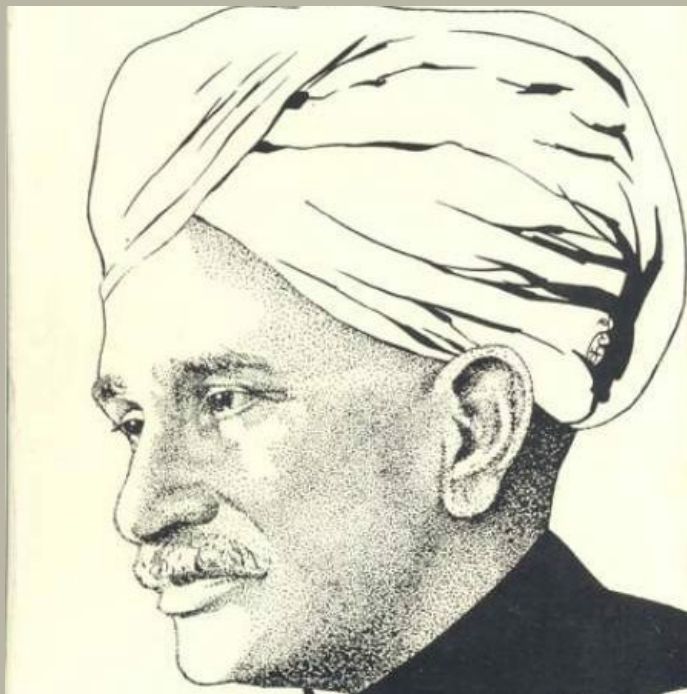


# Sir Chutto Ram - Life and Times

**D.C. VERMA**



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**SIR CHHOTU RAM**

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## FOREWORD

On November 24, 1981 falls the centenary of a great farm leader, Sir Chhotu Ram. He was a great crusader for the cause of the exploited rural people and by his many achievements left a mark on his times.

Chhotu Ram belongs to the first half of the twentieth century when the country saw the great struggle for national independence. Chhotu Ram died just before India became free but nobody can deny that through the Unionist Party which he had founded jointly with Sir Fazl-i-Hussain, another great leader of rural people, he worked to strengthen the roots of national unity. His bold stand against the partition of the country would go down in history as a matter of pride and his name would always be remembered with respect.

Chhotu Ram was a man of strong convictions on which he never compromised. He was prominent in public life for more than two decades. He was a minister in the Punjab Government from 1924 to 1926 and again from 1937 to 1945.

As an administrator, parliamentarian and leader of the rural masses, he occupied an unrivalled position. Amongst his many achievements will be remembered his long and sustained campaign for the uplift of the backward sections of the society. The agrarian laws of the Unionist Government of Punjab which were considered by all progressive thinkers, as pioneering measures, were the result of his thinking and initiative.

The author of this book, Professor Deep Chand Verma, was associated with Sir Chhotu Ram for many years. During the last two years of the Unionist leader's life, Professor Verma was attached with Sir Chhotu Ram as his Public Relations Officer. It is these two years of Sir Chhotu Ram's life which were of crucial significance both for the Punjab and the country as a whole. Professor Verma is an eye-witness to most of the events that took place in the Punjab during this period which he has described with utmost fidelity in this book. The chapter "Chhotu Ram-Jinnah Confrontation" is based on what the author learnt firsthand from Sir Chhotu Ram himself. This book deals with many happenings that shaped the history of the times. The author narrates many anecdotes of Sir Chhotu Ram's colorful life which highlight the character of this extraordinary man.

Professor Verma has attempted to write the history of the period in which Sir Chhotu Ram lived and brought into vivid focus social and economic forces that molded the Punjab and Haryana of those days. I have known Professor Verma since 1948 as an official of the Punjab Government and also as Vice-Chancellor of Kurukshetra University. He is an eminent scholar, who is respected for integrity and objectivity. I

hope, this book, which is a real contribution to the history of Punjab and Haryana, will be read with interest by many people.

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Garden House,  
Kharar (Near Chandigarh)  
2 February, 1981

## PREFACE

As News Editor in the Information Bureau of the Punjab Government from 1943 to 1947 I was in a position to observe events from close quarters in the Punjab. As I was simultaneously working as Public Relations Officer to Sir Chhotu Ram, who dominated Punjab politics during this period, I had an opportunity of laying my hands on material which would have been of historical value but unfortunately this did not occur to me, and all that came to my hands was what I could learn from my daily meetings with Sir Chhotu Ram lasting for about two hours. Sir Chhotu Ram was cast in such a strong mould, physically and mentally, that one looked upon him as something everlasting.

Came the exciting year 1944. Quaid-Azam Jinnah invaded Punjab to fix the label of Muslim League on the Unionist Government. This was effectively repulsed by the combined efforts of the Princely Punjab Premier, Sir Khizar Hyat Khan Tiwana and his redoubtable senior colleague Deen-Bandhu Chaudhri Sir Chhotu Ram, but at a high cost.

The Pakistan movement which was now spreading in the Punjab was causing concern but Chhotu Ram decided to nip it in the bud. He planned out extensive hurricane tours all over the Punjab in which the writer invariably accompanied, and schemes were made to counter the increasing Muslim League propaganda. In these efforts. Sir Chhotu Ram over-reached his physical stamina and after a brief illness from November, 1944 onward, he expired on January 9, 1945. In between he had recovered considerably and on December 22, 1944, he sent for me through his physician. Dr Nand Lal. For once the great man was his old self again. He explained to me the various ideas he had in mind to ensure that the Punjab would never be divided. These included launching a number of daily newspapers from Lahore, reorganizing the Zamindara League and holding of Conferences to turn the Punjab into a veritable fortress against all disruptive forces.

Sir Khizar Hyat Khan who continued to be Premier of the Punjab for another two years after Sir Chhotu Ram's death, sent for me after the departure of the man on whom he had depended most and commissioned me to prepare a draft for the biography of Sir Chhotu Ram. This draft was revised by Chaudhri Tika Ram, who had taken over as Revenue Minister and was published as such in June, 1945. Then came the General Election of 1946 in which the Unionist Party was practically wiped out. With partition in 1947, the Punjab which the Unionist Party under its great leaders. Sir Fazl-i-Hussain, Sir Sikander Hyat Khan, Sir Chhotu Ram and Sir Khizar Hyat Khan had built up, ceased to exist.

Sir Chhotu Ram was all but forgotten. Some interest, however was revived and mainly through the efforts of Chaudhri Sri Chand, Sir Chhotu Ram's nephew, a memorial

institution was established at Rohtak. A few biographies have also been published. Of these, the book by Madan Gopal and another by Raghbir Singh Shastri (in Hindi) deserve mention. But the real Chhotu Ram and his epic role as fighter for the underdog yet remains to be fully depicted.

With the coming of 1981 which is the centenary year of Sir Chhotu Ram, there is a revival – almost an upsurge – of Kisan movement all over the country. This has brought Sir Chhotu Ram once again before the minds of the people.

As Chhotu Ram's centenary would be celebrated throughout 1981, it was decided to set up a Central Centenary Committee to plan the programme for the year. It has also been decided to transform this Central Committee into a permanent Trust to be known as Sir Chhotu Ram Memorial Trust which would establish permanent institutions to commemorate the sacred memory of the great leader. A start is being made with this biography, based as it is, on all available sources. We hope this would be followed by other publications to carry forward the message, which Sir Chhotu Ram symbolized in his own person.

In this work I have received help and cooperation from many well-wishers. My grateful thanks are due to Shri M.S. Randhawa who has been extremely kind with an illuminating foreword. Prof Hari Singh, who has procured some very rare photographs, graciously agreed to do most of the proof reading.

*In conclusion, I would like to dedicate this work to the vast Indian humanity for whom Chhotu Ram lived and died and who still remain neglected.*

D.C. VERMA

Satya Parkash Bhawan,  
100/18A,  
Chandigarh

*"The people are silent I will be the advocate of this silence. I will speak for the dumb. I will speak of the small to the great and of the feeble to strong ..... will speak for all the despairing silent ones. I will interpret this stammering, I will interpret the grumblings, the murmurs, the tumults of crowds, the complaints ill-pronounced, and these cries of beasts that, through ignorance and through sufferings, man is forced to utter will be the word of the people. I will be the bleeding mouth whence the gag is snatched out. I will say everything."*

—VICTOR HUGO



## INTRODUCTION

*The people who get on in this World are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want and, if they can't find them, make them.*

BERNARD SHAW

The Punjab was the last State to fall to the British after the defeat of the Sikhs. All previous invaders to India had come from the North. The British being a sea-power, first established themselves on the coasts in the peninsula and then taking advantage of the internecine warfare amongst the native powers on the disintegration of the Mughal Empire, gradually worked their way up.

Delhi, the historical city, fell to the British in 1803 after the first defeat of the Mahrathas. By the time Lord Hastings left in 1818, the British hold was firmly consolidated. Amongst the Northern States, the Punjab under Maharaja Ranjit Singh was kept out of the British clutches. This was done by an understanding by which the Maharaja agreed to Keep his hands off the Cis-Sutlej States, which had come under British protection.

The Haryana region, which produced Chhotu Ram, had a distinct cultural and social identity of its own. Administratively it became a part of the then NWFP — the present UP after the British take-over.

It was made a separate administrative unit — called the Delhi Territory — and continued so till the Mutiny.

Delhi remained the centre of Muslim rule from the beginning of the 13th century till the breakdown of the Mughal Empire in the 18th. During this long period of more than five centuries, the districts around Delhi (the entire Haryana area) were a sort of backyard of the Muslim rulers, being under their immediate impact.

In spite of this continued domination, the Haryana people sturdily maintained their independent cultural and religious identity. The Muslim rulers succeeded in making few converts around Delhi, as is obvious from the structure of the population, which remains overwhelmingly Hindu.

The martial races of Haryana — the Jats, the Rajputs, the Brahmins, the Gujars, the Ahirs and the Muslim Meos (originally Hindus) never accepted at heart the foreign rulers, whether Muslim or British.

The Sultans and the Mughals found the area difficult because of the independent disposition of the people. Even such brilliant and benevolent administrators as Metcalfe

and Lawrence failed to win over the confidence of the people, in spite of the comparatively enlightened nature of the British rule. During the Mutiny the entire region revolted and reaped the lasting resentment of the Raj.

As a punishment the Haryana area was tacked on to the newly conquered Punjab, with far off Lahore as capital. Haryana and its main city Delhi remained ignored for long.

The Punjab being the gateway of India has never enjoyed stability continuously. Invader after invader passed through it and in the process endowed the region with a heterogeneous character, which it has largely retained.

Writes Azim Hussain:

"The Punjab has never had a settled government for any length of time such as would have enabled it to develop tradition and a culture of its own, like those of Oudh, Bengal or Maharashtra. Apart from lack of cultural tradition, the religious background has become confused. Old nomad tribalism, Hinduism, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Islamism and Sikhism, all throughout Punjab history counteracted, one another, and none of them could become strong enough to be of decisive influence in the life of the province. Perhaps this is the reason why the Punjab has such a fertile ground for new faiths."<sup>1</sup>

The British found the new province a fertile ground for its own purposes. The Punjab was to be used to counterbalance the trends and developments in the rest of India.

Domination by the British appeared so natural to the Punjabis that within 8 years of its conquest, the province provided 70,000 soldiers to their new masters to suppress the Mutiny in Haryana and neighboring territory.

There was one common feature all over the tract covering the Punjab and Haryana: this was the institution of self-preserved joint-village communities of peasant proprietors.

The British administrators took little time to realize that this could be used in maintaining the existing framework of society.

The peasant-proprietor became the backbone of British administration and later on when Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram organized the Unionist Party, the bureaucracy at least in the beginning was sympathetic.

The British, in course of time, developed a new base for the system, a class of dependable people, the loyal-landed gentry.

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<sup>1</sup> Azim Hussain, *Fazl-i-Hussain — a Political Biography*, p. 71.

The Punjab being a non-regulation province, the bureaucracy was more powerful here than in the Presidencies and other regulation provinces.

"The Punjab was administered by a famous school of district officers, who were purposely left by the government a large degree of freedom and initiative. Their relations with the people were personal and intimate and as long as their methods were justified by success, they suffered little interference from Calcutta or Simla."<sup>2</sup>

This bureaucratic patronage, kept the Punjab politically backward. Rule of Law, the most important feature of Pax-Britannica was introduced with many limitations and customary law, largely tribal in origin, continued to have sway, unknown in other parts.

In the matter of constitutional development the Punjab remained behind other provinces. The Indian Councils Act introduced in Bombay and Madras in 1861 became applicable to the Punjab much later. The Minto-Morley Reforms were introduced in the Punjab with discrimination. In the Imperial Legislative Council, the Punjab was represented by nominated Members. Until 1920, the Lt. Governor of the Punjab, was without an Executive Council.

The English had come to Presidencies — Bombay, Madras and Bengal — as traders but when they came to the Punjab they were looked upon as conquerors.

The Punjabis felt overawed by the majesty of the new rulers. Education took long to spread. The Punjab University was not started till 1882.

In 1877 Surendranath Banerjea came to Lahore and started a branch of the Indian Association. Political consciousness was low and what existed was due to the Bengal immigrants. A branch of the Indian National Congress was set up in 1885 but the organization did not function for the greater part of the year. The only active movement was that of the Arya Samaj. Founded at Bombay by Maharishi Dayanand in 1875, its activities soon spread all over the Punjab, including Haryana.

The Land Alienation Act, passed in 1901 due to the initiative of Lord Curzon, became a landmark in the political life of the Punjab. So far the British administrators had done little to protect the peasantry against the usurious practices of money-lenders. According to this Act the money-lenders, by and large urban non-agriculturists, could not purchase the land of agriculturists.

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<sup>2</sup> *History of India*, Robert; p. 517.

As the money-lenders were mostly Hindus and the peasantry, Muslim in the West, Sikh in the centre and Hindu in the South, the Land Alienation Act created a class-consciousness which cut across religion.

Chhotu Ram's genius consisted in raising this consciousness to a level which no amount of religious fanaticism succeeded in diluting.

The Land Alienation Act became an important plank of the Unionist Party's programme. The agrarian legislation sponsored by the Unionist Party under Chhotu Ram's leadership carried this consciousness a step forward. The Punjab peasantry came into its own. It is this which entitles Chhotu Ram to a place in the galaxy of new path-finders.

As a leader of rural Punjab, Chhotu Ram displayed adaptability, originality, courage and imagination. The rural people in the Punjab, Haryana and indeed in the rest of the country have not produced a leader of his caliber. When Chhotu Ram settled down at Rohtak to practice Law, in 1912 Haryana presented a dismal, dreary, depressing picture. When he left the scene after about 3 decades, Haryana was considered ahead of the rest of the Punjab in political-consciousness. Rohtak had become the hub of the political life in the Punjab. This was mainly the work of one man and he did it almost singlehanded.

Both the Congress and the Unionist Party were based on the secular principle. In the peculiar conditions of the Punjab, however, the one became mainly Hindu and the other largely Muslim.

Lahore was not only the capital of the Punjab but centre of all educational, cultural and social activities. Amritsar close by was the commercial capital of the province. In the Western and Central Punjab other prosperous towns and cities grew up as the result of enterprise stimulated by ambitious plans of development.

In the West Punjab, irrigation projects on large scale were taken up turning the arid areas into smiling, prosperous canal colonies.

The Central Punjab prospered commercially. The south which formed Haryana remained backward and neglected.

On the cultural side the coming of the Arya Samaj was a boon to the Punjab and Haryana alike.

Haryana was so backward and superstition-ridden at the time that one wonders what would have happened if the message of Maharishi Dayanand, calling for the new path of enlightenment had not come at the time it did.

On the political and economic side, Chhotu Ram played a role parallel to Dayanand's on the social and educational.

Lala Lajpat Rai, whose first love was Arya Samaj had started as a legal practitioner at Hissar in Haryana and had created considerable social awareness amongst the people. He soon shifted to Lahore and his association with Haryana was short-lived.

There would be several encounters between him and Chhotu Ram later but the Lala became the powerful spokesman of the urban Hindus, as he rose to high eminence in national politics.

The First World War had a greater impact on the Punjab than elsewhere. Haryana, like the rest of the Punjab, is the home of the martial races. The Haryana fighting classes, the Jats, Brahmans, the Rajputs, the Ahirs, the Gujars and the Muslim Meos, all came forward and joined in strength, responding with enthusiasm to the call for recruitment.

Chhotu Ram and Lal Chand had started joint legal practice in 1912 and now they both engaged themselves in support of the recruitment campaign. The bureaucracy was greatly impressed and the entire campaign was entrusted to them with Chhotu Ram as Secretary of the Recruitment Board. The Indian nationalists had come out in support of the war, expecting as quid pro quo, recognition of India's right to self-government. M. K. Gandhi, who had become well-known because of his unique work in South Africa was at the time a firm supporter of the British Empire. If the O, Dwyer-Dyer regime in the Punjab had not blundered into the Jallianwala atrocities, the course of Indian politics would have been different.

Haryana public life at this time was entirely dominated by the Chhotu Ram-Lal Chand team. The Arya Samaj movement had also become strong, Chhotu Ram was prominently associated with it.

In the Punjab proper, new alignments were taking place. The urban Hindus had organized themselves around Lahore from where they controlled practically the entire political life of the province, they being ahead of both the Muslims and the Sikhs.

After the Rowlatt Acts and the Jallianwala bagh tragedy, the Punjab which so far had been somewhat out of the main national stream was thrown into a political whirlwind and became the main centre of a new thrust in Indian politics.

Along with the Arya Samaj, the Congress had made some headway in the Punjab and Haryana after the Bengal-partition agitation Even amongst the Muslims the Congress was making slow impact, one of its outstanding leaders being Mian Fazl-i-Hussain, the future Unionist leader.

The shock of Jallianwala disturbed the Punjab and the country for a while but even so the general trend was not to boycott the Reforms of 1919. The announcements of the Secretary of State, E. Montagu in Parliament in August 1917, had aroused hopes of India obtaining substantial political advancement but the actual Act when finalized considerably toned down the high expectations.

The Congress itself was in two minds, to accept or not to accept. Even such progressive politicians, Tilak, Annie Besant and C.R. Das were not in favor of the boycott. But Gandhi who had by now acquired a new stature carried everybody by storm at Amritsar Congress and non-cooperation was made the policy.

A new factor that entered Indian politics at the time was the Khilafat issue. It was this which Gandhi made use of, to forge Hindu-Muslim unity.

This was a short-sighted opportunist policy which was destined to leave fatal consequences, being the source of Hindu-Muslim disunity and finally bringing in religion in the sphere of politics.

Amongst those most prominent in objecting to this move was M.A. Jinnah, at the time, a liberal moderate constitutional leader, with communal harmony as the main plank of the national programme. Such is the dialectic of politics, which takes politicians from one extreme to the other.

Fazl-i-Hussain, the rising Muslim leader had settled down at Lahore as Lawyer in 1905. By the time of the 1919 Reforms, he had risen to a position of distinction and eminence in education and the public life of the province generally. In the Punjab University Senate of which he was a member, he found that the Hindus took decisions on communal considerations but even so he adhered to broad national policies having been the President of the Punjab Congress for several years. Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram were developing somewhat on parallel lines during this time, without knowing each other. Both were involved in the Congress movement for a while but left the national organization in 1920 when non-cooperation became its creed.

M.A. Jinnah also left the Congress at the same time on the same issue.

All the three had broadly the same approach to problems at the time but later on Jinnah would come in conflict first with Fazl-i-Hussain and later with Chhotu Ram.

## II

The Punjab had made impressive contribution to the war and expected a suitable return.

The peasantry had so far been exploited by the bureaucracy and the educated urban classes alike. The Punjab peasant had realized, how much he was sought after, during the war. Its leaders now wanted a political identity for this numerically largest section in the province.

It was at Rohtak where Chhotu Ram and Lal Chand dominated public life that this idea first arose. Ch. Lal Chand as a Member of the Council of the Lt. Governor of the Punjab raised the issue of separate representation for the urban and rural areas under the new reforms. Chhotu Ram had grasped its implications and had the scheme put forward through Lal Chand.

When the matter came up for discussion in the Council, Fazl-i-Hussain who was also a member, opposed the proposal but with the support of the Lt. Governor it was approved.

Fazl-i-Hussain did not grasp the significance of the rural-urban distinction in demarcating constituencies till much later. The first ministry in the Punjab formed in 1920 was not based on any territorial or economic alignments.

Fazl-i-Hussain and Harkishan Lal, the other minister, represented the Muslims and the Hindus respectively.

In the election of 1923, both Chhotu Ram and Lal Chand were elected to the Council. It was now that the idea of rural and urban distinction arose. Chhotu Ram by this time had come in contact with Fazal-i-Hussain and he persuaded him to insist on the rural basis of the ministry with Lal Chand as second minister.

This became the starting point of the Unionist Party. The advanced urban Hindu classes were greatly disturbed at these developments. They soon so manipulated things that in an election petition Lal Chand lost his council membership and consequently the ministership.

From now on while the urban Hindus would continuously try to suppress the rural Hindus, it would result in further weakening their own position.

Fazl-i-Hussain insisted that Lal Chand's successor should be Chhotu Ram. This changed the future politics of the Punjab with wide-ranging repercussions. Chhotu Ram became minister replacing Lal Chand in spite of the intrigues and machinations of the Lahore Hindu-Sabha lobby – with whom there would be a continuous warfare for nearly two decades.

Politics if it is a game, has no rules. Things often happen by chance.

Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram working together as ministers in charge of the transferred subjects under Diarchy, soon developed a clear programme and ideology, giving definite form and structure to the Unionist Party, which continued to dominate the Punjab till the partition of the country,

Fazli and Chhotu Ram made an ideal working team in the then conditions in the Punjab although they had come from different backgrounds. Fazl-i-Hussain's father was a sessions judge and he had the advantage of belonging to the majority community in the province. He had also got an early start having established himself first in law and then in politics.

Fazl-i-Hussain was so outstanding intellectually, not only amongst the Muslims but in the country as a whole, that he could hold his own in any controversy and come the better out of it.

The Muslim community was not backward as a whole. It produced some eminent men in every sphere, law, education, politics, and even business where the newly arisen Hindu bourgeoisie dominated.

Fazli came from Batala a comparatively better developed part of the State. His ancestors were Hindu Rajputs and he himself was above narrow communalism. He was not cast for the rough and tumble, which politics often becomes but being a clearheaded, shrewd man, he had few equals in the art of strategy.

Chhotu Ram was a crusader and a fighter to the bone. He loved political scrapes and in controversies he often had the better of his adversaries. He followed a rigid code in politics and adhered firmly to principles.

He had a very high regard for Fazl-i-Hussain and unreservedly accepted him as his mentor, because of his integrity, ability and common approach in politics.

Fazl-i-Hussain has remained an enigmatic figure in Indian politics. It was only after his death, when the so-called Muslim nationalists – including M.A. Jinnah, became rank communalists and brought about the partition of India, that the real worth of Fazl-i-Hussain and others who were true Unionists and would have never allowed the country to be divided, was realized. C. Rajagopalachari – a good judge of men and matters, has made the following observations in his Foreword to Azim Hussain's Biography of Fazl-i-Hussain:

"A great man has but little chance in a world, full of small men. Small men do not make things easy but ever try to impede on one ground or another. Thus the struggle is not only to be waged against the stupendous volume and weight of



the work that has to be achieved, not only against the difficulties of the task to be performed, but also against the pull from behind by the small men that are impatient of the big man.

Had Fazl-i-Hussain not become a sick man at an early age and breathed his last at the age of 59, in spite of his great desire to live a little longer so that he might initiate and build up provincial autonomy in the Punjab, the fortunes of the Unionist Party and probably the history of Muslim politics in India would have been different from what they have been.

It is not possible for anyone to escape one's environment or the passions and prejudices arising out of it. Even an attempt to overcome an evil often leads to misunderstanding and is misrepresented as cooperation and conspiracy with the very evil one struggled to overcome. The keynote of Fazl-i-Hussain's policy was that democracy should be run by parties formed on non-communal lines and yet Fazl-i-Hussain was represented by his opponents as a protagonist of communal politics."

This was written before partition. The true significance of the role Fazl-i-Hussain would have played had he been spared some more years, is brought out by Durga Das in '*From Curzon to Nehru and After*' written in 1969.

"I do not want Punjab to be the Ulster of India", Fazli told Durga Das, after retiring from the Viceroy's Council, when he had started the reorganization of the Unionist Party.

"His (Jinnah's) League is on paper. It has no organization ... If God gives me two years, I shall have completed my service to the Punjab and to India. Now that the communal award has given the necessary safeguards, we can work for the early achievement of Swaraj." (pp. 171-172) "Here was a tragic situation", writes Durga Das (p. 173) "Fazli a communalist turned nationalist, envisaged cooperation with the Congress on the economic plane and Jinnah, a nationalist turned-communalist sought a coalition with the Congress on a communal basis . . . The idea of partitioning the country took root among the Muslims only after Fazli's death."

It is in this sense that the history of a nation becomes the history of its great men.

If Fazl-i-Hussain, Sikander and Chhotu Ram had outlived Jinnah, there would have been no partition of India.

Sir Sikander Hyat Khan was not of the same caliber as Fazl-i-Hussain. But he was a real Punjabi — a Punjabi first and anything else afterwards.

Chhotu Ram's hold on the Muslim peasantry — a majority in the Muslim population, amazed everybody. No non-Muslim amongst the greatest nationalists in the Congress or any other party could claim the grip Chhotu Ram had over the rural Punjab, including its Muslim part. Chhotu Ram also suffered from a similar misrepresentation as Fazl-i-Hussain. He could not be charged with communalism, because being a Hindu, he fought Hindu vested interests all his life. He was called feudal, pro-British, reactionary, tribalist, racist or whatever else suited his opponents at times.

Chhotu Ram began as a leader of the Jats, developed a comprehensive theory of politics in course of time, which brought the entire Punjab peasantry, irrespective of caste or religion on a common platform, symbolized by the national Unionist Party.

He was leader of a party with a majority of Muslims. The Congress was similarly a secular party but the majority of its members was Hindu. The nationalist Muslims who joined the Congress were condemned by the Muslim Leaguers as pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim. The Hindu and Sikh Unionists in the Punjab were regarded by the Hindu and Sikh communalists as pro-Muslim. Chhotu Ram in particular was the target of not only all communalists but also of all vested interests that camouflaged under deceptive, misleading nomenclature.

Chhotu Ram once taunted these critics by saying that he ceased to be Hindu if he joined hand with Sikander or Khizar Hyat but Gandhi and Jawaharlal remained staunch Hindus when fraternizing with Abul Kalam Azad, Asaf Ali and other Muslims. Obviously what was sauce for the goose was not sauce for the gander.

The same Chhotu Ram who fought Hindu and Sikh communalism all his life stood firmly against the communalism of Jinnah and the Muslim League, when the unity of the country was at stake.

At that time he was hailed by Raja Narendernath, Bakshi Tek Chand, Master Tara Singh, and other Hindu and Sikh leaders whom Chhotu Ram had fought all his life, as the greatest nationalist head and shoulder above all others.

It was not Chhotu Ram who had changed in any way. He stood steadfast by his principles as he had done all his life. He was once a Congressman and remained so all his life in spirit, giving practical shape to the constructive programme of the Congress.

That was true of Fazl-i-Hussain also, when he expressed his willingness to work with the Congress during the last year of his life.

In the Punjab the Congress always remained dominated by communal forces.

There is a story of a meeting between Lajpat Rai and Chhotu Ram in 1924, when the latter had become a minister. Lala Lajpat Rai was a man of many parts. He was the foremost nationalist leader of the Punjab occupying a place of great eminence at all-India level. He was a staunch Arya-Samaji and at the same time he was never able to cut himself off from Hindu communalism in the Punjab.

Lajpat Rai warned Chhotu Ram about his joining hands with Muslim reactionaries and loyalists, calling themselves Unionists and advised him to become a true nationalist. Chhotu Ram accepted the advice but posed a counter-question. What did nationalism really consist in? He elaborated it himself by telling Lala Lajpat Rai that the Punjabi Hindus were attempting to run with the hare and hunt with the hound. As a consequence they fell between two stools.

Chhotu Ram told Lala Lajpat Rai that the urban Hindus in the Punjab should fight either the British or the Muslims. In one case they would be true nationalists and in the other true communalists. The trouble occurred when they tried to be communalists and nationalists at one and the same time. They wanted to have the cake and eat it too. They wanted to take all the advantages and had no scruples to compromise with anybody if it served their by interest. As a result they were neither trusted by the British nor by the Muslims. The Sikhs often stood with them but at times even they doubted their good faith.

A little later Pt. Madan Mohan Malaviya, a highly respected leader of the Hindu community, who was held in high esteem by all other communities and even by the British because of his integrity and noble character, met Chhotu Ram at the persuasion of the Lahore Hindu leaders.

They had briefed Malaviyaji about the great harm Chhotu Ram was doing to the Punjab Hindus by making common cause with the Muslims. Chhotu Ram explained at length with facts and figures how the urban Hindus had monopolized all places of profit and deprived the rural Hindus concentrated in the Haryana area of their just claims.

Malaviyaji was so impressed by Chhotu Ram that he advised the Lahore leaders to be fair to the Haryana people whom Chhotu Ram represented.

At first Chhotu Ram and Lal Chand wanted only proper representation of the rural Hindus in legislature and services. When they found that the advanced Hindu classes were reluctant to part with any of the privileges and advantages they had managed to monopolize because of their early start in education, the idea of organizing the entire population of the Punjab gradually developed. As the rural people all over the Punjab including the Muslims and the Sikhs had a common grievance, having been exploited by the urban classes, the Unionist Party took form.

Fazl-i-Hussain was at first primarily concerned with safe-guarding Muslim interests both in the Punjab and the country as a whole. He continued to do so till he was able to achieve his objective through the Communal Award in 1932.

In Chhotu Ram he found a person who had a new basis of political organization based on the community of economic interests. Fazl-i-Hussain and later Sikander Hyat saw the point but it was Chhotu Ram alone who provided the real ideology to the Unionist Party. That explains why the Unionist Party never became a truly secular party as its Muslim component which constituted the majority first thought of safeguarding their own interests.

It was Chhotu Ram who was always prepared to make personal sacrifices in the interests of the Party. The rural population in the Punjab as in the rest of the country was backward compared to the urban areas generally. There was mass poverty both in cities and villages but its incidence was greater in the latter.

The British government listened only to those who were vocal enough. The rural cause went by default because there was nobody to proclaim aloud the tremendous disabilities from which the villages suffered.

For the first time it was the Unionist Party of the Punjab, which made the existence of the rural people felt.

When Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram found themselves together in charge of all the transferred departments under the system of diarchy, the idea, which had been in the making for some time, came to fruition.

The Unionist Party took long to become a really effective political force but a beginning was made. Fazl-i-Hussain left the popular side in 1926 on becoming Revenue Member and in 1930 he left the Punjab on appointment to the Viceroy's Council.

It was the tenacity and hard work of Chhotu Ram who assumed leadership of the Party, that kept the organization alive.

Chhotu Ram developed a political philosophy which he put to test both as leader of Opposition and as minister. The awakening he aroused and the class-consciousness he created amongst the Punjab peasantry was the main achievement of his political career.

The Reforms of 1919 and 1935 brought an increasing number of voters on the electorate register. The majority of these was of peasants and other allied rural sections of population.

From 1920 onward both under diarchy and provincial autonomy the majority of legislators belonged to the rural areas. Fazl-i-Hussain's attempt to run diarchy on party lines however was not much of a success.

Sir Malcom Hailey, who had become Punjab Governor in 1923, found Hussain-Chhotu Ram combination a threat to the supremacy of the bureaucracy. He broke this combination in 1926 by persuading Fazl-i-Hussain to shift to the reserved side and refusing to re-nominate Chhotu Ram as minister in 1927.

Azim Hussain, son and biographer of Fazl-i-Hussain has pointed out that this greatly weakened the Unionist Party. Fazl-i-Hussain was not a mass leader. He had been elected both in 1920 and 1923 from the special land holders constituency.

Chhotu Ram remained in the wilderness for full one decade from 1926 to 1936. It is during this period that he became an irresistible mass leader. It is also during this period that the Unionist Party developed its field organization – the Zamindara League, which made Chhotu Ram popular all over the Punjab particularly in the villages.

In the early thirties Chhotu Ram as leader of Opposition sponsored the famous agrarian legislation. This was strongly resented in the urban areas but was acclaimed in the villages, as for the first time the peasantry found that there was a leader determined to protect them from the many-sided exploitation which the urban classes and other vested interests were carrying on.

The villain, of the piece was the money-lender and the various enactments the Punjab Council passed, under Chhotu Ram's advocacy created great enthusiasm in rural areas. Had Fazl-i-Hussain lived longer and headed the Punjab government under Provincial Autonomy, with Chhotu Ram as one of his senior colleagues, it would have made a lot of difference both as regards the real control the popular ministers would have acquired and the constitutional precedents it would have set for the rest of the country.

Sir Sikander Hyat Khan who succeeded Fazl-i-Hussain as leader of the Unionist Party and became the Premier in 1937 was cast in a different mould. He was true to the rural cause, but being a drawing room politician, greatly susceptible to the influence of the bureaucracy, the administration continued to be dominated by the civil services mostly, British at this time.

But Chhotu Ram did not allow any slackness in the protection of the peasantry and both as development minister and revenue minister, he succeeded in implementing the agrarian laws which were hailed by progressive elements all over India as pioneering measures.

The Second World War changed the entire perspective of the Indian problem. The Congress had accepted office and its ministers were functioning in a number of provinces. The Party however, was opposed to the Federal Scheme which envisaged an All-India Union, although with limited popular control. Only Viceroy Linlithgow seemed to be keen to make a beginning but the Muslim League and the Princes, two other, important political forces were opposed to it, like the Congress.

The decade before partition can be seen in retrospect as one of blunders, compounded by blunders. Jinnah was by this time on the parting of the ways. The two-nation theory found explicit expression in the 1940 resolution which called for separate and sovereign Muslim State(s) to be carved out in the North-West and East.

The first blunder of the Congress was to direct its ministers to give up office. This left the way open to Jinnah to occupy all the vantage-points, the Congress was conveniently vacating. Cripps proposals of 1942 were dismissed by Gandhi as a cheque on a crashing bank.

After this the course was set irretrievably for division of India, as the other alternatives that came for consideration so much diluted the central structure that little was left of it. It is astonishing that Congress leadership should have failed to see the slippery path it had started on, since 1939. Perhaps its greatest misjudgment was to have launched the 'Quit India' movement of August 1942.

In 1937 Jinnah had no State which he could call his own. Even in Muslim-majority provinces, there were no League governments. After 1942, Jinnah came to acquire a veto as no constitutional change was possible without his agreement.

In 1942 shortly before Sikander died some Congress leaders, including Sardar Patel, with the consent of Gandhiji, thought of a Congress-Unionist pact. Chhotu Ram was the main negotiator on the Unionist side. But it did not materialize as the Congress leaders did not trust Sikander Hyat. On the other hand, efforts to win over Jinnah even after the declaration of Pakistan, as the set goal of the League, continued.

After the death of Sir Sikander in December 1942, Jinnah felt bold enough to bring the Punjab under his control. This he was debarred from so far, by the Jinnah-Sikander Pact of 1938.

Another mistake of the Congress right wing, controlled by Gandhiji, was its treatment of Subhas Chandra Bose. Subhas represented a dynamic force in Indian politics. He may be aptly described as the bravest of the brave. His political ideology though leftist, was rather of expediency. He wanted above all to throw out the British from India at all costs.

He was acclaimed President for 1938 but when he sought another term his candidature was strongly opposed by the right wing led by Gandhiji himself. When he defeated Patabhi Sitaramaya, Gandhi interpreted it as his own defeat.

Events followed fast culminating finally in Subhas secretly removing himself from India to join the Axis powers in the War against the Allies.

By his subsequent heroic acts and in particular by organizing the Indian National Army, which at one time came close to Indian borders, Subhas has left a saga of untarnished patriotism, which his countrymen will always recollect with pride.

Gandhiji is reported to have been highly impressed by the militancy of Subhas — and one of the factors that influenced the AICC in deciding on 'Quit India' campaign was the anxiety of the high command to counteract the tremendous influence Subhas was acquiring in India and abroad. It is possible, had Subhas led the Congress during the War years, he might have proved more effective in dealing both with Mr. Jinnah and the British.

The death of Sikander Hyat in December 1942, was a serious set-back to anti-League forces in the Punjab and this was the time when the Congress should have joined hands with the Unionists, now led by Khizar Hyat and Chhotu Ram. But the Congress, had already been involved in the 'do or die' attempt of the 'Quit India' movement and all these developments helped Jinnah to gather momentum. From this point onward, Chhotu Ram occupied a decisive position in Punjab politics, Khizar Hyat the new Premier being close to him.

During 1943, Jinnah strengthened his position with the patronage of British bureaucracy who were now openly using the Muslim League against the Congress.

Lord Wavell succeeded Lord Linlithgow and his approach was, somehow, to keep India intact while meeting the Muslim League halfway in its demands. As a soldier, Wavell knew, that the division of India, would weaken its defenses.

Sikander, a clever politician had managed to satisfy Jinnah by giving him general support at All-India level but keeping the Punjab a Unionist citadel, immune from Muslim League interference.

When Khizar on becoming Punjab Premier met Jinnah the latter was impressed by his simplicity and free, frank, unsophisticated approach. The Quaid-i-Azam is reported to have exclaimed that Sikander always slipped away from the hand like a fish, but this man was different. It was perhaps this impression which brought Jinnah to Lahore in April 1944 when he attempted to disintegrate the Unionist Party and replace it by a League government.

Jinnah had a historic meeting with Chhotu Ram, which greatly puzzled and surprised the League leader. He thought the Punjab an easy win but found it a veritable 'hornets nest'.

Jinnah left the Punjab defeated and disappointed as Khizar and Chhotu Ram left the Qaide-i-Azam in no doubt about the hold of the Unionists over the Province.

Chhotu Ram was greatly perturbed by the policy of appeasement Congress was following in an attempt to win the League cooperation for early transfer of power.

In a long, detailed and powerful communication, Chhotu Ram warned Gandhiji about the consequences that would follow if he met Jinnah to discuss the so called C.R. formula. This scheme was an acceptance of the League demand for Pakistan after the liberation of the country.

Jinnah a clever strategist used it to recover from the setback he had received in the Punjab and rejected the formula as a husk offering, what he described as truncated Pakistan.

Chhotu Ram had only a few more months to live, but this constituted the most glorious phase of a long political career spent in strengthening the real roots of Indian nationalism.

The writer has vivid recollections of these last months as he was News-Editor in the Punjab Information Bureau virtually attached to Chhotu Ram as his Public Relations Officer.

Chhotu Ram realized that the Unionist Party would receive little support from the Congress in the coming fight with the Muslim League. He knew that its success or defeat will decide the destiny of India, as the issue involved was no less than unity and integration on one side and division and disintegration on the other. The Punjab peasants at a mammoth conference at Lyallpur shortly after the unsuccessful attempt of the League to break the Unionist Party acclaimed Chhotu Ram as Rahber-i-Azam to match Jinnah's Quaid-i-Azam.

Chhotu Ram knew his Punjab well and he stood at this time as the universally acclaimed leader representing the entire Punjab, rural and urban except the Muslim League communalists, who were definitely in a minority amongst the Muslims so far, while the Hindus, Sikhs and the Christians (a small minority) all stood firmly behind the Unionist Party led by Khizar and Chhotu Ram.



The newspapers owned by the various sections of the Muslim community became lukewarm in supporting the Unionist Party after the clash with Jinnah. The Hindu and Sikh press came out strongly on its side.

Chhotu Ram wanted to start a number of dailies and weeklies with the idea of meeting the Pakistan propaganda which was now stepped up by the League.

A sum of about Rs 33 lakhs (a huge amount in those days) was collected within a few weeks and the field organization the Zamindara League, was strengthened. A question is sometimes asked even now whether Chhotu Ram, had he lived longer, could have baulked Pakistan?

There can be no definite reply to a 'historical might have been' but it is obvious, his presence could have made a lot of difference to the situation that arose in the Punjab with wide repercussions, leading finally to Congress-League duel in which the nationalist forces lost because there was no Fazl-i-Hussain, Sikander or Chhotu Ram to keep the tide of Muslim communalism away from the Punjab — the key province in the Pakistan arch.

### **The Legacy**

Have the Unionists left any legacy which may be relevant to conditions today?

The Congress had agreed to partition and conceded Pakistan in the hope that the long-vexed communal problem would be solved for good.

The two-nation theory visualized, that there was nothing common between the Hindus and the Muslims and hence the demand for a separate, independent and sovereign State for the Muslims.

Jinnah, who propounded this theory, very logically suggested exchange of population.

If the entire Muslim population — about 8 crores at the time had been evacuated to Pakistan, India would then have become a purely Hindu state and Pakistan of course, as it was intended, a purely Islamic country. The Hindu-Sikh minorities in West Punjab, were driven to the last man to India and in this way the problem of minorities there, was finally solved. In East Pakistan — now Bangla Desh — the Hindus are still there in such strength that it is impossible to absorb them in India. That is really the main controversy in the Assam problem for these Hindus and presumably some other minorities still left there, have been steadily driven away from there or they themselves have been anxious to leave, because of insecurity they have felt.

In India itself, the communal problem after the creation of two independent Muslim states on both sides has been aggravated beyond anybody's imagination.

The Muslim population in India today is almost the same as before partition. The immigration from northern India to West Pakistan has now been made up, more or less by the increase in Muslim population, i.e., multiplication of those Muslims left behind after partition.

In West Bengal, similarly, there is sizable Muslim population. So how has the communal problem been solved?

The Muslims in India feel so insecure that they look across the boundaries for protection from states which they consider to be their own and with whom they find greater affinity than the state of which they are real citizens.

