A historical analysis of Sir Chhotu Ram in Punjab politics

Sube Singh and Dr. Ajay Kumar Sharma

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22271/27069109.2023.v5.i2c.240

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. 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 in Garhi Sampla village in Rohtak district in Haryana. The original name of Sir Chhotu Ram was Ram Richhal. In due course the second name gained popularity and replaced the original name. 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. 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.
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” [9]. 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 heroic 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 Raiput 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” [6].

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” [7]. He assumed the charge of the Jat Boarding House at Agra in 1911, as the honorary superintendent [8]. He started legal practice with Chaudhury 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 [9]. He became the honorary superintendent of the Jat boarding house in 1911, in Agra [10]. Sir Chhotu Ram became the honorary secretary of the District Recruitment and War Committee [11]. 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 [12]. Chhotu Ram formed the Jat Sabha at Rohtak in 1912 [13]. He started many schools and the Jat Arya Vedic Sanskrit High School at Rohtak was one of them [14]. 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 [15]. After the First World War, he set out to mobilize Jats in Rajasthan and Western Uter Pradesh. Sir Chhotu Ram wrote against the bahis (account book) and the cruel way in which money-lenders obtained decrees against poor peasants [16]. He criticized the police, district board and other departments for their ill treatments of Jats [17]. 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 [18]. 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 [19].

Arya Samaj in Punjab and Sir Chhotu Ram

During the war years Chhotu Ram developed links with Jat and Arya Samajist leaders [20]. Chhotu Ram’s association with manager of Gurukul at Matindu brought him into contact with Swami Shradhanand [21]. 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 [22]. 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 [23]. 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 [24].

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 [25]. Chhotu Ram had sympathy with the peasantry irrespective of their religion [26]. 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.” [27], 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 [28].

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].

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.

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 personnel, combined with the economic distress of the lower strata of voters, signaled the doom of this party. The changed political position of the Unionist party 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 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 personnels, combined with the economic distress of the lower strata of voters, signaled the doom of this party. The changed political position of the Unionist party 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 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 personnels, combined with the economic distress of the lower strata of voters, signaled the doom of this party. The changed political position of the Unionist party 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No.</th>
<th>Constituencies</th>
<th>1937 Elections</th>
<th>1946 Elections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Votes Polled</td>
<td>Unionist</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Hisar South</td>
<td>20401</td>
<td>12372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Hansi</td>
<td>14794</td>
<td>7633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Hisar North</td>
<td>18650</td>
<td>8610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Rohtak North</td>
<td>26945</td>
<td>15836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Rohtak Central</td>
<td>22550</td>
<td>11383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Jhajjar</td>
<td>20074</td>
<td>15957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Gurgaon North-West</td>
<td>19597</td>
<td>7481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Gurgaon South-East</td>
<td>21960</td>
<td>6539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Karnal South</td>
<td>21799</td>
<td>10917</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Is showing the results of the general, rural constituencies of Ambala division
Before the announcement of the 1946 elections, 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 organizing capacity. In 1946 the Unionist Party had Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana as a “one man mobile Parliamentary organizing capacity. In 1946 the Unionist Party had Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana as a “one man mobile Parliamentary organizing capacity. In 1946 the Unionist Party had Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana as a “one man mobile Parliamentary organizing capacity. In 1946 the Unionist Party had Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana as a “one man mobile Parliamentary organizing capacity. In 1946 the Unionist Party had Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana as a “one man mobile Parliamentary organizing capacity. In 1946 the Unionist Party had Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana as a “one man mobile Parliamentary organizing capacity.

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. 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 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. 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. The released Azad Hind Fauj (Indian National Army) personnel were being hounded by the police were harassed in many ways. They were given assurances by the Congress Party of enlistment in the future Indian Army. By February 1946 the Punjab officials were convinced that the Congress would be able to retain its hold over them.

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”.

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 [49]. Their election fight in this area continued on issues 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” [50]. 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.

References
1. Ohlan Jats were concentrated in Sampla and belonged to a small got.
4. Ram C. Serving the Weak, p.166.
5. Singh, Balbir, Ram SC. Selected Speeches and Writings, New Delhi; c1996. p. 244-49.
6. Ram, Chhotu. The Improvement in Indian Village Life.
7. Chhotu Ram. Serving the Weak, p.162.
12. Leigh MS. The Punjab and the War, Lahore; c1922. p. 54, 82.
16. HAS, H-2, Chhotu Ram to R.C. Bolster; c1919 May 2.
17. HAS, Note on R.S. Chhotu Ram, Pledger; c1919 May 1.
18. On how the Pushkar pilgrimage became a symbol of Jat Identity particularly in South East Punjab after 1920.
22. HSA, Notes on Chhotu Ram, Pledger; c1919 May 1.
23. HSA, Punjab Disturbances.
27. Ram, Chhotu. Serving the Weak, p. 163-164.
31. Jat Gazette; c1929 Jan 16.
34. IOR: L/P&J/5/248, 1945, Glancy to Wavell; c1945 Aug 16.
35. IOR: L/P&J/8/513; c1944.
36. IOR: L/P&J/8/513; c1944.
40. Tribune; c1937 Feb 4.
42. Ghosh KK. The Indian National Army, Meerut; c1969. p. 152.
44. GI: FRP, 18/11/45, November 1945, 18/12/45; c1945 Dec.
46. GI: Hoe Poll, 18/2/46; c1946 Feb.
47. GI: Home Poll, 18/2/46; c1946 Feb.
48. The Tribune; c1946 Feb 18. p. 5.
49. Sharma, Ram S. Interview; c1980 Sept 22.
50. IOR: L/P & j/8/472; c1946.