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**Sube Singh**  
 Ph.D. Research Scholar,  
 Department of History, Amity  
 University, Gurgaon  
 (Manesar), Haryana, India

**Dr. Ajay Kumar Sharma**  
 Department of History, ASLA,  
 Amity University, Gurgram,  
 (Manesar), Haryana, India

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Sube Singh**  
 Ph.D. Research Scholar,  
 Department of History, Amity  
 University, Gurgaon  
 (Manesar), Haryana, India

## A historical analysis of Sir Chhotu Ram in Punjab politics

**Sube Singh and Dr. Ajay Kumar Sharma**

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### Abstract

Sir Chhotu Ram was the principal architect of the Unionist Party of the Punjab. He was in favour of complete independence of India but without partitioning it. Basic Ideology of Sir Chhotu Ram was based on economic issues. He emerged as a sole Jat leader of Punjab and gained prominence as the leader of the agriculturists of the Punjab. He served as an Agriculture Minister, Education Minister, Development Minister, and Revenue Minister in the Punjab Assembly.

The Politics of the Unionist Party was the politics of loyalism, it was made possible by Chhotu Ram, as an important leader in the Unionist politics, he forged an enduring political alliance with the predominant Unionist Muslims of Punjab which was instrumental in making the most successful non-Congress Ministries under the Provincial Autonomy. The main contribution of Sir Chhotu Ram was in championing the cause of the peasantry class and the downtrodden people in the Punjab and he stood for their rights.

**Keywords:** Architect, political ideas, loyalism, alliance, downtrodden

### Introduction

Sir Chhotu Ram was a great visionary. He was the first economic thinker who stressed, initiated, and implemented the policies and programme for the systematic development of agriculture and rural development. He try to ameliorate the condition of the peasants and downtrodden people particularly the rural masses. He sponsored legislation which were wholly constructive and aimed to provide opportunities to rural areas so that they could compete in some way with their richer urban classes. He realized that unless power was transferred to the rural people, the country would not remain united and strong.

The early nineteenth century witnessed India's immense agricultural indebtedness. It continued to increase at an alarming speed with the Government's lackluster approach, Sir Chhotu Ram opposed exploitation and stood for the rights of the downtrodden people. He was a staunch *Arya Samajist* and did not believe in distinguishing the people on religious basis. He was born in the surrounding which helped him to embrace the cult of *Arya Samaj* which was prevalent in the South-Eastern Punjab in the nineteenth century. Despite his deep involvement in political activities, Chhotu Ram found time to propagate and popularize the tenets of the *Arya Samaj*.

### Childhood and Education

Sir Chhotu Ram was born on November 24, 1881 in a *Jat* peasant family of *Ohlan got* <sup>[1]</sup> in *Garhi Sampla* village in Rohtak district in Haryana. The original name of Sir Chhotu Ram was Ram Richhpal. In due course the second name gained popularity and replaced the original name <sup>[2]</sup>. Chaudhary Sukhi Ram, father of Sir Chhotu Ram used to do occasional transaction in purchase of agricultural produce. Chhotu Ram took admission in primary school at Sampla village in January 1891. He passed his vernacular middle school examination from Jhajjar. The teacher registered him as Chhotu Ram. Chhotu Ram left Jhajjar to join the Christian Mission School at Delhi although it was very difficult for the family of Chhotu Ram to raise money for his education. Stay of Chhotu Ram at the Christian Mission High School was eventful <sup>[3]</sup>. During his stay at St. Stephen's college, Delhi, he adopted the Ideas of the *Arya Samaj*. In the College days, he performed Sandhya and read the *Bhagvad Gita* <sup>[4]</sup>.

Chhotu Ram studied Sanskrit rather than English, preferred subject of many of his fellow students who belonged to rich and upper-caste backgrounds. Chhotu Ram was concerned with the educationally and economically backward community, Jats.