The Congress leaders including Gandhi and Nehru never accepted the two-nation theory but they accepted the division based on it. This contradiction they had resolved by propounding queer theories of their own, unconnected with Indian realities. Chhotu Ram in a well argued communication to Gandhiji after the failure of Jinnah in the Punjab had examined the psyche of the Pakistan problem. The Muslims felt insecure in a parliamentary democracy based on the counting of heads in which they were destined to remain a perpetual minority in a sea of vast Hindu majority.

Fazl-i-Hussain and Jinnah had both been scared by the specter of Hindu domination and had sought constitutional safeguards. Fazli was satisfied by the communal award of 1932 and he planned for a *swaraj* based on Hindu-Muslim harmony made possible by the protection of the Muslims in the Act of 1935.

Jinnah opted for partition but the last desperate demand of Pakistan was at first only a bargaining counter. Earlier Jinnah had summed up the Muslims demands in his well-known 14 points.

All Muslim leaders – and this included the Congress Muslims – Azad and others, wanted full and effective constitutional safeguards for the Muslims and other minorities under the Constitution. This could have been easily achieved. The opportunities however that came – all-parties Conference, Nehru Report and finally the negotiations at the Round Table Conference – all failed when a solution had in fact been in sight.

Jinnah did not turn to Pakistan till his efforts to share power with the Congress after the inauguration of Provincial Autonomy were spurned by the Congress. This is the background of the Muslim psychology which Chhotu Ram took pains to explain to Gandhiji.

This was, however, a very late stage as by 1944 much had happened when old safeguards were no longer considered adequate.

All these facts are now becoming clear after the series of publications, the British Government have brought out on the 'Transfer of Power'.

The main fact of the Indian situation remained that the Congress with all its claims to represent everybody really did not represent the Muslims adequately. This remained true before partition and remains true even now, whatever the tall claims made by various non-Muslim organizations.

The Muslims, and their numerical strength in India is sizable, have to be absorbed and assimilated in the mainstream of the nation. Then alone the communal problem would find a final solution.

The Unionists, including Chhotu Ram had no final solution to the communal problem but they did try and succeeded in holding together all communities in a coalition. In the Punjab the situation was the reverse. It was the Hindu and Sikh minorities that were scared of the Muslim majority, as the Muslims in the country were scared of the great Hindu majority.

The main problem was that of the creation of a strong national feeling that could override smaller loyalties. The Unionist Party was a unique experiment and had the party succeeded in keeping the Muslim peasantry, that constituted the main strength, firm on the secular path, as it did at the time of Jinnah-Chhotu Ram confrontation, a solution on the national level would then have been possible.

Not enough recognition has been given to the role Sir Khizar Hyat played in defeating Jinnah. Here is a Muslim leader with feudal background, with no previous association with any nationalist movement and yet he defied the Muslim League, as perhaps no other Muslim was able to do.

In the process he destroyed his own political future. The Muslim League repeatedly approached him to lead them before and after he resigned as head of the coalition government in the Punjab in March 1947. Like a true Unionist and as a colleague of Chhotu Ram whom he accepted unreservedly as his mentor and leader he spurned all communal approaches.

Durga Das has pointedly mentioned in his *From Curzon to Nehru and After* that while the Congress was unable to make a common cause with the Unionists, it readily fell victim to the delusion of winning over Jinnah.

The Unionists were not always able to live up to their high secular and national ideals but they attempted to keep communalism – Hindu or Muslim – away from the Punjab.

Its top leaders and in particular Chhotu Ram stood not only for a secular and non-communal approach to politics but refused to compromise with principles at any cost.

Jinnah on the very day of the creation of Pakistan in his address to the Pakistan Constituent Assembly repudiated his own two-nation theory. He made it clear that Pakistan was not the land of Muslims alone. It belonged equally to all other communities. All were equal citizens.

It was the Congress and the Muslim League that adopted poses that distorted the political situation to suit their approaches. The Unionists had no deep philosophy of politics but what they professed and practiced was firm and clear. There was no deviation from the straight path. This cannot be said of the two larger organizations, who never stayed long on their declared positions, went on changing till little was left of their declared ideals.

India and indeed the two other states of the subcontinent, Pakistan and Bangla Desh can develop harmonious relations only by accepting secularism as the basis for a modern state. In India, it is declared as the objective in the Constitution itself but the two other states appear to have opted for what they call Islamic polity whatever it may mean.

The Congress itself was founded on secularism and there was no tampering with it at least in theory. In recognizing Muslim communalism the Congress gave up its cherished ideal of Indian Unity, implied in accepting Pakistan. Nehru and Patel bowed to the inevitable as a compromise in the game of real politics, accepting a lesser evil in the larger interests of freedom, for at least the major part of the country. But such rationalization in no way condoned the lapse in surrendering a fundamental concept of Indian nationalism.

The success of the Unionists – in holding firm to the economic concept of politics, which at one stage barred the expansion of Jinnah's communalism, was a matter of great significance.

In a Muslim majority province, the League communalism was administered a sharp rebuff.

The Congress failure to retain Indian unity has changed the perspective of the problems in the subcontinent.

Chhotu Ram, the brain of the Unionist Party was also its main theorist. Fazl-i-Hussain, a practical politician, had limited objectives. His main contribution was emphasis on economics in the formation of political parties.

Sikander Hyat essentially a man of the world, had no theory of politics. For him what worked best, was the best.

Chhotu Ram was a fundamentalist and propounded his own theory of socialism without being inspired by Marx or other western thinkers. He once told Lord Wavell, during the confrontation on the control of wheat price that he drew his economics from the book of life.

In his political thought Chhotu Ram was nearest to Gandhiji without accepting the methods by which the Congress tried to enforce its demands.

The theory of class-war, the clash between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' the fight between the rich and poor, the struggle between capitalism and proletariat — were all accepted by Chhotu Ram in his basic approach, which considered a war between the exploiters and the exploited, unavoidable.

Like Karl Marx he believed that finally the capitalist classes will be vanquished by the larger masses — symbolized by the proletariat — in the Indian context, the peasantry.

Gandhiji once observed that during the colonial rule both the British and the urban elite exploited the villages. Jawaharlal Nehru had said that unless the advanced urban classes changed their methods a war between the town and the village would become inevitable.

Chhotu Ram preached that the rural masses would one day overthrow the domination of the upper exploiting classes once they organized themselves under the leadership of the peasantry — the largest section of rural population.

Neither the Congress nor the Muslim League represented the rural masses. They particularly did not represent the vast peasantry of the subcontinent. Both were the strongholds of bourgeois-feudal upper educated classes. They took over from the departing British in 1947 and since then neither in India nor in Pakistan or Bangla Desh has there been any genuine effort on the part of the ruling classes to share power with the masses.

Most of the existing political parties in India at one time or the other were associated with the Indian National Congress and broke away from the parent body supposedly on differences of policy. The left in India has not been able to wean away sufficient

chunk of support from other parties and communism has not found Indian soil very fertile.

There is really no political party in the field at the moment, that has made the peasant's cause its own, not even the communists, whose constituency is the urban proletariat.

The Press in India is largely in the hands of capitalists and generally concerns itself with the vested interests of the class controlling it. Chhotu Ram saw the importance of newspapers and had plans which were cut short because of his unexpected demise.

Amongst the present parties, Lok Dal is closest to the rural areas but somehow the party has not been able to develop an effective strategy.

A search is on to find an alternative to the present Parliamentary system that appears to have outlived its utility. Industrialization and urbanization that have followed from centralized planning and elitist control over government have led to polarization, the rich becoming richer and the poor poorer.

Some experts have estimated that nearly 60% of the Indian people are below poverty line.<sup>3</sup> There is increasing talk of replacing the Westminster Parliamentary System by the Presidential type, as in America or France or may be some other model. It does not occur to anybody that so long as the basic structure of Indian society is not changed, it makes no difference – to the toiling millions whether they are exploited in the name of a President or a Prime Minister.

India being basically rural, because 80% of people live there, can come into its own only when this large sector improves and comes at least on par if not excel the much smaller urban sector which caters only to a small minority. This is simple enough yet in the six plans involving astronomical expenditure, while the talk has always been of the village, the money has gone to the town.

There is no sign that things would change unless the rural people become organized and acquire strength to force the vested interests to render unto Caesar, what belongs to Caesar.

None of the existing parties fills the bill. The Unionist experiment in the Punjab was a restricted one, the powers transferred to the provinces being limited. Even under Provincial autonomy, the British Governor sat pretty and tight over the entire administration, armed with all his privileges and special powers.

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<sup>3</sup> The 10% which consists of the organized sector (CSO estimates) accounts for 33% of income: with black money it comes to 40%.

It was a tight rope dance for the Ministers and only a Fazl-i-Hussain, Chhotu Ram or G.B. Pant could have kept the gubernatorial authorities within their limits.

The real achievement of Chhotu Ram was not in the agrarian legislation which he fathered but the consciousness he created in the rural areas and the peasantry in particular.

When Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram were taunted by the so-called nationalists that they sold themselves, for a mess of pottage, they retorted that one day the Congress would have to follow the lead they were giving.

Now after three decades of freedom these words ring back in our ears but the governments that have followed one after the other have moved in a circle, leaving things where they were in the colonial days.

Gandhi's pleas for grass root democracy and decentralization were ridiculed by the founding fathers of Free India's Constitution.

Nehru realized rather late and a half-hearted attempt was made during the late 'fifties and early 'sixties through Panchayat Raj but it was soon scuttled by a conspiracy of the bureaucracy — which has not changed much since British days — and the politicians, who saw their own position endangered by the rising tide in rural areas.

There is rethinking again and there seems to be a general realization that the existing system needs restructuring.

This restructuring means only one thing. Power must be transferred from the cloistered, exclusive elitist classes, which they have misappropriated or at least have retained too long in their hands to do any good to anybody and it must be passed on to the broad shoulders of the masses to whom it legitimately belongs. In politics the opposites sometimes meet. What a coincidence that this call for Panchayat Raj and decentralized polity, with the peasantry as the hub and centre of things has the common advocacy of Gandhiji — Father of the Nation and Chhotu Ram — a different man in comparison and yet not less significant in his own peculiar way.

This is the relevance of Gandhi today and unless the country recalls his basic teachings, India cannot become the country which the great martyrs and fighters of the Independence battle visualized.

This is also the legacy, Chhotu Ram has left behind.

# I

## The Background

The area which now constitutes Haryana was a part of the Punjab in Chhotu Ram's time. The Aryan civilization after having developed for many centuries in what is Punjab proper found fruition at the banks of the sacred river Saraswati, so much glorified in Vedic lore.

Saraswati flowed close to Kurukshetra in the good old days. After passing through parts of present day Rajasthan it probably emptied itself in the Arabian sea, as some writers believe.

At the banks of this most sacred Aryan river, many Rishis set up their ashrams and many of the Upanishads were produced during this period. The greatest of these the Bhagwat-Gita (Song Celestial) attributed to Lord Krishna was the result of the great crisis that Bharatvarsh was facing of which, warrior Arjuna became the symbol.

Haryana has seen great happenings taking place on its soil because of its antiquity and strategic situation.

Some writers trace the name Haryana itself to these historical events. The great Harishchandra of legendary fame is linked to Haryana by some writers and the area was possibly called after his name. The Bharati war of course, took place in the very heart of the region at Kurukshetra. This fact alone is enough to proclaim Haryana's historical antiquity. After Pandvas' won the war, Nakul, one of the five brothers invaded many parts of Haryana. Sirsa is one of the places visited by the Pandva hero.

During the Imperial age of Indian history, which beginning from the 6th century B.C. continued to the middle of the 7th century A.D., Haryana finds mention as a prominent region. Under Harsha the last of the Emperors, Thaneswar itself was one of his two capitals. Hieun Tswang the Chinese pilgrim who made a long stay at Thaneswar has left a detailed account of the Emperor and the capital. The Chinese pilgrim gives us the impression of a very prosperous people ruled by a most benevolent king.

Haryana continued to do well till its last King Prithvi Raj Chauhan who ruled at Delhi and Ajmer, suffered a mortal defeat at the hands of invader Ghauri at Tarawari, not far from historic Kurukshetra.

Haryana felt the full impact of the Muslim rule being so close to the seat of authority. Both under the Sultanate and the Mughals the people had to face difficult times. Some



of the Sultans were bigots and although there was no continuous religious persecution, the people were kept suppressed.

The Mughals were more enlightened but even so the independent disposition of the martial races of the region invited occasional reprisals. With the breakup of Mughal Empire, Haryana passed through virtual lawlessness. During the 18th century a number of adventurers were able to carve out dominions for themselves. The Irish George Thomas actually styled himself 'Raja of Haryana' by setting up at Hansi fort from where he extended his hold around. Another adventurer Skinner, came to control large areas. In the adjoining tract arose Begum Samru at Sardhana under whom Thomas served for some years.

Near Agra at Bharatpur arose the sizable Jat Kingdom which under Suraj Mai overawed Delhi and the entire Haryana region.

Ahmad Shah Abdali, the last of the Muslim invaders passed through the Punjab and Haryana several times, till his decisive victory in 1761 over the Marathas, deprived the latter of the opportunity to succeed to the Mughals.

The present Haryana State is confined to a few districts, but Haryana connotes in cultural and social terms, a much larger area. The idea of greater Delhi was another name for a State to bring together present Haryana, most of the districts of Western UP and Bharatpur and Alwar tract of Rajasthan. The British occupied Delhi in 1803. By 1818 their hold became firm and by indirect control over the Phulkia States, they remained a constant threat to the independent kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh

Haryana was ruled in the name of Delhi territory till the Mutiny when it became a part of the Punjab.

This period saw some administrative improvements as British rulers like Metcalfe had genuine liking for the area and its people.

Dr T.G.P. Spear the famous historian has discussed in his book *Twilight of the Mughals*, how all the zeal of the British administrators to change life in Haryana villages became counter-productive. The Haryana people had ceased to be progressive in outlook and they did not appreciate improvements but desired to be left alone.

The more the British tried to interfere the more unpopular they became, driving the entire Haryana to rebellion when the Mutiny broke out in 1857

Delhi, the headquarters of the rebel forces was severely punished after the failure of the revolt and the entire Haryana was taken off from the NWFP province as it was then called, and tacked on to the newly conquered Punjab.

Haryana continued to receive step motherly treatment at the hands of the new Punjab rulers till the First World War. The Haryana people had been actively involved in the Mutiny and it took years before the Government could condone the lapse. The caste divisions have always been acute in the area and this further militated against common improvement.

The urban centers that once were flourishing towns had decayed and agriculture carried on by traditional primitive methods was the sole means of subsistence. The trading and commercial classes were chiefly money-lenders who had developed usury into a fine art for robbing the peasantry by unscrupulous methods. The Arya Samaj brought a message of hope and emancipation to the vast peasantry that was looked down upon by the so-called upper-classes but the process was slow. The money-lenders continued their nefarious trade and as a result many holdings changed hands.

As a result of the indifference if not actual hostility on the part of the British officers who had yet to get over their prejudices of the Mutiny days, there was swift decline in the conditions of the people.

While the western and central parts of the Punjab were gradually coming up as a result of coordinated efforts of a well disposed administration, Haryana presented a picture of depression and bleakness.

Haryana has certain similarities and common characteristics with Maharashtra. Both areas present conditions, geographical and climatically, which have helped to produce a hardy race of peasants and soldiers, equally at home with struggle against nature or with foes on the battle-field.

It was this peasantry which Chhotu Ram led when he arrived on the scene.

## Early Life

Chhotu Ram was born on 24, November 1881, in a small peasant household.

Sampla a small township is situated about 24 miles north-west of Delhi. A group of people from this main town settled down in a neighboring village which came to be called Garhi-Sampla. The group included Chhotu Ram's ancestors. Chhotu Ram came from a small peasant family, his immediate ancestors, great-grandfather Ram Ratan and grandfather Ram Das owning a holding of less than 10 acres. In addition, they had acquired another 12 acres through mortgage. The grand-father died in 1875 leaving the family involved in a revenue case which deprived them of the additional 12 acres.

The litigation also proved expensive, bringing the family under temporary debt which was however soon paid off.

While grandfather Ram Das was still alive, Chhotu Ram's father Ch. Sukhi Ram practically became the head of the family at the age of 35. Sukhi Ram though illiterate was intelligent and well-versed in the ways of the world. Apart from the family occupation of agriculture, he also indulged in such business activities as his means permitted. About the year 1898 or 1899 Sukhi Ram suffered substantial loss in a cotton bargain which put him under debt. He was able to maintain his credibility though, due to honest dealings.

Sukhi Ram died in 1905 leaving the debt behind which was discharged by Chhotu Ram after he started legal practice at Rohtak in 1912.

Chhotu Ram's original name was Ram Richpal but as he was the youngest in a large family he was called Chhotu. When he sought admission in the village school, the teacher put down his name as Chhotu Ram, It was under this name he became famous when he rose to eminence in public life.

As a child Chhotu Ram, for lack of work, used to roam about in the village with others forming a small gang which became notorious for their wayward ways.

He was almost 9 or 10 when the family thought of putting him at the local *pathsala*, just to keep him out of harm's way.

Being a precocious child he soon made his mark, passing the first two classes in a single year. His teachers who had first taken him as a rough uncouth lad changed their views

when he surprised them by the academic distinctions he won for the school. He stood first in the district at the primary stage earning a scholarship. This was a distinction in those days.

Greater rewards followed. In the Middle Examination, which was held at the University level, he stood second in the Punjab yielding first place to a fellow student, Mehtab Rai, with whom Chhotu Ram would have to do much in future.

For a village lad from backward Haryana to have gained the second position amongst thousands of students including some from most advanced classes from all over the Punjab, was an astonishing feat .

The Middle School Examination which Chhotu Ram passed in 1899 from Jhajjar, hardened his character both physically and mentally. There was no pacca road from the village to Jhajjar and the entire distance had to be covered on foot, any kind of conveyance being out of the question. He had also to carry on his person all his requirements like wheat, flour, ghee, etc. — that was the way schools worked in those days.

What was a boy like Chhotu Ram to do next even if he did so well at the first two stages of his schooling? For a Jat boy to have gone so far was already something unusual.

The highest officer for the villagers was the local 'Patwari,' who was the god of the peasants. He was the embodiment of all wisdom and authority.

Everything depended on what the Patwari scribbled from time to time in his revenue records. Like the First Information Report in a Police Thana, everything hinged at least in revenue matters on the report the Patwari made in a particular case.

A clever boy like Chhotu Ram should become a Patwari, that was the advice of the village Mahajan, the money-lender — oracle voice in the village, which was accepted without question by all.

That Chhotu Ram would one day decide the fate of hundreds of thousands of Patwaris as Revenue Minister and the money-lender who so smugly underrated the Jat boy would find his whole class tremble at the blows the Unionist leader would strike to uproot usury could hardly be imagined then.

But what was Chhotu Ram to do? Higher education was expensive and even a few rupees were out of reach of an average peasant, most of his produce being appropriated by the revenue authorities and money-lenders, hardly any one escaping from the latter's clutches.

Chhotu Ram's father, Sukhi Ram was a calculating type and he had no idea that higher education could bring any returns. Sukhi Ram was happy that his son had done so well in the Middle Examination but he was still encumbered by the debts he had acquired by his loss in cotton deals. He was not the type to undertake another enterprise with slender means.

The only way was to approach the money-lender. Father and son reached the Bania's prosperous premises at Sampla not far from the village. It was summer and as they were about to take their position in front of the money-lender and request for a loan, the Bania flung the Pankha cord towards Chhotu Ram's father, with unspoken indication to cool his large perspiring semi-naked body.

There comes a moment in a man's life which becomes decisive. The sight of a dead body taught the great Buddha the way to Nirvana. Swami Dayanand finding the mice freely playing on the Shiv image, started on his search for real religion.

Chhotu Ram was so shocked at the money-lender's insult that he rebuked him in strongest terms and advised his father not to have any deal with a person who had no respect even for his elders. Chhotu Ram's rebuke to the money-lender was an occasion which set him on a new path. Deeply affronted he told the money-lender to be ashamed of his conduct. "You could have asked your own son sitting by your side to work the Pankha cord. You could have as well asked me instead of my old father, senior to you by years."

The money-lender apologized and asked his son to move the cloth-fan hung from the ceiling but no further business talks were held. Chhotu Ram awoke to a new consciousness. His "Kundli" was awakened as it were, and he took a silent vow that one day he would see the end of this money-lending business which not only exploited the poor and ignorant villagers but also insulted them, holding them in contempt.

The problem of joining a High School remained. Sukhi Ram expressed his helplessness much as he admired his promising son. Sukhi Ram's younger brother Raje Ram more spirited, came to his nephew's rescue. This obligation Chhotu Ram in his turn, more than repaid when he virtually adopted his brother Neki Ram's son Sri-Chand (who like his illustrious uncle was to make a name for himself in public life), and treated him like his own son. Incidentally, Chhotu Ram had no son of his own.<sup>4</sup> The social inferiority from which the Jats and in fact all the agricultural classes suffered *vis-a-vis* the two upper prestigious classes of the Brahmins and the Banias, continued to rankle in Chhotu Ram's mind for long.

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<sup>4</sup> Chhotu Ram was victim of child-marriage from which his generation suffered. He had two daughters, one of them married Ch. Neki Ram of Jind now in Haryana. Ch. Birender Singh MLA is Chhotu Ram's daughter Bhagwani Devi's son.

Many years later when Chhotu Ram had become a Minister in the Punjab he was invited to preside over a college function at Muzzaffar-Nagar in Western UP. The Collector was an Indian ICS belonging to the upper caste. While showing due deference to Chhotu Ram he said in banter that instead of running after government jobs, the agriculturists should concentrate on the occupation they understood best. Chhotu Ram always sensitive about the claim of the rural people's share in services, asked the Collector why he had himself chosen to become a high government official instead of staying in his hereditary profession. The Collector apologized but Chhotu Ram became convinced that the urban educated classes were determined to retain their monopoly of government jobs by ridiculing the villagers for their pretensions.

Before we pass on to Chhotu Ram's education, another incident comes to mind (I happened to be present on the occasion). There was a High School at village Khera-Garhi near Delhi. It is probably a Higher Secondary School now. This was started by the late Ch. Tika Ram who founded many educational institutions in Haryana, including the Chhotu Ram College at Sonapat.

The year was 1938. The school was in need of funds. The management invited the Chief Commissioner, Delhi, a senior British civilian to preside over their annual function. To impress the Chief Commissioner, they also invited Sir Chhotu Ram who was dominating Punjab politics by this time. A party of 'Bhajnis' (rural singers) who were trained during the period when Chhotu Ram was organizing the Unionist Party incidentally referred in a song to the money-lenders who were exploiting the peasantry. The Chief Commissioner got offended, and rebuked the singers strongly. Not content with this, the Chief Commissioner again made observations in his speech, which amounted to a sort of admonition to those who were creating class-conflicts in rural society.

When it was Chhotu Ram's turn to speak he left the English Commissioner in no doubt as to how he felt about it. In a tone full of sarcasm and contempt, which the Chief Commissioner could not have missed, as all British civilians understood Urdu, Chhotu Ram told the high official that men like the present representative of government, had become out-dated. They had no idea what was happening in rural India.

This happened repeatedly with Chhotu Ram when he came into conflict with the official world. More of this later.

### **At High School**

Raje Ram, Chhotu Ram's uncle had scraped up a sum of Rs 40 and asked him to join a suitable High School at Delhi. This was enough to get him admission at the St. Stephen's School, also called Mission School, then situated in Chandni Chowk, Delhi.

One of his companions was Nand Lal from a neighboring village, who later became a famous doctor. In the same school, Chhotu Ram found Mehtab Rai who had stood first in the Punjab in Middle Examination, while he had obtained second position.

Chhotu Ram was given full fee concession by the school and in addition he also became entitled to a scholarship of Rs 6 per month on the basis of his Middle Examination result. He had Mehtab Rai and Kishori Mohan as his main competitors. Chhotu Ram was determined to excel both. In the annual home examination for the 9th class he actually topped, beating them by some margin but in the effort he lost his health. He became seriously ill and when the school reopened after vacation he returned in a very weak physical condition.

One General Roberts had become very famous during the Mutiny at Delhi. He had settled at Delhi and was still alive after nearly 40 years. His brave deeds were still remembered by the people of Delhi.

The Mission School had a small boarding house of which the Headmaster himself, Pandit Janki Nath Sharma was incharge. Janki Nath was in the habit of brow-beating everybody and conducted himself in a lordly way, doing things as he pleased.

The hostel had a sweeper paid by the students but who was occupied mostly in cleansing the Headmaster's residence. The students organized a strong protest under Chhotu Ram's leadership. Janki Nath refused to listen. Chhotu Ram succeeded in mobilizing the students and for two weeks there was a total boycott. No classes were held. The Principal of the Mission College which was the main institution and controlled the school, admonished the Headmaster and transferred control of hostel menials to Chhotu Ram as monitor.

Chhotu Ram was given the nick name of 'General Roberts', after this victory over the Headmaster.

Chhotu Ram passed the High School examination in the first division but could not achieve any position in order of merit as he had ruined his health by excess he work in his attempt to beat Mehtab Rai a year earlier.

What was he to do next? The domestic financial condition was no better. Raje Ram, the benevolent uncle was still sympathetic but college education, circumstanced as Chhotu Ram was, was no easy matter. Sukhi Ram, his father, was still brooding over his previous losses and showed no greater interest than he had done earlier.

## **St. Stephen's College**

Somehow Chhotu Ram managed to get admitted to St. Stephen's College but with all the resources he could mobilize found it difficult to carry on after six months.

In a mood of depression he wrote to the Principal seeking his permission to withdraw from the college because of financial difficulties. Without awaiting the Principal's reaction, he left the College and returned to his village.

The Principal of the college then was Mr. Wright. Chhotu Ram was much liked by the Vice-Principal Mr. Rudra and Prof Raghbar Dayal, Head of Sanskrit Department. Raghbar Dayal, later became Principal of Sanatan Dharam College, Lahore.

When these two came to know of Chhotu Ram's departure, they persuaded the Principal to recall him, as financial difficulties should not debar such a promising student from further education. Principal Rudra, Prof Raghbar Dayal and Ch. Lajja Ram of Karnal district a senior student caught up with Chhotu Ram in village Chaupal while he was carrying on a debate with some Sanatan Dharmis. Chhotu Ram himself was an Arya Samaji.

The studies at St. Stephen's were resumed and the college authorities saw to it that he was not again embarrassed financially.

He got through the Intermediate creditably with Sanskrit as one of the main subjects. At this stage occurred a chance meeting with Seth Sir Chhaju Ram of Alakhpura, which had a lasting effect on his future career.

### **Meeting with Seth Sir Chhaju Ram**

Chhotu Ram while travelling accidentally met the great philanthropist Seth Chhaju Ram, at Ghaziabad. Chhaju Ram saw that the young man was carrying the Haryanavi 'Hukka'. He got interested and soon Chhotu Ram and Chhaju Ram were like two old friends enjoying the puffs in closest fraternity.

On parting, Seth Chhaju Ram advised the young man to write to him after his examination result. In case he succeeded he would help him in his further studies, provided he joined DAV College at Lahore with Sanskrit as one of the subjects.

On his success in the examination, Chhotu Ram persuaded Seth Ji to finance him at St. Stephen's, instead of the far off Lahore.

This association became so intimate that Chhotu Ram always regarded Chhaju Ram as a father. The latter watched his rising career with the greatest interest and always liberally financed him. Even the famous Rohtak Kothi – Preni Nivas – was got built by Chhaju Ram.



Chhotu Ram's last two years at St. Stephen's were smooth and he passed his B.A. again with credit. This brings us to 1905.

The University examination in those days used to be held at Lahore. When Chhotu Ram returned to his village he learnt of the sad news of his father's death. Sukhi Ram had not taken much interest in his son's education but Chhotu Ram was devoted to his father.

Chhotu Ram got himself admitted in M.A. (English) at Delhi but soon he was forced by circumstances to discontinue studies. He had no alternative but to look for a job.

## Search for a Profession

### Kalakankar Days

In Partapgarh district of U.P. there was the estate of Kalakankar.<sup>5</sup> Raja Ram Pal Singh CIE who ruled the estate needed a secretary. In response to an advertisement Chhotu Ram was called for interview and instantly appointed on a salary of Rs 40 per month with free board and lodging. The Raja was of scholarly disposition, well-versed in English, Sanskrit and Persian. He was also liberal in his political persuasion and held progressive nationalist views.

The Raja found Chhotu Ram just the man he was looking for. Raja Ram Pal Singh was a close associate of Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya and was greatly respected in nationalist circles. He put Chhotu Ram in-charge of his weekly paper *Hindustan* which was published in English and Hindi, in addition to his duties as Private Secretary. The Raja had a well stocked library and reading room, which to a person of Chhotu Ram's studious habits was most welcome. He was also made comfortable in a separate bungalow adjacent to the palace with the sacred Ganga flowing underneath. Chhotu Ram and the Raja had their meals together and relationship was of companionship. The Raja was a good judge of men and he greatly appreciated Chhotu Ram's many qualities.

One day the Raja did not wait for Chhotu Ram to join him at meals, although he had sent a message. This was breach of one of the conditions, so far strictly honored. Chhotu Ram had his meal separately but immediately he sent in his resignation.

The Raja had become so fond of Chhotu Ram that he tried his best to persuade him to change his mind. He went to the extent of apologizing but Chhotu Ram had finally decided to leave Kalakankar. The Raja arranged that his own conveyance should take him up to the Ganga Ghat and in addition offered him one month's extra pay.

Chhotu Ram was greatly in need of money as he had still to pay off the debt his father had left behind. But so strict was his code in money matters that he thankfully declined to accept anything more than was due. An absolute and total integrity in financial matters was one of the characteristics of this man born poor.

Chhotu Ram had no future plans when he left Kalakankar. He spent some time at Agra visiting historical places, the Agra Fort, Taj Mahal, and the nearby Sikandara where Emperor Akbar had been buried. At Sikandara it was explained to him by the guide

<sup>5</sup> Raja Ram Pal Singh was grandfather of Raja Dinesh Singh M.P. and former Foreign Minister of India.

that at one time the Bharatpur Jats under the leadership of Suraj Mai and his son Jawahar Singh had occupied the Agra Fort and had excavated Akbar's tomb at Sikandara. The latter act was in retaliation of what the Mughals had at one time done to Gokul.

Jawahar Singh by nature impulsive and over-enthusiastic planned to set up a Shiv temple in place of the Taj Mahal.

Chhotu Ram thought that when Raja Ram Pal a zamindar of about 30 villages could live in great style, the Maharaja of Bharatpur a full-fledged ruler must be a lot more prosperous.

He decided to visit Bharatpur but was greatly disappointed to find that Maharaja Ram Singh had been deposed and the State was under the control of a council dominated by Rai Bahadur Damodar Das and Rai Bahadur Girdhari Lal. The heir-apparent Raj Kumar Kishan Singh was studying at the Mayo College, Ajmer.

There was no place for a man like Chhotu Ram at Bharatpur under those conditions.

During the next four or five years Chhotu Ram remained undecided as to the future course. He had yet to pay off the debt left by his father and this suggested taking up some job. His independent disposition and obsession to work for the uplift of his people inclined him to continue further studies.

He finally decided to join Law College at Lahore. Then, as now, law classes could be attended in the evening. He managed to find a teacher's job at Rang Mahal Missionary High School, on a salary of Rs 50 per month. An additional income from tuition made Chhotu Ram free of financial care. After a few months however, plague broke out in a virulent form and both Lahore and Delhi were affected. It had spread to his village also. As if to rescue him, Raja Ram Pal Singh again invited him to Kalakankar. Chhotu Ram expressed his willingness but wanted the new assignment to include some work of public welfare. The Raja appointed him Superintendent of Education on a salary of Rs 60 plus all the previous facilities. He was also to edit the *Hindustan*, the weekly paper. The Raja had become so fond of Chhotu Ram that this time he took care not to offend him in any matter and treated him as a colleague, friend and adviser.

Chhotu Ram was an ambitious man and Kalakankar could not hold him for long. After a year he decided to return to the Punjab to appear in the EAC (PCS) competitive examination. He obtained leave for six months from Kalakankar. The Raja gladly agreed and treated the period of leave as on duty. He also suggested that in case he cared to return, his salary would be Rs 100 with better facilities.

Chhotu Ram stood sixth in the EAC examination. He did exceedingly well in all subjects except Mathematics.

He now returned to Agra to study law which he had been unable to continue at Lahore due to the plague epidemic. The financial problem he solved by becoming a teacher at the St. John High School. He also became Superintendent of the local Jat Boarding House.

He passed the LLB examination in 1911 in First Division.

### **Law Practice at Agra**

Law is a jealous mistress. It is also a very tricky profession. In this vast field there is room only at the top. One has also to discover himself afresh. A mere law degree is not much of a help. Some of the famous men in Indian public life who started as lawyers had to show great patience and determination before they could make any headway. A few who rose to great heights in politics did not go far in the profession itself.

The two names that immediately come to mind are those of Gandhiji and Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhiji's attempt to settle down as a practicing lawyer was so discouraging that he readily agreed to take up an assignment in South Africa. Many anecdotes have been narrated by Jawaharlal's contemporaries, by Dr Katju and others how the youthful Nehru though not lacking in talent, had no idea of conducting a law case. M.A. Jinnah, a great advocate had to spend a few years practically without a brief. There are many others who found the first going very stiff. Some of them later became great lawyers by persistence and hard work.

Sir Shadi Lal, first Indian to become Chief Justice of a High Court was brief less in the beginning. Success in a difficult criminal case brought him sudden fame.

Chhotu Ram was rather lucky as he had not to pass through a brief less probation period. Immediately he started practicing, he was engaged in two criminal cases. In the first case, two brothers were charged under Sec. 110 IPC. The facts were widely known and nobody expected they could be acquitted.

Chhotu Ram displayed his forensic skill in his very first case and by clever examination of prosecution witnesses, he saw the brothers out of the clutches of law.

He had started only a few months ago. These brothers, felt so grateful that they went round the whole of Agra district praising Chhotu Ram as a lawyer. It was through these brothers that he got his second case. This was a dacoity case in which about 14 persons were involved. Two of them had been won over by the prosecution. This was a far more complicated case. The Magistrate committed the accused to the Sessions trial. Normally

a beginner should have hesitated to appear in a Sessions case. Not so Chhotu Ram. His entire life had been not merely to accept challenges but to seek them.

He worked very hard on the case, visited the place of occurrence and then examined all the legal aspects.

Through clever cross-examination not only of the witnesses but also of the police, he made out a case for acquittal. Nobody had ever heard of a fresher without any experience winning such a case.

Within a year Chhotu Ram came to be counted amongst the top at the Agra Bar. His name also spread all over the Brij districts — Agra, Mathura, Aligarh and the neighboring Bharatpur due to his other public activities.

## At Rohtak at Last

As the result of the transfer of the capital of India from Calcutta to Delhi after the Royal Durbar in 1911, the Haryana district because of proximity to the new capital, acquired some importance.

Sonepat tehsil so far part of the Delhi district was transferred to Rohtak to make it more viable. Chhotu Ram not only wanted to make a career in law but also to combine it with service to the people. At Agra, he had acquired a respectable position both as a lawyer and as a public man. The vast peasantry was already responding to his charisma, as a born leader of men. It is likely had Chhotu Ram stayed on at Agra and started a movement to organize the peasantry as he later did in the Punjab, he would have risen high in the public life of UP. His heart, however, was in Haryana and the Punjab where he had spent his early life. He decided to shift to Rohtak in 1912.

Chhotu Ram settled at Rohtak and started law practice jointly with Ch. Lal Chand. When Chhotu Ram returned to Rohtak, apart from Lal Chand, there were two other Jat lawyers, Nawal Singh and Ram Chander.

After a short time, the Rohtak Bar realized that a new type of man had entered the legal fraternity. He was one of them so far as legal practice was concerned although even in that his methods were different. In his basic approach he was a public man first and practicing lawyer second.

In Haryana 'Hukka' is a social institution. Each caste and community is set apart as it is not common even now for people particularly in the villages, of different castes, to smoke together.

Ch. Lajja Ram of Karnal, a contemporary of Chhotu Ram at St. Stephen's College, Delhi, used to relate an anecdote about him. Chhotu Ram often used to absent himself from class lectures to enjoy 'Hukka' in the quietness of his hostel room. He used to smoke 'Hukka' from the days when it won him patronage of Seth Sir Chhaju Ram. One day some elderly people had come to the court premises and on meeting Chhotu Ram they invited him to sit with them. They were, of course, carrying the 'Hukka' with them and out of courtesy Chhotu Ram not only sat down on the ground with them but also enjoyed common smoking.

This sent the whole fraternity of lawyers into jitters. Here was a man who had not only degraded himself but brought disgrace to the whole profession. Ever heard of a lawyer

smoking 'Hukka' with rustics! The man deserved to be ostracized and thrown out of the legal profession. Some suggested his social boycott.

An urgent meeting of the Rohtak lawyers decided to depute two of its members to convey to Chhotu Ram what they thought of him. The persons selected were one Ram Chander, a fellow Jat and one Bissya, a Kayastha. The latter conveyed as forcefully as he could the sense of resentment at the sacrilege he had committed. Ram Chander duly reinforced him. Chhotu Ram listened in silence. Then he told the two lawyers that they had no idea of what they were talking about. They falsely assumed that the villagers were untouchables. The lawyers, Chhotu Ram told the two deputationists, were not the bosses of clients. In fact the relationship was just the reverse. The man who hired the lawyer was the boss. Regarding smoking 'Hukka' he said he had done nothing wrong in smoking with respectable elderly people of his own caste. That was the prevailing practice. It would have been another thing if they had suggested not to smoke 'Hukka', as he agreed it was a bad habit.

Chhotu Ram did not rest here. He started a campaign against the maltreatment of clients by the lawyers. He advised the villagers not to suffer any insults. They should assert full social equality as it was their money that kept the lawyers going. Instead of feeling grateful, they had the insolence to treat them as something inferior.

This had immediate effect. Far from resenting, the lawyers realized that Chhotu Ram was right. The villagers who flocked to the courts found a change in the atmosphere. They were shown more courtesy and provided several facilities about which the lawyers had not bothered before.

The joint practice with Lal Chand flourished. It brought enough to keep both in comfort. Lal Chand had important social contacts. By the standards of those days, he was counted amongst the affluent. He had also been a tehsildar once. This added to his prestige. Chhotu Ram became the most important criminal lawyer at the Rohtak Bar. Lal Chand could also draw on his revenue experience.

Chhotu Ram's real interest was the peasantry. He found they were still handicapped in a thousand ways. The government officials as a hangover of the Mutiny days, were still largely hostile or at least indifferent. The senior officials, the Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police used to be invariably British in those days. They found Lal Chand very likable. He was liberal in hospitality and in addition possessed the gift of the gab. Chhotu Ram was a total contrast. The conditions in Haryana in every way were most depressing. In a cumulative way, these were reflected in the Rohtak district.

During the Mutiny, the people had risen in a mass upsurge driving away the British officials from almost every central place. Haryana was one of the main theatres where the Raj had to fight its most desperate battles against the patriotic elements who had

gone all out in support of the rebellious army. The last fight took place at Narnaul, not far from Rohtak. It was here that the combined Haryana forces were overcome because of the support the British received from the Punjab and Rajasthan.

The people of Haryana had to pay heavily for their patriotism. The mutineers were ruthlessly suppressed. The ruling Nawabs and Rajas of the regions disappeared. The martial classes were made to feel the full authority of a vengeful administration.

Development of the Punjab proper was undertaken on an ever increasing scale. New roads, extensive canals, schools, colleges and hospitals, along with business enterprises that followed, all that changed the face of Punjab. Haryana was not only totally ignored but still held in terror by official hierarchy.

Arya Samaj had come to impart a sense of respectability to the peasantry but it became counter-productive as the people were suspected all the more of joining the movement.

In the early stages before the Congress, Arya Samaj was considered dangerous as it bred disloyalty; at least the government thought so.

The officials high and low were a specter inspiring awe, fear and consternation. The Thanedar and Tehsildar looked so big that the villagers mentioned them in whispers.

Rural sayings depicted the might of the Raj. 'One should not mind being beaten by an officer or becoming soiled in muddy water!' 'It is dangerous to stand before an officer or behind a horse', and so on. The lowest revenue official was the village Patwari. He was at the bottom of official hierarchy. But to the villager there was nothing greater in the whole universe. He not only exploited the ignorant peasantry but also kept an eye on the people. He fed the upper hierarchy with all kinds of concocted reports to increase his own importance. These were unquestionably accepted. The Patwari was the main CID in the village.

If the Daroga (Thanedar) passed through the village, the people would run helter-skelter, deserting the streets and would not dare to come out of their houses till they felt sure the danger had passed.

At the time of which we are speaking, land-revenue was the main source of government receipts. This entirely came from the rural areas but was spent mostly in the cities and towns.

The urban people though more prosperous paid comparatively less.

The roads were few and these were meant for the conveyances of the officers, the rich and upper classes but not for the bullock-cart of the peasant taking his produce to the



nearby town. If he ever turned his bullocks from the *kaccha* path below to the metalled road on the side he would invariably be abused and even whipped by the smallest authority, may be a police constable or a tehsil peon.

Haryana par excellence is the home of the peasant proprietors, with largely small holdings. It does not need much skill to calculate how an average cultivator with say 8 or 10 acres (the average is definitely much smaller now) could support a family of five or six with wheat selling at two rupees a md., *gur* about 3 or 4 rupees and other commodities he produced practically of no value. Most of these were taken almost free, not only by the numerous minions of the powers that be, but even by the large number of menials in the village who lived on the peasant. One of the main causes of the French Revolution (1789) it may be recalled here, was the exploitation of the small peasantry by all other classes. These privileges of the aristocracy and feudal classes were protected by an absolute and irresponsible government.

Were conditions very different in India? In some respects the lot of the Indian peasant was even more pitiable.

Yet no revolution has taken place in India. The attitude of the French nobility towards the peasants was expressed by a member of Paris Parliament in the following words:

"All public financial burdens should be borne by the lower orders. These are subject by virtue of their birth to the imposition of the *taille* and without limitations whatsoever to the *corvee*".<sup>6</sup>

Turgot has depicted the deplorable conditions of the French peasants in his famous book, *L'Ancien Regime*.

