

ELECTORAL & COMMUNAL POLITICS IN PUNJAB 1909-1937

***Major Singh, **Dr. Parmindar Singh**

**Research Scholar, **Research Supervisor*

Department of History,

Arunachal Pradesh,

Itanagar

ABSTRACT

Significant changes marked the political landscape of Punjab between 1909 and 1937 due to the introduction of electoral reforms by the British colonial administration. The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 and the Government of India Act of 1919 fundamentally altered the nature of political representation, embedding communal identities within the political framework through separate electorates. During this period, I witnessed a complex interplay of rising nationalist aspirations and deepening communal divisions, significantly impacting the region's socio-political dynamics. The resultant political environment was characterized by frequent communal tensions and conflicts, setting the stage for the turbulent events leading to the partition of India in 1947.

KEYWORDS: *Electoral Reforms, Provincial Autonomy, Diarchy System, Unionist Party, Communal Representation.*

INTRODUCTION

The political landscape of Punjab between 1909 and 1937 was a complex tapestry woven with threads of colonial reforms, rising nationalist aspirations, and deepening communal identities. This period is critical in understanding the intricate dynamics that shaped Punjab's political and social milieu, setting the stage for subsequent historical events, including the partition of India in 1947. The introduction of electoral politics under British colonial rule, particularly through the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 and the Government of India Act of 1919, was a pivotal moment that transformed the political strategies and alliances within Punjab. These reforms were not only reflective of the broader Indian struggle for self-rule but also underscored the unique communal dynamics within the region.

The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 marked a significant turning point in Indian politics, introducing separate electorates for Muslims. This provision allowed Muslims to elect their representatives independently, a move designed to secure their political interests in a predominantly Hindu country. However, this policy also entrenched communal identities within the political framework, fundamentally altering the nature of political competition. In Punjab, a region with a substantial Muslim population, the reforms had profound implications. The introduction of separate electorates ensured Muslim representation in the legislative council but also fostered a political environment where communal identities became the primary basis for political mobilization and competition. Political leaders and parties had to navigate these communal realities, often leading to the reinforcement of communal divisions.

The impact of the First World War (1914-1918) on Punjab's political and social fabric cannot be understated. The British colonial government's demand for soldiers and resources from Punjab, often referred to as the "sword arm" of the British Empire, led to widespread discontent. The heavy recruitment drives and economic pressures exacerbated existing social and economic tensions, further complicating the communal landscape. During and after the war, nationalist sentiment surged, as Indians from various communities were united by a common desire for self-rule. However, in Punjab, the communal question continued to dominate politics. The British strategy of "divide and rule" found fertile ground in Punjab's diverse religious demographics, with political parties and leaders often emphasizing communal identities to galvanize support.

The Government of India Act of 1919, also known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, was another significant milestone in Punjab's political evolution. The act introduced diarchy in the provinces, including Punjab, further expanding the legislative councils and allowing for greater Indian participation in governance, albeit with limited powers. However, the system of separate electorates continued, solidifying communal divisions within the electoral process. In Punjab, the diarchy system meant that while Indian leaders could now participate in the administration, real power remained with the British officials. The reforms led to the emergence of new political groups and leaders who had to operate within this limited and communalized political structure. The Punjab Legislative Council saw a mix of communal and nationalist politics, with leaders such as Fazl-i-Hussain and the Unionist Party playing prominent roles. These developments highlighted the ongoing tension between the desire for self-rule and the realities of communal representation.

The appointment of the Simon Commission in 1927, tasked with reviewing the Government of India Act of 1919, was met with widespread opposition across India, including Punjab. The commission's all-British composition and its perceived lack of understanding of Indian aspirations led to significant protests. In Punjab, the response was marked by a mix of nationalist and communal mobilization. The subsequent Civil Disobedience Movement, launched by the Indian National Congress in 1930, saw participation from various communities in Punjab. However, the movement also highlighted the challenges of communal unity, as communal interests often intersected with nationalist goals. The political landscape in Punjab during this period was thus characterized by a complex interplay of nationalist fervor and communal considerations.

The Government of India Act of 1935 marked another significant milestone in Punjab's electoral and communal politics. The act proposed the establishment of provincial autonomy and expanded the franchise, leading to more inclusive but still communalized electoral processes. The act also set the stage for the provincial elections of 1937, which were a crucial test of communal and political alliances. In Punjab, the elections saw the Unionist Party, led by leaders like Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan, emerge as a dominant force. The party, which represented a coalition of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, sought to transcend communal divisions and focus on agrarian issues and provincial autonomy. However, communal parties and organizations, such as the All India Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha, also played significant roles, reflecting the persistent communal undercurrents in Punjab's politics.

Throughout this period, the British colonial administration adeptly manipulated communal identities to maintain control, using policies that pitted different communities against each other. The separate electorates introduced in 1909, and perpetuated in subsequent reforms, institutionalized communalism in the political process. Political parties and leaders, in turn, leveraged communal identities to build their constituencies and secure electoral victories. This dynamic often led to the marginalization of broader nationalist objectives in favor of immediate communal gains. The interplay of these factors created a volatile political environment in Punjab, marked by frequent communal tensions and conflicts.