Chhotu Ram published an article in the college magazine in 1907. In this article, he reflected on the ways how to improve life in rural areas, to end the isolation of the people and to curb the monopoly of the village *Bania*, “the incarnation of Shylock in our times”<sup>[5]</sup>. One way of infusing some dynamism into the lives of people was to make popular, the bard, the village *panchayat*, and festivals. According to him, “A substantial relief in this monopoly takes place when the hereditary bard of the village pays his visit which generally lasts for several weeks. The stirring war-ballads touch a more responsive string in the nature of villager and induce a greater variety of feeling in his heart than he has experience in a whole year. He always sways backwards and forwards, waves his head, shrugs his shoulders, frowns, gnashes his teeth, or restrains his tears, as the various ideas including the corresponding sentiments, fits across his mind. He is no more than the tiller of the field. He is the brave warrior in the field of battle, the faithful vassal of his Liege Lord, the loyal follower of his heroic chief. The soul-stirring *Johurs* of Chittore and the marvelous valour and chivalry of the brave *Rajput* to whom the very mission of *Kshatriya* life was to sacrifice one’s self in delivering the weak from the repression of the strong, to whom any death except on the battle-field was regarded as a curse, send such an exciting thrill through the villager’s whole frame, that when he retires to sleep, he dreams of battles swords and spears instead of his peaceful avocation and humble tools of husbandry”<sup>[6]</sup>.

Chhotu Ram wrote a booklet on Physical Geography in English to aid students preparing for the matriculation examination and also a pamphlet entitled “Aids to the study of Indian History”<sup>[7]</sup>. He assumed the charge of the *Jat* Boarding House at Agra in 1911, as the honorary superintendent<sup>[8]</sup>. He started legal practice with Chaudhary Lal Chand in 1912. Sir Chhotu Ram joined Law College in evening shift in Lahore in 1906. He simultaneously started teaching at the *Rang Mahal* Mission High School, Lahore. Chhotu Ram Joined Law College at Agra in 1908 and got Law degree in 1911 securing first division and got himself registered as a practising lawyer at Agra under the Allahabad High Court. Chhotu Ram raised money for maintenance and construction of the additional rooms in the *Jat* Boarding House as a superintendent of it. Chhotu Ram established himself as one of the best criminal lawyer in Agra and Meerut divisions. Chhotu Ram came back to Rohtak in 1912 and started legal practices. He became very popular among the common people particularly the agriculturists.

#### As a Jat Leader

During his stay and studying Law at Agra, Chhotu Ram came to know the local conditions of Agra and Meerut divisions. This strengthened his desire to improve the socio-economic and political status of the *Jats*<sup>[9]</sup>. He became the honorary superintendent of the *Jat* boarding house in 1911, in Agra<sup>[10]</sup>. Sir Chhotu Ram became the honorary secretary of the District Recruitment and War Committee<sup>[11]</sup>. The *Jats* provided about half of the total recruits in Rohtak district during the First World War and number rose from

6245 in January 1915 to 22144 in November 1918<sup>[12]</sup>. Chhotu Ram formed the *Jat Sabha* at Rohtak in 1912<sup>[13]</sup>. He started many schools and the *Jat Arya Vedic* Sanskrit High School at Rohtak was one of them<sup>[14]</sup>. Sir Chhotu Ram encouraged the students from *Jat* community to join the Young *Jat* Association, study at the *Jat* School and at the St. Stephen’s College Delhi<sup>[15]</sup>. After the First World War, he set out to mobilize *Jats* in Rajasthan and Western Uttar Pradesh. Sir Chhotu Ram wrote against the *bahis* (account book) and the cruel way in which moneylenders obtained decrees against poor peasants<sup>[16]</sup>. He criticized the police, district board and other departments for their ill treatments of *Jats*<sup>[17]</sup>. Between 1920 and 1930, Sir Chhotu Ram was the main inspiration behind the *Jat* identity in the Punjab. Chhotu Ram drew upon his *Arya Samaj* background to appropriate this cultural rhetoric of *Jat* assertion in *Pushkar*, his interpretation of the *Pushkar* episode ran contrary to Dayanand’s views on pilgrimage<sup>[18]</sup>. In 1934, he organized a rally of ten thousand *Jat* peasants in *Sikar* (Rajasthan) to launch an anti-rent campaign. Those who came wearing the sacred thread, made offerings of *ghee* and read from the *Satyarth Prakash*<sup>[19]</sup>.