"Look at him as he is depicted in the documents, I have cited, so passionately fond of the soil that he consecrates all his earnings to its purpose, and buys it at any price. To acquire it, he must first pay a tax, not to the government, but to other land owners of the neighborhood, as foreign as he is to the administration of public business, and almost as powerless, as he is. He possesses it at last, he buries his heart in it, with the grain he sows. This little corner of earth, of which he himself is owner in this vast universe, fills him with pride and independence. However, these same neighbors take him away from this plot and oblige him to go and work elsewhere without salary; does he wish to protect his seed from their game; they prevent him; they wait for him at the river ford to take a toll. He finds them at the market, where they sell him the right to sell his own produce; and when returned home, he wants to turn to his own use, the remainder of the corn — that corn which has grown under his own eyes and by his own

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<sup>6</sup> *Taille* and *corvee* were a special kind of tax imposed on the lower classes.

handiwork, he can do so after having sent it to be ground in the mill and baked in the oven of these same men. A part of the revenue of his little domain is devoted to paying them quit rents, which are irredeemable. Whatever he does, he meets everywhere these annoying neighbors barring his path, to trouble his pleasure, to hinder his work, to eat his produce; and when he has finished with them, others clothed in black present themselves to carry off the most available part of the harvest. Picture to yourself the condition, the needs, the character, the passions of this man, and calculate if you can the store of hate and envy that is accumulated in his heart.

*Mutatis-mutandi's*, the plight of the Punjab peasant was not much different. Chhotu Ram has depicted the plight of the peasant of his times in his well-known booklet *Bachara Zamindar* (The Helpless Peasant). This is as graphic as what Turgot has said of the French peasant. The French peasant played an important part in the Revolution of 1789 but the leadership was retained by the newly risen bourgeois classes.

There is parallel even in this, with the Indian case. The Gandhian Revolution had a wide sweep but as in the French Revolution the Indian bourgeoisie cleverly used the masses including the peasantry to build up the momentum, retaining leadership in its own hands. This trend has continued in India even after Independence.

With this parenthesis, let us go back to Chhotu Ram and carry further the story of his attempts to create awakening and consciousness amongst the people of his own district and of the Punjab as a whole.

While education was spreading fast in the rest of the Punjab, Haryana students had to go to Delhi, the only important city in the whole region and even to distant Lahore for higher education. In Rohtak there was not even a High School.

One Bhani Ram of Gangana village in Gohana Tehsil of Rohtak District was a student at Lahore in the DAV College. As a result of the spread of Arya Samaj, DAV institutions were being established in the Punjab at important centers. The biggest of these was the DAV College at Lahore which became famous under the Principalship of Mahatma Hans Raj.

Bhani Ram, taking the inspiration from Lahore took a vow to establish a High School at Rohtak. He died before he could give his ideas any practical shape but he committed his close friend Baldev Singh — a student at the Training College, Lahore, at the time, to carry out his commitment. Baldev Singh true to his friend planned a Jat Anglo Sanskrit High School to be started with public support. This was in 1913, Arya Samajis from Rohtak and Haryana districts gave full support. Dr Ramji Lal and his brother Ch. Matu Ram extended full cooperation from Hissar. The response of lawyers including the .Tal

lawyers, however, was lukewarm due to the English Deputy Commissioner who at that time was one Mr. Kilwart. The Deputy Commissioner wanted to keep the management of the proposed school in his own hands and in fact desired the institution to be named after him. He promised full help from government, including land and substantial funds, Baldev Singh and other Samaj leaders wanted the school to be completely free of government influence.

Chhotu Ram was of the same view but he wanted the other important persons at Rohtak including the Jat lawyers to become associated.

Chhotu Ram succeeded in enlisting wide support and the school was established with himself as Secretary.

During the First World War Rohtak was one of the main centers of recruitment and the martial classes; Jats, Rajputs, Brahmans, Gujars, and Ahirs got enlisted in strength. The Jats, because of their predominance in population, were the most numerous.

The school attracted much notice and funds came from all places, the army personnel making the highest contribution.

It is significant that it was at Chhotu Ram's initiative that every institution in Rohtak came into existence.

He next thought of starting a weekly paper in Urdu. Chhotu Ram's close friend Rai Sahib Ch. Kanhya Lal of Mattan village helped in starting the *Jat Gazette* with an initial contribution of Rs 1500.

The main cause of the rural people being ignored was lack of advocacy of their cause. The *Jat Gazette* established in 1916 was a small paper but its effectiveness increased when Chhotu Ram made regular contributions through articles and editorials. Later on Chhotu Ram's articles and comments were so highly acclaimed that many urban newspapers at Lahore and Delhi reproduced them.

Gandhiji's non-cooperation included boycott of the British system of education. The Jat school at Rohtak was controlled by Baldev Singh who was also influenced by the overpowering nationalist sentiment which led to the closure of many educational institutions in the country. But some nationalist leaders thought otherwise. Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya the founder of the Hindu University, Banaras, refused to bow before the storm. He succeeded in keeping the University intact in spite of a strong wave in favor of the new system of education.

Chhotu Ram handled the situation in a different way. A new school under the name of Jat Heroes Memorial School was started when Baldev Singh transformed the original school into the national pattern.

The boycott of western education and courts succeeded only temporarily. It was soon realized that Gandhi's ideas appealed widely to the masses but were too idealistic to be practical.

At Banaras the Vidya Peeth, that was intended to replace the Hindu University did not go far though it survived.

At Rohtak, Baldev Singh, soon lost the battle. The new 'Heroes' so completely eclipsed the original Anglo-Sanskrit that it did not survive long.

The Jat School started by Chhotu Ram is now an important college in the new University at Rohtak.

It appears Chhotu Ram quickly saw the possibilities that the war had created. Haryana long ignored, became one of the main centers because of its martial people who went to fight in the Kaisers war in strength.

Both Chhotu Ram and Lal Chand took active part in the recruitment campaign. In Rohtak ballads and songs were composed and plays staged to popularize the war activities. There was a Brahmin, Deep Chand by name belonging to Khanda-Sehri village of Sonapat Tehsil. He is still remembered as the Shakespeare of Haryana. His war songs were on everybody's lips.

E. Montagu the Liberal Secretary of State visited India during war time. He was anxious to honor the statement he had made in the House of Commons in August 1917, to grant India a substantial measure of political reform.

When Montagu came to the Punjab, Chhotu Ram led a deputation on behalf of the Punjab Zamindara Association.

The question of Reforms was discussed in the Punjab Council of which Lal Chand was a member. At the suggestion of Chhotu Ram, three points were raised by Lal Chand during the discussions:

- (i) There should be separate urban and rural constituencies.
- (ii) The number of seats to be allotted to the two categories should be in proportion to population and incidence of taxes. This worked out at 90 percent rural and 10 percent urban.

- (iii) In the rural areas the representation should be confined to the rural people.

The Council conceded all the three points. This was Chhotu Ram's first victory in his life-long campaign against the bourgeois vested interests.

Chhotu Ram personally pressed the Secretary of State for the need of various safeguards for the backward rural people against the advanced urban sections.

The first election under the 1919 Reforms was held in 1920. Lai Chand was elected unopposed as the nomination papers of the opposing candidates were rejected.

Chhotu Ram had become so popular due to his incessant activities in various fields, that his election appeared to be certain. He was being opposed by Risaldar Sarup Singh of Badli. At the last minute, it was suggested that the matter may be decided by a Panchayat of 24 villages of the constituency.

Chhotu Ram agreed to this in spite of his certain position otherwise. The Panchayat decided in favor of his opponent. Chhotu Ram withdrew from the election at once, but still voting had to take place according to procedure. Chhotu Ram lost only by 22 votes.

### **Involvement in a Murder Case**

In the Rohtak district board the majority of members were those who could keep the officials particularly, the Deputy Commissioner humored by demonstrative sycophancy. Ch. Nihal Singh was a Zaildar and had been a member of the district board for long. In the last election he was defeated by Ch. Devi Singh of Bohar village – a supporter of Chhotu Ram. Nihal Singh had a patron in Pooran Nath – Mahant of the richly endowed monastery of Bohar. He was murdered in the summer of 1921. Both Nihal Singh and Pooran Nath had opposed Chhotu Ram in the Council election the previous year. The district officials were unhappy with Chhotu Ram because he would spare nobody high or low.

The district board, Rohtak, was maintaining a dhobi-ghat but it was mainly occupied in doing washing for the Deputy Commissioner. The board decided to abolish the ghat which decision, it refused to reverse in spite of the Deputy Commissioner who was the permanent President. Chhotu Ram had written several articles in the *Tribune* regarding corruption in the district pointedly mentioning the Superintendent of Police who had acquired a bad reputation.

The two officers found Nihal Singh's murder a good opportunity to involve both Chhotu Ram and Lal Chand.

When the Ambala Division Commissioner came to investigate, a strong deputation led by Zaildar Jug Lal — an outstanding Arya Samaj leader, made it clear to the Commissioner that if their respected leaders were involved in false cases at the instance of corrupt district officials, there would be unprecedented public resentment, which it may not be possible for the Government to control.

The Commissioner took the hint and reported to the Government that there was no truth in the murder charge.

## The Reforms of 1910 and the Punjab-Nationalist Unionist Party

The Halifax Committee appointed to determine the franchise qualifications had a proposal before it that while the distinction between the rural and urban constituencies should be maintained, there should be further residence qualification so that a person contesting election from a particular constituency should have continuously resided there for a number of years. This was opposed by both Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram. Fazl-i-Hussain speaking in the Punjab Council said:

"There is the urban area, there is the rural area. Within these two areas the greatest possible freedom should be allowed with the object of not returning the suitable men but returning the most suitable men that the province can put forward from those areas."<sup>7</sup>

Chhotu Ram in a letter to the *Tribune* (Lahore) on May 1, 1920, wrote:

"The imposition of any inter-district restrictions on the score of residence will seriously imperil the chances of any real growth of political life in the countryside. Rural areas cannot boast of any excess of thoroughly competent candidates and such a crude application of the principle of the residential qualification as is proposed by the Halifax Committee will result in a political disaster of the first magnitude. It is difficult to view with equanimity the prospects of a Council swarming with mere dummies. And if the recommendations of the Halifax Committee are accepted, this will exactly be the result. Inefficiency, incompetence, incapacity, ignorance will be the only fruits which can be borne by the recommendations of the Halifax Committee report."

The justification of this criticism was recognized in time and the residential qualification was removed in 1923.

Fazl-i-Hussain in the beginning was considered an urbanite. He had actually opposed the resolution moved by Lal Chand which led to the establishment of separate rural and urban constituencies.

When he was appointed Minister in 1921 along with Lala Harkishan Lal, the *Jat Gazette*, Rohtak commented in its issue dated January 12, 1921:

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<sup>7</sup> Punjab Council Proceedings, March 8, 1920.

"Both of them are connected with the urban population and were elected by special constituencies. The new Council contains a large number of members elected by the rural constituencies and unless the present ministers are supported by them they will be unable to retain their posts even with the help of the official and nominated members ... The nomination of both from among the representatives of the urban population is an insult to the men returned by rural constituencies."

### **Fazl-i-Hussain's Politics**

Fazl-i-Hussain's approach to politics is thus summed up by his son Azim Hussain.<sup>8</sup>

"Fazl-i-Hussain called himself a 'Moderate Unionist' desiring to bring together the Extremists and the Moderates. He was a constitutionist and regarded the Civil Disobedience Movement as an inexpedient means of achieving political advance. He believed that 'Freedom is the recognition of necessity' and no positive political achievement is possible except by realization of limiting factors. He also believed that the non-cooperation leaders were impractical and that their programme was fraught with grave dangers to the masses who could not grasp or practice the idealistic doctrine of Ahimsa."

Azim Hussain adds;

"In the Punjab Council as a 'Responsive Moderate' Fazl-i-Hussain offered to work the Reforms provided that the Punjab Government would give an assurance that the officials would cooperate fully with the representatives of the new electorate to make the Reforms a success. The new Lt. Governor was sympathetic to popular aspirations and gave the required assurance on behalf of the government and in some ways a hopeful future for the Reforms in the Punjab was assured."<sup>9</sup>

The Swaraj Party founded by C.R. Das and Moti Lal Nehru had precisely the same objective as the Punjab Unionist Party but they camouflaged it by saying that their idea was to fight the foreign rule from inside. In 1937 when the Congress captured majorities in a number of provinces, they readily agreed to form ministries on an assurance from the respective Governors that there would be no interference in the day-to-day working of the ministers.

Sir Sikander Hyat who formed the first government in the Punjab under Provincial Autonomy at the same time as the Congress did in six Congress majority States, said in

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<sup>8</sup> Azim Hussain, *Fazl-i-Hussain, A Political Biography*.

<sup>9</sup> In 1937 after the introduction of provincial autonomy the Congress accepted office after obtaining similar assurances from the concerned governors. The Unionists were thus ahead of the Congress in this respect.



an article at the time to clarify the Unionist Party position that they proceeded on the assumption that there would be no unnecessary interference from the Governor but in case interference did occur, his Ministry would not shirk deadlocks that might follow.

The general view in the country about the 1919 Reforms was to work them for what they were worth. In fact Gandhiji himself was in favor of working the Reforms but changed his stand after the Rowlatt Acts and the Punjab atrocities which created a climate of extremism in the country.

In the Punjab itself which suffered under the reactionary Odwyer-Dyer regime, there was violent outburst of public feelings, leading to the Jallianwala firing and martial law in the province.

Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs were at one in condemning the atrocities in Punjab in the strongest terms. Lala Harkishan Lai was in the fore-front of the agitation against the Rowlatt Acts.

But the anger soon died down and the Punjab leaders belonging to all communities while strongly resenting the policies of the reactionary Odwyer regime were in favor of working the Reforms to prevent their being misused by reactionary pro-government loyalists. Azim Hussain commenting on the situation observes:<sup>10</sup>

"The provincial Congress committees were asked by the All India Congress to express their views about non-cooperation. The Punjab Congress Committee (under the influence of Fazl-i-Hussain and Harkishan Lal) and the Andhra, Bengal and C.P. Congress Committees gave their opinion that a boycott of the new legislatures was not called for. Tilak disapproved of both the Khilafat agitation and the non-cooperation programme and with his dying breath said: 'We want majorities not Mahatmas'. C.R. Das stood four-square against non-cooperation. 'There is not a single argument' he said, 'advanced against my proposition of any value except only one, namely, Mr. Gandhi — Mahatama Gandhi said this and said that. This is not an argument.' "

Mrs. Besant refused to reject the Reforms altogether and Mr. Jinnah opposed Gandhi's programme. Pt. Malviya, preferred to be called a political juggler, rather than non-cooperator.

Such were the personalities arraigned against Gandhi but for a packed session non-cooperation had little hope of success.

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<sup>10</sup> Azim Hussain, *Fazl-i-Hussain—A Political Biography*.

In the Punjab Provincial Conference at Amritsar, Harkishan Lai, Ganpat Rai and Gokal Chand Narang declined to boycott the Reforms scheme. But extremists which included Dr Kitchlew, Duni Chand and Dr Sat Pal refused to accept this view and forced the moderates to secede from the Congress.

Chhotu Ram independently came to the same view as the other Punjab moderates. In the conditions in which the peasantry was situated at the time, he realized that they would not be able to practice the non-cooperation programme with any hope of success. He feared that in case of non-payment of taxes the peasants would be deprived of all their holdings, the lands passing on the sly into the hands of the money-lenders.

Chhotu Ram gradually developed an ideology and a philosophy of politics. He remained firm in his conviction that the peasantry had to be organized to become strong enough to safeguard its interests. He was influenced in his views by the Punjab situation but as things changed, his views became less parochial. Towards the end of his career, when after successfully fighting Hindu communalism he was faced by the Muslim communalism on the Pakistan issue, his firm stand against communalism, Hindu or Muslim and his heroic fight against partition and Pakistan was hailed all over India. At that time, he was regarded as the most powerful advocate of Indian unity and nationalism.

The Punjab situation was peculiar. It was not a Hindu-Muslim issue but a triangular fight, the Sikhs being an important third party. Just as the Muslims claimed special privileges because they had ruled India, so long, the Sikhs were the rulers of the Punjab when the British took over. The urban Hindus had taken advantage of new educational facilities and were ahead of both the Muslims and the Sikhs. The rural people belonging to all the three communities were markedly behind. It was this vast backward section that was the real constituency of Chhotu Ram.

Both Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram used to claim that the Unionist Party was the real Congress in the Punjab' as it was based on a secular programme.

Lala Lajpat Rai was the best known Congress leader in the Punjab but his base remained Arya Samaj and to some extent Hindu Mahasabha. Chhotu Ram had no quarrel with Arya Samaj as he himself was a firm believer in it but he remained strongly opposed to the Hindu Mahasabha approach which claimed to represent all the Hindus in the Punjab including the rural peasantry of Haryana. The urban Hindus in fact constituted a small minority in the total Hindu population but appropriated all privileges due to the Hindus. It was in this background that the Unionist Party was founded.

## Diarchy in the Punjab

In the first Ministry under diarchy the two Ministers in charge of the transferred subjects were Fazl-i-Hussain and Harkishan Lal.

After the second general elections in 1923, Fazl-i-Hussain who had become the most dominating politician in the Punjab, respected for his integrity and ability, for the first time thought of developing a party system under which the reforms could be worked for the remaining period. Chhotu Ram by this time had developed close relations with Fazl-i-Hussain and had greatly impressed him. Along with Lal Chand he had been elected to the Punjab Council in 1923 and in discussions with Fazl-i-Hussain the idea of a rural party to safeguard the interests of the backward classes took form.

Fazl-i-Hussain who was to be the first Minister, persuaded the Governor, Sir Malcom Hailey, to include Lal Chand in the Ministry. But soon after Lal Chand was disqualified due to an election petition. Who should be Lal Chand's successor?

The Governor was reluctant to be pressed again to include a person of Fazl-i-Hussain's choice. He had realized by this time that Fazl-i-Hussain was working systematically to strengthen his own position. The Governor had practically decided to appoint an urban Hindu from Lahore under the pressure of the vocal Hindu lobby but was persuaded by Fazl-i-Hussain to defer his decision till he had assessed the feelings of the people in the Ambala Division, which had the bulk of the Hindu population.

At Rohtak and Hissar deputation after deputation urged on the Governor the inclusion of Chhotu Ram in the Ministry. The ex-army personnel gathered in strength and left the Governor in no doubt about their strong feelings.

On returning to Lahore, Hailey agreed with Fazl-i-Hussain and appointed Chhotu Ram to succeed Lal Chand.

### The Communal Triangle

Politics in India had become the hand-made of communalism. It was not a simple Hindu-Muslim conflict. There was the third arm of the triangle which manipulated the other two arms. The great satisfaction which the British bureaucracy in India and the conservative die-hards at home expressed when the Muslim League led a deputation to Lord Minto in 1906 demanding separate representation for the Muslims underlined the basic approach of British imperialists to the Indian problem. When Jawaharlal Nehru

declared towards the concluding stage of the Congress fight against the foreign rule that there were only two parties in India the British imperialists and the Indian nationalists Jinnah joined the contest by announcing the presence of a third party – the Muslim League.

The communal problem assumed different forms from province to province. Broadly, there were Hindu' majority provinces and Muslim majority provinces. The Muslims were not in minority everywhere nor Hindus in majority in all areas.

The Muslim League led by Jinnah before it opted for separation was attempting to obtain protection for the Muslims in Hindu majority provinces, with one-third share at the centre. The Hindus and other minorities like the Sikhs in the Punjab could similarly be given representation in excess of their population in Muslim majority provinces of the Punjab, Bengal, Sindh and NWEF.

That explains why the Muslims were always pressing for a larger number of Muslim majority provinces. Fazl-i-Hussain's strategy included balancing of Hindu majority provinces by Muslim majority provinces.

Fazl-i-Hussain's approach, however, was quite different from Jinnah's. M.A. Jinnah remained a member of the Congress till the non-cooperation movement. He continued to bargain till the All Parties Conference and the Nehru Report (1928). Thereafter he parted company with the nationalists and had in fact settled down in England till he was provoked to return by political developments in India around 1935. From this point onwards Jinnah was not only vehemently opposed to the Congress but remained intransigent to the extent of being unreasonable.

Fazl-i-Hussain wanted to obtain as many concessions as possible for the Muslims but ultimately he wanted to have joint-electorate and a common Hindu-Muslim front to realize Indian freedom.

### **The Punjab Case**

In the Punjab three and not two communities were concerned giving the bureaucracy greater scope to manipulate the strings in their own favor. The communal problem presented difficulties in the Punjab and to some extent Bengal as the majority-minority gap was small in both cases. If the communal problem could be satisfactorily resolved in these two cases there would have been much less difficulty elsewhere. The urban Hindus and Sikhs in the Punjab were in a small minority compared to the rural Hindus and Sikhs. The urban Muslims were even smaller compared to the vast Muslim population of the peasantry in western and northern Punjab.

The British administrators talked a lot about the sturdy Punjab peasant but the real fruits of Pax Britannica were reaped by the urban classes. Higher education so far was confined to towns and cities.

Fazl-i-Hussain after practicing at Sialkot for a few years settled down at Lahore as a leading Muslim lawyer. This was in 1905. He had progressive nationalist views and was an active Congress man, being provincial president for several years. He was thinking however, mainly about the future of the Punjabi Muslims whom he found much backward compared to the urban Hindus. The Hindus and Muslims kept up appearances and even joined hands at times but each community was at heart anxious to gain at the cost of the other. This race, however, was confined to the urban population. The rural people Hindus or Muslims were not much in the picture at the time.

Fazl-i-Hussain belonged to Batala in Gurdaspur district. His ancestors were Hindu Rajputs and the family had been converted to the Muslim faith in recent times. They still followed many Rajput customs and practices.

He found during his Lahore career that in the Punjab University and in local politics while the Hindus conceded his superiority they always tended to favor a Hindu if a contest arose. This naturally embittered Fazl-i-Hussain to some extent and he thought of organizing his own community so that they could compete with the more advanced urban Hindus. Fazl-i-Hussain's thinking was not in terms of rural or urban but to organize the Muslim community as a whole.

This was the position when Chhotu Ram joined hands with him and gave a new turn to the Punjab politics.

Even under the limited scope the scheme of 'diarchy' provided, the strong combination of Chhotu Ram and Fazl-i-Hussain kept the bureaucracy under leash.

Even a Governor as strongly 'Imperialist' as Sir Malcolm Hailey found that the two ministers in charge of the transferred departments would not allow his undue interference.

In many cases, where Hailey tried to impose himself, he was obliged to retreat.

## **First Term Minister ( 1924 - 26 )**

Both Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram were ex-Congress men. Throughout they remained true to the maxim 'Once a Congress man, always a Congress man.' Fazl-i-Hussain had become too well established for anybody to have any rivalry with him. Chhotu Ram was a new comer. At Lahore at the time there were highly placed Hindus to whom the appearance of a rustic from far off Rohtak was something of a mental shock. The high places under the British were their monopoly so far. Who was this unknown person not only to claim a share in the high prizes but actually to have pocketed the much coveted Ministership which was earlier adorned by so distinguished a person of their own class — the great financial wizard Harkishan Lal Gauba? The urban Hindu elite which included Raja Narendra Nath, Dr Gokal Chand Narang, Lala Ramsaran Das, Pt. Nanak Chand, Bakshi Tek Chand and others had so far ignored the Ambala Division. Chhotu Ram's team made their presence felt and succeeded even capturing Ministership in 1923.

### **Meeting with Lajpat Rai**

Lala Lajpat Rai was a front rank leader of national stature but on occasions he was not above descending to the Hindu Sabha level. He was very close to Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya both being in the Congress and the Hindu Maha Sabha.

After the formation of the Swaraj Party, Lajpat Rai and Malviya opposed Pt. Motilal Nehru wherever they could and got themselves elected to the Central Assembly defying the Congress and the Swarajists alike.

Lajpat Rai, a rare orator in Urdu — a fearless fighter against the British rule and commanding much respect and following all over northern India often supported the Lahore group when it came in conflict with the Unionist Party.

There was a meeting soon after Chhotu Ram became Minister between him and Lajpat Rai. Lala Lajpat Rai was impressed with Chhotu Ram and he wanted to convince him of his own point of view regarding Punjab politics.

Lajpat Rai advised Chhotu Ram to dissociate himself from the feudal and bureaucratic dominated Unionist Party and join the nationalist ranks.

Chhotu Ram retorted that he was prepared to do so provided nationalism was not confused with communalism.

He pointed out that in the Punjab the Congress was a camouflaged Hindu Mahasabha.

Chhotu Ram further elaborated that the Punjab Hindus were in two minds. They should make their choice. If they really wanted to be nationalists, they should make up with the Muslims and the Sikhs and fight only the British. If they wanted to be communalists they should fight only the Muslims. Their present plight was that of falling between two stools.

That being the position the urban Hindus were trusted neither by the bureaucracy nor the Muslims. Even the Sikhs who generally stood by them often suspected them.

In his very first term Chhotu Ram established himself as an outstanding administrator, clear in head, firm in objective with mastery over details. His noting on files remains a model even today.

The senior Secretariat officialdom mostly British civilians, accustomed to take Indian ministers for granted were shaken up. They found, the new minister not only had a policy but knew how to carry it out.

Chhotu Ram had in Fazl-i-Hussain a person of outstanding ability and he learnt much from him. Mian Sahib considered Chhotu Ram as the ablest person in the Unionist ranks and reposed complete trust and confidence in him.

Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram had in the then Governor Sir Malcom Hailey, one of the cleverest and ablest civilians that the British ever sent to India. He was an imperialist and judged every issue from this angle. The two ministers – both at heart nationalists – had the interests of the Punjab uppermost in their approach. Hailey often attempted to browbeat them but it was seldom he had the upper hand. The Governor kept up appearances with Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram – he was too tactful and diplomatic to oppose openly in matters under the jurisdiction of the ministers on the transferred side – but he always tried to restrain them whenever he could.

According to the 1919 Act, the First President of the Council was to be nominated by the Governor for the duration of the first four Sessions of the Council. Mr. Caison ICS, who had been Commissioner of Arabala occupied this position for this duration. Now the Council could elect its own Speaker.

Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram always took a stand when there was a conflict between the bureaucracy and public interest. Their broad approach was to prefer an Indian to a British and an agriculturist to a non-agriculturist.

On the other hand the Hindu lobby of Lahore led by Raja Narender Nath — an ex-bureaucrat himself, always tried to remain in the good books of the British Governors, even if it resulted in set-back to the national cause.

In the matter of election of a new Speaker to the Punjab Council, Raja Narender Nath and his group including Bhai Jodh Singh assured the Governor of support for Mr. Caison if he sought election. Hailey talked the matter over with his two ministers and was surprised that they were dead set to have an elected member of the Council to become the Speaker.

Chhotu Ram met the Hindu leaders at the suggestion of Fazl-i-Hussain to persuade them for an elected Speaker. They were agreeable provided some one from the urban Hindus was to be the common candidate.

Hailey was keen to make the Reforms succeed in the Punjab but being an imperialist he wanted to exploit every situation to expose Hindu-Muslim differences. In this case, he wanted to show that the Hindus and Muslims could never agree amongst themselves. They always accepted a Britisher more easily, as the way out.

Finally Mr. Abdul Quadir a member of the Unionist Party was elected as the Speaker of the Punjab Council in place of the nominated Mr. Caison.

Chhotu Ram had offered Deputy-Speakership to urban Hindus if they accepted a Unionist to be the Speaker. But as they had not agreed to this, a Unionist, Sardar Mahender Singh, was elected Deputy Speaker, defeating Pt. Nanak Chand, a front ranker amongst the Hindu Maha Sabhaites. This happened in spite of the Governor's support to Pt. Nanak Chand.

Shortly afterwards Fazl-i-Hussain was appointed to the Viceroy's Executive Council in a temporary vacancy. Sheikh Abdul Quadir was keen to become Education Minister in place of Fazl-i-Hussain. He arranged with Chhotu Ram that he could have his friend Ch. Shabuddin, as Speaker in which position he could continue even after Fazli's return as he would not want to become Speaker again.

This time even the Unionist Party was divided on the issue. Malik Feroz Khan Noon became a candidate in spite of Sikander Hyat (who was related to him) warning him against it. Feroz retired but then Shah Nawaz Khan a big feudal lord, with high connections appeared in the field. Even Fazl-i-Hussain was doubtful about Shabuddin's success. Chhotu Ram stood firmly by his friend and had him elected Speaker in place of Sheikh Abdul Quadir.



Shah Nawaz became an opponent of Chhotu Ram and publicly upbraided him for being the cause of dividing not only the Hindus but also the Muslims.

### **A Meeting with Madan Mohan Malviya**

The Lahore Hindu lobby was always on the lookout for an excuse to discredit Chhotu Ram. They were well placed to do it because of their entrenched position. Pt. Malviya who often visited Lahore being a friend of Lajpat Rai was briefed by the Hindu Mahasabha and he was persuaded to meet Chhotu Ram to persuade him to accept the Hindu lobby approach.

Chhotu Ram received Malviyaji with all the respect due to a leader of his eminence and they had a long talk. He gave Malviyaji the full gist of the background of Punjab politics and explained with facts and figures how the Hindu zaraindars who were a majority in the Hindu population of the province, were deprived of all rights by the advanced and educated classes amongst the Hindus. Malviyaji was greatly surprised. After that he held Chhotu Ram in great regard and advised the Lahore Hindus to accommodate the Hindu agriculturists if they really wanted to strengthen their position

### **Achievements During the First Term**

Chhotu Ram's first term as Minister lasted from September 28, 1924 to December 26, 1926. During this period, twice he was incharge of the departments under Fazl-i-Hussain also once, when Mian Sahib's health broke down and he wanted Chhotu Ram to look after education and other departments held by him and again when he went temporarily to Delhi.

When Fazl-i-Hussain returned from Delhi he took over as Revenue Member on the reserved side and Chhotu Ram became Education Minister in his place. Chhotu Ram so manipulated things that in the vacancy so caused. Sir Joginder Singh a Sikh Jat was appointed, blocking Bhai Jodh Singh who was trying hard to become a minister.

Like Karl Marx (whom Chhotu Ram had never read), he had developed his own dialectics of politics. Like Marx, Chhotu Ram believed that the poor and the rich, the propertied classes and those without property were in perpetual and basic conflict.

Marx visualized that the capitalists would one day be defeated by the proletariat, their destruction being implied in the working of the capitalist system – the law of the concentration of capital. Chhotu Ram believed that the agriculturists will one day defeat the non-agriculturists. Agriculture, however, remains the most disorganized sector in Indian economics. The Indian proletariat on the other hand has become a factor in Indian politics being highly organized through its trade-unions.

Chhotu Ram's was a long, lonely struggle but he was confident that the Punjab peasant will one day awaken and break the unholy combination of the bureaucracy and the urban exploiters.

The first decade of Montford Reforms (1921-30) was dominated by Fazl-i-Hussain. The first Ministry (1920-23) may be described as Congress-Liberal — both Fazli and Harkishan Lal being ex-Congress men. But they had been appointed to represent their respective communities. The second Ministry was truly Unionist, as Fazli had his colleague drawn from his own party.

The third Ministry which took over in 1927 was again formed on communal considerations. Meanwhile Fazl-i-Hussain had been shifted to the reserved side as Revenue Member. This does not reflect well on Fazl-i-Hussain for he appeared to have offered no resistance to the change.

Fazl-i-Hussain was anxious to establish democratic and parliamentary traditions in India but his technique did not rise above drawing room methods. His health was always weak.

He agreed to shift to the reserved side, as it saved him from fighting an election. Even earlier he had been elected from the land-holders constituency both in 1920 and 1923. He was convinced that Chhotu Ram was head and shoulders above his Muslim followers yet he always got reconciled when preference was given to one of the Muslim Unionists.

The Unionist Party was not truly secular. It was secular only as far as the Hindu zamindars were concerned. The Muslim Unionists were never prepared to make any sacrifice to demonstrate the secular character of the party. Left to himself Fazli would make no distinction between a Hindu and Muslim in the party but his Muslim followers mostly feudal landlords were always keen to have the major share of the cake. Dilating on this aspect of the Unionist Party Azim Hussain observes:

"The distinction of urban versus rural was in the programme rather than in the rules for membership or in the Muslim personnel of the party. Many urbanites and non-agriculturists were prominent members of the party. Sir Abdul Qadir a non-agriculturist, and an urbanite, for example, was not only a member but was unanimously elected by the party as Deputy President and later on, as President of the Council. In 1925, he officiated as minister and later as Revenue Member in the leave vacancy of Fazl-i-Hussain. Similarly, Sheikh Din-Muhammad was a member and was put up as a Unionist candidate for Deputy Presidentship and later on appointed Assistant Legal Remembrance with the full support and goodwill of the Nationalist Unionist Party. Among members there were Dr Iqbal, Mir Maqbool Mahmood, Sheikh Abdul Ghani, Sheikh Mohammad Sadiq,

Khawaja Muhammad Yusaf and Sheikh Faiz Mohammad, all of whom were urban Muslims. Only the non-Muslim members were strictly rural rather than urban."<sup>11</sup>

Even this was not strictly true. Amongst the Hindus only the zamindar followers of Chhotu Ram were truly rural and secular. When Sikander Hyat took over the leadership of the party the urban Hindus led by Raja Narender Nath – staunch opponents of rural interests – became a part of the Ministerialists by forming coalition with the Unionist Party.

The Unionist Party as such was never a purely rural party. It was always a coalition, the rural members dominating because of their numerical strength.

Fazl-i-Hussain handed over Unionist Party in 1926 after becoming Revenue Member to Chhotu Ram, who had been Deputy leader. Chhotu Ram retained this position till the return of Fazl-i-Hussain from the Centre in 1935, when he again resumed leadership.

Fazl-i-Hussain died in July, 1936. If the Unionist Party had been a really secular party the leader after Fazl-i-Hussain should have been Chhotu Ram. Sikander Hayat at the time was a Deputy Governor at the Reserve Bank and had been away from active politics for a number of years. Yet he was recalled to assume leadership for the simple reason that the Punjab being a Muslim majority province must necessarily have a Muslim as leader even of a party that claimed to be secular. If Fazl-i-Hussain had refused to be shifted to the reserved side, the Governor would have been obliged to reappoint him minister and he could have then insisted on the inclusion of Chhotu Ram also. This would have given a new turn to Punjab politics. The Unionist Party would have vindicated its secular and democratic character.

The Unionist Party and its leaders obviously functioned within limits. Fazl-i-Hussain was unable at times to curb the selfish ambitions of his Muslim followers and Chhotu Ram represented only a small group in the party. His own position was due to his dynamism and dedication. He remains the solitary figure in the party who was always ready to forgo personal advantage and make room for persons far inferior to him in the interests of party solidarity.

### **Achievements of Fazli-Chhotu Ram Team (1924-26)**

During this brief period achievements in the administrative, social and economic spheres were considerable. When two such outstanding administrators got an opportunity to work together, they were able to lay down broad lines of policy to which the Unionist Party adhered during the coming years.

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<sup>11</sup> Azim Hussain, Fazl-i-Hussain — A Political Biography.

Fazl-i-Hussain was a highly gifted politician and he knew how to get to his objectives in the communal climate of Punjab. He realized from the very start that the only effective way of removing the backwardness of the agriculturists was to provide them educational facilities which could to some extent approximate to what was available to the urban people.

Under a well-thought out plan primary and secondary education was improved in quality in the rural areas. A network of Intermediate Colleges appeared at most of the district head-quarters. Similarly dispensaries, hospitals and numerous other medical and health facilities were provided on an ever expanding scale to the rural areas. Fazl-i-Hussain was strongly disposed to strengthen local self-government. The Punjab Government had already passed an act to establish village *panchayats* in 1921. These were further strengthened. Municipalities and District Boards were improved by extensive reforms.

District Boards were the main instrument of rural self-government under the British rule. The two Unionist ministers were keen to decrease the official influence and help the rural people to manage the Boards through their elected representatives. By 1926 out of a total of 1177 members 812 were elected. In 1925 it was announced to replace the official Chairmen by non-official elected persons. Till this was done the Boards were encouraged to delegate large administrative powers to the elected Vice-Chairman.

Apart from the towns there were 36,000 villages in the Punjab. The Unionist leaders desired that the benefits of local self-government should reach every village.

Rural India had always been strongly under the influence of age-old *Panchayats*. It was unfortunate that under the centralized bureaucratic administration, these traditional bodies had ceased to function. The Act of 1921 not only aimed at reviving these institutions but assign them important functions in rural administration. As the 1919 Reforms had extended franchise to the villages, the *Panchayats* could be useful in giving training to the rural people for participation in administration.

It may be noted that the Unionist Party anticipated by 40 years the importance of the *Panchayats* for the development work in the villages. This was taken up towards the end of the fifties under the initiative of Prime Minister Nehru, when *Panchayati Raj* bodies were established in many States. The Unionist government established *Panchayats* and appointed *Panchayat* Officers to help them function properly. Dr Gokal Chand Narang who was Minister of Local Self-Government in 1931 and as a representative of urban Hindus had been opposed to the *Panchayat* Movement since 1921, abolished the *Panchayat* staff, with disastrous effect on the growth of the *Panchayat* system.

### **The Gurudwara Act**

An important event of this period was the rise of the Akali movement. The Sikh Gurudwaras were mismanaged by the Mahants and the reforming group amongst the Sikhs – the Akalis – organized a strong movement to remove these Mahants who were misusing considerable funds of the Gurudwaras.

Under the leadership of Teja Singh, the reformist, Sikhs seized the Akali Takht, the Central Shrine near the Golden Temple and established a Committee, Shrimani Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee. But this was not the end of the matter. The Akalis had to make many sacrifices to oust the Mahants as the Government at first refused to accept the forcible control of Gurudwaras by the Akalis. The Gurudwara Act of 1922 did not satisfy the Akalis and ultimately the government was obliged to accept the demands of the Sikh community. Sir Malcom Hailey also wanted to use the Sikhs against the increasing Muslim influence. As a result of discussions between Sir Frederick Puckle and Sir Herbert Emerson the Akalis accepted the new terras, which were embodied in the Gurudwara Act of 1925.

### **Sir Chhotu Ram's Achievements**

During his first term Chhotu Ram was Minister of Agriculture with Fazl-i-Hussain as Education Minister. Later he became Education Minister when Fazl-i-Hussain became Revenue Member.

In both capacities Chhotu Ram established himself as an outstanding administrator. He initiated several new schemes and even his critics amongst the Maha Sabha urbanites benefited from his liberal educational policy.

### **Irrigation Plans**

The main problem in Indian agriculture is inadequate irrigation. Even now with all the various hydro-electric schemes, irrigation falls short of requirements.

The West Punjab at one time was a dreary, desolate land but the British initiated a number of schemes turning most of the land into flourishing colonies. Most of the irrigation plans were first implemented in Western areas because of Muslim pressure on Government. Chhotu Ram while not unsympathetic to the needs of other parts of the Punjab, wanted to meet the crying need of the Haryana districts where practically no projects were taken up after the Western Jamuna Canal system, which met only a small part of the total requirements. He first took up the Mandi Hydro-electric project which was successfully completed in spite of objections from various quarters.

### **The Bhakra Project**

In the early years of this century an English Superintending Engineer Nicholson had explored the possibilities of a bund at Bhakra to irrigate the southern Punjab including the dry Rohtak and Hissar districts. The scheme remained on paper for many years and whenever any serious effort was made to implement it other priorities pushed this project into the background.

During his first term Chhotu Ram could do no more than to revive the project. He was supported in this by Sir Sunder Singh Majithia but the Muslim landlords from the Western areas never became enthusiastic about it. In spite of this Chhotu Ram had the project thoroughly explored and examined by experts.

The project was taken up when Chhotu Ram became Minister again in 1937 but so slow was the working of bureaucratic machinery that a lot of time was wasted in meeting this point and that. It is on record that the last thing Chhotu Ram did before he suddenly expired in January 1945 was to have completed all details about Bhakra including orders for its implementation. We shall revert to this later.

Before his first term came to an end, Chhotu Ram was able to remove some just grievances of the urban Hindus and Sikhs. These related to admissions to various technical institutions and grants-in-aid to schools and colleges. Most of the government grants for colleges went to Missionary and Islamic colleges while the D.A.V. institutions and the Sanatan Dharam colleges received only token amounts. Chhotu Ram set this right and issued orders for equitable distribution of government grants.

## A Decade of Wilderness ( 1926 - 36 )

In spite of Chhotu Ram's best efforts to win over the Mahasabha lobby, they remained unreconciled to his occupying any important position in public life. They wanted to have full control of the third arm of the provincial triangle. The Muslims had become well-organized under Fazl-i-Hussain's leadership and the Sikhs were a progressive community, more advanced than the urban Hindus themselves in certain respects. The Hindu agriculturists under Chhotu Ram's leadership questioned the representative capacity of urban Hindus. The Hindu agriculturists wanted their due share in the Punjab Council and government service.

The urban Hindus with Lahore as centre were in a strong position to deal with Chhotu Ram who had dared to challenge their monopoly of power.

A conspiracy was hatched to defeat Chhotu Ram in the forthcoming elections. Several names were considered from amongst the Rohtak area to oppose Chhotu Ram. There was no difficulty of funds. Chhotu Ram had to be defeated at all cost. Finally they fixed upon one Sher Singh of village Bohar to oppose Chhotu Ram in the election. The Mahasabha leaders knew that it was not easy to defeat Chhotu Ram who had by this time become a household name in Haryana. They made a plan to have him disqualified through an election. petition, just as they had done in the case of Lal Chand in 1924.

Chhotu Ram was returned to the Council by a convincing majority. Sher Singh the defeated candidate had been saying that he would be a gainer even in defeat. One day he took Chhotu Ram to his village and showed him the new *pucca* house he had built out of the savings from the election funds supplied by Chhotu Ram's opponents.

