjab, however, homogeneous village proprietary body did not closely related by ties of kinship. In the south-eastern districts, the village land was predominantly held and cultivated by proprietary bodies of kinsfolk with ancestral rights.

---

<sup>23</sup> Banerjee, Himadri, *Agrarian Society of the Punjab, 1849-1901*. New Delhi, 1982, p.184.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.185.

<sup>25</sup> Karnal District Gazetteer, Lahore, 1918, p.132.

<sup>26</sup> Census of India, 1921, Vol. XV, Punjab and Delhi, Part I, Lahore, 1923, p.36.

<sup>27</sup> Karnal District Gazetteer, Lahore, 1918, p.46.

<sup>28</sup> Census of India, 1921, Vol. XV, Punjab and Delhi, Part I, Lahore, 1923, p.366.

<sup>29</sup> Karnal District Gazetteer, Lahore, 1918, p.131.

The north-west of the province was characterized by the juxtaposition of dominant families and clans and a miscellaneous collection of inferior tribes. In Gurgaon and Rohtak districts, the average landholdings was ten acres or less. But Sirsa tehsil was peculiar, for its holdings were larger than almost everywhere else in this region.

In Karnal district 69 per cent of the agricultural land was for the most part in the hands of self-cultivating peasant-proprietors, the proportion being largest in Kaithal (78 per cent), and smallest in Thanesar (52 per cent) while Karnal and Panipat had 65 percent each. The Pathan Nawab of Kunjpura and the Mandal family of Karnal were the main landlords of Karnal tehsil and also had interests in other parts of district.