#### Arya Samaj in Punjab and Sir Chhotu Ram

During the war years Chhotu Ram developed links with *Jat* and *Arya Samajist* leaders<sup>[20]</sup>. Chhotu Ram’s association with manager of *Gurukul* at Matindu brought him into contact with Swami Shradhanand<sup>[21]</sup>. Master Nathu Ram was his close ally in Rohtak and he was famous among the *Jats* as an *Arya* preacher. He was with Chhotu Ram at the time of the disturbances of 1919<sup>[22]</sup>. Chhotu Ram constituted a committee of *Arya Samajists* in Rohtak. His identification with the *Arya Samajists* made officials to complain that Chhotu Ram undertakes the causes of the *Jat* Community and the propagation of *Arya* doctrines together<sup>[23]</sup>. The All India Congress and the *Arya Samaj* both were popular movements. Earlier Sir Chhotu Ram had been both, a Congressman and an *Arya Samajist*. He resigned from the Congress Party in 1920. Although he did not cease to be an *Arya Samajist* but he withdrew from the official *Arya Samaj*<sup>[24]</sup>.

#### Sir Chhotu Ram as a Congress Leader

Chhotu Ram was more attentive to the cause of the peasantry. He did not have any problem with the identity of the peasants, Hindu, or Muslim. Sir Chhotu Ram joined the All India Congress Party in 1916 and worked as the President of the Rohtak District Congress Committee from 1916 to November 8, 1920<sup>[25]</sup>. Chhotu Ram had sympathy with the peasantry irrespective of their religion<sup>[26]</sup>. Chhotu Ram said, “I was a Congressman inwardly and outwardly and thus anti-Government. This conflicted with my conviction that a backward class and the class to which I belonged was admittedly a backward class cannot afford to fight against Government.”<sup>[27]</sup>. The *Arya Samaj* and the Indian National Congress were not succeeded in weakening Chhotu Ram’s hold over the *Jat* landowners. Chhotu Ram kept on projecting the image of a united *Jat* Community with himself as the sole representative of *Jat* interests<sup>[28]</sup>.

#### Leader of the Unionist Party: Minister in various Departments in the Punjab

Fazl-i-Husain and Chhotu Ram founded the Punjab Unionist Party in 1923. They issued an election Manifesto which

defined aim and objectives of the Unionist Party of Punjab [29]. Hindu-Muslim tensions and rural-urban conflict within and outside the Punjab Council cut across the *Arya Samaj* community people in the Punjab [30]. In this scenario, Chhotu Ram felt that there was much at stake in an alliance with explicitly urban Hindu interests [31].

Sir Chhotu Ram served as Agriculture Minister of Punjab from September 1924 to 1925 and Education Minister from 1925 to 1927. He was elected as the President of the Punjab Council with the death of Fazl-i-Hussain. Now Sir Chhotu Ram became the most important leader of the Unionist Party of the Punjab along with Sikander Hayat Khan. He was the chief organizer of the Unionist Party's election machinery at the time of the 1937 elections. The Unionist Party won the elections of 1937 with a big majority. The Unionist Party of the Punjab formed the ministry under the leadership of Sikander Hayat Khan. Sir Chhotu Ram took over as the Minister of Development from 1937 to 1941 and Revenue Minister from 1941 to 1945 [32].