The Governor Malcom Hailey had been greatly impressed by Chhotu Ram's personality and he intended to reappoint him as Minister. Raja Narendra Nath and others brought the greatest pressure on the Governor to ignore Chhotu Ram but the Governor refused to change his mind. Then a last effort was made. A memorandum was submitted to the Governor through Sir Ganga Ram a great Hindu philanthropist and a highly respected Hindu leader – which explained why it was in the interests of the British government to strengthen the urban Hindus. It was the urban Hindus who had loyally stood by the Government and only with their support the increasing Muslim influence could be counteracted.

Hailey an imperialist par excellence took the bait. In a polite letter to Chhotu Ram, the Governor expressed his inability to include him in the cabinet.

Chhotu Ram accustomed to set-backs took it lightly but the rural members of the Council who were in a majority raised a strong voice in protest. Chhotu Ram requested the Governor to allow him to make his letter public but Hailey did not agree to it.

The new Ministers were Lala Manohar Lal to represent Hindu Mahasabha and Sir Joginder Singh to represent the Sikhs. Malik Feroz Khan Noon was included to win over the Muslim Unionists.

Fazl-i- Hussain resented Chhotu Ram's exclusion but after the inclusion of Feroz he appeared to have become reconciled.

It is significant that Chhotu Ram's claims were ignored repeatedly for the next ten years and Fazl-i-Hussain while he moved from one post to another, he never seriously put up a fight for Chhotu Ram. Every time he appeared to be unhappy and paid high tributes to Chhotu Ram's work for the party but beyond this he did nothing else.

Fazl-i-Hussain's efforts to develop a party system during the Montford Reforms had only a limited success. The Governor still held all reins of power and he could have been forced to part with some of his privileges if Fazl-i-Hussain had shown greater tenacity of purpose. He should have refused to become revenue member and declined to accept any office unless Chhotu Ram was included in the ministry.

Azim Hussain makes the following observations in this connection:

"The tradition of forming non-party ministries once established continued and militated against the development of a vigorous party system. At the next and the last general election under the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms in 1930 the strength of the Unionist Party decreased to thirty-six, of whom only three were non-Muslims, thereby losing much of its non-communal character. The National Progressive Party under the leadership of Raja Narendra Nath gained strength and increased its membership to twenty. The new Governor Sir Geoffrey de Montmorency, appointed Sir Joginder Singh (non-party), Feroz Khan Noon (Unionist) and Dr Gokal Chand Narang (National Reform) as ministers and Sir Sikander Hyat Khan as Revenue Member."<sup>12</sup>

The Unionist Party was in government and in Opposition at the same time. While Feroz was a minister, Chhotu Ram as the real leader of the Unionist Party functioned as leader of Opposition. This contradiction was due to the peculiar system called 'Diarchy'. The exclusion of Chhotu Ram from the ministry in 1926 rankled in Hailey's mind and he wanted to make some amends. He also knew that a man of Chhotu Ram's

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<sup>12</sup> Azim Hussain, *Fazl-i-Hussain — A Political Biography*. p. 163.



determination and tenacity would not let the government rest in peace. He consulted the Viceroy Lord Irwin and thought of a plan to send Chhotu Ram on an assignment outside the Punjab.

He visited Rohtak for the purpose and asked Chhotu Ram to meet him. He praised Chhotu Ram for his work as minister and suggested that the Viceroy would be happy to make him Prime Minister of the Kashmir State.

### **The Kashmir Offer**

Kashmir Prime Ministership has been a great prize and many eminent persons have held the post from time to time. Chhotu Ram, however, was not tempted. He flatly rejected the offer and told the Governor that while he was very grateful to the Viceroy and to him, his mission in life was to work for the backward rural people. He was accustomed to a very simple life and his legal income was enough to meet his few needs.

Hailey was astounded. So was everybody else who heard about it. There was great consternation in Rohtak and many friends of Chhotu Ram felt that he had no sense of worldly values.

In 1927 few could have resisted the offer of Kashmir's Prime Ministership. Lal Chand, still Diwan at Bharatpur suggested to the Maharaja that Chhotu Ram should be brought in his place. This offer also Chhotu Ram declined.

Chhotu Ram was ambitious like any other politician but with a difference. Ministership for him was only a means to an end. But he never felt disheartened. His real aim was to organize the peasantry to a level when it may no longer be possible for any government to ignore it.

The *Jat Gazette*, the weekly, he had launched in 1916 started on a new career, now that Chhotu Ram had time to put in new vigor in its columns.

The Zamindara League field organization of the Unionist Party began to hold regular conferences, attracting large gatherings. Starting from Rohtak the movement spread all over the Punjab. Ludhiana and Lyallpur became two other important centers where the Zamindara League movement was strong.

In the Punjab Council, Chhotu Ram was the most outstanding figure eclipsing the treasury benches, which had many experienced and distinguished personalities. Fazl-i-Hussain no longer a popular Minister had to function from behind, using Chhotu Ram as his spokesman.

Outside the Council Chhotu Ram drew a plan of action which revolved around a five-point programme.

### **Five-Point Programme**

These included a sustained and vigorous campaign against corruption, a similar campaign against the exploitation of the peasantry, in particular and the rural population in general, the chief culprits being the government officials and the money-lenders, the enlightenment of the people to save them from false propaganda of religious fanatics, organization of the rural people through an economic programme based on the community of interests and to ensure full representation of the rural people in the elected bodies and government services.

Chhotu Ram aimed to organize the peasantry' against all officials from the Patwari onward who were indulging in corruption on a large scale and the money-lenders whose practices had ruined the peasants, depriving them of the fruits of their hard labor.

### **Ramble Through the Cheating Bazar**

In order to expose the government officials, Chhotu Ram started a series of articles in his weekly paper under the caption "*Thagi Kai Bazar ki Saar*" Chhotu Ram commanded a style of his own. In Urdu both as a writer and speaker he was unrivalled. These articles which appeared regularly one' after the other created a stir in the smug officialdom. When these articles took the form of a campaign which spared nobody from small district functionaries right upto the Divisional Commissioner, the government felt disturbed.

At first the reaction was one of anger and resentment. "*Thagi kai Bazar ki Saar*" was followed by another series, under the heading "*Bechara Zamindar*" "The Helpless Peasants". Seventeen articles in the second series appeared one after the other in the *Jat Gazette*. The captions of these articles were enough to arouse the suspicions of the bureaucracy. These appeared under the sub-headings; a clarion call; a paper-ridden government, the money-lenders noose; know the enemy; learn to speak out; back-breaking taxes; blandishments of the urban exploiters and so on.

The government could not ignore what looked like a call to rebellion and bureaucracy came into action.

The senior officers got together and even prejudiced the Governor. Secret instructions and orders followed to Deputy Commissioners of Rohtak, Ludhiana, Jullundur, Ferozepur, Lahore and Lyallpur districts. The Zamindara League was not officially outlawed but was treated as such at government level.

At Ludhiana Sardar Mahender Singh of Mohi village – a fearless fighter in the cause of the peasantry and a devoted follower of Chhotu Ram, was arrested. In other districts also cases were started against the workers of the party. At Rohtak, Ch. Tika Ram, a leading lawyer and a senior colleague of Chhotu Ram was arrested on the flimsy excuse that as Vice-Chairman of the Rohtak District Board he had been late in depositing a paltry sum of sixty-five rupees which he had received as auction of a ghat.

Tika Ram was actually sentenced to two years rigorous imprisonment and was acquitted on an appeal to the Commissioner on Chhotu Ram's intervention.

The government wanted Chhotu Ram to give up the various campaigns he had launched simultaneously. They threatened to prosecute him for the various articles. Far from being intimidated, Chhotu Ram brought out the articles in the form of a booklet under the heading '*Bechara Zamindar*'. This booklet is still very popular in the rural areas. The villagers, particularly the peasants, seldom dare to stand up against the officials. They are easily cowed down and intimidated. Even when they are right and functioning within rules and regulations they never dare to speak out.

The unexpected success of the campaign launched by Chhotu Ram and the awakening it brought in Haryana and the Punjab as a whole was something government had never experienced before.

The administrative machinery was tightened up. The local officials from the Patwari, Police Daroga and Naib Tehsildar upward were asked to watch and report the minutest details of Zamindara meetings and conferences.

Chhotu Ram moved from district, to district, hailed by the peasants who gathered in thousands at his conferences. The government looked on helplessly. Chhotu Ram never believed in violating laws but he insisted on his right to educate the peasantry and make them conscious of the force they constituted. Once organized nothing could curb the vast peasantry. That had been Chhotu Ram's conviction. He criticized the bureaucracy and the other exploiters of the peasant, particularly, the money-lenders quoting facts and figures of the incidence of rural indebtedness.

Chhotu Ram as a speaker was irresistible to rural audiences. He was a master of a style, diction and phraseology that went home, based as it was on daily life of the villagers. He preached that the system of taxes was iniquitous. While the urban people, who paid few taxes except income tax (rather limited in those days) every inch of land of the cultivator was taxed. He wanted this to be revised so that the same principle of exemption upto a certain level, as was applicable to income tax, could be applied to land revenue. "How could the villagers compete with the advanced urbanites, when they had no schools of quality?" Chhotu Ram asked.

The peasant was exploited by everybody, the officials, the upper classes, the money-lender, those who were managing *mandis* and markets, where the agricultural produce never fetched due price, the courts where the villager was mercilessly fleeced by all and never received any justice.

The peasantry took heart; saw that they had a man who spoke their language and responded raucously and demonstratively.

Many people inclined towards the left joined the Zamindara League, Chhotu Ram was preaching outright socialism without calling his programme as such. The new recruits, included Sardar Mangal Singh, Ch. Afzal Haq, Mufti Mahmood Naseen, Malik Lal Khan, and Ferozuddin, all enjoying substantial public support in the localities.

The government decided to take counter measures. A Zamindara Sabha was launched under official auspices as a decoy and meetings were organized in reply to Chhotu Ram's conferences. This was not very effective. At Rohtak, a liberal league, was started under the overall control of Ch. Lal Chand who had moved away from Chhotu Ram. A weekly, *Haryana Gazette*, was also started to counteract the *Jat Gazette*.

All these efforts produced nothing to counteract the rising tide of the Kisan movement.

### **Campaign inside the Punjab Council**

During his first term as minister, Chhotu Ram had acquainted himself thoroughly with the minutest details of administration. He came to have such a mastery of statistics that he could quote at random facts concerning every department. As leader of Opposition, his speeches on the Punjab budgets were compared by many with those of Satyamurti and Govind Ballabh Pant in the Central Assembly.

Every year from 1927 to 1935, Chhotu Ram spoke on the Punjab budget with full preparation arming himself with all relevant information and factual position of each department. He ruthlessly exposed the bureaucracy for its reluctance to incur any expenditure in the rural area in contrast to the town and cities. All departments that concerned the villages directly, the Panchayats, Cooperatives, Agriculture, Rural Industries, received only token grants, the bulk of the budget being devoured by the administrative machinery itself. There was no plan whatsoever to develop the rural areas. The ministers incharge of transferred departments were at the mercy of their colleagues on the reserved side. The finance member could throttle any department at will.

Speaking on the budget for 1928, on Feb. 26 Chhotu Ram said<sup>13</sup>:

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<sup>13</sup> Proceeding of the Punjab Council.

"As a representative of the peasantry, I want the government to realize that 9 rupees out of 10 in the government budget come from the pockets of the poor zamindars. I have so far failed to make the government realize that the poor peasant needs some relief. I want to know on what basis the government collects irrigation charges from land irrigated by zamindars through their own wells for the construction of which the government has contributed not a pie. The peasant sinks a well in his field pending his hard-earned money. -When he gets some additional produce through this irrigation, the government promptly comes forward to claim its share. The entire income from this irrigation should go to the zamindar and government has no business whatsoever to ask for any part of it. Yet the justice of the zamindar's case is not accepted and all pleas fall on deaf ears.

We have repeatedly urged on a change in the system of Land Revenue. The same principle that applies to Income Tax should apply here also. The government has dismissed the matter in a bantering way without even considering it. The demand that land upto one acre should be free of land tax has similarly been ignored.

... The money extracted from the peasantry is wasted in constructing palatial houses for the government officials. During the last year government incurred an expenditure of Rs 2 crores and 25 lakhs on this absolutely unnecessary item. The government is ever generous in spending money over the comforts of the officials. (The Financial Commissioner, interrupting, said that this observation is outside the scope of budget discussion). Chhotu Ram retorted; "Every pie that is included in the budget is within the scope of our discussion."

## **The White Paper**

The Congress was never consistent in its policy of non-cooperation with the government. It adopted agitational, populist strategy but it varied from time to time. There was no difference in the Swaraj Party (Legislative wing of the Congress) and such other moderate liberal parties as the Unionist and the Justice parties, when it came to the matter of entry into legislatures. The Swarajists claimed to be working for the removal of the government through its own institutions but ultimately they found it to be futile.

Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram were represented by hostile propaganda in urban press as being the henchmen of the bureaucracy, working for the perpetuation of the foreign rule. Yet there were few in the nationalist ranks who could match them in audacity for taking the bureaucracy to task when it encroached unlawfully in matters that had been constitutionally conceded.

Fazl-i-Hussain always spoke out his mind as Executive Member of the Viceroy's Council whenever a matter of principle arose. He was the only member of the Council always ready with his dissent, whenever the bureaucracy made inroads into matters of public interest.

Chhotu Ram was even more outspoken. He never cared where his barbed onslaughts hit right or left. The target may be the provincial Governor, the Viceroy himself or the Secretary of State at Home.

The British government issued through the Secretary of State, Sir Samuel Hoare the White Paper on the Reforms of 1935 following the Round Table Conferences.

The matter was placed before the Punjab Council by the revenue member Sir Sikander Hyat in the form of a resolution for discussion.

### **One Step Forward – Two Steps Backward**

Speaking on the resolution Chhotu Ram made the following observations:<sup>14</sup>

"I would like first to refer to the question of responsible government to which the government had committed itself. The White Paper is silent on the subject. There is, however, enough indication that there is no likelihood of a system of responsible government in India in the near future.

The Governor-General according to this White Paper will be able to exercise greater powers than what he is able to do at present. These special powers intended to be conferred on the Governor-General make a mockery of the very concept of responsible government. The responsibilities of the Central government have been exaggerated to look like a labyrinth woven by God Indira 'Indira Jal'. In conceding constitutional advancement, the government takes one step forward balanced by two steps backward. The new Reforms will concentrate all powers in the Governor-General, making him an autocrat.

So far the Governor-General could issue only ordinances; under the planned Reforms, he will be able even to make laws.

Such laws will have the same competence as those framed by legislatures.

In the Gandhi-Irwin agreement it was stipulated that the safeguards in the new Constitution will be in the interests of India. The White Paper now says that these will

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<sup>14</sup> Proceedings of the Punjab Council, March 28, 1933.

be in the interests of both India and Great Britain. This shows that the British government is going back on its commitments. The special powers of the Governor-General at the Centre will serve as model for similar powers for the Governors in the provinces. The ministers in the provinces will have only nominal control over the services.

This shows that the constitutional proposals are no more than an empty husk".

### **Corruption in Administration**

The standards of public life before Independence were higher than what we see today. In the administration, corruption was mostly in the lower ranks. When senior officers were caught in cases of bribery or other malpractices, rare as these were – punishment followed swift, if these were established. Both the government and the public were more sensitive in the matter than is the case today.

Even so, corruption did exist. Chhotu Ram had been carrying on a campaign against corruption through his writings in the *Jat Gazette*, Rohtak and the Tribune, Lahore. He never minced words and when he felt sure about a particular case he mentioned persons by name. Sometimes it included senior officers like Deputy Commissioners and Superintendents of Police – generally British in those days.

A resolution on the subject came under discussion in the Punjab Council on July 22, 1933.

Addressing the House, Chhotu Ram said:<sup>15</sup>

"I have been sensing for some time that the officers are losing their contact with the public, for whose benefit they are supposed to be working. The government benches while not opposing the resolution have attempted to show that they themselves are not responsible for corruption."

Continuing, he said:

"I do not accept that the government has no responsibility in the matter of corruption amongst services. The government is as much responsible as the public. If the D.C., S.P., the executive engineer and other district heads of departments do not know what is happening in their departments, then they have neither eyes to see nor ears to hear. Such officers are useless."

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<sup>15</sup> Proceedings of the Punjab Council, July 22, 1933.

Sir Henry Oraik, then Finance Secretary, interrupting wanted to know, if proofs could be supplied.

Chhotu Ram retorted:

"What proofs does the government want? If a D.C. knows that a Naib Tehsildar is living luxuriously with a car, horses etc. is it not clear that he is living beyond his means? If a S.P. knows the Daroga maintains two horses, several buffaloes and lives in style, is any proof needed to establish that he is corrupt? The D.Cs and S.Ps have a responsibility in the matter."

Chhotu Ram kept his campaign against corruption in the government and public in full force, without bothering about people in high position, who were annoyed.

Sir Herbert Emerson then Governor visited Rohtak at this time. Chhotu Ram complained against the poor reputation of the English Deputy Commissioner and charged him with corruption. The Governor was annoyed and wanted Chhotu Ram to provide proof if he felt so sure about it. The Governor's tone was one of irritation and displeasure. Chhotu Ram retorted that 'if the government was not prepared to entertain any complaints about its officers, it was the end of the matter. If, however, they were serious about the removal of corruption, they must themselves be vigilant about it. Regarding the Deputy Commissioner he added in an assertive tone, "he was not complaining without truth."

The Governor after an enquiry through the Chief Secretary found that there was substance in what Chhotu Ram had said. When Chhotu Ram met the Governor next at Lahore, Sir Herbert informed him that the Deputy Commissioner had been suitably warned.

### **The Peasant and the Money-Lender**

There were two main exploiters of the Punjab peasants. The government impoverished him through excessive taxation and the money-lender wove a web around him from which he could never release himself.

In 'The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt', M.L. Darling, a former Financial Commissioner in the pre-partition Punjab, has graphically depicted how a peasant once in debt could never be out of it. No man in the United Punjab put up a more consistent fight against usury than Chhotu Ram.



As leader of the Opposition in the Punjab Council, he sponsored, 'The Punjab Relief of Indebtedness Bill' in 1934. The speech he made on the occasion was one of the most powerful he ever did:<sup>16</sup>

"We are told that this bill is being sponsored under threats, that, in case this is not made Law, there would be bloodshed in the province. But may I inform the hon'ble members that we have said nothing comparable to what a former Financial Commissioner Sir Mynord has said in the course of an article in the famous periodical, 'Foreign Affairs.'

Sir John Mynord had , described the malpractices of the Punjab money-lenders in the London based 'Foreign Affairs', how the excessive decrees obtained from courts and attachment proceedings that followed, made the peasants desperate. When the peasants lost everything to the money-lenders, they retaliated by murdering their exploiters, in a reckless bid by taking the law in their own hands."

The Financial Commissioner wrote:

"He had warned that unless the exploitation of the peasantry at the hands of money-lenders was stopped there would be no law and order in the Punjab."

Chhotu Ram narrated case after case in which the peasant had lost everything he possessed, the house, the grains, cattle, even the few clothes the family had, and above all land, the only source of his livelihood.

"A short while ago Pandit Nanak Chand had given details of a case in which the money-lender against a loan of Rs 2,300 had obtained a decree of Rs 7,000" Chhotu Ram continued: "I have another case of 1882 in my knowledge when for a loan of Rs 500 a zamindar mortgaged his 3000 kanal land to a money-lender. Rs 300 was to carry an interest of 25 percent and the balance of Rs 200 accounted for the income from the mortgaged land," he explained. "The mortgager died before he could get the land released. His successor some two years ago approached the court. The court decided that the total amount payable by this time was Rs 2 lakhs and 10,000. The land could be released only after this payment. The High Court endorsed the decision of the lower court. But how can we blame the courts? They are administering the law as it exists at present. The point is, can we allow such laws to remain on the statute book?" Chhotu Ram declared thumping the desk before him. "If the hon'ble members opposite desire that such practices continue, they should themselves take responsibility for the safety of the money-lenders" the champion of the harassed peasantry, added, pointing his finger at the supporters of the money-lenders.

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<sup>16</sup> Report of Proceedings of the Punjab Council, 1934.

Quoting statistics on the subject, Chhotu Ram said that out of a population of 2 crores and 35 lakhs in the Punjab, about 2 crores and 12 lakhs were under debt. The number of money-lenders including those who were agriculturists was 40,000. Of these, 19,000 only were non-agriculturists. "It was this latter category that my friends were keen to protect." "It was certain they prepared to sacrifice over 2 crore people for a number of people who are admittedly indulging in worst kind of usury," he added. "Against the burden of land-revenue which came to Rs 3 crores, the interest on money-lenders debt was ten times, i.e. Rs 30 crores. When the peasant is unable to pay even the land-revenue, how can he bear this tremendous burden, which has made him a destitute."

Warming up towards the end of a long speech, he said in peroration:

"Suppose you succeed in obstructing this legislation, the money-lenders would continue obtaining decrees. What would be the value of such decrees? If some of you want to purchase such decrees, these could be obtained cheaply. It is one thing to obtain a court decree, another to enforce it. If the debtors find that these decrees fraudulently obtained amount to the death of themselves and their families, they may adopt a course which is most dreadful even to conceive. If your advice to the money-lenders is to persist in the course that may endanger their lives, our advice to the peasants will be that in case they have no alternative except to die, then they should die in a manner which may not be fruitless."

### **The Simon Commission**

Chhotu Ram played a very meaningful role during the period from 1926-36 when he was leader of the Opposition.

This period is full of important happenings and developments both in the Punjab and the country.

The all-white Simon Commission appointed by the British government to examine the question of further constitutional changes toured India during 1927. The Commission was unpopular because of the exclusion of Indians. Not only the Congress but also moderate constitutionalists criticized its composition. The Commission during its tours in India was boycotted by the Congress and other parties in spite of the government efforts to obtain support of conservative and loyalist elements.

In the Punjab, a Committee consisting of Sir Sikander Hyat, Ch. Chhotu Ram, Ch. Zaffarulla Khan, Mr. O.N. Roberts, Raja Narender Nath, Dr Gokal Chand Narang and Sir Joginder Singh was constituted to prepare a report, presenting the Punjab point of view regarding the constitutional changes.

Chhotu Rain persuaded all the Muslim members of the Committee to agree to a formula according to which the Punjab Muslims would accept representation of 51 percent against their population of 57 percent in the Punjab Legislature to be formed under the new reforms.

The reservation of seats was to continue for another 10 years but after that there would be no reservation of seats for any community. The problem in the Punjab was that although the Muslims were in a majority in the population, this majority was not reflected in the electoral strength because of the backwardness of the community. The Unionist Party under the guidance of Sir Fazl-i-Hussain wanted to arrive at a settlement with the Hindus and the Sikhs so that under the proposed Provincial Autonomy the British Governor would not be able to follow the policy of 'Divide and Rule', as was successfully done during Diarchy.

The Punjab Hindus and Sikhs led by Raja Narender Nath and Dr Gokal Chand looked at the matter differently. They expected better terms from the British government as a tit for tat for the increased Muslim representation in Hindu majority provinces.

The Committee had also to consider whether it would be advisable to separate the Ambala Division from the Punjab so that the remaining Hindus and the Sikhs could be given greater weightage on the analogy of provinces where Muslims were a small minority.

The Punjab and Bengal presented the most ticklish aspect of the communal problem and as the Round Table Conference and the Communal Award of the British Prime Minister failed to tackle this vexed problem, it became the single most important cause of the partition of India.

Chhotu Ram was authorized by the Muslim members of the Committee to decide about the separation of the Ambala Division. From a narrow point of view Chhotu Ram should have been tempted to recommend the separation of the Ambala Division from the Punjab. This would have lent strength to the formation of a separate Delhi province where the Hindu agriculturists would have been in a more comfortable position. Chhotu Ram, however, resisted the temptation on national grounds as he was opposed to all separatist tendencies. He rejected the idea, of separation.

These two aspects of the Punjab communal problem later came before the Round Table Conference. Once again, a proposal came for consideration of the separation of Ambala Division from the Punjab to be incorporated in the Greater Delhi Province. The idea was dropped as the Punjab Hindus and Sikhs felt scared as it would have further reduced the percentage of the minorities in the Punjab. The All Parties Conference and the Nehru Report following it had settled most of the points to the satisfaction of all but its refusal to guarantee statutory majority to the Muslims in the Punjab and Bengal where

they were in a majority in the population was the main cause of Mr. Jinnah's revolt against the Congress.

At the Round Table Conference the Punjab delegation representing the minorities refused to agree even to the 51 percent representation of the Muslims which was 66 percent short of their population ratio.

A very favorable opportunity had occurred during the second session of the Round Table when the Congress had been represented by Mahatma Gandhi. The Muslim delegation led by Aga Khan with M.A. Jinnah and Sir Mohammad Shafi as two of its prominent members had at one stage agreed to forego separate electorate provided the Muslims were conceded their demands particularly in Bengal and the Punjab. The minority representatives from these two provinces, refused to concede these demands.

The British politicians always succeeded in dividing the two main communities because they had patronage in their hands which helped in tempting the one community or the other.

The Punjab Hindus and Sikhs got much less in Ramsay MacDonald's award than what Chhotu Ram had persuaded his Muslim colleagues to concede to the minorities. The injustice to the Hindus in Bengal was even more glaring. Chhotu Ram openly criticized the communal award and wrote to Sir Fazl-i-Hussain that it was unfair to the minorities in Punjab and Bengal.

Sir Fazl-i-Hussain wrote back assuring Chhotu Ram that he would have the award amended provided Raja Narendra Nath at the Punjab level and Pt. Malviya at All-India level made suggestions for consideration. An All-India Conference held at Allahabad during these days, however, nullified the efforts of Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram to get justice done to the Punjab and Bengal minorities.

The urban Hindus' game was to create a clash between the Sikhs and the Muslims and exploit the situation for their own benefit.

### **Saheed Ganj Mosque Dispute**

A serious conflict developed between the Muslims and the Sikhs over what is known as Saheed Ganj case.

Both the communities claimed the premises. During Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule the place was in the possession of Sikhs. Many Sikhs were slaughtered at this place during the reign of Furrukshiar — one of the later Mughals. The Sikhs thus had a double claim to Saheed Ganj which in fact was a Gurudwara. The courts decided in favor of the Sikhs but the Muslims started an agitation and tried to occupy the place by force. The

government had to support the findings of the court and there was shooting by the police to maintain law and order. The Muslims, however, were worked up emotionally and the agitation continued.

It did not concern Chhotu Ram as such but he tried to get the matter settled peacefully through Fazl-i-Hussain. Chhotu Ram also interceded through several other leading Muslim leaders and finally it was agreed that the matter may be pursued legally.

### **Chhotu Ram Again Excluded From Ministry**

Sir Malcolm Hailey was succeeded by Sir Geoffrey-de-Montmorency as Governor in 1929. As Fazl-i-Hussain was appointed to the Viceroy's Council, there was no outstanding Muslim leader left in the Punjab. The party had also developed serious internal squabbles due to rivalry between Feroz Khan Noon and Ch. Shab-ud-din. Fazl-i-Hussain desired the inclusion of Chhotu Ram and Harbaksh Singh in addition to Feroz but the internal quarrels of the Unionist Party, helped the Governor to form a ministry on communal considerations.

Fazl-i-Hussain wrote in his diary (October 14, 1930);

"News from Lahore hopeful. Feroz will be reappointed and this is highly satisfactory. Manohar Lal will be ousted by Gokal Chand but really Chhotu Ram should have been appointed. Governor is caring more for peace than principle – the policy was initiated by Hailey and retarded the development of parties in the province."

In separate letters to Chhotu Ram and Harbaksh Singh, (October 14, 1930) Fazl-i-Hussain, expressed his feelings:

"This personal squabble" he wrote to Chhotu Ram, "has hurt me more than anything else. My personal views on the subject are, as you know, quite strong. I would prefer a Ministry of two, both ministers being non-Muslim – as long as they belong to the Unionist Party."

To Harbaksh Singh he wrote the same day:

"It has been my ambition and in fact my only ambition in life to see established in the Punjab a school of thought which proceeds on principles, vital principles, and not creeds and I had aspired to bring together men, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, all subscribing to one political creed wherein, whenever there was an office of responsibility and trust the preponderating majority of Muslims would show their confidence and faith in their non-Muslim colleagues by putting their

principles before themselves. Personally, I would have preferred a Ministry of two only and both non-Muslims, provided it came from the party."

There is no doubt, Fazl-i-Hussain was genuinely non-communal and sincere in his desire to see a secular party rule the Punjab.

After Fazl-i-Hussain there was no leader of his caliber in the Punjab. Although the Unionist Party continued to function in the Punjab, for nearly a decade after Fazl-i-Hussain his successors, Sikander Hyat and Khizar Hyat were basically provincial leaders and unable to influence Muslim politics outside the Punjab.

### **Chhotu Ram Develops A Mass Base ( 1930 - 35 )**

The years 1930-35 are important for the development of Chhotu Ram as a leader of the masses. In the Punjab, apart from Lala Lajpat Rai, who was a front-rank national leader, there was no other person in the province who attracted crowds to the extent he did.

There were some urban leaders amongst all the communities who were popular amongst the people but they had no contacts in the villages, where Chhotu Ram was hailed as the savior of the peasantry. As leader of Opposition he sponsored what has come to be known as agrarian laws. These included in addition to the measures concerning Debt Relief a series of other acts to protect the peasantry. The strong opposition these enactments aroused in the urban sections brought the rural population strongly under Chhotu Ram's influence — who had now acquired a new image.

The urban elite had a strong press which they used to defame Chhotu Ram charging him with all the sins in the calendar. The more urban press denounced Chhotu Ram, the more popular he became in the rural areas. The Unionist Party had hardly any newspaper of its own. Chhotu Ram's own Rohtak weekly was a flea-bite compared to the widely circulated urban Hindu productions, the Pratap, the Milap and half a dozen other dailies. The Tribune was not communal but not particularly disposed towards Chhotu Ram although it readily published all communications from him.

The Muslims had also a few well circulated Urdu dailies, like the *Zamindar* and the *Inquilab*, who apart from the Muslim point of view also supported the Unionists whenever it suited them.

*The Civil and Military Gazette*, an important daily in those days tried to keep a balance between the various communities — its main approach being pro-British. Chhotu Ram was a born journalist and commanded a powerful and facile pen. What he had picked up during his apprenticeship at Kalakankar in editing the Hindustan of Raja Ram Pal Singh, he used with devastating effect to hold his own against the powerful and highly equipped urban politicians.

The Punjab like the rest of the country was caught in the economic depression which had started in 1931. It was a world phenomenon and had thrown England off the Gold standard. It brought the fall of the Labour government and its replacement by a National Coalition government. In America, President Roosevelt started the policy known as New Deal to cope with the crisis.

The British bureaucracy in India was never sensitive to the sufferings of the common people. In the Punjab the Unionist Party had a majority in the Council but the ministry did not reflect what was passing in the minds of the masses in the rural or urban areas. While all classes suffered during the depression which continued for many years, the peasantry was most hard hit. Wheat, the chief produce of the province was selling at 2 rupees a maund, with the result that the peasantry was unable to pay even the land revenue — a most compulsive demand on its income.

The exploitation of the money-lenders continued unabated producing a climate of restlessness about which Chhotu Ram had warned the government and the urban supporters of the money-lenders in his opening speech, while introducing the Debt Relief Act.

### **Need for Radical Retrenchment**

A series of articles were published in the *Tribune* under the caption "Need for Radical Retrenchment." The writer was Chhotu Ram.

The articles were such a masterly exposition of the malaise created by the economic and social policies of the government that remedial measures became essential.

### **Air of New Expectancy**

The Round Table Conference was rounded off by Ramsay MacDonald's Communal Award of 1932. We have already mentioned that this award was most unfair to the minorities in the Punjab and Chhotu Ram had raised his powerful voice against it although his protest effected the Muslim interests who formed an overwhelming majority in the Unionist Party.

### **Fazl-i-Hussain and the Act of 1935**

Fazl-i-Hussain was in the Viceroy's Executive Council from 1930-35 — a most crucial period — when important political developments took place, finally bringing the Act of 1935 on the Statute Book.

During these five years, although Fazl-i-Hussain kept himself in touch with the Punjab he was mostly occupied in pulling strings to ensure full safeguards for the Muslims in the new constitutional set-up.

Fazl-i-Hussain cleverly manipulated things from his vantage position at the Viceroy's Council and used all the means at his disposal including the Viceroy and the bureaucracy to have conceded most of the demands of the Muslims in the Act of 1935.

He followed the proceedings of the Round Table Conference from day-to-day keeping himself in close touch with the Aga Khan, leader of the Muslim delegation.

Finding the going hard for the Muslims at the first Round Table Conference Fazl-i-Hussain got disturbed and noted the following in his diary (November 15, 1930):

"Labour Government is proposing to abdicate British responsibility in India, i.e., complete provincial autonomy, and responsibility at the centre in all except the army, industry and political department and without any settlement of the communal issue as to the constitution of the Legislatures. Horrible; the Simon Report and the Government of India Dispatch in the waste paper basket. Parliamentary proposals gone to the dogs."

The opening session of the conference was more favorable to the Hindus and they therefore took a more uncompromising view regarding the Muslim demands. The leading members of the Muslim delegation were negotiating with the Hindus and the Sikhs, accepting joint-electorate on certain conditions. Fazl-i-Hussain again noted in his diary (December 3, 1930):

"News room Round Table Conference indicates that Labour Government made attempts to make Muslims agree to some sort of joint electorate. Shafi Bhopal, Sultan Ahmad, Fazl-ulhaq, Hidayutullah were ready for the game but others were against it. Mohammad Ali was also helping and no doubt Jinnah too, though himself remaining in the background. I had to take strong action and the situation has just been saved. We must keep our present weightage in six provinces and centre and separate electorates and have majority in Punjab and Bengal through separate electorate. Let Hindus non-cooperate and let us build up sufficient strength during the next 10 years."

But for the manipulations of Fazl-i-Hussain through the Viceroy and the Secretary of State and by his control of Aga Khan the leader of the Muslim delegation, the proposal of joint-electorate favored by both Mr. Jinnah and Sir Mohammad Shafi would in all likelihood have gone through.



The Aga Khan at the instance of Fazl-i-Hussain contradicted both Jinnah and Shafi and the proposal fell through.

The role of Fazl-i-Hussain at the Round Table Conference where he had managed to put several of his spokesmen has been severely criticized.

F.W. Wilson in his book *The Indian Chaos* has made the following observations

"Sir Fazl-i-Hussain had a very clear understanding with Civil Service elements in the Government of India. It was generally supposed that this understanding comprised support of the Civil Service point of view, in return for a support of Muslim claims."

"... Sir Fazli's plan has the merit and advantage of simplicity. He does not wish to see any reforms until he has so organized his community that they will be strong enough to insist upon their own terms."

Fazl-i-Hussain felt so strongly about safeguards for the Muslims that he was prepared to have the Reforms postponed unless these were embodied in full in the new Constitution. He had prepared the ground to ensure the failure of Congress plans for joint electorate even before Gandhi went to the Round Table Conference. "A most shameful conspiracy to undermine the Congress and the political advancement of India was hatched by the British bureaucrats with the help of some Indian princes and some Muslim reactionaries, including Sir Fazl-i-Hussain, an ex-Congress man, who has left the Congress for a handful of silver and a ribbon to stick to his coat," is the comment of another observer of the contemporary Indian scene.<sup>17</sup> The observer also states:

"He held his place in the official circles simply because of his anti-national views. At the eleventh hour. Sir Fazl-i-Hussain then a member of the Viceroy's Council openly stepped in and wrecked the pourparler, which had been going on first at Bhopal and finally at Simla in May 1931. He was actively assisted by tripartite conspirators namely the suborned Muslims, reactionary bureaucrats and some princes."

After the third Round Table Conference, Fazl-i-Hussain kept himself in close touch with both the Muslim League and the Muslim Conference so that the Communal Award which was favorable to the Muslims was not either rejected or modified due to any further developments.

The stages of the Consultative Committee, the White Paper and the Joint Select Committee were still ahead.

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<sup>17</sup> Kailash Chandra, *The Tragedy of Jinnah*, 1941; pp 35-6.

These efforts of Fazl-i-Hussain eventually helped in obtaining recognition of the Muslim claims from the Congress also.

In its Manifesto issued in 1934, the Congress had to take a non-committal position regarding the Award.

"It (the Award) is anti-national but the Congress cannot refuse to take into account the attitude of the Mussalmans in general who seem to want the Award, nor can the Congress accept it as the Hindus and the Sikhs reject it."

The new Constitution (1935) conceded most of the demands of the Muslims which Fazl-i-Hussain had been working from 1929 onward.

Both N.W.F.P. and Sindh became separate provinces, Muslim share in the services was fixed at 25 percent, the residuary powers were vested not in the centre but the Governor-General, separate electorate stayed and the Muslims got statutory majority in the Punjab.

### **The Reorganization of the Unionist Party**

We have dealt at length with the part Fazl-i-Hussain played in securing advantages for the Muslims in general and the Punjab Muslims in particular which duly found place in the Act of 1935. Chhotu Ram could not have the same approach as Fazl-i-Hussain in the matter of the constitutional changes. We have noted that he was unhappy with the Communal Award, where as Fazl-i-Hussain had been working for it.

As the later events will show Chhotu Ram was a strong nationalist and a unionist in the true sense of the term. In the absence of Fazl-i-Hussain from the Punjab it was Chhotu Ram who kept the Unionist Party intact. "The only person who held aloft the banner of the Unionist Party in the absence of Fazl-i-Hussain was Chhotu Ram, the leader of the party since 1926."<sup>18</sup>

Fazl-i-Hussain presumably due to the difficulty he found in adjusting the claims of his numerous power-hungry Muslim followers was not always able to obtain due recognition for Chhotu Ram for his services to the Unionist cause often by personal sacrifices, but he fully knew the worth of his contribution. Fazli wrote in his diary (October 19, 1935):

"Saw Chhotu Ram. He is hard-working, intelligent and clear-headed, distinctly and considerably above the average. If my health permits my forming Ministry

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<sup>18</sup> Azim Hussain ...op. cit p. 278.

under the Reforms, it will not be without Chhotu Ram. We had a very satisfactory talk. I wish Feroz were possessed of even half the qualifications which distinguished Chhotu Ram from others."

Again, speaking at the inauguration of the Unionist Party headquarters, he said:

"Ch, Chhotu Ram did excellent work as Minister, his work as leader of the Unionist Party is unsurpassed by any leader of a party in any of the provincial legislatures. The ability, the industry, the enthusiasm, the perseverance, the persistence the courage and the independence, all of which he possesses in pre-eminent degree have won him the gratitude of the party and of every member of the party."

### **Fazl-i-Hussain and Sir Sikander**

After his return from Delhi in April 1935 and before he agreed to reorganize the Unionist Party to fight elections under the Reforms of 1935, there was a conspiracy between some of Sikander's friends both Muslims and Hindus to oust Fazl-i-Hussain so that Sikander could become Prime Minister after the elections.

Sir Sikander's role in Punjab politics was only next to Fazl-i-Hussain's so far as the Muslims were concerned.

We may now take a measure of Sikander Hyat as he dominated the scene from 1937 onward till his sudden demise in 1942.

Sikander Hyat had a truly romantic career. He belonged to the Cambalpore district, the family having come into prominence only recently. One of his ancestors is said to have saved the life of General Nicholson at the siege of Kashmiri Gate at Delhi during the Mutiny. For this the British felt indebted and recognized it by generous awards.

Sikander himself later served in the army and rose to an officer's rank. In the matter of civil employment, the story goes that when he appeared before the then Financial Commissioner for a Naib-Tehsildar's job, he was rejected outright.

Later he came to hold high offices one after the other. He entered the Punjab Council under Mont-Ford Reforms. In 1929, he became revenue member during a temporary vacancy caused by Fazl-i-Hussain's going to Delhi as executive councilor.

Shortly after this appointment Fazl-i-Hussain wrote in his diary (September 24, 1930):

"Sikander Hyat and I motored to Kalka. We had a chat about many things about the Punjab Muslims in various departments. He seems to have been poorly lately

and wonders if he will be able to work hard, because he is not well equipped and so has to work harder."

He did not pursue the same policies as Fazl-i-Hussain. In 1932 he moved a resolution in the Council to provide for a second chamber which Fazl-i-Hussain got defeated through Chhotu Ram. In 1932 Sikander officiated as Governor during the illness of Montmorency.

The pro-British streak in Sikander was strong. While on leave in England, he gave a statement to the press:

"I have the fullest confidence as to the effective working of the administrative machine under the Reforms. Both as a member of the government and as acting Governor, I received the fullest cooperation from the ICS, the Police and other services.

In the Punjab all the communities repose confidence in the British officers of Government and we hope that under the new Constitution there will be a substantial leavings of British element in the services."

Fazl-i-Hussain strongly criticized him for this and conveyed to him, his reaction. He also wrote to Sir Zaffarulla-Khan:

"A great deal of publicity was given to Sikander's statement about the White Paper and the last part of it ... has naturally aroused disappointment in certain quarters and indignation in others and some papers have commented that proposals as to his permanent appointment as Governor are being matured in London."

After his return he was appointed Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank on a salary of Rs 5,500 per month. After Sir Fazl-i-Hussain's death, he resigned this post and resumed charge of the Unionist Party in the Punjab.

### **Sir Fazl-i-Hussain on Punjab Politics**

Sir Fazli's plans for the Punjab under provincial autonomy aimed at securing cooperation of all the communities to make the experiment a success. He was convinced that the Muslims alone could not work the reforms successfully by themselves.

He sketched out his ideas anonymously in a pamphlet, *Punjab Politics* which was widely circulated and much talked about in those days.

"Irrespective of caste, class and creed, the three communities in the Punjab should constitute themselves in one party on the basis of a definitely liberal and socialistic programme of work and work for the uplift of the Indian masses pushing forward the cause of the backward people and the backward areas, provision of better facilities for the masses in all departments of government activities."

### **Fazl-i-Hussain and Jinnah**

Fazl-i-Hussain after safeguarding the position of the Muslims both in the Punjab and the country as a whole through the Act of 1935, wanted to work provincial autonomy through non-communal parties. Jinnah on the other hand had travelled a long way from his days when he was considered Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity.