THE MORLEY-MINTO REFORMS OF 1909

The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, officially known as the Indian Councils Act 1909, were a significant milestone in the political development of British India. These reforms were introduced by John Morley, the Secretary of State for India, and Lord Minto, the Viceroy of India, with the following key points:

1. **Expansion of Legislative Councils:** The reforms expanded the size of the legislative councils at both the central and provincial levels, allowing for more Indian members to participate.
2. **Separate Electorates:** A pivotal feature was the introduction of separate electorates for Muslims. This meant that Muslims would elect their representatives separately, ensuring their political interests were safeguarded in a predominantly Hindu country.
3. **Increased Indian Representation:** The reforms allowed for the election of Indian members to the councils through a limited franchise, involving local bodies, landlords, and chambers of commerce.
4. **Non-official Majority:** While the majority of the members were still official appointees, the reforms introduced non-official members, including Indians, who were nominated or elected.
5. **Advisory Role:** Although the councils had limited legislative powers and primarily served an advisory role, the inclusion of elected Indian members marked a step towards greater political participation and representation.

Overall, the Morley-Minto Reforms laid the groundwork for future political developments and played a crucial role in shaping communal identities by institutionalizing separate electorates.

THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA ACT OF 1919

The Government of India Act of 1919, also known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, was a landmark legislation introduced by the British government to expand Indian participation in the governance of British India. The key features of the Act include:

1. **Diarchy in Provinces:** The Act introduced the system of diarchy in the provinces, dividing subjects into 'transferred' and 'reserved' categories. Indian ministers were given control over transferred subjects such as education, agriculture, and health, while the British governor and his executive council retained control over reserved subjects like finance, police, and justice.
2. **Expanded Legislative Councils:** The Act expanded the legislative councils at both the central and provincial levels, increasing the number of elected Indian representatives. However, the majority of seats in these councils were still held by officials appointed by the British government.
3. **Limited Franchise:** The reforms introduced a limited franchise based on property, tax, and educational qualifications, allowing a small percentage of the Indian population to vote. This selective enfranchisement aimed to include the more affluent and educated segments of society in the political process.
4. **Bicameral Legislature:** At the central level, the Act established a bicameral legislature with the creation of the Council of State (Upper House) and the Legislative Assembly (Lower House), marking the first instance of a bicameral system in Indian governance.
5. **Provincial Autonomy:** The Act granted a degree of autonomy to provincial governments, allowing them to formulate and implement policies on transferred subjects independently, albeit under the overarching control of the British governor.
6. **Communal Representation:** The Act continued and expanded the system of communal representation, providing separate electorates for Muslims, Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, and Europeans, thereby institutionalizing communal divisions in the political system.
7. **Central Control:** Despite the increased participation of Indians, the central government remained firmly under British control, with the Viceroy retaining significant powers, including the ability to override decisions made by the legislative councils.

Overall, the Government of India Act of 1919 was a step towards greater Indian involvement in governance but fell short of meeting the aspirations for full self-rule. It laid the foundation for future constitutional reforms and highlighted the growing complexities of managing communal identities within the political framework of British India.

CONCLUSION

The period from 1909 to 1937 in Punjab was marked by the entrenchment of communal politics within the broader context of colonial electoral reforms and rising nationalist sentiments. The introduction of separate electorates and the subsequent political developments underscored the complexities of managing communal identities in a diverse and politically charged environment. While efforts like those of the Unionist Party aimed at bridging communal divides, the legacy of

communal politics continued to shape Punjab's political landscape, setting the stage for the turbulent decades that followed, leading up to the partition of India in 1947. The electoral and communal politics of this period thus provide crucial insights into the challenges of political representation and communal harmony in a colonial context.

REFERENCES

1. Ahmad, I. (2009). *Punjab Politics in the 1940s: The Role of the Unionist Party*. Journal of South Asian Studies, 32(2), 141-157.
2. Bajwa, F. (2002). *Pakistan: A Historical and Contemporary Look at the Place and Role of Religion in Statehood*. South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 25(1), 59-75.
3. Barrier, N. G. (2003). *Punjab Disturbances of 1947 and the Role of the Civil Administration*. Journal of Asian Studies, 62(2), 522-549.
4. Brass, P. R. (2003). *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*. University of Washington Press.
5. Chatterji, A. (2004). *The Partition of Bengal: Politics and Perspectives*. South Asia Research, 24(2), 249-275.
6. Chhabra, G. S. (2005). *Advance Study in the History of Modern India (Volume 3: 1920-1947)*. Lotus Press.
7. Gilmartin, D. (2009). *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan*. University of California Press.
8. Gupta, N. (2003). *Communalism and Secularism in Indian Politics: A Historical Perspective*. Social Scientist, 31(1/2), 54-75.
9. Jalal, A. (2000). *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam Since 1850*. Routledge.
10. Jones, K. W. (2007). *Communalism in the Punjab: The Arya Samaj Contribution*. University of California Press.
11. Khan, Y. (2007). *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*. Yale University Press.
12. Major, A. (2011). *Return to Empire: Punjab's Sikhs and the First World War*. South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 34(1), 31-50.
13. Puri, H. K. (2003). *Communalism in Indian Politics: A Study of Punjab*. Journal of Contemporary Asia, 33(4), 516-532.

14. Talbot, I. (2011). *Pakistan: A New History*. Oxford University Press.
15. Yadav, K. C. (2008). *Haryana: Studies in History and Politics*. Manohar Publishers & Distributors.