### Comparative Analysis and Performance of the Unionist Party in the Punjab: Elections of 1937 and 1945

The changed political position of the Unionist party of 1937, in the elections of 1946 is demonstrated by the new political propaganda tactics of the other major political parties which ceased to consider the Unionist Party even worthy of attack. The alienation of some of the major traditional supporters of the Unionists, whether the rich agriculturists or the military personnel, combined with the economic distress of the lower strata of voters, signaled the doom of this party. The situation for the Unionist Party had turned so adverse that they were not even left with a viable election slogan, Glancy, the Governor of the Punjab, put this in August 1945, "The Unionists have no spectacular battle cry, they can point no doubt to their consistent support of the war effort, to the various reforms they have introduced such as vast reduction of agricultural indebtedness and to their extensive post war programme for the benefit of the province" [33]. The Unionists, in 1946, lacked a convincing election campaign cry. Even the British officials were unable to suggest a better catch word than Punjabi, designed to cut into the demand of Pakistan for the Muslim League and the demand of the Independence of India for the Indian National Congress, as a slogan in the elections of 1946 [34]. The political scenario in the Punjab was showing a change. There was a widespread belief that the British were quitting India, the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League were possible successors to the British [35]. It frightened the Unionist Party leaders like Chhotu Ram and Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana who openly expressed their apprehensions regarding the rewards of victory going to the enemies and not to loyalists like themselves [36].

### Aftermath of Sir Chhotu Ram

Chhotu Ram's death in January 10, 1945 brought down the curtain of hold of the Unionist Party in the South-East Punjab. Elections of 1946 were a triumphant victory for the Indian National Congress Party in the general constituencies and of the Muslim League in the Muslim Constituencies of the Punjab. Chhotu Ram's politics had been responsible to the great extent in giving the urban middle class and mercantile complexion to the Punjab Congress. The cause of this rout of the Unionist Party of the Punjab has so far been accepted as the untimely removal of Chhotu Ram from the political scene and the inability of his successors to continue the kind of politics he had perfected.

The Congress performance juxtaposed with that of the Unionist and the Muslim League in the elections of 1937 and 1946. A comparison of the Unionist Party position in the elections of 1937 and 1946, reveal the significance of the Congress Party triumph in 1946. Under the Government of India Act 1935, Ambala division was allotted 22 seats, eleven General rural seats, two General urban seats, three reserved seats and six Muslim rural seats. Except for one seat in the general rural constituency which went to the Congress party, the Unionist party won all ten. This contrasted sharply with 1946 election results (Table-1) when they won merely two seats. After having getting 54.57 percent of the polled votes in the general rural constituencies in 1937, the Unionist polled 32.72 percent only in 1946. The Indian National Congress in the elections of 1937, had fielded their candidates for seven constituencies, four for General rural, two for General urban and one for Muslim rural. In the four General constituencies the Congress captured 31.23 percent of the polled votes (Table-2) as compared to 1946 when they won nine seats out of a total of 11, and succeeded in capturing 52.13 percent of the total polled votes. (Table-2)

Tika Ram, the political successor of Chhotu Ram, had served as the Revenue Minister and also as Parliamentary Secretary from 1937 to 1945. The Unionist candidate was elected from Gurgaon, South-East Constituency in 1937 forfeited his deposit in 1946. Unionist victories in the Gurgaon North-West and Hansi constituencies had a little margin of 231 and 935 votes respectively. The two urban Hindu seats of this region remained with the Congress in both these elections. The figures given in Table-3 are a strong indication of the Congress support being drawn from among the urban Hindu middle class and mercantile groups. The incredible figure of 99.19 percent of the polled votes in the elections of 1946 in the South-Eastern Towns constituency shows a near unanimous verdict in favour of the Congress Party candidate.

**Table 1:** Is showing the results of the general, rural constituencies of Ambala division

S. No.	Constituencies	1937 Elections			1946 Elections				
		Total Votes Polled	Unionist	Percentage	Total Votes Polled	Unionist	Percentage	Congress	Percentage
1.	Hisar South	20401	12372	60.64	16064	5889	36.66	10175	63.34
2.	Hansi	14794	7633	51.60	13008	7231	55.59	5777	44.41
3.	Hisar North	18650	8610	46.17	13928	1586	11.39	7839	57.00
4.	Rohtak North	26945	15836	58.78	26422	12137	45.94	14235	53.88
5.	Rohtak Central	22550	11383	50.48	18215	6668	36.61	9338	51.27
6.	Jhajjar	20074	15957	79.49	18798	6873	36.56	11866	63.12
7.	Gurgaon North-West	19597	7481	38.17	17729	8956	36.52	8773	49.48
8.	Gurgaon South -East	21960	6539	29.78	22525	2750	12.21	10063	44.68
9.	Karnal South	21799	10917	50.08	22233	4013	18.05	10964	49.31