To fight elections under the new Act, Jinnah established a Central Parliamentary Board of the Muslim League and approached Fazl-i-Hussain to join it. He also tried to persuade Fazli to preside over the League session in 1936, which the latter declined.

Fazl-i-Hussain was strongly opposed to Jinnah's move on various grounds. He thought Provincial Autonomy needed decentralization rather than centralization of powers which Jinnah was attempting to do. In the Punjab the Muslim majority being only nominal, support of other communities was indispensable. Fazli wrote to Sir Sikander (May 6, 1936): "Jinnah's move in establishing a Central Parliamentary Board was a wrong move, detrimental to Indian Muslim interests." Sikander in his reply dated May 29, said, "His (Jinnah's) activities ... are contrary to his professions ... We cannot, possibly allow Provincial Autonomy to be tampered with in any sphere and by anybody."

Jinnah visited Lahore all the same and after failing to convert Fazli told Raja Narendra Nath, "Fazli thinks he carries the Punjab in his pocket. Raja Sahib, I am going to smash Fazli." "You must be a very strong man then", was the Raja's sarcastic comment.

A week before his death in July, 1936, Fazl-i-Hussain was able to say:

"Jinnah's Central Parliamentary Board is finished and this was to be expected."

### **Fazl-i-Hussain and Dr Mohammad Iqbal**

Dr (Sir) Mohammad Iqbal the poet-philosopher is one of the most celebrated names in the Muslim world.

His ancestors were Kashmiri Pandits of Sapru sub-group and in his early career he wrote poems that stirred nationalist India. The demarcation of urban and rural was less

marked amongst the Muslims than was the case amongst the Hindus and the Sikhs in the Punjab. Fazl-i-Hussain, in particular, tried to promote the interests of several educated urban Muslims and some of them were prominent members of the Unionist Party.

Fazli tried to help Iqbal several times but somehow nothing very important came out of it. It was mainly the fault of Dr Iqbal himself for he had no patience essential for success in politics and whenever something was about to mature, it failed because of Iqbal indulging at that precise moment in untimely speech or action making Fazl-i-Hussain's effort still-born.

Iqbal never believed in Fazl-i-Hussain's politics and towards the end of his career, he was transformed from a nationalist into a Pan-Islamic communalist.

Iqbal is credited to be the author of a scheme for a separate state of the Muslims in North-West India, which inspired later the whole idea of Pakistan.

In 1935, after he failed to secure any important position in political life, Iqbal launched an attack on Fazl-i-Hussain.

Speaking at the anniversary of Anjuman-i-Himayati Islam, Dr Iqbal said:

"It is really unfortunate that this urban-rural question should have received the support of Sir Fazl-i-Hussain, who obtained power in the first instance not as a rural leader but as a Muslim leader of the Province, but unfortunately clung to his power by accentuating rural-urban differences".

Dr Iqbal, as a poet inspired the educated people all over India, more particularly in Northern India and even when he started actively participating in politics for which he had no aptitude, he remained a great influence.

Chhotu Ram had made a scholarly study of the poet but it was not Iqbal's politics but his philosophy that attracted him. This will be dealt with later in detail at an appropriate place.

### **Urban Muslim Discontentment**

The urban Muslims better educated than their rural counterparts became dissatisfied with the Unionist Party and Fazl-i-Hussain, when they saw inferior Muslims from feudal classes rising high in politics to their exclusion.

This dissatisfaction was of the same nature as amongst the Urban Hindus and Sikhs though not of the same intensity as many urban Muslims still managed to work their way up, often through the Unionist Party itself.

Fazl-i-Hussain though not hostile to urban Muslims generally preferred rural Muslims increasingly as with spread of education many suitable persons were available for appointments in administration and also qualified for taking up assignments in political life.

### **Fazli-Sikander Rivalry**

There was no comparison (between Fazli-Hussain and Sir Sikander Hyat but when the Unionist Party was being reorganized some friends of the latter both amongst the Muslims and the Hindus thought it opportune to project him as a more suitable leader to work the Reforms. Ahmad Yar Khan Daultana closely allied to Sikander was the main person who along with Raja Narendra Nath worked for this alternative. Sir Fazl-i-Hussain knew that he was too weak physically to stand the strain and had actually suggested to Sir Sikander to take over but the latter while demonstrating great loyalty to his leader was waiting to create a climate when it might appear that he had come forward reluctantly, after sacrificing a well paid job.

In reply to a letter from Fazli, Sikander wrote:

"Unless you are prepared to take the lead and get into harness again, I am afraid the Muslims will go under forever, from the very start. If you come forward, I can assure you once again that there will be no dearth of reliable and efficient lieutenants to assist you in your work" (letter dated September 23, 1935).

But Ahmad Yar and Mir Maqbool (Sikander's brother-in-law) continued to spread the idea that Sikander would be a more suitable person to lead the Punjab under the Reforms.

This was expressed through The Daily Herald, Lahore which wrote in its issue dated January 27, 1936:

"Hindus and Sikhs have suffered so much in recent years, owing to his pro-Muslim policy that to be known as a friend of Sir Fazl-i-Hussain is a matter of discredit. If he has no personal ambition for the Chief Ministership and only wants his province to prosper, he will do well to leave the field clear for the time being to Sir Sikander Hyat, Nawab Muzaffar Khan, Sir Shahabuddin, Ahmad Yar Khan Daultana, Sardar Habbibullah and the Ahrars to bridge the gulf that separates the Muslims and the non-Muslim ... Hindu and Sikh leaders can be found, more easily to work in cooperation with them."

The *Tribune* commented in its issue dated April 5, 1936:

"Sir Sikander expressed his readiness to his non- Muslim friends to take a leading part in the formation of the future provincial cabinet."

The paper added that non-Muslims were offering their support to Sir Sikander in return for, "a less aggressively communal policy than that of Sir Fazl-i-Hussain."

Fazl-i-Hussain asked Sikander to clarify. In reply, he confessed that he had been negotiating with Raja Narender Nath but he would give him full support and take up any office as his lieutenant.

With this, things were at least patched up, for the time being. But the atmosphere remained surcharged with suspicion. *The Civil and Military Gazette* wrote on June 23, 1936, regarding further talks between Sikander and Raja Narender Nath:

"Centered around the formation of a new political party which will rally the various interests in the province and that would keep in check the communal activities of certain Muslim leaders and work wholeheartedly for the good of the province."

Sikander Hyat explained it away as a social meeting. When Fazl-i-Hussain threatened to bring the whole issue for discussion before the Unionist Party both Ahmad Yar Khan Daultana and Sir Sikander hastened to assure Fazli that there were no two policies. Daultana in his letter dated July 2, 1936, informed Fazl-i-Hussain that Sikander would do whatever he ordered him to do and there would be no misunderstandings in future.

Fazl-i-Hussain also started talks with Hindu Mahasabha leaders. He met apart from Raja Narender Nath, Bhai Parmanand and Prof Gulshan Rai.

Raja Narender Nath declared the object of the Hindu Party to be the abolition of<sup>19</sup>:

- 1 . Communal electorates;
2. Communal representation in services;
3. Communal representation in local government bodies;
4. The discriminative provisions of the Land Alienation Act;

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<sup>19</sup> Azim Hussain, *Fazl-i-Hussain — a Political Biography*, p. 355.



## 5. The discriminative provisions of the indebtedness legislation.

This really amounted to a demand for undoing all that the Unionist Party had achieved so far. The talks with the other two Hindu leaders were no more successful.

The strategy of the Hindu Mahasabha was to start negotiations with both Fazli and Sikander and back the one who accommodated them better. These talks could not have succeeded because the problem was not communal but economic.

The rural people amongst all communities were backward but the advanced classes (urban Hindus in the case of the Punjab) were resisting by all possible means any encroachments on what so far had been their special preserve.

Fazl-i-Hussain summed up the problem as follows:

"I resent this campaign [Hindu campaign against him] because it has been widening the gulf between the communities and thus retarding the political progress of the province, and perhaps of the country as a whole. The Muslims might have been helped sympathetically and peacefully to come into their own, which they were bound to do in any case ... I also resent this so-called Hindu campaign because it is now directed in effect, against the backward section of the Hindu community itself. The fight against me on communal grounds is only a trick, a tactical method of deceiving the world. The fight is now really against Ch. Chhotu Ram as representing the revolt of the Hindu masses against the dominance of a handful of self-seekers. The authors of the campaign are really trying to suppress him and the cause which he represents, but their efforts are foredoomed to failure."<sup>20</sup>

If Fazl-i-Hussain had come to a settlement with Raja Narendra Nath on terms we have mentioned earlier, it would have amounted to the repudiation of Chhotu Ram. It was the legislation sponsored by him and carried in the Punjab Council in the teeth of opposition of the exploiting classes that the Hindu Mahasabha leaders wanted to undo. This was the price they sought for cooperation. That also explained why Sir Sikander Hyat was so much more acceptable to them than Fazl-i-Hussain as the Prime Minister under the new reforms as through him they hoped to realize at least some, if not all, of their objectives. Sikander was also more acceptable to the bureaucracy and the services, being more pliant to their views.

## The Unionist Party and the Congress

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in *Mian Fazl-i-Hussain* by Syed Nur Ahmad p. 82.

The Unionist Party under the leadership of Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram followed virtually the same programme which the Congress would have done if it had opted to work the Reforms.

The Congress in its right wing had several prominent leaders who had so much in common with these two leaders. Chhotu Ram had felt drawn to Sardar Patel, like him a peasant leader and throughout, their relations remained very cordial. Fazl-i-Hussain similarly had in Bhullabhai Desai an akin spirit. He held talks with him after the breakdown of negotiations with Mahasabha leaders. Through his friend Raizada Hansraj, Fazli also opened negotiations with the Punjab Congress leaders:

In a letter to his son Azim, then in England, he explained his object in having these negotiations:

"As to my being in the Congress, I was in the Congress in 1917-19. When the Congress started non-cooperation, I left the Congress. Since then I have been outside the Congress, because of its extremist policy. Now that the Congress has practically abandoned that policy and is reverting to the position it occupied when I was in it, naturally I felt it necessary to ask the Congress to make common cause, with us, the Unionists in the Punjab. I do not mind being said that I have joined the Congress provided thereby it is meant that it is the Congress of the pre-non-cooperation days."<sup>21</sup>

Prof Gulshan Rai, prominent Hindu Mahasabha leader and a lifelong opponent wrote after Fazli's death:

"Those who came in close 'contact with him knew that he would have followed a nationalist policy in the future Punjab. He would have bridged the gulf between the warring communities in the province."<sup>22</sup>

He added:

"Some of us who have been carefully watching the progress of the events during the last two years, know that at one time, the late Mian Fazl-i-Hussain was negotiating an alliance with the Congress Party."

## **The Unionist Party**

Amidst controversies, conspiracies and negotiations, the reorganization of the Unionist Party, proceeded apace, both Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram taking active interest.

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<sup>21</sup> Letter, dated April 23, 1936.

<sup>22</sup> The *Tribune*, dated December 2, 1937.

The programme was indicated in the pamphlet, *Punjab Politics* to which we have referred earlier. Fazli wrote to his son (March 19, 1936):

"This pamphlet has created a great stir, and the Press, in particular in the Punjab, is very active about it, very strong opposition in some quarters, fairly general appreciation of the facts and fiction and almost universal agreement with the programme for the future outlined therein."

A central office of the party was set up at Lahore, with Fazl-i- Hussain as leader, Chhotu Ram as deputy leader and Ahmad Yar Khan Daultana as Organizing and Office Secretary.

Funds totaling Rs 50,000 were raised to start with, both Fazli and Chhotu Ram contributing Rs 3000 each.

Chhotu Ram, the only mass orator in the party, started a whirlwind tour of the province. He attracted huge gatherings. Election strategy was finalized. Fazl-i-Hussain personally intervened to remove differences between Chhotu Ram and Lal Chand – the two had not been working in harmony for some time. Lal Chand agreed to withdraw from the provincial politics on the understanding that he would be helped to become the first non-official chairman of Rohtak District Board.

Fazl-i-Hussain was possessed of a canny faculty of making forecast of events which he often anticipated correctly. When he was a member of the Punjab University Senate, he used to prepare a draft of the proceedings before hand. It was surprising how accurately he assessed men and matters.

He made a forecast of the coming Punjab Assembly elections. He anticipated the Unionist support of 80 Muslims, 15 rural Hindus (Chhotu Ram group), 15 Sikhs and 4 Landholders, the Opposition to consist of 10 Muslims (Ahrars and Urbanites) 5 Congress, 15 Sikhs and 21 urban Hindus. He shot very near the target. The elections were yet ahead by a year. The creed of the Unionist Party was defined anew in clearer terms as:

1. Attainment of Dominion Status by all constitutional means at as early a date as practicable;
2. The securing of an honorable status for Indians overseas;
3. The establishment in the province of provincial autonomy de facto;

4. The acceptance of the community of economic interests as the true basis of political parties, irrespective of caste, creed or residence; and
5. The provision of equal facilities and opportunities for all with special solicitude for the backward classes and areas whether rural or urban.

The manifesto issued by the Party on the occasion said:

"The problem of the Punjab is essentially an economic problem. The population of the province is nearly 57 percent Muslims, 28 percent Hindus and 13 percent Sikhs and about 90 percent of them live directly or indirectly by agriculture. But whether, they belong to one community or the other and irrespective of their being agriculturists or non-agriculturists, rural or urban, it has been estimated that the average income of a Punjabi is less than the expense on the clothing and feeding of a prisoner in the Punjab jails. Moreover over 80 percent of the proprietors are involved in debt which amounts to forty times the land revenue while annual interest charges are alone nearly ten times the total land revenue. The fall in agricultural prices has further intensified economic distress. Unemployment is rampant. Graduates have been seen cleaning shoes in the streets and the pathetic tale of promising youths committing suicide due to lack of employment is a real problem, the problem of poverty and starvation, which is staring the Punjab in the face and demands the most earnest and collective effort from the best of the Punjabis.

It affects all communities alike, urbanites, as well as ruralites, agriculturists as well as non-agriculturists. Government service can at best absorb about 3 in every thousand of the population, 997 still remain. Moreover, it is obvious that the communal demands, must, before long be either met or settled, and the agonizing pains of economic iniquities and starvation will, unless treated in time, exhibit their symptoms in the language of fire and blood. The country wants bread and no patriotic constructive party can with wisdom, afford to post-pone or ignore this vital issue."

Fazl-i-Hussain elucidated further by saying<sup>23</sup>:

"We do not want to pose as communists or Sovietwalas, but we claim that we have an intense desire to raise the masses to a higher level of living than they occupy at present, that we have it in our programme and in order to achieve this object, it will be our business to persuade the wealthier classes to become alive to their responsibility in this matter and to prepare themselves to shoulder the burden in that connection, for such wise action on their part is the best guarantee

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<sup>23</sup> Speech on April 12, 1936 at the inauguration of the Unionist Party headquarters.

of the maintenance of the integrity of private property and of healthy capitalism, while selfish capitalism, narrow capitalism, greedy capitalism, defeats its own object. If the gulf between the rich and the poor grows wider and wider, no government can protect the rich for any length of time. Therefore, it is a wise investment on the part of the rich to enable government to take steps to elevate the masses, to spend money on beneficent activities so that the gulf may be bridged, if not altogether removed."

### **Fazl-i-Hussain's Death**

Fazl-i-Hussain did not live long after the reorganization of the Unionist Party. He had rejoined the Punjab government as Education Minister and had plans in hand to reform the entire administrative set-up. He died after a brief illness on July 9, 1936.

Sir Fazli had suffered from poor health all his life. It is most creditable to him and speaks much for his capacity for hard work that he achieved so much both in the Punjab and for the country in spite of this serious handicap. By common consent he was considered the most outstanding statesman of the Montford Reform era.

The event of his demise was widely taken note of, both in India and abroad. Bold headlines in the press proclaimed him as "Maker of modern India", "The most successful politician of his day in India" and "India's greatest Statesman".

### **The BBC declared:**

"Sir Fazl-i-Hussain was by far and away the most important political figure in the Punjab and one of the ablest leaders, hitherto produced by the Muslim community."

A memorial meeting at Simla passed a resolution saying:

"By common consent he was the greatest parliamentarian whom the Reforms have produced and it is a tragedy that he should not have been spared to help India and his province along the next stage of Constitutional development."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *The Civil and Military Gazette*, July 15, 1936.

## The Reforms of 1935

The Act of 1935, which conceded provincial autonomy but did not introduce the principle of responsible government at the Centre, fell far below the expectations of progressive public opinion in the country. The Congress had anticipated the kind of Constitution that was to be conferred on India and had resumed Civil Disobedience on the return of Mahatma Gandhi from the Round Table Conference in 1932.

The Communal Award had enraged Gandhiji so much that he undertook a fast unto death in protest and forced the government to amend the sections relating to the Scheduled Classes.

The Congress rejected the Act of 1935 but contested elections in February 1937. The party won clear majorities in six provinces, with comparative majority in another two provinces.

The Muslim League won some seats in UP and Bombay but in other provinces including the four Muslim majority areas of the Punjab, Bengal, Sind and N.W.F.P. it made no impact. In the Punjab the Unionists had a landslide victory while in Bengal, Maulvi Fazl-ul-Haq captured majority of seats. Similarly, non-League Muslim groups defeated the League in Sindh and N.W.F.P.

Jinnah was in chastened mood and anxious to cooperate with the Congress, if he could share power.

The last decade before Independence with substantial power transferred to the provinces was a period when Indian politicians could make or mar the future of the country.

From now on two men played a decisive historical role. Jinnah had left the Congress in 1920 on the non-cooperation issue but he was still thinking in terms of sharing power with the Congress. He had been disappointed by the outcome of the All-Parties Conference and the recommendations of the Nehru Report. For some time he had even shifted to England and returned only when he thought he could again play a role in the changing situation.

Jinnah wanted to form coalition governments in UP and Bombay where the Congress had a working majority but the Muslim League had also sizable strength.

Gandhi favored the idea but Nehru, now Congress President, wanted the League members to join the Congress Party and endorse the Congress programme. This issue proved to be a turning point in India's constitutional history.

Jinnah was a clever strategist and his motives were not always clear. He had insisted on a separate identity for himself, whatever party he happened to lead. Now, towards the conclusive stage of political bargaining, Jinnah's object appears to have been to claim an equal status with the Congress for purposes of bargaining.

The rebuff administered by Nehru proved to be the final parting of ways. Jinnah and Nehru were now to clash repeatedly.

Jinnah a constitutionalist all his life, now adopted some of the tactics which he had previously condemned in the Congress Party. The Congress had adopted methods that led to direct defiance of government when the British refused to yield through negotiations. Jinnah adopted the same methods *vis-a-vis* the Congress.

He called the Indian Muslims to rise against the monopolist tyranny of Hindu Raj symbolized by the Congress.

### **Provincial Autonomy in the Punjab**

Sir Sikander Hyat succeeded Sir Fazl-i-Hussain as leader of the Unionist Party in the Punjab. His cabinet included Sir Sunder Singh Majithia, Sir Chhotu Ram, Sir Manohar Lal, Mian Abdul Haye and Malik Sir Khizar Hyat Khan, all distinguished persons.

Raja Narendra Nath desired Dr Gokal Chand Narang to represent the urban Hindus but on Chhotu Ram's insistence he was excluded.

### **Governor's Special Powers**

A crisis threatened to develop immediately after the Congress took over government in their majority provinces. This was got over by the Governor's giving an undertaking not to meddle in the day-to-day administration.

In the Punjab Sikander Hyat in a signed article to the Press made it clear that while the Unionist aim was to work the new reforms constructively, they would not shirk deadlocks if these arose.

### **Chhotu Ram's Agrarian Legislation**

Chhotu Ram, the brain behind the Unionist Party, immediately planned new laws to supplement what he had achieved as leader of Opposition in the pre-autonomy period.

These were meant to be even more sweeping, providing further relief to rural indebtedness, establishment of marketing committees to regulate price for agricultural produce, and further restrictions on money-lenders etc.

Sikander was a different man from both Fazl-i- Hussain and Chhotu Ram. Though of rural extraction, he had been long associated with many business concerns and he did not feel the poignancy of rural backwardness to the extent the other two did. He was more urban than rural in outlook and had very intimate relations with well-established Hindu leaders like Raja Narender Nath.

The Hindu Sabha lobby attempted to drive a wedge between Sikander and Chhotu Ram in which they partly succeeded at first. They persuaded Sikander that Chhotu Ram with his urban versus rural stance would ultimately wreck his government.

Sikander suggested to Chhotu Ram to go slow.

### **The Sonapat Conference**

Chhotu Ram reacted in his characteristic way. He told the Premier bluntly that his urban friends had turned him into a softist. He did not realize the tremendous power behind him. He invited Sikander and other members of the cabinet to participate in a Zamindara Conference. This was held in March 1938 at Sonapat. Sir Sikander presided. The present writer who was present at the conference still remembers the great ovation lakhs of peasants gave to the Punjab Prime Minister and his colleagues. Sikander a drawing room politician and an easy-going one at that had never seen such a gathering before.

He could not believe his eyes. Did Chhotu Ram command the support and allegiance of such a vast peasantry? What were Narender Nath and his few Lahore urban friends worth compared to this? In an emotional response Sir Sikander hailed Chhotu Ram as the uncrowned king of Punjab peasantry. He confessed frankly that he never realized the source of Chhotu Ram's power till he had seen this great sea of humanity. Chhotu Ram from that day onward remained Sikander's mentor, guide and philosopher.

### **Sikander-Jinnah Pact (October 1938)**

Jinnah had failed in 1936 to persuade Fazl-i-Hussain to fight the forthcoming elections on the Muslim League label. When he was ignored by the Congress in the formation of Ministries in Bombay and UP he turned to Sir Sikander Hyat and Fazl-ul-Haq to sharpen his armory in the coming show-down with the Congress.



Sir Sikander was persuaded by Jinnah at Lucknow in October 1938 to sign what has come to be known as 'Sikander-Jinnah pact'. By this agreement Sikander agreed that the Muslim members of the Unionist Party in the Punjab would for all practical purposes be also members of the Muslim League to safeguard the all-India interests of the Muslim community. This, however, would not affect the working of the Unionist Party in the Punjab, in any way nor would there be any outside interference in the working of the Unionist government.

This dual membership was to become the cause of great embarrassment to Malik Khizar Hyat Tiwana, Sikander's successor, when Jinnah was to take advantage of it in his attempts to disorganize the Unionist Party. We shall discuss its implications later at the proper place.

### **The Second World War**

With the coming of the World War II in 1939 the political scenario changed completely. The thinking in the Congress camp remained diffused and confused throughout with the result that the party lost initiative to Jinnah who took full advantage of it.

The Congress directed its ministers to resign and remained in the wilderness throughout the duration of the war. Meanwhile by its 'Quit India' movement of 1942, it helped Jinnah and the League to occupy all points of vantage to further their disintegrating activities.

The Punjab under the Unionists came forward enthusiastically in support of England in her deadly combat with Nazi Germany. Both Sikander and Chhotu Ram mobilized the martial people of the Punjab who gave a full-throated response. The Punjab gave the greatest support to the Allied cause in men and material.

Sikander a former company commander and heir to a military tradition rose to his full stature. He concentrated entirely on the war-effort, leaving the administration practically in Chhotu Ram's charge.

### **The Pakistan Resolution**

The Muslim League in its session at Lahore in March 1940, adopted- what has come to be known as the Pakistan Resolution, although the word Pakistan does not occur there.

This resolution, it is widely believed, was drafted by Sir Sikander Hyat himself.

The resolution broadly lays down that in any future constitutional settlement the Indian Muslims should be entitled to independent sovereign areas both in the north-west and the east to constitute separate States.

### **The Cripps Proposals**

Under pressure from President Roosevelt the British Premier and war-time leader Winston Churchill agreed to send Sir Stafford Cripps, one of his senior colleagues to India with proposals to make an attempt to break the Indian stalemate.

These proposals sounded attractive, as they promised interim control of government to Indians with commitment to frame a constitution after the war, when power would have been transferred in full.

Gandhi dismissed the proposals at the very start, describing them as a cheque on a crashing bank. Nehru and Abul Kalam Azad thought differently but their efforts to the contrary proved ineffective.

### **Congress-Unionist Alliance**

Chhotu Ram remained very active in both politics and administration and had by this time developed important links with Congress leaders, particularly Sardar Patel and C. Rajagopalachari, the razor-sharp brain in the Congress Party.

Mahatma Gandhi had also come to think highly of Chhotu Ram by this time. Since the Pakistan Resolution of 1940, Chhotu Ram had been carrying on an uncompromising campaign against all plans of the Muslim League to disrupt Indian unity. K.M. Munshi another prominent Congress leader had become a great admirer of Chhotu Ram and brought his views to the notice of the Congress leaders.

At the time of the Cripps proposals, Chhotu Ram had arranged a big conference at Delhi presided over by the Maharaja of Bharatpur. At this conference resolutions were adopted against all proposals that aimed at breaking the unity of India.

The conference had received wide notice. An attempt was made (initiative being taken by some Congress leaders) to form an alliance between the Congress and the Unionist Party to combat Jinnah. Chhotu Ram was sounded and some progress was made. The move had the approval, of Mahatma Gandhi.

Sikander Hyat in spite of his evasive methods and his disinclination to come into direct conflict with Jinnah was at heart strongly opposed to the division of the Punjab which the Pakistan scheme implied.

In a speech in the Punjab Assembly, Sikander made it clear that whatever may happen the Punjab could never be divided.

The Congress-Unionist negotiations fell through when it was suggested from the Congress side that any arrangement with Sir Sikander Hyat should be underscored by Chhotu Ram. As it implied distrust in Sir Sikander the talks did not proceed further.

Time and men determine historical events. Jinnah was rather lucky for he had no one in the Congress camp to match his subtlety and grasp of strategy except Rajagopalachari. But Chhotu Ram had been for long a suspect with Patel and Nehru – the men who really counted. In the Punjab, Fazl-i-Hussain if he had lived would have made all the difference. Sir Sikander a staunch Punjabi would have also obstructed Jinnah but he too suddenly died towards the end of December 1942.

### **Chhotu Ram and Sir Sikander**

Sir Chhotu Ram related to the writer a discussion he had with Sir Sikander only a few months before the latter's demise. There was a proposal to appoint Sir Sikander Hyat to the Viceroy's Executive Council and entrust him with Defence portfolio. Sikander had suggested to Chhotu Ram that in his place he would arrange to have him succeed in the Punjab which would help in collaboration between the Punjab and the Government of India regarding war efforts.

Sir Chhotu Ram told me that he did not allow Sir Sikander even to elaborate on his ideas, as he was not agreeable to the suggestion of his leaving the Punjab.

I was at the time lecturer at the Government College, Rohtak and met Sir Chhotu Ram whenever he visited Rohtak which he did frequently.

It was only a day or so before when Chhotu Ram was at Rohtak and told me that Governor Glancy was proving difficult in the appointment of a new member to the Provincial Public Service Commission, in succession to Ch. Lal Chand.

The Governor had made it clear that he would not let Chhotu Ram have his way this time. Sir Chhotu Ram handed me a few communications on the subject which were to be released to the press. It was made clear in these communications that in case the Governor blocked the appointment of a Zamindar in place of Ch. Lal Chand, the Unionist cabinet would press the matter to the extent of creating a constitutional crisis.

Chhotu Ram sent a list of about a dozen persons belonging to all communities and from this list Ch. Bharat Singh a Rajput from Ambala, was selected.

Sir Sikander had arranged two marriages in the family on December 25, 1942. When the celebrations were completed, he suddenly had a heart attack and died soon after.

The news was broadcast the same night. I met Chhotu Ram on the morning of the 26th and much to our surprise he said nothing about the death of the Premier. Instead he went to address a meeting at Baraut in Meerut district as previously arranged. When he returned in the evening he had all but broken down in grief for his great colleague and friend. Immediately he left for Lahore by a special plane from Delhi as a new situation had arisen in the Punjab.

### **Punjab's New Premier**

Chhotu Ram being the deputy leader of the Unionist Party should have succeeded to the leadership of the party after Sikander Hyat. He was the most prominent and senior most member of the party and would have made an excellent Prime-Minister. (The Provincial Premier was so designated then as there was no Prime Minister at the Centre). Chhotu Ram knew that the Unionist Party would no doubt accept him initially but later communal considerations would come to the fore.

The party practically left the choice of the new leader to Chhotu Ram, all the prominent members of the party being agreeable to his arbitration. Chhotu Ram had discussions with half a dozen leading members to find out the consensus. His choice fell on Malik Sir Khizar Hyat Khan, with whom he had developed close affinity.

The Unionist Party selected Major Shaukat Hyat Khan, eldest son of the late Premier as candidate for the vacant assembly seat. He was also included in the cabinet. (The writer has some inside knowledge of the developments that followed, as by this time he had shifted to Lahore as News Editor in the State Information Bureau).

The Director of the Bureau was Syed Nur Ahmad an experienced journalist, with considerable background of Punjab affairs. My relations with Nur Ahmad soon developed to a friendly level and often he took me into his confidence about happenings in Punjab politics.

Nur Ahmad had been brought to the Bureau from the local Civil and Military Gazette where he had been working as a senior reporter, by Ahmad Yar Khan Daultana, a great confidant of Sir Sikander. Sir Chhotu Ram had also helped in his appointment. At that time the Director of Information Bureau was rather an important person, as he functioned virtually as a political adviser to the Unionist government. My own appointment had become possible because of Nur Ahmad's anxiety after the death of Sir Sikander to stay on the right side of Chhotu Ram.

Shaukat Hyat was an impressive young man but without experience. In the Punjab feudal classes, there had been rivalries between the various groups. Sir Khizar had been included in the cabinet in 1937 on the persuasion of Chhotu Ram. This helped in bringing the powerful Tiwana group close to Sir Sikander! Shaukat had been included in the cabinet to continue the smooth relationship between these two powerful families.

We have already noticed that the Muslim Unionists had accepted through the Lucknow Pact between Jinnah and Sir Sikander in 1938, an additional membership of Muslim League. Shaukat Hyat had to get elected to the assembly after his inclusion in the cabinet within six months as provided in the Constitution. He was primarily a candidate on behalf of the Unionist Party but in addition he had also the support of the Muslim League. Jinnah had acquired vast proportions after the adoption of the Pakistan Resolution.

The dual allegiance was diluting the secular character of the Unionist Party.

Shaukat Hyat won the bye-election but he would have won it just as well without the Muslim League label.

It is an irony of the Punjab situation that Shaukat Hyat who should have known better became an instrument in the hands of Jinnah, causing great embarrassment to Khizar and Chhotu Ram, who were responsible for his inclusion in the cabinet.

Shaukat was under the influence of Nawab Muzzafar Khan, cousin of Sir Sikander Hyat. His main mentor by this time was Nur Ahmad, the Information Bureau chief. I knew what was passing between the two men and I kept Chhotu Ram well-posted.

Shaukat made a speech at Panipat, in which he indirectly supported Pakistan. On his return to Lahore, he was snubbed and admonished by Chhotu Ram and Shaukat expressed regret. Chhotu Ram warned him that any further deviation from the Party would not be tolerated.

Shaukat kept his contacts with Nur Ahmad and it appears by this time he had decided to cast his lot with the Muslim League. A few days later he again made a statement, which brought him in direct conflict with the Unionist leadership.

## Jinnah Chhotu Ram Confrontation

Jinnah visited Lahore in April 1944 and made an outright attempt to disintegrate the Unionist Party.

Khizar Hyat though opposed to Pakistan was unwilling to come into direct clash with Jinnah. Chhotu Ram, however, had made it clear to Khizar that if he wavered in his stand regarding Pakistan the Unionist Party would break, as Hindu and Sikh members of the Party were uncompromising on the issue. In particular he warned him that so far as he was concerned it was a matter of basic principle for him to oppose any scheme that weakened Indian unity.

Malik Khizar Hyat had no doubt in his mind that if it came to a choice between Jinnah and Chhotu Ram he would stand firmly with his senior colleague and guide. But he still hoped that a via-media might be found. Chhotu Ram had basic differences with Jinnah and he was reluctant to meet him when a meeting between the two was suggested.

Khizar Hyat found a way out. He arranged a dinner seating Jinnah and Chhotu Ram facing each other so that at least some conversation could start. The dinner, however, did not take place as unfortunately Sir Umar Hyat Khan Tiwana, Kizar's father suddenly died that day.

Negotiations had been going on between Khizar and Jinnah.

The Sikander-Jinnah pact of 1938 was invoked by the League leader to convince Khizar that the Muslim members of the Unionist Party were already members of the Muslim League and as such the *de jure* Punjab government was a League government. He was asking Khizar only to acknowledge what already existed.

On this point Jinnah was in a strong position but Khizar guided by Chhotu Ram and his other cabinet colleagues, refused on the ground that the same pact provided for the non-interference of the Muslim League in Punjab affairs.

Jinnah always authoritarian with persons of his own or even superior ranks like Governors or even the Viceroy was treating Khizar as a person of no great importance. He was practically behaving like a dictator. At one stage during negotiations, when he was talking on the telephone to Khizar, Jinnah lost patience and went to the extent of abusing Khizar's father — a person of great position and eminence.

Sir Umar Hyat Tiwana, Khizar's father was a Nawab in the true sense. He had the status of a General in the army and was one of the biggest landlords in the Punjab. He was extra-loyal to the British and his eminence was largely due to the favors he had continuously received from the British rulers.

Jinnah said something unpleasant to Khizar Hyat on the telephone. Probably he hinted at this subservience of Khizar's father to the British.

The proud Tiwana dropped the telephone and refused to have any further talk with Jinnah. In between, there had been a Jinnah-Chhotu Ram meeting.

### **The Inevitable Confrontation**

One day I went to meet Chhotu Ram in his office, along with Ch. Tika Ram who was then Parliamentary Secretary.

Chhotu Ram asked us to be quick in what we wanted to say as he had a scheduled meeting with Jinnah soon after.

I realized the historical nature of this Jinnah-Chhotu Ram meeting. We stayed in his office to await Chhotu Ram's return from the meeting.

When Chhotu Ram came back after about two hours, we were the first to have a firsthand account of what transpired.

Chhotu Ram gave full details of the meeting and I would like to share the same now with my readers. At the time of the Unionist-League clash the Unionists had a following of about 130 in a House of 175.

The revolt in the party was headed by Shaukat Hyat but he had others like Raja Ghazanfar Ali – a parliamentary secretary, Nawab of Mamdot who was a member of the Unionist Party as well as President of the Punjab Muslim League, Begam Shah-Nawaz, daughter of Sir Mohammad Shafi – once an important Muslim leader and several others. The total of the rebels did not exceed 10 or 12. They had, however, told Jinnah that there was a general revolt in the party and the majority of the Muslim members would leave Khizar if he refused to accept the League label.

Chhotu Ram gave us a graphic account of his meeting with Jinnah, Jinnah received Chhotu Ram at the footsteps of the Mamdot villa where he was staying and conducted him inside with a show of deference— -something he had not done to governors and British high-up's or the Congress leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi himself. Jinnah's tone however was patronizing from the very start.

When they got seated, Jinnah began his monologue, emphasizing on Chhotu Ram the wisdom of staying on with the Muslims with whom he had been throughout his political life. "After all what does it matter, whether the Punjab Government carries the Muslim League label or it calls itself Unionist. It is a Muslim majority government." Chhotu Ram remained patient and allowed Jinnah to have his full say.

"So far as you are concerned," Jinnah continued, "You will have an assured place in the League cabinet."

At this point Chhotu Ram joined issue with the Qaide-Azam and came out firmly and strongly with what he wanted to tell Jinnah.

"Qaide-Azam, you have been thoroughly misinformed about the Punjab situation. There is no question of any League government in the Punjab. The Unionist government is a coalition of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, working on a common agreed programme. Such a government cannot come in the control of any one community and change its present nomenclature."

Jinnah was completely surprised as Mamdot and Ghazanfar had given him altogether a different account of the situation. He was in fact expecting Chhotu Ram to be grateful to him for assuring him his present position in the League cabinet. Chhotu Ram now warmed up and spoke to the League leader in his characteristic blunt style;

"Not more than a handful of the present Unionist members would change sides leaving the party strengthened rather than weakened, as the present government would then have strong support from the entire opposition of about 45 members."

Jinnah though disappointed with his discussions with Chhotu Ram did not want to break negotiations. He suggested to Chhotu Ram to reconsider the whole matter. "I sleep over it and you sleep over it and then we resume discussions later" was what Jinnah said at the end of the talks.

After a few days there was another telephone from Mamdot villa. Jinnah wanted to talk again.

This time Chhotu Ram spent only a few minutes with Jinnah. He informed the League leader that his position was the same as he had previously explained to him. There could be no compromise with a basic principle for the sake of ministership.

Chhotu Ram's strong and firm stand was confirmed by Jinnah himself in a statement he issued after the failure of the talks.



"Although this is a matter of our own internal concern, I thought it proper, as Sir Chhotu Ram representing his group is a member of the present coalition, to consult him. I put our case before him and we have had free and frank discussion regarding the matter. Sir Chhotu Ram is adamant and insists and maintains that every member of the Muslim League party in the Assembly owes its primary allegiance to the creed, policy and programme of the so-called Unionist Party and is bound by them."

"This position" Mr. Jinnah added, "is utterly untenable and it is now for us to consider what decision we should take in the matter." Tika Ram in his Biography of Chhotu Ram (1946) makes the following observations in regard to Jinnah's statement:

"The general consensus of public opinion in the Punjab on the other hand was that it was the position taken up by the Qaide-Azam that was untenable."

Mr. Kali Nath Ray, ex-Editor of the Tribune wrote as follows in his old paper:

"It has seldom been my lot to see eye to eye with Sir Chhotu Ram on any major issue, but I feel no hesitation in saying that in this matter of vital importance, he is absolutely and incontestably in the right. So far from his position being untenable as Mr. Jinnah says, it is the only position that is constitutionally sound. The boot as regards untenability and unconstitutionality, is entirely on the other leg."<sup>25</sup>

Another journalist, analyzed the situation in the *Tribune* and in the course of an article, he said:

"Poised on the rickety stilts, provided to him (Mr. Jinnah) by peculiar circumstances, we will know that they are rickety, when they break. He thunders and asks the Unionists to surrender unconditionally. He conveniently forgets that the mere blast of his trumpet will not bring down the Unionist citadel. The circumstances are entirely different in the Punjab. Mr. Jinnah may have rallied round himself some disgruntled politicians, ambitious Nawabs and Nawabzadas and raw young men. In other provinces also Pakistan is generally supported by Muslim capitalism, feudalism and adventurism, and he may have enlisted the support of some journals, that thrive on fanaticism and have no Sikandrian curb now imposed on their objectionable activities. But all other factors are operating against this move. Apart from the firm determination of the Unionist Muslim MLAs generally to remain true to the pledge given by them to the electorate and to the Sikandrian spirit embodied in the Pact, which Mr. Jinnah has denounced, there is the irrepressible feeling among the people that nobody should be permitted to upset the 'Government of the Punjabis by the Punjabis, for the Punjabis.' Then there are

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted by Tika Ram, p, 67.

strong non-Muslim anti-vivisectionist elements in the Punjab Assembly and outside, which even abnormally inflated vanity cannot ignore. Let alone these things, where is that blatantly unconstitutional gubernatorial partiality on which Mr. Jinnah has everywhere relied in achieving success? It does not exist in the Punjab. Mr. Jinnah may well meet his Stalingrad in Lahore."

Lahore did prove to be a Stalingrad for Jinnah and he had to retreat, defeated, at least for the time being. The Unionist Party stood firm; not more than a dozen including four Parliamentary Secretaries, resigned from the party to support the League.

The Unionist citadel remained impregnable.

Tika Ram in his Biography of Sir Chhotu Ram observes:<sup>26</sup>

"The part played by Sir Chhotu Ram in this issue was vital and of paramount importance. He was one of the original founders of the Unionist Party and during the last 20 years his dynamic personality was seen behind every achievement of the party. Mr. Jinnah now wanted Chhotu Ram to repudiate his whole political past, liquidate the Unionist party and become a camp-follower of the Qaide-Azam for the sake of a place in the Muslim League cabinet. The demand was extravagant and insolent. The whole controversy in the last analysis became a personal tussle between the Qaide-Azam, who appealed to the religious zeal of his co-religionists and the Rahbar-i-Azam (the title lovingly conferred on Chhotu Ram at a mammoth conference at Lyallpur), who had his stand on the community of economic interests that bound all the Punjab agriculturists together. Economics for once defeated religious fanaticism and the Rahbar-i-Azam scored over the Qaide-Azam. The firm stand of the Unionists had all-India repercussions. Mr. Jinnah suffered a great setback in prestige and popularity. A great event had occurred in the land of the five rivers, which would go down in history, and Sir Chhotu Ram's name for ever shall remain associated with that achievement."

Following the breakdown of the Unionist-League negotiations, Mr. Jinnah, addressed a large conference at the Islamia College, Lahore. Sir Chhotu Ram asked me to attend the conference. I put on a suitable *achken* and Kashmiri cap and was admitted to the conference as a Muslim journalist. I was the sole non-Muslim at the conference.

Jinnah now changed his tactics. He attacked Chhotu Ram vehemently holding him responsible for all the ills of the Punjab by misleading the people by false slogans of tribalism and urban rural conflicts. He considered him the main obstacle in the path of Pakistan and called upon the Punjab Muslims to deal with him suitably.

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<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, page 69.

Shaukat Hyat speaking next openly declared his support for Pakistan.

I reported to Chhotu Ram the speeches at the conference and while I was still with him he contacted Governor Glancy, suggesting immediate interview.

In a few hours Shaukat was sacked from the cabinet. At the Information Bureau, I was able to get the reaction of the Muslim Leaguers as Nur Ahmad was now openly on their side.

I happened to meet Chhotu Ram again in the evening at a party. I always felt free with him and frankly expressed myself on political happenings. He never took it amiss. When I pointed out that Shaukat's dismissal looked rather unconstitutional, Sir Chhotu Ram thumped the table before him and said that in politics he who strikes first wins. "We have thrown him out and let Mr. Jinnah do his worst now."