10.	Karnal North	18248	18072	99.04	31568	6512	20.63	13232	41.92
11.	Ambala & Simla	24996	10479	41.92	35577	14629	41.12	20708	58.21
Grand Total		230012	125279	54.47	236067	77244	32.72	123070	52.13

**Source:** Figures calculated from Parliamentary Papers, Return showing the results of election in India, 1937, Cmd. 5589, Tribune, February 4-12, 1937, and February 19-23, 1946, and Times of India, March 13, 1946, p. 8 [37].

**Table 2:** Is showing the results of the general rural constituencies contested by the congress party in Ambala division in the elections of 1937

S. No.	Constituency	Total votes polled	Congress	Percentage polled by the Congress
1.	Hissar South	20401	7833	38.40
2.	Rohtak Central	22550	11139	49.40
3.	Jhajjar	22074	4098	20.41
4.	Ambala and Simla	38422	12000	31.23
		101447	35070	34.57

**Source:** Figures calculated from Parliamentary Papers, Return showing the results of election in India, 1937, Cmd. 5589, Tribune, February 4-12, 1937, and February 19-23, 1946, and the Times of India, March 13, 1946, p. 8 [38].

**Table 3:** Is Showing the Results of the General Urban Constituencies won by the Congress Party in Ambala Division.

S. No.	Constituency	Elections 1937			Elections 1946		
		Total votes polled	Congress	Percentage	Total votes polled	Congress	Percentage
1.	Southern towns	12220	7966	65.10	10728	8858	82.57
2.	South-eastern towns	14635	9001	61.50	15215	15091	99.19
Total		26855	16967	63.18	25943	23949	92.31

**Source:** Figures calculated from Parliamentary Papers, Return showing the results of elections in India, 1937, Cmd. 5589, Tribune, February 4-12, 1937, and February 19-23, 1946, and the Times of India, March 13, 1946, p. 8 [39].

There were three seats reserved for the scheduled caste category candidates in Ambala Division. The Unionists had never gone beyond paying lip sympathy to their cause and had ignored them. They were considered electorally insignificant. These castes were dependant on the landowners socially and economically. No attempts were made by the Unionists to woo them during the 1937 elections. The six Muslim rural constituencies were won by the Unionists in 1937. An unusual electoral phenomenon witnessed during elections of 1937 was that of the Unionist Muslims being pitted against each other [40]. The Muslim constituency of Gurgaon North-West had three candidates, all were Unionist Muslims. In the elections of 1946, the Unionists contested four out of six Muslim seats were routed by the Muslim League candidates, two Unionist Muslims lost their deposits and one came very near losing it. The basic reason for the change in the political fortunes of the Unionists, the Congress and the Muslim League is to be found in the changed Muslim politics of the province. Before the announcement of the 1946 elections, the Unionist party had almost collapsed and the British administrators openly presaged the victory of the Muslim Leaguers over the Unionist Muslims.

**Table 4:** Is Showing the Indian National Army Personnel from South-East Punjab

S.No.	District	Ambala	Karnal	Gurgaon	Rohtak	Hissar	Total
1.	Officers	01	14	106	149	61	331
2.	Soldiers	30	105	580	724	478	1917
Total		31	119	686	873	539	2248

**Source:** Chander, Jagdish, Political Developments in Haryana 1928-1947, in Yadav, J.N., Singh, (ed.), Haryana: Studies in History and Politics, New Delhi, 1976, p. 105 [41].

The most important aspect that contributed to this shift was the rise of the *Azad Hind Fauj* (Indian National Army). By 1945, the actual strength of the Indian National Army was calculated to be 45000 [42]. A large number of them

belonged to the Punjab. The Punjab Congress Committee quickly took up the cause. With the removal of press censorship in September, 1945, the Nationalist press succeeded in turning the *Azad Hind Fauj* (Indian National Army) issue into a highly emotional one. The release of a large number of Congress leaders from the jails in August 1945 who were imprisoned in the 1942 movement, the announcement on August 21, 1945 of the forth coming elections to be held in 1946 and the Congress defence of the *Azad Hind Fauj* (Indian National Army) officers at the public trial held at Red Fort, Delhi, between November 5 to December 31, 1945, succeeded in creating an atmosphere which proved electorally decisive.

To deal with the Indian National Army problem, the Congress party set up relief and employment committees in five districts of this region [43]. The released Indian National Army personnel began to contact the Congress organizations, delivered seditious speeches from the Congress platform, got enrolled as Congress workers and became Congress election propagandists.<sup>44</sup> The released *Azad Hind Fauj* (Indian National Army) personnel were being hounded by the police were harassed in many ways.<sup>45</sup> They were given assurances by the Congress Party of enlistment in the future Indian Army [46]. By February 1946 the Punjab officials were convinced that the Congress would be able to retain its hold over them [47].

After the death of Sir Chhotu Ram on January 10, 1945, Tika Ram, political successor of Chhotu Ram, fell short of Chhotu Ram's capacity for work. Some newspapers even speculated on the future of the Unionist ministry. Glancy, the Governor of Punjab considered his death a "calamity and severe blow to the Unionist Party of the Punjab". The Unionist Party had the financial support of many of the rich Unionist Muslim landlords. Chhotu Ram had an immense organizing capacity. In 1946 the Unionist Party had Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana as a "one man mobile Parliamentary Board who handled the elections" [48].

In Ambala division, absence of Chhotu Ram led to a bitter

fight between Tika Ram and Sri Chand, Chhotu Ram's nephew and political heir on the issue of selection of Unionist Party candidates<sup>[49]</sup>. Their election fight in this area continued to centre on issues like incitement to caste prejudices, issue of *zamindar* and non-*zamindars*, the *Bania* and *Mahajan* Congress. The difference between the elections of 1937 and 1946 is accurately summed up by A. A. Mac Donald (Election Commissioner of Punjab), "A notable fact is that the Elections unlike previous elections were fought on party lines, not on personal and caste considerations. Party label is the case of the Congress and the Muslim League went a very long way to ensuring the success of candidates. There was a falling away of personal influence in swaying the votes"<sup>[50]</sup>. This explains the defeat of the Unionists. The whole socio economic and political context was changed by the time of the elections of 1946. Chhotu Ram was known to have kept this region against the Congress for many years and after him there was no one among the rural Hindus to replace him. This shows the defeat of the Unionist Party.

### Conclusion

Sir Chhotu Ram worked for the welfare and betterment of the peasantry in the Punjab. He organized the peasantry in the Punjab and taught them how to fight for their Social, political and economic rights. To improve the social and economic condition of the peasantry, Sir Chhotu Ram took rural development on the top priority and much emphasis was given on it. The post Chhotu Ram period saw a sudden collapse of his politics due to changed socio economic and political conditions. Sir Chhotu Ram made great efforts to lower the rate of interest and to bring relief to the peasantry. Sir Chhotu Ram was a secular minded person and he did not compromise to any communal question. His advocacy of secularism was to separate religion from politics. Chhotu Ram believed in the slogan of secularism when comparing the Congress Party with political groups like the Muslim League, Hindu *Mahasabha* and the *Akali Dal*. Secularism of Chhotu Ram was not based on the opposition to religion. In rural areas it was necessary to win the support of the peasants.

Death of Sir Chhotu Ram was a big blow to the Unionist party in the Punjab. Despite being a loyalist, he was a hardcore Nationalist and worked for the betterment of the peasantry and downtrodden people without any communal biasness. After his death communal problem reach at an alarming level when led to partition of Punjab as well as that of India. In the post-Independence period in India, peasantry of Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh has been inspired by political and social ideas and works of Sir Chhotu Ram.

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