Mr. Jinnah spent another few days in the Punjab after his discomfiture. He addressed another conference at Sialkot where again he blamed everything on Chhotu Ram.

There was at the time an unconfirmed rumor at Lahore that Chhotu Ram had asked Mr. Jinnah to leave the Punjab immediately. There might be something in it as the League leader left for Kashmir after the Sialkot conference for rest and recreation.

The people in the Punjab were jubilant. Khizar and Chhotu Ram were loudly acclaimed all over the country for their firm handling of Jinnah.

### **Chhotu Ram's Campaign Against Pakistan**

Chhotu Ram never believed in half-hearted efforts. He drew a comprehensive plan to fight Pakistan. Khizar was on his side. The Unionist Party being a rural organization had hardly any newspapers of its own. Generally the urban press had been against it. After the conflict with the Muslim League, the Hindu and Sikh press started supporting the Unionist stand but that was not enough to counteract the Pakistan movement that was spreading fast all over the Punjab.

The Muslim newspapers largely in the hands of the urban Muslims became lukewarm in the support they had given so far. Some of them became the mouthpiece of League propaganda.

Chhotu Ram planned to start two daily newspapers from Lahore (English and Urdu) and an appeal was made for funds. The response was most heartening. In about two months, the amount collected exceeded Rs 33 lakhs.

The Unionist Party was also weak on the platform. With the sole exception of Chhotu Ram the party had hardly any leader who could face the masses with confidence. Chhotu Ram planned conferences and meetings all over the Punjab and through Khizar instructions were issued to the Director of Information Bureau that his speeches should be officially reported. Nur Ahmad was asked to make necessary arrangements.

From this time onward, I became attached to Chhotu Ram as his Public Relations Officer.

The Information Bureau in those days was a small office with no organization in the districts.

Chhotu Ram moved all over the Punjab like an avalanche, sometimes addressing three or four big conferences in a day. The response of the peasantry was heartening. He attracted large audiences wherever he went.

While the rural areas all over the Punjab including the thickly Muslim West Punjab came strongly in support of the Unionist stand, the Muslim League launched its campaign in large cities but in the beginning it did not have much success.

Jinnah's stock had perceptibly gone down in the rest of the country also.

Pakistan was an All-India issue. It could not be fought by the Unionists alone. If the Congress had made a common cause with the Unionists, the only party in a position to face the League challenge, things might have turned differently.

### **Congress Blunders During the War**

Durga Das, the veteran journalist, who had access to all leaders including Jinnah, met him at the time of the Simla conference in 1945 when the Congress had conceded parity to the League. Jinnah, however, broke the conference on the issue of the inclusion of the Muslims in the Viceroy's Council.

When Durga Das asked Jinnah why he was breaking the conference when the Congress was yielding to him, he significantly said, "Why should I accept this when I am being offered Pakistan on the platter."<sup>27</sup>

Every time the Congress yielded to the League, Mr. Jinnah stiffened his terms in which he was invariably supported from behind by the British bureaucracy.

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<sup>27</sup> Durga Das, *From Curzon to Nehru and After*.

The Congress made mistake after mistake during the war-time negotiations with the British and the Muslim League. At first, even Linlithgow, stolid, unimaginative and reactionary, considered the Congress a better bet than the League but gradually the Congress leadership became progressively intransigent, throwing the government in Jinnah's lap.

The Congress, if it had remained in office would have kept Jinnah in his place, and, the course of events would have been different. The "Quit India" movement has remained a puzzle to many contemporary observers. It was a grave misjudgment of the situation. Jawaharlal Nehru considered Fascism as the greatest danger to the world and in his view the British Imperialism could not last long. In any case, it was a lesser danger and India could not be kept down for long. If A.K. Azad's view had prevailed there would have been no Pakistan.

It was Gandhi who drove the Congress to the 'do or die' struggle with the British.

He was greatly impressed by the sudden rise to world fame of Subhas Bose, after his joining hands with the Fascist powers. The INA organized by Bose was marching swiftly with Japanese help to the borders of India. Bose had suddenly become the most popular leader in India. It was necessary for the Congress to take an offensive to maintain its position. Also by 1942 when Cripps arrived, the British cause appeared to have been lost already.

All these calculations proved wrong and in the process greatly weakened the Congress position. The Allied position was stabilized after victories in Africa. The Japanese offensive stopped at the borders of India.

The 'Quit India' movement after creating conditions of chaos in parts of India was brought under control if not suppressed. Jinnah took full advantage of the absence of Gandhi and other Congress leaders from the political arena and moved from one vantage point to another to strengthen his position, which had been so weak when the war started.

It was under this euphoria, Jinnah moved to the Punjab to disrupt the Unionists and annex the State to the League.

The reversal in the Punjab was a serious setback to Jinnah but the Congress failed to take advantage of it, most of the leaders being still in jail, Gandhiji had been released but he failed to see the significance of the Punjab events.

It was at this stage that Rajagopalachari, who was at odds with the Congress, but still exercised considerable influence on Gandhi came forward with what became known as 'C.R. Formula'.

The subtle mind of C.R. came to the conclusion that the best way of defeating Pakistan was to make an offer of it.

The C.R. Plan virtually conceded Pakistan. (Gandhi had rejected the Cripps offer which conceded Pakistan less explicitly than C.R. Formula. This showed the deterioration of the Congress position). It gave option to the Muslim-majority areas to stay out of the Union if they so desired.

The immediate task was to remove the British from India and for this both the Congress and the Muslim League should make a joint front.

Against the advice of most seasoned statesmen like Tej Bahadur Sapru, Gandhiji made an appointment with Jinnah at Bombay to discuss this scheme.

Jinnah agreed at once as it afforded an opportunity to commit the Congress to the Pakistan plan, it had been resisting so far.

As was expected nothing came of the talks, but it further weakened the Congress position. Jinnah wanted the Congress to first accept Pakistan unequivocally. He declared the C.R. Formula to be vague and unsatisfactory and broke off negotiations.

Jinnah had moved to another milestone on the road to Pakistan.

### **Chhotu Ram's Warning**

Chhotu Ram had taken a good measure of Jinnah. He felt confident that the Punjab peasantry could be mobilized to defeat all attempts to divide the Punjab. If Punjab could not be divided, Pakistan will remain a will-o-the-wisp no more than a bargaining counter, as it was intended to be. Suspecting that the Congress was again trying to placate Jinnah, Chhotu Ram addressed a 10-page letter to Mahatma Gandhi, (Dated Simla East, August 15, 1944). ,

Some extracts from this historical document will be helpful in understanding the Pakistan problem in the correct perspective.

"I may say at the very outset that as a true Unionist I am opposed to all communalism and although a regular and formal Congressman, originally, I have always discountenanced the sanctions devised by the Congress to enforce its demands."

"Now that you are engaged in finding a solution of the communal tangle and the present political deadlock, I may be allowed to convey to you a view, which is

shared by all the non-Muslims of the Punjab except a few communists and not by inconsiderable proportion of Muslims."

After going into the genesis of the Pakistan demand, Chhotu Ram listed the various factors that had created the psychosis of an average Muslim. Amongst these was the fear of Hindu domination.

"The Hindus will be all powerful at the Centre and will also be in an overwhelming majority in all the provinces, except N.W.F.P., Punjab, Sindh and Bengal and the result of a federal India will be persecution of Muslims in the Central sphere and emasculation of Provincial Autonomy due to Central interference".

This feeling, Chhotu Ram said, had been created by the persistent League propaganda. The Muslims had been made to believe that,

"The only remedy was a separate federation of their own which could join hands with other Muslim countries and conquer the rest of India,"

The Muslims also believed that the British being opposed to the Congress will help them in their demand.

"With this general picture before his mind," Chhotu Ram wrote, "an average Muslim is bound to be charmed by the glamour of Pakistan".

### **Non-Muslim Attitude**

Referring to the non-Muslim attitude, Chhotu Ram said:

"The Hindus and Sikhs of the Punjab are horror-stricken at the prospects of Muslim Raj in the province. They regard India as one and indivisible and look upon a divided India as an area of constant civil war and as an easy prey to any adventurous foreign power. By a wrong presentation of the history of the Muslim rule in India and by a generalization based on the incidents of its abnormal periods, Hindus and Sikhs have come to believe that Islamic Raj will only mean a reign of terror, persecution and tyranny for non-Muslims and will place in danger their religion, culture, liberty, honor, property and laws of inheritance and marriage."

### **Rajaji Formula**

Chhotu Ram recounted the demerits of Rajaji Formula. It neither helped in the solution of the communal problem nor in breaking the existing political deadlock.

"He (Jinnah) will only use it and its amended form as a fresh starting point for bargaining with the Congress and the British."

"If plebiscite is confined to Muslims, to which, it is feared you may agree, it will drive the last nail into the coffin of nationalism."

"The formula is expected to furnish a solution of the communal tangle and the present political deadlock. As already stated above, it will do neither."

The letter then listed some fundamental objections to the formula. These related to the false two-nation theory, the mixing of religion with politics.

"The offer made by Rajaji and blessed by you treats the Hindus of Bengal and Hindus and Sikhs of the Punjab as mere chattel to be dealt with as you like."

"The provinces that are most intimately affected by the advent of Pakistan are the Punjab and Bengal and yet these provinces were never consulted before the formula was devised or presented to Mr. Jinnah for acceptance and consideration."

"The offer of Pakistan is a matter of life and death to the Hindus of Bengal and to the Hindus and Sikhs of Punjab and yet the offer was made to Mr. Jinnah, by men who however eminent and respected know precious little about the evils of a communal Raj."

The Unionist leader pointed out that the formula also threw "to the wolves all those Muslim groups and individuals who, in the midst of a deluge of odium and calumny have stood by the Congress." It also "throws overboard the assurance given to the Sikhs in 1929 that no communal settlement will be arrived at without consulting them."

### **Far-Reaching Evil Consequences**

"It was made at a time when the prestige and influence of Jinnah had received a rude shock first in the Punjab and then in Kashmir."

"The formula had demoralized the Muslim allies of the Congress, weakened the faith of the Sikhs and other minorities in the word of the Congress."

"It will encourage Mr. Jinnah to obtain an increasingly high bid alternately from Congress and Britain" Sir Chhotu Ram added.



## **True Remedy**

"It is difficult to escape from the conclusion that a wrong remedy has been adopted by Rajaji and yourself."

The letter continued:

"The formula bears the impress of despair on the one hand and deep seated prejudice, I will not call it ill-will, against the Britisher on the other. In your impatience to get rid of British domination — a very laudable object in itself — both you and Rajaji have betrayed yourselves into a course which contrary to your wishes and expectation will initially help to. strengthen the grip of British domination and ultimately fasten instead an iron grip of an intolerant and intolerable theocracy dominated and directed mainly by alien elements.

"Will it be disrespectful to remind you that according to your own teachings, yielding to despair or defeatism or prejudice bordering upon ill-will is inconsistent with the creed of Satyagraha.

"The true remedy is to put up temporarily with the lesser of the two evils and use the interval to strengthen and consolidate the forces of nationalism and patriotism on such a scale and to such a pitch that they will enable the country to rid itself of the lesser evil also."

The letter then suggested several concrete steps that could help in strengthening the patriotic forces.

"The policy of appeasement should be given up once and for all. An ounce of Churchill will do the Congress immeasurably greater good than tons of Chamberlain."

Chhotu Ram said.

## **Certain Fallacies**

The letter pointed out that Jinnah was not intrinsically strong. At most he had a 'nuisance value':

"It is a great error if you fancy that you can obtain Mr. Jinnah's co-operation in fighting against British domination by offering him any concessions. The British can always outbid you there."

How to treat Jinnah?

"While Mr. Jinnah should be treated with all the courtesy and respect which is due to his position, he should not be encouraged in his attitude of intransigence by undue deference to his demands or wishes."

Chhotu Ram suggested that before coming to any decision, the formula should be carefully considered by the Congress Working Committee where the Punjab and Bengal should be invited to acquaint the Committee with the views of the Hindus and Sikhs and other minorities in the two provinces. Mr. Jinnah should also be made to define the boundaries of Pakistan and give all other details and particulars about the nature of the proposed State.

Concluding his long letter, Chhotu Ram wrote:

"A knowledge of all these things is essential so that the people may know when they go to a plebiscite what they are voting for and what would be the implications of separation. A clear perception of the consequences of Pakistan will result in an immense diminution of support to the chimera of Pakistan and Mr. Jinnah's popularity among Muslims."

Mahatma Gandhi was greatly impressed by the arguments Chhotu Ram gave in support of his point of view. He acknowledged the letter but kept the course of action he might be made to follow, open.

Ultimately Rajagopalachari prevailed upon him to have discussions with Jinnah with disastrous consequences that followed.

Chhotu Ram had shown remarkable foresight in the tactics that Jinnah was adopting but the Congress leaders under some false assumptions, thought, that the Muslim leader could be won over by generous offers. Far from making him an ally of the Congress to fight the British, it had just the opposite effect. After the failure of the Jinnah-Gandhi talks in September 1944, the situation developed as Chhotu Ram had forecast.

Jinnah dismissed the Rajaji Formula as unacceptable not conceding the Pakistan of his dreams.

He continued his game of now turning to the Congress, now to the Viceroy and meanwhile emphasizing that the League would accept nothing short of a separate Sovereign Pakistan as defined in the Lahore Resolution of 1940.

Lord Wavell had replaced Linlithgow as Viceroy in 1943. Wavell was an honest, straightforward man true to his military background. He was puzzled and astonished

by the moves the politicians made against each other always involving him and expecting that he would uphold this or that point of view against the other party.

Wavell was unhappy with the British cabinet also. He held the politicians at home responsible for the Indian stalemate because of their dilatory tactics. The British government under Churchill wanted to delay transfer of power as long as they could.

Wavell in his anxiety to solve the Indian problem paid a protracted visit to England and at the end all that he got was the concurrence of the British cabinet to bring the League and the Congress jointly in Indian Government by reshuffling the Viceroy's Executive Council. This led to the Simla Conference of 1945, which we have already noticed was broken by Jinnah on the issue of the Muslim representation.

### **The Punjab Situation**

Chhotu Ram had not liked Sikander Hyat entering into a pact with Jinnah in 1937 in which a very vital point had been surrendered. All the Muslim members of the Unionist Legislative Party had simultaneously accepted allegiance to the League in all-India politics. Jinnah at the time was so powerless that this looked innocuous. But gradually Jinnah built up his strength. In 1940, at the very centre of the Unionists, the Pakistan resolution was adopted at Lahore.

People outside the Punjab did not take it seriously but the Punjab non- Muslims were greatly alarmed.

A meeting of the various schools of thought amongst the Hindus was called at Lahore on November 3, 1942. Chhotu Ram participated along with other Hindu Unionists. In his speech he made it clear that he was opposed to Pakistan but if the worst came to the worst he would insist on the Hindu-Sikh majority districts to be separated from the proposed Pakistan.

### **Sikander Formula**

Sir Sikander was opposed to the division of the Punjab.<sup>28</sup> In order to weaken Jinnah's position he had formulated a formula, known after his name, which gave the same right

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<sup>28</sup> I also pointed out to the Members that recently Sir Sikander Hyat Khan had published a scheme for the future Constitution of India in which he had proposed the division of India into seven different zones and had also provided for a Confederal Structure. Personally I said, I would suggest confining our demand to the separation of Muslim Zones, viz. N.W.F.P., Sindh, Baluchistan, and Punjab in the North-West and Bengal & Assam in the East and would leave the rest to the Congress to deal with.

At this stage Sir Sikander, who was sitting at the right of Mr. Jinnah, started pleading for his confederal scheme and Mr. Jinnah opposing it. The discussion went on for about two hours, when finally, with the concurrence of the

of self-determination to the minorities in the Punjab which the Muslims claimed for themselves at all-India level. This was with the concurrence of Chhotu Ram. Chhotu Ram said during his speech at this meeting:

"In any matter related to Hinduism, I yield to none in my loyalty to Hinduism. If anyone will attempt to devour the Hindus, I would not allow him to do so before I was myself devoured first."

Chhotu Ram thought that the Sikander Formula was one way out. This would help in easing the situation.

The formula was considered separately by the Sikhs also. No decision was taken one way or the other immediately. After sometime, however, interest in the formula was revived but this was when the author of the formula himself was no more. Sikander had died some time earlier.

### **The Azad Punjab Scheme**

The main difficulty in settling the Hindu-Muslim problem was the delicate balance of communities in the two provinces of Bengal and Punjab. These two provinces also held the key to Pakistan.

In the Punjab, schemes were made from time to time to redraw the boundaries of the province. Lala Lajpat Rai himself, the most outstanding Hindu leader, who also occupied a prominent place in the Congress had suggested in the early twenties to divide the Punjab. His idea was to separate the north-western Punjab from the rest of the province. This would have given an overwhelming majority to the Muslims in that part and the minorities left there could claim weightage on the pattern of the Hindu majority provinces like UP or Bombay.

The question was again revived at the Round Table Conference but was dropped in the face of opposition from the Hindus and the Sikhs.

The Akali Party in the Punjab led by their leader Master Tara Singh devised a scheme known as 'Azad Punjab scheme.' The idea was to divide the Punjab in such a way that none of the three principal communities, the Muslims, the Sikhs and the Hindus would be in a statutory majority in any part. Like the Pakistan scheme, the Azad Punjab plan was vague, tentative, nebulous. On principle both were objectionable as each involved division as against unity.

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Members, Mr. Jinnah rejected Sir Sikander's scheme and entered in his note-book my suggestion with approval." (Ch. Khaliqzaman — *Pathway to Pakistan*, Lahore-1961, pp. 233-4.)

But the Azad Punjab scheme neither claimed majority for any community nor led to the division of the country. It was not anti-national as it did not stipulate any special rights for the Sikh community.

Ordinarily Chhotu Ram should have supported this plan as it would have improved the position of the Hindu agriculturists in the new province. Chhotu Ram, however, opposed the Azad Punjab scheme as firmly as he had opposed Pakistan. Primarily, he opposed it, as it would set a new trend, leading to similar demands elsewhere.

The situation demanded emphasis on the unity of the country. Any regional, linguistic, or parochial claims from any part of the country would indirectly support the divisive tendencies.

India should stand firm as one against all forces of disruption. Pakistan could be defeated only on the high plane of principle.

Chhotu Ram's position had become so central by this time in Punjab politics that nothing could succeed without his support.

The Azad Punjab scheme did not make much headway due to strong opposition from Chhotu Ram. The urban Hindus for once accepted Chhotu Ram's lead and they also became lukewarm in its support.

Malik Khizar Hyat Tiwana succeeded Sir Sikander Hyat as the Prime Minister of the Punjab in January 1943.

From this date onwards — a period of about 2 years (at the end of which Chhotu Ram disappeared from the scene) he was the main centre of all decisions. Khizar not only looked up to him for guidance, having unquestionable faith in his mature judgment, but regarded him almost like a father.

These two last year's saw Chhotu Ram rise to his full stature — as a patriot, nationalist, and above all as the man who wanted to see before his eyes a new Punjab and a new India, where the common people, particularly the rural masses would have a place of self-respect — so far denied to them by a multifarious exploitation, by the capitalists and the British bureaucracy.

I was lucky to be with Sir Chhotu Ram during this period, for although, I was designated as News Editor in the Information Bureau of the Punjab government, there was little of news editing there. I was attached with him as virtually his Public Relations Officer. He spent most of his time touring the vast spaces of the then Punjab and we went from one corner to the other from the northern Rawalpindi — gateway to Kashmir — to the remote Palwal and Gurgaon bordering and touching the neighboring UP.

There were 29 districts in the pre-partition Punjab and although they varied considerably – the western and northern areas being dominated by the militant Muslims, the central by the virile Sikhs, and south-east by the comparatively mild Hindu agriculturists – the province as a whole was the home of sturdy peasantry, the like of which did not exist in any other part of India.

Chhotu Ram came to dominate this vast land, throbbing with new life, mainly due to his own herculean efforts spread over two decades, after he first became Minister in 1924.

It was a case of complete identification as Chhotu Ram had no existence apart from the peasantry, which explained the tremendous influence he had with the rural Punjab.

## The Peasant – Problems and Perspectives

Indian economy has been traditionally based on her agriculture. This holds true even today. Lord Curzon once said that Indian agriculture was a gamble in monsoon. If the monsoon fails, everything turns topsy turvy. This happens after every third or fourth year. Politics, administration, industry, entire life puts on a dreary, bleak appearance. The British knew this but they developed agriculture to the extent it supplemented industry at home.

Karl Marx who studied this aspect of the British occupation of India, came to the conclusion that the foreign rule in India was both degenerative, and regenerative. Degenerative because the vast resources of the subcontinent were diverted to complete the industrial revolution in England and regenerative because without the intervention of a modern force such as the British represented, India, in fact Asia as a whole, could not be pulled out of the historic stratification.

Daddabhai, Ranade, Gokhale and other nationalists during the closing years of the 19th century pointed out that Indian poverty was the direct outcome of the British policies, which aimed at reducing the Indian people to hewers of wood and drawers of water. During the preceding rule of the Mughals, India was one of the richest and industrially advanced countries of the world. This is on the testimony of British historians and economists like Moreland, who writing about India at the close of Akbar's rule established by comparative statistics her superiority over countries like England and France.

The British bled India white. The process started in a planned deliberate way under Lord Curzon. Reviewing the *Failure of Lord Curzon* by C. J. Odonell, who wrote after 28 years of close study of India, where he had been a civil servant, Sir William Wedderburn Bart, ex-MP said:

"The superficial observer might from the title of the book, suppose that it was a personal attack on Lord Curzon. But this would be a mistake. The book is an attack, not on an individual but on a system; it is a condemnation of the extravagance, the oppressiveness, the obscurantism, the corruption and the general folly of imperialism."

Curzon was a romantic in his craze for imperialism; he wanted to modernize Indian administration to serve imperialist purposes. Indian army was expanded to overawe

the neighboring countries. All this meant more taxation which in the last resort was borne by the already over-burdened peasantry, G.K. Gokhale, the ablest member of Curzon's Legislative Council speaking on the Budget for 1900-01, pointed out that the taxes proposed in the Budget amounted to an unbearable burden on the people.

### **Double Wrong**

Referring to the surpluses in the Budget, Gokhale said:

"These surpluses constitute a double wrong to the community that government should take so much more from the people than is needed in times of serious depression and suffering and they are also wrong because they lend themselves to easy misinterpretation."

Gokhale showed that there was no prosperity but an excessive merciless taxation which takes from the miserable peasantry 3/5 of the profits of their fields besides laying heavy burdens through indirect taxes on commodities of consumption.

"Such continuous piling up of tax upon tax" [cried Gokhale] "and such ceaseless adding to the burdens of a suffering people is probably without precedent in the annals of finance."

Much before Gokhale, Sir William Hunter, the distinguished Indian historian, when a member of the Viceroy's Council in 1879, declared;

"The Government assessment does not leave enough food to the cultivator to support himself and his family, throughout the year."

The excessive taxation on agriculture both by way of land-revenue and irrigation charges continued unabated down to recent times. The land alienation act of 1901 did provide a limited protection to the cultivators against the money-lenders but this was more than set-off by the other policies, governing agricultural economy.

In almost all provinces throughout the country, taxes on agriculturists, in one form or the other, remained the main source of government income. The British administrators particularly in the north after the annexation of the Punjab made a great show of sympathy with the peasantry. Certain measures like irrigation projects on ambitious scale, both in the Punjab and later in Sindh did add to agricultural wealth leading to some improvement in the lot of the agriculturists but the main object was to mobilize the peasantry as support in the game of keeping British hold firm on the land.

It is the upper urban bourgeois class that really gained from the policies of British imperialists. The Punjab (including Haryana) was the main source for recruitment to



the army and part of the patronage the bureaucracy manifested was to keep this source unimpaired.

Till the very end of the British rule, land-revenue remained an important if not the primary source of government income but the bulk of this was spent on the top-heavy administrative structure itself. Gandhiji once wrote to Lord Irwin about the disparity in the emoluments of the British hierarchy in India, pointing out the absurdly high salary the Viceroy himself was drawing when considered in terms of the per capita income in India.

Such money as the Provincial and Central governments could spare after meeting the needs of the governmental structure, the army, the police, the magistracy and other civil services, a disproportionate high percentage was spent in urban areas, the important centers from where the Raj functioned.

Towards the end of the 19th century an Indian counterpart of the British bourgeois classes arose in India and the two at first joined hands in exploiting the vast peasantry and other have-not classes both in the rural and urban areas.

This was the hey-day of British imperialism which came to an end with the close of Curzon's Viceroyalty.

The Indian revival which started after the Mutiny was, at first, social, cultural and religious, and the Indian National Congress which owed its birth to a British civilian was itself for many years a supplicating body. At its annual gatherings it passed year after year resolutions praising the Raj and recounting its blessings to the people. They only wanted to be favored with some crumbs that might fall from the Imperialist table.

When the nationalist movement developed in full blast under Gandhian leadership, it was dominated by the Indian bourgeois classes, the object being capture of power.

The fight between the Hindus and Muslims which has come to be known as the communal problem was really a quarrel between the middle classes of the two communities for share in services and legislatures. The objectives of the Indian nationalist movement remained limited to the capture of political power by its vocal middle classes.

The Congress, the best organized nationalist organization never developed a grass-root structure. It had no widely based cadres that could connect its leadership with the peasantry and the common people. The Muslim League, its rival, was a grossly feudal organization that exploited the Muslim masses by injecting them with religious fanaticism.

The Congress though secular in outlook and programme was numerically so dominated by the Hindus that it developed under Gandhi a terminology that irked non-Hindus.

The masses were used by the Congress and later on by the Muslim League to establish their representative capacity to bargain with the British bureaucracy and with each other.

At the Annual Congress Session in 1938 under the Presidentship of Subhas Bose a resolution was sponsored by some Kisan leaders suggesting non-payment of land-revenue and other taxes because of their continued exploitation in Gujarat and other places. The working committee dominated by the rightists pooh-poohed the resolution as it did not want to alienate the landlords and other vested groups that gave support to the Congress.

The Congress ideology appealed to the masses but the organization itself remained the hand-maid of the upper and middle classes. In particular the peasantry in spite of Gandhi's constructive programme remained ignored.

Gandhi occasionally did underline this double exploitation of the masses, by the foreign rulers and also by the Indian upper classes but no steps were taken to bring the peasantry close to the movement.

Occasionally the Kisan issues came to the forefront and the Congress leadership got interested in rural problems for a while. Gandhi himself came to the forefront in 1917 by championing the cause of agricultural laborers who were exploited by the tea planters in Champaran district in Bihar.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, himself a peasant — repeatedly got involved in Kisan problems. He organized the famous Bardoli Satyagraha in Gujarat in 1928 and made peace on his own terms, forcing the government to yield on all points.

Earlier in 1907 in the Punjab, Sardar Ajit Singh uncle of the Revolutionary Bhagat Singh, raised the slogan of "*pagri sambhal Jatta*" to draw attention to the grievances of the peasants in the canal colonies.

This had scared the bureaucracy because of the stir it created. The movement was supported by Lala Lajpat Rai.

Generally the grievances of the Kisans and indeed the rural problems as such never figured as basic issues in the various confrontations of the Congress with the British government.

Mahatma Gandhi in his famous book *Hind Swaraj* conceived a decentralized polity with roots in the villages but this was never adopted officially by the Congress.

In fact in an exchange of letters in 1945, Nehru made it clear to Gandhiji that his whole idea of idyllic Ram Raj, called '*Panchayat Raj*' was out of step with the modern world. That is why India adopted or rather copied the Westminster model which has led to the rise of a small, elitist class of capitalists, industrialists, bureaucrats and politicians who have nothing in common with the masses, although the Constitution of 1950 was drawn by proclaiming "We the people etc.

### **The Disorganized Sector**

Agriculture remains the most disorganized sector in Indian economy, even when it provides more than 50 percent of GNP.

The peasant, the back-bone not only of Indian economy but the main prop supporting the entire superstructure, himself remains voiceless. Even those drawn from the peasant stock, once they rise to high positions, forget the ladder that raised them to eminence.

Both agriculture and the peasant figure prominently in the manifestoes of the political parties when elections come. If the peasantry had been organized like industrial labor, the whole complexion of Indian politics would have undergone a sea-change.

While every party remembers the peasant when vote is needed the parties of the left, CPI and CPI (M) have taken some pains to get close to the rural electorate. But their real constituency remains the urban proletariat.

There has been a great debate in India — still alive — as to the application of what everybody calls Socialism, without defining its contours. Socialism has become such a vague and diffused concept that everybody warms up to the term, the capitalist, the bureaucrat and politician of every variety. Like an old hat it has lost its shape because of over-use.

Jawaharlal Nehru paid a visit to Soviet Russia in 1926 and wrote a book on it. From then on he never ceased talking of socialism although his ideas changed considerably as his own position in politics changed.

As Prime Minister he organized a Planning Department with himself at its head. Since then India has completed or at least formulated five plans and we are in the midst of the sixth, at the moment.

Who and whom, Lenin used to say, are important questions in politics. These have to be precisely defined when planning is undertaken in a comprehensive manner.

These terms have never been clearly defined in the context of Indian planning. Planning started in India within a few years of Independence. The resources expended, both internally and what could be obtained from outside, have been very considerable.

Yet what do we find after three decades of planning. It appears the planners got the wrong end of the stick at the very start. The plan schemes have seldom coincided with realities. India's planning is neither capitalistic nor communist. It is based on what they call 'Mixed Economy'.

Agriculture — the main sector — received some priority in the First Plan. It is again receiving some attention after a series of plans (when other considerations prevailed). But it has not yet received the priority it deserves.

The main emphasis has been on developing an industrial superstructure, with big industry as base. There has been some success in this. But the result has been more centralization, unhealthy and almost unmanageable urbanization, multiplication of bureaucracy on a frightening scale and polarization, riches accumulating at one end and poverty at the other.

With alarming increase in population the percentage of those classed as poor — at present nearly half of the total population — is likely to increase to a level when the process may become irreversible. Planning for whom?

Planning of course is not done in a vacuum. The total internal resources in the context of the total world situation at a given time, determine its directions.

The aims of the Indian planners are not at fault. Their methods are. Planning would become meaningless unless we are sure of the number for whom we are planning. The family planning methods in India have been a near failure. Some lessons could be drawn from what has been achieved in China where the problem is even more acute. By an effective use of incentives and punishment they have achieved some success.

The question of priorities is even more basic. What has been achieved by now in the industrial sphere can be made use of to develop agriculture speedily if priorities are strictly laid and adhered to.

This presupposes an administration committed to build up from the bottom onward. This would mean reversal of many policies. All parties in India claim to be secular and socialist. These claims have been made for long but so far India is neither socialist nor secular.

## **Socialism Applied to India**

The broad principle is to bring increasingly as large a sector in private control within the public sector as may be feasible. That is what has been attempted so far. Some vital spheres like banks, insurance, etc., have been taken over by the state. Many new departments have been started which it is claimed, will take the country to socialism.

The more the state has nationalized industry, the more the private sector has prospered. That is the dilemma of Indian economy. The Indian bourgeoisie has proved too clever for socialist ideologists.

## **Agriculture**

That is the real problem. India is still overwhelmingly rural and its economy hovers around agriculture. And around monsoons!

India remains a capitalist-bureaucratic state with all talk of socialism. The urban middle and capitalist classes totally control the state. Business and industry are largely in the hands of moneyed classes — a tradition that goes back to centuries and still remains unbroken.

The key points in administration are also in the hands of the same or allied groups.

But what is to be done with agriculture? The ruling bourgeois classes are interested in agriculture and the rural people the same way as their predecessors, the British Imperialists, were interested. Indian agriculture in its present largely undeveloped state must remain subordinate to industry and support the way of life the bourgeoisie have adopted imitating the former British rulers.

If certain sectors of industry have been taken over by the Government, *i.e.*, nationalized, why not agriculture where there are still exploiting feudal, big landholders, contributing little to the state exchequer?

In a socialist state there is no private property. How is the state control to be established over land?

Obviously by establishing large state-farms or collective farms as has been done in Russia and China. In these two countries there has been a communist revolution which replaced the previous social and economic structure by a new one, based on communist ideology.

India's revolution — if a revolution — was national bourgeois. The social and economic structure remains unaffected. Only the ruling class has changed. The Indian bourgeoisie has established a new bureaucracy largely drawn from its own ranks.

So how can you have collective or state farms when industry itself remains largely outside the state ownership?

In Nehru's time at the Nagpur Session of the Congress (1955) a resolution on co-operative farming was debated. Nehru strongly supported the resolution. Charan Singh from U.P. strongly opposed it. The resolution was adopted but it has remained only on paper.

The Congress and other parties — leaving out the real leftists — talk not of socialism but of a socialistic society. The two can be a good deal different.

There is no objection to service-cooperatives but land reforms must come first. This aspect has been much emphasized by the Swedish economist, Gunnar Myrdal in his classical book, *The Asian Drama — an enquiry into the poverty of nations*.

Institutional changes must be made both in agriculture and industry before Indian economy can become progressive.

The problem of land in India is the problem of its scarcity. Population is going up now by more than geometrical ratio — something even Malthus did not visualize but the land cannot be stretched. It remains static.

Most of the unmanageable holdings have been cut into bits and passed on to the landless. There are still some large holdings left but even with these the problem is not solved. Without a viable or economic holding agriculture ceases to be even a means of subsistence. The owner of an uneconomic holding starves. This is understood by everybody except the experts at New Delhi at Krishi Bhavan and the planners at the Yojna Bhavan. If planning in India is to make any sense, the disparities between agriculture and industry, the contrast between urban and rural life, the polarization of wealth and poverty, the sharp social divisions, these must be attacked first.

Looking back to developments before Independence, under provincial autonomy, agrarian laws were passed in all States, Congress and non-Congress. The Congress Party then was more progressive or at least it so appeared than the Unionist Party of Chhotu Ram in the Punjab. The Unionists however were the first to adopt legislation to improve conditions in rural areas, to curb unhealthy usurious practices of money-lenders and provide price support to agriculture produce, etc. The Congress accepted office in 1937 and passed similar laws protecting the interests of the small cultivators. The Unionists however had set the pace.

After Independence, the Congress has been more interested in industry and the development of urban areas, because of the dominance of the bourgeois classes.

One way of reversing the present policies is to study Gandhi and his system afresh.

Gandhi emphasized the need of decentralization in everything – politics, administration and economics. All power should be centralized, only retaining such control at the Centre and in provinces as was required by responsibilities to be discharged. Most other things should go down to the districts and lower down to villages, where *panchayats* must be self-contained governments.

The reverse has happened – more centralization, urbanization, bureaucratization and overall control by elitist, privileged classes, reducing the common people both in cities and villages to mere pawns in the game of electoral politics.

The community development programme launched in 1952 was followed by the Panchayati Raj Legislation – Nehru being the inspiration behind both. Both these programmes were mischievously diverted away from what they were aimed at.

We have gone through this long discussion on the peasant and his problems to approach the subject from a wider perspective necessitated by the existing conditions.

Chhotu Ram lived and worked in different times but what he has said and written about the peasant, agriculture and rural life as a whole is amazingly relevant to our own times.

Democracy, secularism and socialism become meaningless terms unless translated into action. In the Indian context it means divesting the vested interests and planning with village, agriculture and the peasant as the base.

Fazl-i-Hussain's Unionist Party which remained dominated by Muslim landlords was not inspired by Gandhian principle Chhotu Ram firmly believed in the constructive programmes of the Congress as framed by Gandhiji but being a member of a party not so fully committed to it, his own efforts remained circumscribed.

Chhotu Ram's significance lies in the fact that he attempted to do so much under such an unfavorable environment. In one sense his role has been almost prophetic. In the controversies that arose in his times, of which he was the main centre, he was blamed by the Congress and other nationalist leaders for having become an instrument in the hands of reactionary, feudal and bureaucratic elements.

Chhotu Ram used to retort that he was laying down the real foundation of Swaraj by working for the rural areas. His involvement with the peasant was so passionate and total that he became in his person the embodiment of rural India.

In the Punjab, under the Unionist regime, a strong peasant movement had developed and the Government which represented the Punjab peasantry had helped in creating strong consciousness amongst the peasantry and the rural areas as a whole.

That the peasantry had become class conscious is clear from the fact that in West Punjab (present Pakistan) the entire peasant population, including the big landlords, supported the stand taken by the Premier Sir Khizar Hyat Khan and Sir Chhotu Ram against the Muslim League regarding the creation of Pakistan.

Sir John Lawrence who later became Governor-General had spent most of his time in the Punjab and founded there what has been described as a 'School of Paternalistic Administration'. Amongst the disciples, he had such distinguished civilians as Montgomery, Darling, Bayne, Jacob and Abbot. The Unionist government further developed this tradition and created a rural consciousness which defied the Pakistan-wave, when other provinces had been overwhelmed. The migration of 8 million Muslims from India to the area marked for Pakistan, destroyed the cohesion which had existed there for centuries. West Pakistan became dominated by the urban Muslims who had immigrated from India and on this side the East Punjab, (now part of the Indian Union) was dominated by the Congress Party, which again was urban dominated.

We have already mentioned that both the Congress and the Muslim League, the two dominating parties at the time of partition, adopted programmes and policies which adversely affected agriculturists in both the countries. Before Independence, the united Punjab was so prosperous agriculturally that it met the food needs of the rest of India. After partition because of the anti-rural programmes of the Muslim League and subsequently of all other parties that followed. West Pakistan became a deficit area in food which it still continues to be. In India also there was food deficiency in spite of strenuous efforts through planning to increase production and it is only recently that the country has acquired a modicum of self-sufficiency. Both the countries continued the political system they had inherited from the British with the result that the economic and social development, expected has not materialized.

The peasantry in both countries has been ignored as compared to the upper and middle classes.

There can be no real prosperity either in Pakistan or in India or for that matter in Bangla Desh unless the policies followed by the governments of these countries are reversed. The peasantry in all the three countries is not organized effectively and unless the rural people are able to assert themselves, it is unlikely that economic and social conditions can markedly be improved.



We are really dealing with a dilemma. Unless the peasants through strong organization snatch political power, their social and economic conditions cannot improve. But they cannot acquire political power unless they become economically and socially strong.

Economic and social conditions in the three countries of this sub-continent have been stagnant and the lower classes particularly in the rural areas have suffered the most in spite of large scale planning. The planned schemes have till now been biased in favor of the middle and upper classes and the peasantry and rural problems have not received due consideration. If conditions continuously deteriorate, there may be a breakdown of the present system without an alternative.

## Social and Political Philosophy

Environments determine how a person will grow but whereas an ordinary man is totally dominated by his surroundings, a great man will outgrow them. Circumstances, and physical conditions, play, an important part but an exceptional person will ultimately master, them and fulfill his destiny.

Some of, the greatest achievements were made under most difficult and .adverse conditions. There is no easy way to eminence.

The age in which a person lives also becomes an important factor. The only way, these limitations can be overcome is by strong will and determination — that is strong character — a deep-rooted and unshakable belief in one's own capacity and destiny.

Chhotu Ram was a great linguist, which helped him to master Hindi, Sanskrit, Persian and Urdu, in addition to English. He had a highly developed literary style and whatever time he could save from a busy public life, he gave to books and newspapers.

He was greatly attracted to Dr Sir Mohammad Iqbal — poet and philosopher, although politically their views were far apart.

He made a rare mastery of his poetry and was greatly inspired by certain aspects of his life-philosophy.

What impressed him most was the poet's concept of 'Khudi' 'personality' (self).

*'Khudi-ko-kar buland itna — ki har Taqdir Sai Pahlai Khuda bandai sa yaiun puchhai — bata tairi raza kaya hai'*

("Raise thyself to such a height that God Himself may be obliged to ask thee 'What destiny wilt thou have?")

Again addressing humanity in general Iqbal says:

*'Yakin Mohkim, amal pahani, mohabbat fathe allam Zihade jindgani main hain yaih mardaon ki sham-sherain':*

("Firm faith, incessant action, and all conquering love, are the true weapons of warriors in the battle of life").

Addressing the peasant, the poet of the East says:

*'Kayon giraftrai Tilsam. haitch mikdari hai tu daikh tau poshida tujh main shaukatai thufan bhi ha'.*

("Why art thou the victim of faint-heartedness? Look inwards. Thou hast the might of a storm hidden in thee.")

I have selected these most typical verses from Iqbal, which Chhotu Ram frequently recited before his rural audiences. These gave Chhotu Ram a firm faith in his own mission which was to galvanize the vast potentialities of the Punjab peasantry. Once the peasant realized his own hidden powers, it would raise a storm changing everything, he believed. Chhotu Ram started well at Rohtak. His first effort was to establish himself as a lawyer although the thought of joining his profession to give service to his people was always uppermost in his mind.

The period from 1912 when he settled down at Rohtak to 1920 when he left the Congress, had given rise to various ideas that later fixed the final course of his political career. He does not appear to have entertained very ambitious plans during this period, as scope in public life was limited. He occupied himself with spade work, like opening the Jat High School, one of the earliest of its kind in Haryana, starting the Weekly paper *Jat Gazette*, work for the Congress Party of which he was district president, etc. Such public eminence as was then possible, he left to his senior colleague and friend Ch. Lal Chand.

The First World War provided new opportunities. Rohtak, home of martial races came into its own. The Government was impressed by Chhotu Ram's public activities and depended entirely on him for galvanizing the people in war support. He was made Secretary of the District Recruiting Body.

Through his colleague Lal Chand, Chhotu Ram succeeded in making the Punjab government accept the proposal of separate rural and urban constituencies as basis of representation in the Punjab Council, that was to be constituted under 1919 Reforms.

That was an important step onward, though its significance was so little realized at the time, that Fazl-i-Hussain had opposed the proposal.

Chhotu Ram throughout this period was projecting Lal Chand as the future political leader of Haryana. He was satisfied to be his junior colleague.

He appears, however, to have matured a good deal by this time and already he was writing articles in newspapers, including his own Weekly, *Jat Gazette* propagating his future plans and policies.

He criticized the first Punjab Ministry formed in 1920, as both Fazl-i-Hussain and Harkishan Lal – the two ministers – were urbanites, the rural people going unrepresented. Fazl-i-Hussain was considered more urban than rural at that time.

In the second Ministry in 1923 Lal Chand was included but he had to leave due to an election petition.

This brought in Chhotu Ram himself and it is from this point onward, his planning for the future began in an ambitious way. His first experience as Minister (1924-26) made him realize this complacently indifferent way the bureaucratic machinery functioned being almost inaccessible at the Simla heights or equally remote at Lahore, placing an insurmountable distance between the people, the vast majority that lived in widely dispersed areas and the closed official world.

For one full decade 1926-36, Chhotu Ram was in Opposition. It is during this period he developed his political philosophy, based on the realities of the hard rural life in the Punjab. He was heading a political party dominated, numerically by its Muslim feudal elements, whose representatives like Sikander, Feroz, Daultana, Shahbuddin and others, were not actuated by any ideological considerations but mainly moved by thoughts of their own political ambitions. All of them occupied important lucrative offices during this period but the leader himself was toiling almost alone, highly respected for his sacrifices but without any power except that of organization and agitation.

Fazl-i-Hussain looked on benevolently from his high perch at Simla or New Delhi.

The speeches Chhotu Ram made in the Punjab Council, the frequent contributions he made to the press – limiting himself to the problems faced by the peasantry, and the large number of meetings and conferences he organized all over the Punjab – these brought about a new consciousness, slow as it was, which paved the way for the success of the Unionist Party at the end of this decade.

This was a most fruitful decade for Chhotu Ram, for having been left to his own resources, it brought out the best in him.

He developed a political, social and economic ideology which made rural Punjab throb with new awakening.

It did not exist before and it could not have happened without Chhotu Ram.

He applied the devastating and disturbing philosophy of poet Iqbal to stir the vast and immobile mass, which was the Punjab peasantry, unconscious of its own self, hardly feeling that it existed as anything else than an object of exploitation by others.

This is what a truly great man does. He moves the people to goad them to a new level of consciousness. Gandhi did it on a far larger scale but Chhotu Ram, so different in his methods, did the same in a significant way.

### **Source of His Convictions**

In reply to an address presented to Chhotu Ram at Rohtak in 1942 to celebrate his 61st birthday, he revealed the sources of his convictions. Apart from Iqbal he said he was greatly inspired by Gita – (the Song Celestial) in which Lord Krishna advised warrior Arjuna, amongst other things:

"Thou shalt not depart from the path of duty by any hope of reward or fear of penalty; thy concern is only with action, not with the fruit thereof ... In the performance of the duty thou shalt be indifferent to comfort and discomfort, to gain and loss, to victory and defeat."

"I have a deep conviction, in the teachings of Lord Krishna. This conviction reflects the inner soul of my politics, and constitutes the real philosophy of my life. I have chosen the path of serving the weak and raising the fallen, according to my own lights and I have selected the agricultural classes as the symbol of weakness and as the standard-bearer of the army of rescue and relief against the forces of social tyranny and economic exploitation," Chhotu Ram explained. He mentioned yet another source that helped him to follow the course he did.

"I was born and brought up in rural surroundings which gave me a close and deep insight into the handicaps, difficulties, trials and tribulations of the rural population. This insight could not have failed to influence the whole course of my psychological and moral growth. Side by side with the imperceptible and constant working of this factor a deep and passionate love for the Jat tribe in which I was born, warmed my heart from early life. A Sanskrat couplet which I read in one of my text-books the Hitopadesha, for the first time in 1897, sowed in my young breast the seed of the inchoate desire which in later years grew into a powerful passion for uplifting my tribe, educationally, socially, economically and politically. The simple rendering of this couplet in English is: In the ordinary course of nature thousands upon thousands are born every day, but he alone is truly born, whose birth leads to the elevation of his race'."

Chhotu Ram must have developed these convictions at a very early stage of his career, for amongst the difficulties and hurdles that his rural environments presented, a lesser man would have reconciled himself with facts of life.

Chhotu Ram persisted. When a person is so passionately dedicated to certain ideals, difficulties move out of the way and helpful hands descend, unexpectedly out of the blue.

Seth Chhaju Ram entered Chhotu Ram's life and pulled him through the last stage of his student life and then Raja Ram Pal Singh came to his rescue twice. At Agra he was lucky in his early years and the contacts he then made increased his sphere of influence.

### **Social and Political Philosophy**

But Chhotu Ram learnt the facts of life the hard way. Fazl-i-Hussain's association helped considerably but the two men had come from different backgrounds.

Fazli's father was a Sessions Judge and he never experienced the financial and other difficulties Chhotu Ram did.

Fazl-i-Hussain was a man of great integrity, firm of principle and intellectually superior to most of his contemporaries but politics remained for him a game to be played from the drawing room. He never faced the tumult and shouting on the street and as a Muslim he had an advantageous position in the Punjab — a province where the majority community looked up to him for leadership.

Chhotu Ram had no such advantages. But his hardships and adverse circumstances proved to be a blessing in disguise.

He used to repeat at his rural conferences a popular verse of Iqbal — his favorite poet;

*'Tundia badai mukhalif sa na ghabra aiy uqqab — Yah toh chalti hain tujhe uncha udana kai-liya.'*

("Do not get disheartened by the fury of the adverse winds, O Eagle, These blow to enable you to fly still higher.")

During the early thirties, things were going hard for Chhotu Ram. He had missed ministership a second time and because of his strong criticism of the Government both from the platform and the press, the bureaucracy had turned very hostile towards him. Fazl-i-Hussain was away at Delhi in his high office and the Muslim ministers from his party in the Punjab were thoroughly engrossed in pomp and show, in their well-paid posts. Sikander, Feroz, Shahbuddin all of them held cushioned jobs. Ahmad Yar, a

crony of Sikander but a loyal Unionist and much devoted to Chhotu Ram shared his enthusiasm for party work, but an element of self-interest entered there. He was one of the highly encumbered feudal lords of Multan and Chhotu Ram's debt legislation was a source of much relief, keeping him financially alive.

The small peasants in Western Punjab, most of them, tenants were placed similarly as the Haryana peasant — proprietors (traditionally called *zamindars*). They had small holdings, hardly enough to provide them subsistence.

The Punjab peasant's plight deteriorating every day moved Chhotu Ram to his depths. He decided to depict the peasant as he saw him in a small pamphlet '*Bachara Zamindar*' (Helpless Peasant) to which we have already referred.

The pamphlet graphically described the peasant but it was also a call for action. A few samples given below will show how in his passion for protecting this helpless creature, Chhotu Ram produced a literary masterpiece, which moves all those acquainted with the sufferings and ordeals of the man behind the plough.

The pamphlet starts by describing the peasant as an anomaly, in the modern age, an anachronism, with hardly any identity and no impact anywhere.

"The modern age is one of science, education art and culture, speech, writing, organization count. The peasant knows nothing of these. He is a relic of something past and dead. But his faith that justice will be done unto him is pathetic. Oh how simple and naive."

"But strange that I should at all pose these questions. The most dominating trait of the peasant is while seeing everything to see nothing. His eyesight can make him see something really very obvious like a well or a village pond. He stumbles hundred times, on the same stone. That is what distinguishes him most."

"This world has changed miraculously. The Kisan remains what he has been, a relic of the old, unchanged and unchangeable. He has the same old plough, the same cart, the same Persian wheel, the same old tools and implements."

"The Kisan is dumb, deaf and speechless." Chhotu Ram quotes a line from Iqbal:

*'Khamoshi guftgu hai, baizabani hai zaban meri.'*

("Silence is my speech, my tongue being incapable of any expression")

This is the most characteristic trait of the peasant. Driving his point further home, Chhotu Ram quotes other verses from Iqbal, which though written in a different context depict the Kisan admirably:

*"Baka ki phikar kar nadan, mussibat anai wali hai  
tri barbadyon kai muswarai hain asmanon, main  
Zara daik iss ko jo khuch ho raha hai honai wala hai  
dhara kai hai bhalla Ahda khohan ki dastanon main."*

*"Yah khamoshi kahan tak, Lizzata faryad paida kar  
Zamin par tu hao and tari sada hao asmanon par."*

("O Thoughtless one, think of the future, some calamity is about to come; the elements are conspiring to destroy you; think of what is happening and is likely to happen; what is the use of old bygone tales? How long will you remain dumb? Create in yourself the power of speech, so that while you are on the ground, your voice resounds in the skies.")

That was Chhotu Ram's clarion call for action. He wanted the dumb – speechless peasant to raise his voice, so that his enemies and exploiters may find their peace disturbed.

A popular song that the Bhajan parties, organized by the Zamindara League sang at rural gatherings ran as follows:

*"Jaida nahin zamindar bus Doa bat main lai,  
Ik boalna Lal seekh ik dusman pahchan lai."*

(Just understand two things my dear peasant. Recognize your enemy and learn how to speak.)

Warning the peasant against all those who were robbing him day and night on one pretext or the-other, Chhotu Ram wrote:

*"Wake up, O Kisan; be alert, gather your wits, the world around is full of cheats;  
and you are easy prey. Those very people for whom you labor, are after your  
blood."*

You do not even know how you are exploited. They appear in various garbs; one a religious guide (Peer), another a prophet (a Hindu religious leader) someone as a creditor charging exorbitant interest and another makes you to give bribe, some appear as customers, others as salesmen, some rob you through *arhat* (fee charged in grain market); some, through commission of all kinds; you lose in



whatever transaction you make; your goods are taken cheap; and you are given under-weight. If you are well-to-do, '*doom*', '*bhat*', and '*mirasi*', befool you to part with your wealth through flattery and if you are poor, the Sahukar will squeeze the last drop of your blood."

How to cope with such a dreadful fate? Chhotu Ram prescribes the remedy, if only the peasant will listen.

"You can save yourself, O Kisan! only through well-planned action, by loudly mouthing your grievances, not by showing weakness but strength, not by appearing helpless but by preparing yourself for struggle."

At another place in the book, Chhotu Ram thus sums up the lot of the peasant:

"Frankly speaking, what actually is the peasant? A moving picture of sadness and pity, an embodiment of all woes. His heart is totally pierced by countless troubles, but he does not possess the faculty to express them. If he has a mouth there is no tongue in it.

The moment the peasant gains the faculty of speech and learns to express himself, his exploiters will find the earth moving from under their feet, there would be an earthquake all around. The government which, because of its ignorance and arrogance, is indifferent, will get so disturbed as to lose all its complacency. All those misleading the government by flattery and falsehood, will involve the existing system into . greatest catastrophe."

Chhotu Ram raised the important issue of the ownership rights in land.

"Under the existing laws the ownership of the land is vested in the government and the peasant is no more than a tenant. This means the government can remove the peasant from the land and is otherwise free to interfere in various ways, because of its right of ownership."

Chhotu Ram questioned this system. He tried to show why this position, taken up by the government under laws framed by itself, was untenable.

The land was cultivated by the people much before there was any government, he argued. He pointed out that the claim of the British government to have inherited the right of ownership from previous governments — those of the Muslim and before that of the Hindus — was not well founded because those governments never claimed the right of ownership, the way the British did.

The system of assessment according to which every inch of land was taxed was most iniquitous, Chhotu Ram pointed out. In every system of taxation, for instance, a certain portion of income was tax-free, such as in the case of income tax. But that principle was not applicable in the case of land revenue, where even the smallest cultivator had to pay in full.

Chhotu Ram pointed out that the government could increase land-revenue by Executive Order and the Legislative Council had no say in the matter. Even a subsequent amendment which brought the reports of Settlement Officers within the jurisdiction of the Council, simultaneously authorized the government to ignore the Council as the legislature had been given only nominal powers in this respect.

The cultivators being mostly illiterate, were never in a position to know why and how these increases were made. The government could also increase other charges such as fees on mutation of a holding, irrigation charges and cess on well-irrigation etc.

The representatives of the peasants in the Legislative Council could do little to protect the peasants against these executive powers of the government. The government was able to impose all these taxes arbitrarily because the peasant had no means of effective protest. About the time when Chhotu Ram was writing (early thirties) the peasant was really in a most helpless position. Apart from all the taxes there was another tax called 'Chaukidara'.

A *chaukidar* was maintained in every village. He was controlled by officials at the lower hierarchy, but he was a financial burden on the village for doing hardly anything of direct benefit to the villagers. His main job was to run errands from the village to police-station and other places and vice-versa. He was supposed to keep watch at night but even this was done in a perfunctory way, if at all.

Chhotu Ram contrasted this with the position in towns and cities where government maintained a police force to ensure the security of the urban people at its own cost.

The Punjab budget in those days came to about 12 crores on an average. Of this about 10 crores came from the peasantry as land revenue and irrigation charges. Excise gave about a crore and a similar amount came from stamp duties. The villagers contributed substantially even to these items. The only tax paid by the urban people, though not exclusively, as well-to-do people in the village also contributed to it, was income tax. This was not very high in those days and being a central tax, only a small share came to the provinces.

The bulk of this income went in maintaining the Government departments or providing facilities to the urban people.

Chhotu Ram concluded this chapter of his book with a clarion call to the peasant to rise and fight against the injustices inflicted on him by a callous system of government. He wrote:

"The government and the urban people belittle the sufferings of the rural people. These are of no concern to them.

On the other hand, if there is any inconvenience to the urban people real or imaginary, they shout to the skies and the newspapers raise a hue and cry. There are torrential speeches from countless platforms. The government at once gets scared and action follows in no time. Steps are taken to satisfy the urban people because, they are vocal.

But who bothers about the Kisan — poor, hungry, his back broken by taxes and debt — but who bothers? The government does not believe that the peasant is so badly off."

The conditions have not markedly changed after these many years in Free India. This only reinforces what Chhotu Ram said in those pre-Independence days. Chhotu Ram holds the peasant himself responsible for his plight.

"My dear Kisan; have you ever given thought to your helpless condition? Why are you lying crushed under poverty? Let me tell you the main cause of your helplessness. You have not recognized yourself. You have so far considered yourself weak and humble. Others also consider you to be so. But if you rise to your consciousness and organize yourself, the power and hidden force within, will be released, taking everybody by surprise. You are suffering from an inferiority complex. Shake yourself out of this and you will see a storm will rise drowning all your exploiters. You will then come into your own real self."

Chhotu Ram attached great importance to public services, which in his time were mostly manned by the urban middle classes. The rural areas could not compete with the urban intelligentsia on equal terms because of lack of educational facilities. He wrote:

"The government spends annually between 2 to 3 crores on the salaries of its employees. The bulk of the money comes from the rural people, but they have no share in government services."

"The government had decided in 1919 to reserve certain percentage of jobs for the rural areas. Upto today (1933) I nothing has been done to implement it."

"It is difficult to believe that any improvement will be possible in the near future as the criterion of recruitment militates against the candidates from rural areas,

the subjects of examination being purely literary. In the IGS the overwhelming majority is of those drawn from urban population. During the next ten years out of 29 districts in the Punjab, 20 of them will have non-agriculturist Deputy Commissioners, which will affect the representation of agriculturists in other departments too. If the government is serious to do justice to the rural people, they should change the present system of recruitment. For instance in the recruitment to the ICS there should be at least 2 or 3 subjects which are essential for making them really effective field officers. They may be required to undergo certain tests of physical stamina, such as to undertake a journey of 10 or 15 miles on a moonless night on foot or on horse."

## Religion and Politics

Religion has been the bane of Indian politics. Even those leaders and political parties apparently secular, are often found wanting on crucial occasions.

Chhotu Ram is one great exception. There is hardly any other example in Indian politics when a person stood four square against all forces that confused religion with politics.

We have already noticed the gradual evolution of Chhotu Ram as a secular leader. He was at first an Arya Samaji, then joined the Congress and finally along with Fazl-i-Hussain organized the Unionist Party on a non-religious, secular principle based on "the community of economic interests.

For many years he was victim of a virulent campaign in the communal press in the Punjab which painted him as a reactionary in league with the British government and feudal elements in the Muslim community.

Chhotu Ram had to work hard to counteract this propaganda. It required considerable courage to challenge the deep-rooted religious fanaticism which dominated Punjab politics.

"The Congress, Muslim League, Sikh League, Chief Khals, Diwan and Hindu Sabha — all these are dominated by urban elements."

Chhotu Ram wrote in *Bachara Zamindar*:

"I call upon the Punjab peasants to leave these parties to the urban people. The Kisans should organize themselves separately by developing a new consciousness and chalk out a new path for their salvation."

"Leave religion to the four corners of the temple, the mosque, and the Gurudwara. Release yourself from the bondage of the Maulvis, the Pandits and

the Granthis. Do whatever you feel in observing your religious tenets but keep it strictly outside politics."

"I believe firmly that the Kisan is now coming together on a common political platform after getting out of the clutches of religious fanatics."

Addressing himself to the government and the non-agriculturists, Chhotu Ram said:

"The Kisan is the centre of all economic and political life in the Punjab. The prosperity of every other section depends on the prosperity of the Kisan ... If the Kisan survives, everybody survives. If he dies then everything will get destroyed."

He quoted a couplet from Iqbal in support of his thesis:

*"Maira rona nahin rona hai  
yah sarai gulstan ka,  
Voh gul huon main, khizan  
har gul ki hai goya khizan mairi."*

"(If I [Kisan] weep, the whole world weeps; I am that flower, whose autumn is the autumn of every other flower.)"

Continuing the refrain, Chhotu Ram wrote:

"There is no other being so innocent in thought, action, behavior and in dealings with others. But look at his ill-fate. He is victim of exploitation from all sides. He is bound in shackles, hands and feet, by laws, rules, customs, that have descended on him through the vicissitudes of historic forces ... The Kisan is silent, as if he has no voice. But every vein of his muscle and every part of his body vocally depict his tale of woe. The main producer of the nation's wealth is often faced with starvation and the good things of life, he produces in abundance are not his lot to enjoy.

He again quotes Iqbal:

*'Wawaai nadani, ki tuu mohtazai saki ho gaya  
mai bhi tuu, maina bhi tuu, saki bhi tau, mahfil bhi tau.'*

("What fool-hardiness: You have become dependent on the wine-giver; when wine, the wine-container, wine-giver, and the Mahfil [those present on the occasion] – all belong to you, you being the embodiment of all.")

## Way to Salvation

After having diagnosed the disease, Chhotu Ram prescribes the remedy. He now turns to the Kisan and shakes him up from the inertia and deep sleep that his enemies have induced in him to exploit him fully. The Kisan must organize himself and shout his grievances. The Kisan has accepted the assessment that others have made of him. He has been placed low in the scale, but actually he is the single most important category that keeps the whole social fabric functioning. The Kisan has been made dependent on everybody else and he is in mighty terror of governmental functionaries, and the *sahukar* who squeezes him like a lemon.

Even the village menials consider him inferior while living on him. Chhotu Ram uses different methods, speaks to the Kisan in phrases that would go home and goads him to rebel against the system that has held him captive. He wants the Kisan to challenge all his enemies by setting up his own political organization – the Zamindara League – the instrument with which to defeat his opponents.

The key to the emancipation, Chhotu Ram emphasizes on the Kisan, is in recognizing his own hidden powers, and know his real self. He used to relate the fable of the cub of a tiger which got mixed up with a flock of sheep and for a long time thought itself one of them. Once he saw his face in water and realized that he was different and superior to them all.

Chhotu Ram said the same was true of the Kisan. Once the Kisan realized that the position was the reverse of what he had so far understood, there would be social convulsions, bringing to an end the exploitation from which the peasant has suffered.

### **Organization (*sangathan*)**

It is not easy to organize the huge, peasant-mass dispersed over thousands of hamlets and villages without any effective line of communication.

In contrast the cities and towns have all the means that make them function as a sensitive sector, aware of their interests and in a position to safeguard the same.

In the Punjab Council the rural representatives had an absolute majority. The Unionist Party that commanded the allegiance of the majority of these members was in office for more than two decades from 1923 to 1946.

Yet at the end of it, it could not be said that the rural community had realized its real interests and was in a position to defend them. If this were so, the Punjab could not have been split and the country would have been spared the consequences that followed. But as long as Chhotu Ram lived he succeeded in keeping the disruptive forces at bay.

When he expired on the morning of January 9, 1945, his last words were, "I am going; may God help all".

After Chhotu Ram, the deluge came in the form of the partition.

Considering that it was a one-man effort, Chhotu Ram succeeded substantially in creating a consciousness amongst the rural people generally and the Kisan's in particular, of their identity. By *sangathan* (organization) Chhotu Ram meant to mould the vast rural sector into an instrument to safeguard their interests by making them vocal through press and platform. He planned to have a Central Zamindara-League with headquarters at Lahore, a branch at every district and sub-branches down below to tehsil, thana, and village levels.

He was keen to start one English daily and two or three other newspapers in vernaculars to reach the various regions at the districts. His aim was to make intimate contacts with the masses in the villages.

Chhotu Ram concluded *Baichara Zamindar*: the political manifesto of the peasantry, comparable with the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 with the following peroration:

"If there is any life left in the Kisan and he wants to live with self-respect, he would have to modernize his outlook. In the 20th century one cannot fight with outmoded tools. The new instruments are organization and propaganda. The Kisans should unite to safeguard their interests. In particular they should guard themselves against the false religious cry."

Adopting the Marxist phraseology Chhotu Ram declared religion to be "the opium" that made the Kisan politically dull and lifeless.

He ended the long discourse aimed at firing the peasantry with new spirit with appropriate verses from Iqbal.

'Mahftl main purani dastan ko nai chhair,  
rang par jao ab nai aiya oun fisonaon ko nai chhair',

("Do not relate old tales in the present company; do not talk of things which do not suit the present occasion").

'Nahin begangi acchchhi rufikai rahai manzil sa'

("Do not become indifferent to those who are your companions in journey.")

'Na rah apno sa bagana is main kher hai teri

*Agar manzoor hai dimiya main o begani-khu rahni!*

("If you want to survive do not become indifferent to those who are your own.")

*'Yahi ainain kudrat hai, yahi aslooba fitrat hai  
Jo hai rahai amal main gamzan mahbooba fitrat hai.'*

("Only those are the beloved of nature who are constantly engaged in action").

And finally:

*"Cbaman jara 'Mahhobat' main khamoshi mot hai bulbul  
Yahan ki zindgi pabandai rasmain phughan tak hai.'*

("In the world of 'Love' O Bulbul, to remain silent is to invite death. This is a sphere where only loud clamor is appropriate.")<sup>29</sup>

I have given above some important extracts from Baichara Zamindar which Chhotu Ram wrote when Punjab peasantry had few friends and many enemies. It is not a message of pessimism but of hope and optimism.

Without doubting for a moment the correctness of the path he had adopted, he worked with rare dedication and steadfastness, for more than two decades. At the end of it, when Provincial Autonomy was first implemented in 1937, Sikander Hyat, a glamorous personality of the times — became the first Premier of the Punjab at the head of a party composed largely of the peasants, but everybody knew that the man who made that possible was Chhotu Ram.

### **Chhotu Ram's Detractors**

A man who would not mince words and call everything by its right name could not expect to go unchallenged. This is more so in the case of Chhotu Ram for he was frank to the point of bluntness. He said what he felt. He never tried to moderate his language, when he felt strongly. Where the interests of the peasantry were concerned he crossed swords with the British Governors and on several occasions he joined issue with the British Viceroy.

He gave his mind unambiguously to such eminent public leaders as Mahatma Gandhi and M.A. Jinnah.

Once he wrote to a political opponent;

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<sup>29</sup> In the above verse, Chhotu Ram used to replace the word 'Love' by 'Siyasat'.



"I am neither thick-skinned nor thin-skinned. I am a normal man with a normal man's feelings. I do not believe in Christ's teaching that you turn your right cheek also, if you are smitten on the left. I believe in the teaching of Moses; an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. If you hurl a stone at me, I will hurl a heavier stone at you. Please do not squeal when you are hit. I promise you, I won't."

So that was, Chhotu Ram, and naturally he evoked strong feelings. He was the stormy petrel of Punjab politics. He was always the centre of debate and controversy.

His detractors may be divided broadly into two groups. There were those who admired him as a man of unimpeachable character, but regretted he had gone to the wrong side. He was once a Congress man and headed the party at the district level. Some of his old colleagues felt that he left the Congress because he was tempted by the lure of opportunities under the Montford Reforms.

The same charge has been made against Fazl-i-Hussain who like Chhotu Ram was an eminent Congress man for many years, but like him left the party on the non-cooperation issue. There is no doubt that there was great similarity in the programmes of the Congress and the Unionist Party. But there was a basic difference. The Congress believed with considerable truth that the main problem before the country was to achieve political freedom. The so-called Reforms which the British were doling out from time to time were merely pretexts to prolong their own stay by creating differences between the various sections. The Congress charged the Unionists with going over to the enemy – the bureaucracy and its feudal supporters.

This raises an important point. Chhotu Ram has explained his change over by saying that non-cooperation instead of leading to political Independence would only create conditions of lawlessness. Power could not be captured in India under the existing conditions by either violence on small or large scale or by organizing civil disobedience movements. The safest and also the quickest way was to establish Hindu-Muslim unity and then press the national demand through constitutional methods.

India became free ultimately in 1947 mainly because of international conditions. British imperialism retreated because it had no means of holding its world-wide possessions due to the new forces that not only liquidated imperialism everywhere but gave rise to a new world order.

The Congress failed to achieve Hindu-Muslim unity and as a result lost one of its most cherished objectives, namely a United State of free India.

But the argument does not end there. Chhotu Ram had the caliber of rising to the status of a front rank national leader. He confined himself to the Punjab and remained

reluctant to leave the provincial sphere even when opportunities came towards the close of his career. He even refused to become Prime Minister of the Punjab when Sikander made the proposal. Chhotu Ram believed that the Congress – the only national organization he could join was dominated by urban middle class people whose vital interests clashed with the peasantry. Personally he would have acquired some eminence if he had chosen to work through the Congress but he would have failed to establish the separate identity of the rural people, which the Unionists did succeed in a marked way so far as the Punjab was concerned.

If Sikander and Chhotu Ram had lived longer it is possible that the Punjab peasantry would have successfully defied all attempts to divide the Punjab.

That would have changed the course of history. There is another class of detractors who do not consider Chhotu Ram to have been progressive enough to withstand the dominance of the feudal elements in the Unionist Party. The land remained in the hands of comparatively big landholders except in the South-East (Haryana region) and it is this section of zamindars that benefited largely from the agrarian legislation of the Unionist Party. Chhotu Ram himself had no sympathy with big landholders and at his own level he always favored the smaller peasants and even the tenants and landless laborers.

Madan Gopal in his biography of Chhotu Ram has made the following comments in this regard:

"During his regime as Minister under Diarchy and Provincial Autonomy, Sir Chhotu Ram had been the instrument in getting a number of Bills passed to safeguard the interests of the peasants and the field laborer in preference to those of landed aristocrats.

Very small holdings have been exempted from the payment of revenue; Jinshi Batai has been abolished in districts like Dera-Gazi-Khan, the Abiana (irrigation charges) has been reduced; rural indebtedness has been greatly reduced and finally the Agricultural Marketing Act, the Benami Act, and the Land-Alienation Amendment Act, have been passed – these Acts have been differently called, as the 'Golden Bills' and the 'Black Bills'.

Most of these were drafted by Sir Chhotu Ram to the last word. When I pointed out that 81 percent land in the province was being owned by 19 percent of the population and that the agriculturist could not be helped materially so long as the big estates remained intact, he said:

'But that is too hasty and revolutionary a step. It shall come one day, may be 20 years or 50 years. The Tenancy Laws are at present under the Federal Legislature

and we cannot do anything in this connection. Where I can do anything, I certainly do my bit. For instance, whereas government land previously auctioned yearly was taken up by big landlords, whose lands lay contiguous to those tracts, more than 70 percent of this land now goes to those who have very small holdings'."

Chhotu Ram did not claim to be a revolutionary as his methods were confined to bring about change in rural areas by progressive legislative, administrative and economic measures. As this question has been raised by several critics, not all friends of the small peasant, we may go into the matter more minutely.

According to H. Culvert<sup>30</sup> the distribution of agricultural land in the Punjab at the time between various categories was as follows: 15.5 percent had 61.3; 26.2 had 26.6 and the remaining 58.3 holders possessed 12 percent of the land. According to the size of holdings, this worked out, giving 2.2 acres or less to 58.3 percent holders, 8.4 acres to 26.2 percent holders (or even less) whereas 15.5 percent had land varying between 32 to 61 acres per holder.

This relates to the Punjab as a whole. This is not true, however, about the central and south-east districts where the number of those having large holdings was smaller. This was particularly so with regard to districts in Haryana region (Ambala Division) where Chhotu Ram was directly concerned. In these two tracts, which constituted a little less than half of the province, the average holding was somewhat larger because the big zamindars were fewer.

But obviously there was a fair number of big zamindars in the Punjab particularly in the north-west the majority of whom was Muslim, with a sprinkling of Sikhs.

These bigger holdings have a historical background. Some of these big landlords, which included many princely States, traced their rise to the coming of the British. Quite a few of these were remnants of the feudal aristocracy of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's regime.

The British also, after the Mutiny, when Haryana became a part of the conquered Punjab, had concentrated on the development of the western parts which saw the rise of many prosperous canal colonies.

The Punjab being the sword arm of India, land was awarded to those who helped the British government during wars. The landed aristocracy of the Punjab was thus the result of these various historical factors.

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<sup>30</sup> H. Culvert, *The Wealth and Welfare of the Punjab* (Lahore 1936) p. 166.

But supposing there were large landholders in the Punjab and most of the land was in their control, what do the critics aim to establish? Was Chhotu Ram a friend of the rich or of the poor? Was he a reactionary in league with the feudal landlords of the western parts, working for the exploitation of the small cultivators under the mask of being their friend?

A sustained and virulent propaganda was carried on for a long time by the Hindu Mahasabha lobby at Lahore which controlled a powerful press but all the mud with which they smeared Chhotu Ram boomeranged to blacken their own faces. Chhotu Ram was not the friend of the exploiting feudal elements which undoubtedly existed in the Unionist Party. Whenever opportunity presented itself he upheld the cause of the small proprietor, the holder of a few acres and also of the landless and the share-cropper. Indian agriculture needs institutional changes to safeguard the interests of the actual cultivators. This applied to the Punjab of Chhotu Ram's time also.

The average holding in the Punjab at that time was larger than is the case now although it was not always viable even then. The problem of a viable holding, *i.e.*, holding below which cultivation would not be worthwhile has not been satisfactorily worked out even after these several decades of Independence when so much planning has been undertaken.

In the pre- Independence Punjab, the problem was not so much of small holdings as lack of facilities, like irrigation and even more the exploitation of the peasantry through excessive taxation and by the money-lenders who stripped the peasant naked by usurious practices.

The pressure on land has now increased so much due to increase of rural population without sufficient outlet for employment in industry that the question of the size of the holding has become the central issue. Yet so little have the planners grasped this issue that they continue harping on land reforms which have been difficult to implement, without scientifically working for an integrated plan where agriculture and industry could fit in a proper perspective.

Chhotu Ram had raised certain basic questions in his times, which still remain unanswered.

The rural population as a whole, was ignored under the colonial rule and it still remains the backyard of the nationalist bourgeois hierarchy of rulers that replaced the British bureaucracy. There must be re-distribution of land so that the idle landlord does not live on the labor of the real producer but what about industry?

The Congress governments one after the other have been living on the slogan 'Land to the tiller' and most of the land has changed hands to the extent of rendering the

majority of the holdings uneconomic, making them a losing proposition, agriculturally speaking.

The statistics published by the government itself, admit that about, a score of big capitalists control the bulk of the nation's industrial wealth.

Some of the industries have no doubt been nationalized but the compensation has been paid so generously and liberally that it has been all to the benefit of the owner.

Mahatma Gandhi is on record as having said, that when time for nationalization would come India would not be in a position to pay any compensation. But who bothers about Mahatma Gandhi now? In the case of land, State legislatures have passed laws declaring surplus without carefully working out the minimum beyond which a holding should not be reduced. Most of this surplus land has been passed on to persons who know little or nothing of the technique of cultivation and without means to put it to productive use. The persons losing the land have often been left with uneconomic holdings and they have received nominal, if any, compensation.

Chhotu Ram was very realistic in the matter of land distribution. He knew there was not enough land to occupy the increasing rural population and so there was no way out except diversification by providing openings in the industrial sector.

The advanced urban classes in the Punjab had a monopoly of government jobs before the rise of the Unionist Party. When Chhotu Ram insisted on giving proper share of these jobs to the rural people a hue and cry was raised and he was charged with nepotism and favoritism. He was called a 'traitor', 'unpatriotic' and what not, for joining hands with the British bureaucracy for the sake of small jobs for his followers.

Actually the Unionist government only reserved about 66 percent government jobs for the agriculturists which was much less than their share according to population. Many of these jobs continued to be filled by the non-agriculturists as qualified agriculturists often were not available.

In contrast to what has been witnessed after Independence when generally the same upper educated classes have dominated both at the Centre and most of the States, the Unionists can be considered a paragon of justice and equity who always gave proper representation to all sections rural or urban, agriculturists and non-agriculturists.

The Unionists not only produced men like Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram who set high standards but even the general party members were quite capable men. The scope of governmental activities in those days was rather limited but once certain rules and regulations were adopted, those were strictly observed.

Chhotu Ram was a rare phenomenon in the public life of the pre-partition Punjab. The general run of people who were attracted to public life, was comparatively of high caliber and even amongst that distinguished galaxy Chhotu Ram was different.

Politicians in those days worked for acquiring power, as they do now, but public office then was a means to some end different from self-aggrandizement. That was true of a larger number of people in public life in those days than is the case today. Chhotu Ram's ambition was not personal. It was infused with a mission to raise the lot of the people amongst whom he was born.

Chhotu Ram's memory is very green among the rural population all over northern India. Even in the Punjab, on the Pakistan side, now that emotional upsurge that divided the province has cooled down, men like Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram are still remembered for what they did for the common people.

The writer visited Lahore in 1955 on official business and was agreeably surprised to find the new intelligentsia were balanced in their assessment of the Unionist regime.

On this side of the fence the peasantry both in the Punjab and Haryana miss Chhotu Ram greatly. Since then there has been no leader who could make the rural cause his own. The peasant all over this region and indeed all over the country look forward to the rise of another man who would carry to consummation the programme that was launched by Chhotu Ram many years ago.

## Last Bays

During the second term as Minister under Provincial Autonomy, Chhotu Ram became the most discussed politician in the Punjab. He was implicitly trusted by all sections of the Unionist Party and even his lifelong opponents of the Hindu Mahasabha gradually came to understand him better as problems came to be appreciated in a fuller perspective. The Punjab peasantry under the joint Sikander-Chhotu Ram leadership had come into its own.

The vested interests were forced to accept the new situation. Sikander Hyat never wavered in his full support to the most dynamic minister of his government after he had seen with his own eyes the tremendous charisma Chhotu Ram exercised over the peasantry and the rural masses.

From 1940 Sikander was involved increasingly in all India politics and much of his time was spent in conferences in India and abroad to mobilize war efforts.

He entrusted the Punjab administration to Chhotu Ram, his senior-most colleague. We have already mentioned that Sikander actually wanted him to become Premier in his place, as he was being pressed by the Viceroy to join the Centre as Defence Member.

Chhotu Ram was at the height of his popularity by the beginning of 1942 which was demonstrated by the celebration of his 61st birthday at Rohtak on March 1, at a mammoth gathering of over 2 lakhs. The peasants and their leaders gathered at the Jat Heroes College from all over the Punjab and the neighboring States of Rajasthan, Delhi and UP to honor the man who had brought about a silent revolution in rural areas. The peasant now was not only the owner of his small plot of land but was virtually the ruler of the most prosperous State in India.

While tributes to his work were paid by many distinguished persons from all walks of life, what Sikander Hyat said on the occasion, as president of the conference was an inspired utterance:

"Sir Chhotu Ram is amongst those rare souls who appear once after long decades to start a new era and inaugurate a new age".

The Punjab Prime Minister further said:

"What Chhotu Ram has done in a short period for the benefit of the people will be remembered for ever. In his own time he has done so much that the Punjab will need no other leader for centuries to come.

I salute the great land that produced a mighty leader and great man like Chhotu Ram."

This was the time when the Pakistan movement was gathering momentum and both Chhotu Ram and Sir Sikander were devising methods to counteract it. Chhotu Ram's main obsession during the last 2 or 3 years was the danger the country faced because of the threat of division implied in the Muslim League Resolution of 1940. While his hold on the peasantry including the Muslim peasantry remained as assured as before, he was acquiring increasing support from the urban Hindus and Sikhs who had so far been opposed to him.

The powerful Hindu press also saw him in a new light. The Muslim press was becoming lukewarm but the daily *Ehsan* an important paper in those days, came out strongly to support Chhotu Ram.

Writing editorially in its issue of 13 December 1942, the paper commented:

"Our Muslim brethren should fully understand that Chhotu Ram is not opposed to Hindu Mahajans and Sikh Akalis due to any particular sympathy with the Muslims nor does he talk in this strain because he is under the influence of Sir Sikander or some other Muslim. Sir Chhotu Ram is not less of a Hindu than Sir Gokal Chand. He has been openly declaring this. The difference between the two, however, consists in this; Sir Gokal Chand is betting a horse, which is sure to lose the race. If not today then without doubt tomorrow, he would have no voice in the politics of the province. On the other hand Sir Chhotu Ram's political game is such that he is not likely to miss his target. What is required is that the Muslims should carefully listen to what Sir Chhotu Ram says and deeply ponder over it."

The paper further observed:

"In future, we would have to deal not with men like Gokal Chand. Our conflict or cooperation — enmity or friendship would be with those Hindus, who have Sir Chhotu Ram's point of view. It is the duty of our leaders to understand this point of view. Sir Chhotu Ram is a Hindu Jat and belongs to the Rohtak district. The Hindu Jats are spread from Rohtak, Hissar, Gurgaon to Delhi, Mathura, Bharatpur Agra on one side and extend upto Meerut on the other. Perhaps the Hindu Jat in the Punjab, as Chhotu Ram thinks, is yet backward. But during the last 20 years the Jats constitute a very strong force. The Jat is not a usurious



Bania. They are a strong and sturdy people and unlike the parasitic Mahajan, they constitute the earning section of the population. Chhotu Ram is the leader of the Jats. It is difficult to say how long he would continue to lead them but so far as the community is concerned, it seems to have a most brilliant future. Sir Chhotu Ram is opposed to the Hindu Mahajan [the paper wrote in conclusion]. He is also opposed to the Azad Punjab demand of the Sikhs. He is no supporter of the Muslim demand for Pakistan either.

"What he (Chhotu Ram) wants may best be said in his own words. 'The war between capitalism and socialism is about to commence. The next clash would be between the rich and the poor'. The Muslims as a community should now think out for themselves how far they can accept the ideas of Chhotu Ram. They must understand that the man who fought furiously against the Mahajans and is at war with the Sikhs' 'Azad Punjab', will not tolerate the vested interests of the Muslims either. The Muslims have to go ahead, they must decide whether they would go with or against Sir Chhotu Ram."

This editorial places in bold perspective the central position Sir Chhotu Ram occupied at that time and continued to do so till the end.

During this last phase of his life, Sir Chhotu Ram was greatly worried on account of the policies the Congress was following to appease Jinnah. The Congress had repeatedly missed chances when it could have strengthened itself against both the League and the British government.

A wrong lead was given at the very start by Mahatma Gandhi regarding the Cripps proposals. The 'Quit India' movement that followed in August 1942, immeasurably strengthened Jinnah as the British imperialists from now on decided not to have any truck with the Congress.

The Unionists and the Congress were natural allies against the League but their relations with the British Government were on a different footing. The Unionists also felt weakened after the Congress Government break, as the Muslim League began to acquire increased importance.

Chhotu Ram, however, was not disheartened as he felt they would never allow the League to acquire any stronghold in the Punjab.

He was a staunch Arya Samaji in his religious beliefs but his politics remained uncompromisingly secular.

In Malik Khizar Hyat Khan Tiwana, he had a colleague who was a tower of strength, firmly wedded like himself, to uphold the cause of the solidarity of the Punjab

peasantry at all costs. The passing away of Sir Sikander in December 1942 was a severe blow. The chances of the Allied powers winning the war were gradually improving and by 1943 the tide had turned. Had Sir Sikander been alive, he would have exercised greater pull with the British than Jinnah.

Khizar who succeeded Sikander was more firmly opposed to Pakistan but he did not possess the same stature.

After Sikander everything gravitated around Chhotu Ram and it is a great tribute to his personality, in spite of the rising tide of Muslim communalism, the peasantry in the Punjab the majority being Muslims, never wavered in the slightest in their loyalty to the Unionist Party.

Chhotu Ram knew that this loyalty could be sustained only by further strengthening the party both on the platform and in the press.

There was great dearth of public speakers amongst the Unionists and some of the Muslim members like Raja Ghazanfar Ali and Begum Shah Nawaz – both very vocal – were already showing leanings towards the League.

The new Premier, Khizar Hyat, had to take over all the work of his predecessor regarding the war and the political mobilization of the rural masses against Pakistan had to be shouldered almost single-handedly by Chhotu Ram.

Chhotu Ram had been following a clock-like routine for years and sometimes he worked practically without sleep day and night. He put in on an average about 18 hours daily.

He had a strong physique and his spartan habits had so far enabled him to cope with the increasing demands but the pressure began to tell on him. Like Fazl-i-Hussain, Chhotu Ram was a demon of file work but unlike his mentor he was essentially a man of the masses, and like Jawaharlal Nehru returned refreshed after addressing large gatherings which now became even more frequent than before.

The writer much younger to him always accompanied him and it was often difficult to stand the strain of three or four conferences daily held hundreds of miles apart.

Chhotu Ram never took any rest during day time and he was a sparse eater. It would be either lunch or dinner but never both. He took occasional cups of tea. This was a schedule which was strictly followed. On several occasions, when on long motor trips pure luck saved us from very uncomfortable situations. It was June 1943 and the season was at its severest. As we neared Faridkot, the car broke down and we were stranded on the road with no shelter. The Maharaja was a good friend of Chhotu Rani and when

a message was sent, his men rescued us from our plight. After a few hours the journey was resumed, the destination being Sirsa in far off Haryana. On another occasion while going to Rohtak under torrential rain, the road being almost invisible, and his Manni driver going at his usual top speed, it was sheer chance that an accident was avoided.

One day I suggested to Sir Chhotu Ram, that as in most of his speeches the central theme was of the fight of the agriculturists against the world of vested interests, the same ideas could be conveyed with better effect and to far larger audience if we organized a strong press at Lahore. The idea appealed to him and he promised to take it up after consulting Khizar Hyat. The scheme materialized after some time but by then the slogan of 'Pakistan' had grown into a very disturbing movement and Jinnah had already attempted to disrupt the Unionist Party.

The Punjab had responded generously to the appeal for funds;- Chhotu Ram never did things by 'halves'. Several acres of land were acquired in Garden town near Shakti Bhawan — Chhotu Ram's residence — but then fate intervened and events followed in quick succession. At first came Jinnah but when he was repulsed and plans were taken in hand, Sir Chhotu Ram became -Seriously ill. The political situation in India in those days was in a state of flux and for Sir Chhotu Ram it became a race against time.

From May to October, 1944, Sir Chhotu Ram attempted too much to be able to stand the strain. The last public appearance he made was in early November, at Jhang. He was running temperature but he insisted on addressing the gathering. He continued speaking for several hours and as if it was his last call to his beloved peasantry he recaptured all he had been attempting to achieve for over a quarter century of his active public life.

On reaching Lahore he took to bed which he was never to leave, till he was called by powers over which nobody ever has any control. This happened in the morning of January 9, 1945, his close colleague Sir Khizar Hyat holding his hand and on his lips, the last words: "*Ham tau chale, Ram sab ka bhala karai.*"

### **Tributes from far and wide**

Political events follow in a rhythm leading to all kinds of speculations but the expected seldom happens. That is why politics often becomes a gamble and the outcome always remains so uncertain.

The appearance or disappearance of a strong political personality always gives a new turn to the situation.

This happened on the sudden demise of Sir Chhotu Ram. M.A. Jinnah was a clever politician but luck was also on his side. The Punjab and, to a lesser extent, Bengal were

the two key provinces in the dreamland of Pakistan. Bengal did not have at the time persons of caliber among the Muslims that could resist Jinnah. The Unionists, however, possessed men who could be more than a match for him. But three of them disappeared prematurely, which helped Jinnah in coming nearer to his destination.

Fazl-i-Hussain died at the age of 59 in 1936, Sikander was hardly 50 at the time of his demise in 1942. And then Chhotu Ram breathed his last at the age of 63. Jinnah was older than all the three.

Chhotu Ram who had limited himself to the Punjab had acquired a national image during his last days. He inspired trust amongst the majority of the Punjabis which now included practically all Hindus and Sikhs and a majority of Muslims. Khizar's father had died a few months earlier but he was able to absorb the shock. With the Tielmsman of the Unionist Party gone, Khizar felt like an orphan.

Chhotu Ram's death was a tragic event that affected the future of the country. The loss was felt in all circles. In spite of political clash, the old Unionists, now followers of the League, flocked to Shakti Bhawan to pay their tributes to the man whom at heart they held in high esteem.

The Hindus and Sikhs felt that the last shield against Pakistan had been suddenly taken away. I saw Raja Narendra Nath, the grand old man of the Punjab, then 86, braving the severe January cold, expressing his dismay and anguish.

"I could not rest after hearing of this," the Raja said. Governor Glancy and all ministers who came immediately were trying to take a measure of the situation rendered so unstable by the demise of a man on whom they had depended most so far. Telegrams and messages came from all over, some from the British civilians (now retired) who had served under Sir Chhotu Ram at one time or the other.

Gandhiji in a telegram said:

"I never thought the end would come so soon. I have great admiration for many qualities Sir Chhotu Ram possessed."

C. Rajagopalachari, whose formula, Chhotu Ram had strongly opposed said:

"The death of Sir Chhotu Ram has removed from our midst a very dynamic figure. We had in Sir Chhotu Ram a man who had not only great aims, but knew how to reach them. The Punjab is much the poorer for his death."

Bhim Sen Sachar, future Chief Minister of East Punjab, and leader of the Congress Assembly Party at that time, said:

"On account of his forceful personality he could not help creating friends and foes as one with such a strong personality was bound to have two things that struck me most were his plea to keep religion divorced from politics and his uncompromising opposition to the attempts to destroy the indestructible unity of India."

Brigadier F.L. Brayne, ICS (Retd.), the famous author of the Gurgaon Experiment in Rural Development recollected his association with Sir Chhotu Ram, under whom he had served and described him the best chief, "I had ever had." A number of Muslim League leaders paid him rich tributes in spite of political differences. Mian Mumtaz Daultana, son of Ahmad Yar Khan, at one time an important Unionist leader, described him as one of the boldest and most fearless sons of the Punjab who fought bravely for the cause he loved.

Raja Ghazanfar Ali, who at one time was Parliamentary Secretary to Chhotu Ram, and later came to hold high offices in Pakistan, described Chhotu Ram's death as a great shock;

"He was a man of very strong convictions and high character and served his province more than anyone ever since the inauguration of the Reforms. One could say that the habit of hard work had cost him, his life."

Malik Barkat Ali, MLA, who was the only Muslim League member in the Punjab Assembly, at one time, described him as a friend of the underdog and an eternal foe of the exploits:

"He was really a unique personality. His powers of speech and debate were remarkable."

Bhai Parmanand MLA (Central) described him as a man of real Punjabi character:

"We very rarely meet men of his type. He was the most efficient Minister who had in fact proved himself to be the soul of the Punjab cabinet."

Dewan Bahadur S.P. Singha, MLA and Registrar, Punjab University, described him as the giant of Punjab politics, and a rough diamond:

"The Punjab zamindars have lost their Herculean champion in him. I recall his protest against the Indianisation scheme in the army. It was a classic of its kind and I have not seen the Indian case put better by anyone else."

Dr Mahommad Alam, MLA an important Congress leader of those days called him the pillar of strength of the Unionist Party and benefactor of poorer classes.

Lala Bihari Lal Chanana, President Beopar Mandal, who was politically opposed to him, said:

"No one can deny that as long as Sir Chhotu Ram held the distinguished position in the public life of the province, all politics of the Punjab government centered around him alone ... even in the life time of Sir Sikander it was he who possessed real power..."

His cabinet colleagues greatly shaken by his untimely demise paid him rich tributes for the guidance he provided to the government.

Sir Manohar Lal, Minister of Finance and famous economist, described him:

"essentially a fighter but hardly any less a constructive thinker. I looked upon him as something of a hero from an outlying part of the province."

Sardar Baldev Singh, Minister for Development and a close associate described him as a man of principles and uncompromising loyalty. "Much of what has happened in the province in recent years in the political and legislative fields will bear the stamp of Sir Chhotu Ram's personality for years to come ... Sir Chhotu Ram was far too preoccupied in provincial affairs to be known much outside. In recent months, however, when our province was faced with the disruptive assaults, of a blatant communalism, we learnt to value his patriotism more than anything else ... his memory will live as a valiant soldier who lived for the oppressed and the exploited and for a united and free India."

Malik Khizar Hyat Khan Tiwana, Premier of the Punjab to whom the loss was both personal and political, remembered his long association with Sir Chhotu Ram and mourned the loss;

"Not only of an illustrious son of the Punjab and a valued colleague, I mourn above else the loss of a cherished friend whose unfailing kindness and support I can never forget or replace."

Raja Narender Nath, Bakshi Sir Tek Chand and other Hindu leaders, with whom Sir Chhotu Ram, had basic differences of policy paid him high tributes.

## **Press Comments**

Newspapers all over the country flashed the news in banner headlines and wrote moving editorials. While most newspapers recalled his many achievements, they all emphasized his role in fighting for India's unity.

*The Tribune* (Lahore) described him as:

"A fighter to the very marrow of his bones."

"Though Sir Chhotu Ram severed his connections with the Congress in 1920... he was never tired of praising the towering personality of the Mahatma and declaring that the Congress was his first love."

"His politics changed but his alertness and agility, his vigor and assiduity remained unimpaired. Wherever he was present, he was bound to make his presence felt.. "

"...Against the repeated fierce onslaughts of rabid communalism, Sir Chhotu Ram stood firm like the rock of Gibraltar."

*The Civil and Military Gazette* (Lahore) described him as a "political figure of unique calibre ... His name was writ large in a series of enactments passed by the old Legislative Council which have been hailed as: "pioneer measures in the modern economic history of India."

"Similarly the Legislative Assembly since 1937 bristles with enactments the purpose of which Sir Chhotu Ram held dearest to his heart. His unremitting championship of Unionism against the manifestations of communalism was never more convincingly demonstrated than during the stress of the Unionist-League controversy and history will reveal how great a part he played in forcing Mr. Jinnah's strategic retreat from the Punjab last summer. In the verbal rough and tumble of the Assembly Sessions he stood head and shoulders above his colleagues on the Ministerial benches."

*The Statesman* (Calcutta) described him as a man of sturdy commonsense, a true son of the soil and pillar of the Unionist alliance:

"After Sir Sikander Hyat Khan's sudden death two years ago, it was largely to Sir Chhotu Ram that the party looked for guidance, and strength ... The tussle with Mr. Jinnah last April, proved his loyalty to the province's comparatively youthful Premier; he ably sustained the Unionist Party throughout a difficult controversy engineered from outside. Once of the Congress, he broke away from it many years ago and if his tongue was sometimes sharp, that was the directness of approach, typical of the Jat peasant that he was. He rarely chose the lime-light;

his work lay in practical betterment of the lot of the agriculturists; the fierceness of the urban politics did not deflect him there from. His death comes at a time when the Punjab needs strong men of integrity."

"Although Sir Chhotu Ram played second fiddle to three Premiers," *The Times of India* (Bombay) wrote:

"He was the driving force in Punjab politics. Supreme as he was among the Jat peasantry, his decisions carried great weight in the Councils of the Unionist Party. He spent all his life defying all those who sought to encroach on the rights of the agriculturists. Since the historic day when he joined the late Sir Fazl-i-Hussain, to build the Unionist Party, he never looked back. On Malik Khizar Hyat Khan's shoulders falls the task of preserving the Unionist Party. If he succeeds, it will be due in large measure to the spade work done by Chhotu Ram."

*The Hindustan Times* (New Delhi) said that next to Fazl-i-Hussain, he was the most powerful politician that the Punjab's public life threw up during the past quarter of a century;

"His death is most untimely in that he was a tower of strength to the Unionist coalition against the onslaughts of the Muslim League."

*The Pioneer* (Lucknow) declared that not only the Punjab but the whole country was poorer by the death of Sir Chhotu Ram, one of the most colorful figures in Indian politics.

"Essentially a fighter, he was originally drawn to Congress by its militant philosophy but the Party's barren policy of non-cooperation forced him to sever connection with it. His constructive genius found full scope in the programme of the Unionist Party which he formed along with Sir Fazl-i-Hussain. Sir Chhotu Ram had no use for political catch-words and slogans. He firmly believed that the agriculturists were the backbone of the community and resolutely applied himself to the task of ameliorating their lot."

"Uncompromising by temperament, he reveled in political scraps and did not hesitate to cross swords even with Mr. Jinnah when the latter tried to affix the label of the Muslim League on the Unionist Ministry. A man of his dynamic personality could not help making enemies in a politics-ridden country. But even the most uncharitable critic would not deny that he was a clean fighter. Communalism in any form had no appeal for him."



*The Leader* (Allahabad) described Sir Chhotu Ram as one of the foremost leaders who took a prominent part in the public life and administration of the province for more than 20 years.

"Holding the views he did it was inevitable that Sir Chhotu Ram should come into conflict with Mr. Jinnah. The Qaid-i-Azam regards the Punjab as the corner stone of the scheme of Pakistan. He thought that because Bengal and Sindh had Muslim League ministries, he would succeed in establishing a Ministry of his choice in the Punjab also. He failed. One of the persons responsible for Mr. Jinnah's failure was Sir Chhotu Ram."

*The Daily Herald* (Lahore) paying its tributes observed:

"There are many who admired him and many others who criticized him in his life-time but whether one is an admirer or a critic one cannot but pay tribute to his sincerity, integrity, his indomitable energy and the tenacity with which he upheld his point of view."

### **The Vernacular Press**

The Lahore vernacular newspapers vied with each other to recall the many-sided personality of the man they had reported upon for years.

*The Ajit* (Punjabi) called him the uncrowned king of the Jats, the life-giver of the poor peasants and the helper of the backward rural classes. "—Sir Chhotu Ram as fighter for the underdog had no rival. He sacrificed his very life for the welfare of the poor and the depressed communities."

The widely read *Inqilab* (Urdu) considered Chhotu Ram's death a calamity for the Punjab.

"Today there is no one who can compare with him in ability, wisdom, experience, courage and loyalty to principles. People said all sorts of things about him, but we assert with the greatest confidence that the backward and depressed classes will never again find such a supporter of their cause..."

His private character was very high. Whatever he earned was given in charity to support poor students and helpless widows. He never allowed his feelings of being an Indian to be dominated by Western influences."

Another Urdu *Vir Bharat* declared that Chhotu Ram was a fearless and honest statesman:

"Besides with the agriculturists and rural people he was sympathetic with the poor of all classes. He was responsible for the enactment of several laws, which helped the laborers and persons of small income in the cities."

*Parbhat*, (Urdu) described him as a man of steel:

"Sir Chhotu Ram proved himself one of the greatest patriots that India ever produced. In the history of India's fight for liberty his name will be Written in letters of gold."

Ahsan Muslim-owned daily came out with rich tributes to the man whom it had always supported in his fight against the vested interests:

"Sir Chhotu Ram shaped the Punjab in a new mould. He saved the Punjab peasant from sure destruction at the hands of the money-lenders. By the enactment of the agrarian laws Sir Chhotu Ram has written his name in the history of the Punjab with letters of gold. The greatest Jat of his times, he lived for the uplift of the Punjab Jat. He had many opportunities when he could become an All India leader ... But he devoted his whole life to the service of the Punjab ... His courage was so great that he did not hesitate to challenge and fight the greatest leaders of India.

He was first a Punjabi and anything else afterwards."

*Shabaz* another Muslim daily said that only with time Punjabis will realize what they have lost in the death of Sir Chhotu Ram:

"He was firm in principle, honest in dealings, a devotee to truth, sympathetic with the poor, an enemy of capitalism, and usury and loyal to his friends. Throughout he lived bravely and acted courageously caring neither for the slander of the Hindus nor abuse of the Muslims."

"Sir Chhotu Ram as a leader and reformer was devoted to a principle and he never deviated from it, although in its pursuit he had to face the greatest difficulties. It is this trait which entitles him to a place of the greatest respect in the galaxy of Indian leadership."

*Nawai- Waqt* said that the Unionist Party revolved around his personality.

*The Zamindar* said that Sir Chhotu Ram's mission was to pull the cultivator from the depth of lowness and place him on a higher level.

The two widely circulated Hindu papers *Milap* and *Pratap* edited by the ablest editors at the time were eloquent in their praise of Sir Chhotu Ram whom they had vehemently attacked at times. *Milap* in its issue dated January 11, wrote in a poetic prose:

"It would not be incorrect to say that Sir Chhotu Ram was the crew of the Punjab boat ... The storms came, the boat dashed against hostile winds, it passed through rivers of hood but the boatman held the anchor so firmly in his hand that it astonished all spectators.

"Sometimes the occupants of the boat felt nervous and thought they were going astray but the boatman smiled and assured them that they were all safe in his hands.

"Many a time the river was in spate and the people felt that the boat would go down but the crew stood fast, called everyone to his duty and the shaky boat, facing the most dangerous waves passed across safely."

The *Pratap* owned by Mahashey Krishan, a veteran columnist and editorial writer made the following observations:

"The passing away of Sir Chhotu Ram is a most lamentable event. In him the Punjab has lost a most hard-working and powerful politician. He has left a void which will never be filled. He has gone when the province needed him most."

## Appraisal

What is the criterion of greatness? The Hindu philosophers when they talk of *dharma* really mean one's duty to society, A man to be worth anything should live for others, his ambition something different from gratification of self.

The Greeks emphasized virtue. The most virtuous person, the philosopher king should rule.

In actual practice such high standards are seldom achieved but the ideal has always been there.

In Indian history we have examples when great rulers like Ashoka, Vikramaditya, Harsha and to some extent Akbar tried to approximate the high objective.

The British rulers were influenced by the juridical and administrative ideas of the Romans which they adopted to suit their times.

After the Mutiny the British evolved a new pattern of administration in India. The impact of Western education produced a cultural and intellectual revival – a mix of the old and the new. This is the time when foundation was laid for the rise of the nationalist movement, which starting apologetically, with extra deference to what India could learn from the West and in particular from the British grew into a full throated defiance of the foreign imposed rule as a reaction to Curzonian policies.

Even before Gandhiji arrived on the scene, men like Aurobindo and Tilak were harkening back to the glories of the olden times. The extremists in the Congress camp – Bal, Lal, and Pal had really no convincing alternative and it was Gokhale and not Tilak who dominated the political life after the Congress split of 1907.

Gokhale was great both as a man and as a statesman. Few reached his high stature; he inspired many young men who rose to eminence later. M.A. Jinnah learnt much from Gokhale when he was his private Secretary. It is another thing that he diverted completely from his Guru's ideals under political stress.

Gandhi accepted Gokhale in toto. He also diverted from his teachings later.

If the broad currents of Indian nationalism had remained within the confines of the ideals and policies laid down by Gokhale, the Indian subcontinent would present an

altogether different picture today. The Indian liberals were old Congress men who had stayed true to Gokhale. They were pushed to the back seats by the Gandhian storm but they persisted and occasionally made valuable contribution.

Some of the greatest men in Indian politics starting from Dadabhai Naoroji, Justice Ranade, and Pheroz Shah Mehta to Surinder Nath Banerjee, Srinivas Shastri and Tej Bahadur Sapru – were all liberals. Gokhale towered above everybody else.

The Liberal Party in England, which inspired Indian liberals also – disappeared after the First World War, its single cause being the methods adopted by Lloyd George – its last important leader.

In India the Party produced no successor to Gokhale after his death in 1915. The way was thrown open to two extremists – Tilak and Gandhi and it was the latter who won.

This prologue is not intended to underestimate the methods Gandhi introduced in Indian politics. Far from it, the technique of non-cooperation and Satyagraha as a moral weapon has a place in human affairs. Gandhi showed that it could be a moral substitute for war.

But the liberal tradition which aimed at change through moral values, had also an important place in politics.

Gokhale died very young, hardly 49. If he had lived longer, the course of events would have been different. It is arguable that India had a good chance to achieve self-government through constitutional and liberal methods. In that case India's unity would also have been preserved.

Several important Congress leaders left the Congress in 1920 on the non-cooperation issue. They were not self-seekers or unpatriotic.

In the Punjab – amongst others, two such men were Fazl-i-Hussain and Chhotu Ram. The fact that they could dominate Punjab politics for nearly two decades did not allow any party including the Congress to acquire stronghold, showed their relevance to the times in which they lived.

A politician who has no deep convictions and is adept only in using a situation for his own selfish purposes, does not last long. He is found out sooner or later. Posterity always looks down on such selfish characters and they are safely confined to oblivion where they belong.

Ibsen, the Norwegian dramatist has a theme that the strongest man is he who stands alone. J.S. Mill has said the same thing, if somewhat differently. One man according to

Mill, who has convictions is better than many who have only interests. Politics today, at least in India, has few who have convictions and many with interests – selfish ones at that. Fazl-i-Hussain's letters have been published in Pakistan. The book is available in India. Fazl-i-Hussain was a man of deep convictions and great integrity. Even when he occupied high positions in government he strongly criticized policies and measures with which he disagreed. That was true of him both in the Punjab government where he held high offices for a decade and later at the Government of India when Member of Viceroy's Executive Council.

Once the Viceroy objected to a statement he had made to the press pointing out its inappropriateness. Fazl-i-Hussain wrote back sticking to his point of view and enclosing his resignation, conceding that while the Viceroy would be right in asking him to resign, he could not object to his saying what he considered to be right.

In the case of Chhotu Ram, such incidents are even more numerous. Chhotu Ram expressed firmly even bluntly when he felt strongly about any matter.

Geoffrey de-Montmorency who succeeded Hailey as Governor in the Punjab once tried to overawe Chhotu Ram. The occasion was a discussion of certain agrarian laws sponsored by Chhotu Ram. He asked a deputation of Unionist Party to meet him.

The Governor showed annoyance with the sweeping nature of Unionist legislation and indicated his intention to veto the Bills. Chhotu Ram's only reaction was to tell the Governor that while he had powers to do so, the Unionist Party was also determined to see the Bills through. He added that he now knew that there was no difference between capitalists – white or black.

The Bills were passed without a change of comma. Chhotu Ram's first encounter with Lord Wavell took the military Viceroy by surprise. He could not believe that a provincial minister – whom he did not know – could tell him on his very face that the Punjab government totally disagreed with what he proposed. The issue was control price of wheat.

There is no occasion in Chhotu Ram's long public career, when he failed to rise to his convictions or shirked in the slightest to say firmly what he felt in a given situation.

Such men are not opportunists or careerists, who live merely to line their own pockets. Such men never waver from their chosen path.

On the other hand examples are galore, when the so-called nationalists and *desh-bhakt*s betrayed public interests for purely selfish purposes.

This happened both before and after Independence. If a rich man becomes richer and does not squander his heritage, there must be some merit in it. If a poor man without means and resources rises to a great position and uses that position not to accumulate a fortune for private use but to work selflessly for public good, there is an element of true greatness in him.

There are many instances of such persons in Indian public life. Some of them sacrificed everything they possessed and became martyrs to the cause. Chhotu Ram belongs to the galaxy of such men.

Values and standards now are not what they were before. These have undergone changes gradually. After Independence the changes have been drastic and generally pointed downhill.

A person's success or failure should be judged with reference to the times and conditions in which he lives and works. Chhotu Ram was born in the backward tract of Haryana, a part of the Punjab in his times. The conditions in Haryana in those days were depressing to the limit. A reign of terror prevailed producing a fear psychosis. The people had lost self-confidence and they were afraid of everything.

The Arya Samaj did bring a ray of hope but its programme was limited to social reforms. In the rest of the Punjab political awakening had started but in Haryana smallest government minions held sway who treated the people particularly in villages, like their private property.

Then came Chhotu Ram and everything changed. Chhotu Ram had to grope his way. He was much moved by the degraded conditions of the agricultural classes to whom he belonged.

He was always methodical and worked hard to make a success of whatever came his way. He became a strong Arya Samaji and then took enthusiastically to the Congress. In both spheres he worked selflessly.

He was never a camp follower of anybody. His loyalty was always to a cause. This was instinctive with him and remained a life-long habit. Even when poor and without means, he showed an unusual sense of self-respect. Only a person sensitive to personal dignity would give up a reasonably good job — private Secretary to a Raja — simply because the Raja delayed in calling him to a meal with him. Private Secretaries generally do not dine with bosses. Chhotu Ram thought even then that he was not inferior to Raja Ram Pal Singh owner of some thirty villages and while he could hardly claim even few acres as his own.

We have many other examples of such sensitive souls who placed self-respect above everything else. A man who lacks in self-respect, cannot expect to be respected by others or have self-confidence which comes from a strong will. These two qualities, which Chhotu Ram possessed in a marked degree, molded his future career.

Another quality which distinguished Chhotu Ram, was his ability to resist temptation when it diverted him from certain basic principles.

Sir Malcolm Hailey deliberately kept him out of the Ministry in 1927 but soon after offered him Prime Ministership of Jammu and Kashmir. When the latter turned down the offer the government realized that Chhotu Ram, unlike most other politicians, could not be bought.

He was again kept out of office in 1930 and attempts were made to sidetrack him by tempting offers. His convictions had become so strong that his main mission became the organization of the peasantry so that the party he headed could capture power with its own strength.

Chhotu Ram by this time had become not only an important politician with a distinct identity but was widely respected in the Punjab and the neighboring States where the peasantry was awakening to a new consciousness.

He allowed colleagues in the Unionist Party to sidestep him in the race of high offices under Diarchy — colleagues distinctly inferior to him in every way, and never entered into competition with them. Fazl-i-Hussain's diaries bear ample testimony to it. This saved the Unionist Party.

Chhotu Ram was not tempted even to go to the Round Table Conference which he could do for the asking — Fazl-i-Hussain had a lot to do with the matter — as he felt the real job was in the Punjab.

Only really strong leaders move the masses, and leave a permanent impact on the age they live in. They evolve systems of lasting value. Chhotu Ram falls in this category.

History does not always make a just evaluation of the worth of men. Some historical characters are blown high making them appear larger than life, to posterity. In other cases their real worth may go unnoticed because of the tumult and shouting of the times they lived in, relegating their constructive work to the background.

Chhotu Ram suddenly became a great name when he clashed with Jinnah. The so-called nationalist press that had always downgraded him, praised him to the skies, and from a reactionary, feudal, and anti-national politician, he was classed amongst the most powerful forces operating on the side of nationalism.



His confrontation with Jinnah was accidental. This only brought to limelight the great qualities he had always possessed and which he used in building up rural Punjab.

Most politicians are like daily newspapers. They last for a day and public has only ephemeral interest in their doings. They disappear as they had appeared – arousing interest – for a while, and then are forgotten and replaced by other similar species.

Men like Chhotu Ram fall in a different category. Their work is of lasting value. When the fight for Swaraj was on, tub-thumping orators appeared drawing vast audiences, receiving wide notice in the media. How many of them are still alive in the pages of history?

It is not the lot of majority of politicians to leave behind something lasting. A few whose work lasts are possessed of creative minds.

Both the British bureaucrats who ruled India, and the nationalists who opposed them were agreed that the real problem was of the masses, more particularly of those engaged in agriculture as they formed the overwhelming majority.

There were few Englishmen over a 200-year rule, who raised their voice in favor of India. Some of them, however, were outstanding in their own way and their professions for the solicitude of the interests of rural India was genuine. Men like Munro, Elphinstone, Metcalfe, Lawrence and others worked hard to improve the lot of the people engaged in agriculture.

In the Punjab there appeared from time to time outstanding civilians with zeal to make the Punjab a model for other provinces. But with all their goodwill, their main task remained to make the Empire strong. Some of them were self-righteous in the manner of Kipling and they remained conscious of the 'White Man's burden'.

When the Unionists appeared, claiming more intimate relationship with the man behind the plough, these bureaucrats were at first sympathetic. Chhotu Ram's many speeches in the Legislative Council under 'Diarchy' and in the Legislative Assembly when Provincial Autonomy was introduced, are testimony to the good work of some of these civilians. He was, however, not in the habit of praising bureaucrats for he was at heart deadly opposed to the foreign rule.

Even their role in helping the Punjab peasant was limited. Fazl-i-Hussain a past master in the art of administrative manipulation, was a nationalist basically, but his first care was the Muslim community which he wanted to bring up to the level of the Hindus so that the two could work together without fear of each other.

Chhotu Ram did not believe in either the Hindus or the Muslims. His constituency was the downtrodden of all communities the masses — the '*daridranarayana*' — the true salt of the earth. He was called '*Din-Bandhu*' by the people, the man who fought for the most backward. That was also the guiding principle of the Unionist Party but it did not always come up to this high level.

The Congress from Gokhale to Gandhi had identified itself with the common people and Swaraj meant 'people's rule' not domination of a few as has actually happened.

The Indian counterpart of the British bourgeoisie who took over from the latter have now managed to stay on in power in spite of their failure to fulfill any of the promises on which they have been returned, term after term.

The government remains in the hands of a few — a new elitist class, as in former colonial days. Only the label has changed.

The western system of government was retained in 1947 and the Constitution framed in 1950 was on the Westminster model. It was not realized that England and the West as a whole took centuries to evolve their political and economic institutions and these could not be adopted ready-made.

Gandhi suggested village democracy so that a new structure could be built up from the ground upwards.

Since then we have worked in confusion as the British model has not solved our problems and no government has been bold enough to opt for the Gandhian democracy.

The Unionists had been working the institutions developed by the British but they attempted to use them, as far as they could, in favor of the rural people.

The Congress being dominated by the middle classes, used the same institutions not for the common people as they were expected to do, but first to safeguard their own class interests.

The Constitution of 1950 based on high sounding principles, with fundamental rights and directive principles and various schedules included as part of the constitution to safeguard violation of accepted legislation, has not helped really in realizing the aims and objectives for which Independence was achieved.

Even the Constitution of 1950 could have helped in reducing social and economic inequalities, if the former standards that had endeared the Congress to the masses, had been observed.

Democracy, as practiced, in India, is bourgeois-dominated, irrespective of the labels, political parties assume to confuse the electorate.

Poverty, unemployment, disparities-social, economic and political – are increasing day-by-day and a larger percentage of people are progressively joining the category of have-nots. There is no point in pretending that under the present system the problems of the masses can be tackled and there is a limit beyond which the people cannot be bamboozled.

There is now increasing awareness that the country adopted unsuitable western institutions and we must go back to Gandhi who wanted free India to adhere to her own tradition.

Jayaprakash Narayan had worked out the blueprint of Gandhian democracy but he was diverted from his objective by his involvement in political situation that culminated in the Emergency. His concept of total revolution aimed to establish a system of decentralized administration on Gandhian principles.

On the face of it there is nothing common between Gandhi, Jayaprakash Narayan and Chhotu Ram.

Even the first two with some similarities were cast in different moulds. Yet there is a connecting thread. They all wanted that power should be effectively transferred to the people to whom it belonged. India's *swaraj* should be *gram-swaraj*. Unless the exploitation of the villages by the towns ceased, there would be no real Swaraj – whatever the pretensions of the ruling classes.

This exploitation can cease only when the rural masses are themselves in effective control of government, not through the make-believe representatives of the present system but through a *panchayat*-based decentralized policy.

The vested interests symbolized by the urban-moneyed- classes are resisting such a transformation but this is inevitable now.

Comparisons are odious and there are no two similar individuals. Chhotu Ram was such a rugged individualist that he was different even from his close Unionist associates, like Fazl-i-Hussain and Sikander Hyat. He repudiated the Gandhian methods but not the Congress programme. He had much in common with Dr B.R. Ambedkar as both of them represented the exploited classes. Amongst the Congress leaders he was greatly attracted to Sardar Patel – two peasants with temperamental similarity.

K.M. Munshi, a man of many parts and an eminent leader in his own right became a great admirer of Chhotu Ram during the Unionist-League controversy.

M.N. Roy, communist of international fame, greatly appreciated Chhotu Ram's pro-rural approach in politics. So did Maulana A.K. Azad.

Pandit Nehru, also acknowledged Chhotu Ram's influence over the Punjab peasantry.

### **Reassessment in Retrospect**

His admirers and detractors have both over-shot the mark. Some of his followers have tried to make him what he was not. He was a regional leader by choice. The national reputation he acquired came to him because of the central place he occupied in the Punjab, the cornerstone in the Pakistan arch, which Jinnah wanted to annex. More than anybody else, it was Chhotu Ram who forced retreat on the League leader. This astonished the whole country because Jinnah appeared to be irresistible at the time.

The present writer remained close to Chhotu Ram for more than a decade and can claim to assess him objectively. Chhotu Ram was not a leftist, but without being one, he did more for the poorer sections than anybody else in his times.

He believed in the supremacy of race over religion. Race not religion was a stronger link. A man could change his religion at will (he told me) but the blood in one's veins could never be changed. There was a verse to this effect, which he frequently quoted and it was hung in a frame over his chair in his working room.

He was a great organizer and man of thought and action combined. Chhotu Ram has been criticized for having encouraged caste and tribalism in politics.

The caste is a strange phenomenon in Indian politics. Everybody disowns it and yet feels proud of it, if the occasion suits. The same is true about secularism. There is so much hypocrisy amongst Indian politicians — or for that matter amongst politicians as a class — that it is difficult to say what they really are. Chhotu Ram's fault was — if fault it was — to be absolutely frank. Sometimes brutally frank. He never minced words. He did not say one thing when he meant something else. This is not the idiom of an average politician. Chhotu Ram never advocated caste or tribalism. He built up a new mass movement of the rural people with the peasantry in the leading role. What was Chhotu Ram to do when he left the Congress? He could not join the Hindu Mahasabha because he truly hated communalism. We have already referred to the logic which led him to organize the peasantry — first as Jats — the most numerous community in the rural Punjab and then widen the movement so as to rope in other allied groups, the Rajputs, the Gujars, the Ahirs, Sainis, Brahmins, Jangra and others.

This became the Zamindara-League that ruled the Punjab for more than two decades. The peasant movement in the Punjab cut across caste, community and religion. Chhotu Ram's vision was not confined to the peasantry. He wanted to build up a strong movement which could unite all the rural people against their exploiters.

Gandhiji emphasized the village against the city and Jawaharlal Nehru is on record to have warned the opulent urban classes that a rural-urban conflict would become inevitable unless they changed their ways.

The newspapers owned mostly by the self-same interests presented Chhotu Ram for years in such an unfavorable light that propaganda stuck. The picture they drew was a distorted one the question is; how far is Chhotu Ram relevant today?

There is a strong peasant movement in the country and the rural people are becoming more and more vocal. Let there be no doubt about it. But they are not yet sufficiently organized and are still greatly handicapped *vis-a-vis* the urban people because of lack of an effective line of communication. It is not an easy job to bring the widely dispersed rural areas with many social and economic conflicts on a common platform or bind them with a common ideology.

M.N. Roy in his book *The Future of Indian Politics*, has suggested in the usual communist way that the Indian Revolution would be brought about by the proletariat with the backing of the peasantry. The correct perspective would be to reverse the roles. India like China must have an agrarian revolution. That was the Gandhian approach. Attempts made to organize the vast peasantry after Independence to become a coherent political force to safeguard their interests have not made much headway.

The communists have penetrated the agricultural sector in several areas but their objective is not to develop a peasant front. There are, however, several other eminent leaders of long standing genuinely committed to the peasant interests. The present President, Sanjiva Reddy is deeply involved in the welfare of the peasantry and the rural people and has expressed himself strongly on several occasions, pointing out that policies and methods need drastic changes if the country is to be really strengthened.

Chhotu Ram's movement has spread besides the Punjab and Haryana to the States of Rajasthan, Bihar, HP., Gujarat, AP and UP. Amongst the existing politicians, Ch. Charan Singh (LD) leader comes nearest in ideology to Chhotu Ram.

Ch. Charan Singh has a long record of public life and like Chhotu Ram he has been a strong advocate of the peasant and the rural cause as a whole. His recently published book, *India's Economic Policy – The Gandhian Blueprint* deals mainly with economic policies and to that extent it builds up a convincing case for drastic changes in the strategy of development.

If his thesis of economic decentralization with emphasis on agriculture and cottage industries is implemented, it will help in tackling some very pressing problems like unemployment and may also help in mitigating poverty to some extent. But the main problem will still remain untackled. That is the problem of capturing political power. Chhotu Ram had posed this problem and it still remains unanswered. This is the main question. Considering that Chhotu Ram started from scratch and worked against tremendous handicaps and disabilities, his achievements were not small. By strictly constitutional methods he built up a strong peasant movement in the Punjab and Haryana which agriculturally are the most prosperous states in the country today.

An essentially practical man Sir Chhotu Ram first brought the peasantry together under a common political platform which developed into an effective political organization and simultaneously propagated a creed that created a lasting ideological impact.

It is this consciousness which his work created that is his legacy to the country as a whole.

It is amazing how much one man could achieve under circumstances that left little scope for anything more than routine administrative work even for those who managed to acquire political power.

The ruling classes in India today are the upper middle classes who have managed to retain power through ballot tricks and sustained propaganda. Democracy with adult franchise should lead to socialism. This has not happened in countries with far better democratic traditions. It is unlikely to happen in India.

The leadership of all parties in India remains elitist. The Communist leadership is no different.

Chhotu Ram anticipated problems that we are facing today. His methods being constitutional could produce only slow results. All the same he posed basic issues, which cannot be sidetracked.

These problems cannot be solved within the four corners of the bourgeois parliamentary system, India has been practicing since Independence. The middle classes who have used this system mainly to protect their class interests are now at the tethers end. They have ceased to be creative in any meaningful sense. Their search for monopoly of power has led to stagnation.

The British rulers and their successors, the Indian bourgeois classes, look like cognates, a case of tweedledum and tweedledee. Gandhi's village democracy appears to be the only way to break the stalemate.

Most of the opposition to the Gandhian system is based on ignorance. Decentralization can only strengthen the existing polity. When you build a mansion brick by brick on sound foundations it imparts strength, not weakness, to the structure.

### In Memoriam

*'Men at sometime are masters of their fates,  
The fault dear Brutus, is not in our stars.  
But in us, that we are underlings.'*  
— Shakespeare (JULIUS CAESAR).

The special correspondent of the *Tribune*, A.C. Bali, reporting the cremation scene at Rohtak wrote;

"Mourners from the adjoining districts and rural areas came pouring in by all means of transport to have the last look of their 'benefactor'. The tribute these illiterate people paid, was '*Mahara Raja Mar gaya!*' (Our King is dead!) Wrapped in the Unionist flag presented by the Premier and a huge national flag presented on behalf of the Congress workers to honor their former District Congress President Sir Chhotu Ram's body was taken in a procession to the Jat Heroes College in whose premises, the greatest Jat of his time was laid to eternal rest. More than 50,000 persons came to pay their homage to Sir Chhotu Ram, whom Hindus and Muslims joined to honor as the hero of the Haryana Prant."

Chhotu Ram started as the leader of the Jats and even when his programme widened and his ideology came to include all the oppressed classes, he retained a special niche in the hearts of all the Jats — the numerous tribe that is spread all over northern India and is not confined to any one particular region.

The term Jat really means a cultivator and was so interpreted by the British administrators.

Chhotu Ram was the third great Jat in recent history who was acclaimed as the undisputed leader of all agricultural classes. He had two other predecessors, whose role in contemporary history was even on a grander scale.

In the 18th century after the decline of the Mughal Empire, Bharatpur arose into a sizable power, as a result of two great leaders, Badan Singh and his adopted son Suraj Mai.



Suraj Mai has been described by Sir Jadunath Sarkar, as 'Plato of the Jat tribe.' According to this great historian, he was by far the ablest, richest and cleverest prince of his times and had no rival in the art of either swordsmanship or diplomacy.

The Marathas would have won at Panipat, if they had paid heed to Suraj Mai's advice, when he met Bhao at Delhi.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh who founded the United Punjab Kingdom like Badan Singh had modest beginnings. By sheer statesmanship, amounting to genius, he has left a record of achievements, which still makes us marvel, how one man could achieve so much by personal exertion. Chhotu Ram whose beginnings were far more humble and who was not a Raja or a King except symbolically as he came to represent the most vital forces in Indian politics of his times, still bears resemblance with these two of his great tribesmen as like them he has become a historical figure.

Ranjit Singh kept the British imperialists at bay during his long rule and Suraj Mai's clear grasp of warfare and diplomacy of his times would have given a new turn to modern Indian history if his crucial advice had prevailed.

Chhotu Ram gave timely warning to Mahatma Gandhi, in whose hands the future of India lay, but his patriotic and statesman-like advice went unheeded. His name will ever remain associated in history as a true Unionist, justifying the party founded.

Not enough work has been done on Ranjit Singh — a man of Napoleonic proportions and Suraj Mai — the greatest diplomat and warrior of his times. These two great rulers were truly of national stature and deserve to be honored as such.

Chhotu Ram occupying a somewhat humbler corner in the corridor of history has been paid even less attention. All those who worked for national greatness should occupy an honorable place in a nation's galaxy of historic personalities

It is not the quantum of power — armies, wealth, resources — that a ruler commands — that is important; the important thing is the use he makes of them.

In a democratic set-up a politician's worth would depend on the use he makes of his position in forwarding causes widely accepted as publicly beneficial.

Thomas Carlyle has emphasized that a nation should honor its heroes. Some historians look upon history itself as a sum-total of the biographies of its great men.

Jawaharlal Nehru said that a person is great according to the cause he espouses. Chhotu Ram espoused the cause of the most vital part of Indian humanity.

*'Mera rom nahin rona hai yah sarai guliston ka'.*

(It is not my wail alone, but it is the wail of the entire world).

He not only espoused this cause but became identified with it. Such a man deserves greater remembrance than has been done so far.

Chhotu Ram raised some vital issues and these still remain unresolved. The best memorial to Chhotu Ram would be to carry on the work he initiated. There is no properly organized peasant organization in the country at the moment although each political party is careful to express concern for the man-behind-the-plough when the rural vote is needed.

The Government at Delhi and in northern States, Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana and UP – where Chhotu Ram is still a name to be conjured with, could express their appreciation by naming institutions or projects after him.

It is really a matter of sad omission, that Chhotu Ram's name is not associated in any form with the 'Bhakra Dam' and allied projects of which he was the real originator.

Some Universities could also be named after him or at least there could be chairs in subjects like agriculture, economics, political science, law and public administration.

Chhotu Ram was great enough to have a statue in the Parliament Square in New Delhi and at Chandigarh where successors of the old Legislature have been housed.

His Centenary in 1981 should become an occasion for a movement to ensure the revival of all that this great benefactor of rural India stood for.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prof D. C. Verma IAS (Retd.) is a former Vice-Chancellor of Kurukshetra University. He was Director of Public Relations and Director of Panchayats in the Punjab before the creation of Haryana State. He was associated with Sir Chhotu Ram closely for a number of years and during the last few years, he worked as his Public Relations Officer. Sir Chhotu Ram, while recommending the author for admission to a good British university for Ph.D. in 1938, observed:

"I have know Chaudhary Deep Chand Verma M.A. for the last 8 or 9 years. He is a young man of exceptional ability and has a distinct taste for literary work. He is very well informed on most matters particularly History, Economics and Politics."

His other books include *Haryana*, published by the National Book Trust, India and more recently. *The Unfinished Revolution – a Treatise on Democratic Decentralization*.