



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>
 Vol. 03 No. 01. Jan-March 2025. Page#. 2248-2260
 Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)
 Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



Hydraulic Power and Political Order: Canal Colonies and Intermediary Elites in Montgomery (Sahiwal) District

Dr. Saeed Ahmed Butt

Assistant Professor, GCU Lahore

saeedbutt@gcu.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the nexus amid irrigation structures, colonialism, and social-political change in Montgomery District (now Sahiwal) under the British rule. It claims that the canal colonization was a strategic policy of political engineering, according to which the possession of water and land enabled the formation of intermediate elites, who guaranteed the cooperation of the administration and political stability. Drawing upon Punjab Settlement Reports, District Gazetteers, Canal Colony administrative files and modern historiography, study demonstrates how hydraulic control was translated into political authority. The article based on in-depth case studies of Pakpattan, Shergarh, Okara and Dipalpur demonstrates that canal colonization created a formalized hierarchy of loyalty, dependence, and mediated government that spilled over to late colonial electoral politics. The results are added to larger discussions about the formation of colonial states, agrarian transformation and legacy of intermediary power in South Asia.

Keywords: Hydraulic Power, Political Order, Canals, Colonies, Intermediary Elites, Montgomery

Introduction

The Punjab British colonial change is one of the brightest examples of environmental engineering with the political control. Some of these changes were most important, such as the creation of canal colonies in western Punjab, specifically in Montgomery District. The British state in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was engaged in a vigorous irrigation project which transformed arid wastelands into valuable agricultural lands. Although role of canal colonization in the economy has received a lot of recognition, the political aspects of canal colonization should be considered more carefully. This paper suggests that canal colonies cannot be seen as mere agrarian reforms but rather as a means to achieve a stable, loyal and controllable rural population, which was the goal of the colonial state. The notion of hydraulic power, which was based on political ecology and historical sociology, is helpful to examine the ways in which the power over the water resources turned into the mechanism of political power. Colonial rulers were keenly aware of the political importance of irrigation. A Montgomery District Settlement Report (1916), observed; The canal is not simply a source of water, but the mainstay of order in the colony.¹ The cultivator who relies on it must necessarily seek his prosperity in Government. This is the gist of colonial strategy: the state dominated livelihoods through its control of water and determined political behavior through the control of livelihoods.

Historiographical Context and Theoretical Framework:

¹ Montgomery District Settlement Report (1916)

The science of canal colonies has grown and developed greatly over time. Colonial literature at the time stressed their economic achievement and civilizing process, and irrigation was a kind gesture. However, modern historiography has challenged this narrative. Imran Ali identifies the formation by the canal colonies of a new agrarian hierarchy, which was dominated by the large landholder, whereas David Gilmartin identifies the political aspects of irrigation, that is, its role in the construction of authority. On the same note, Ian Talbot highlights the role of rural elites in brokering colonial rule. This paper is based on these observations, incorporating the idea of hydraulic power. It is based on the theory of hydraulic societies introduced by Karl Wittfogel, according to which the British, gaining the control over the water resources in colonial Punjab, were able to establish the system of centralized power with the help of local intermediaries.

Canal Colonization and environmental change

The impact of British conquest of Punjab in 1849 was the shift to irrigation system since inundation canals (seasonal) which depended on seasonal floods were replaced by permanent canals.² Colonial canals are responsible in political and ideological and mechanical construction of canals in Indus Basin during the second half of nineteenth century. In order to develop the barren bar lands and construct and maintain irrigation systems, British government promoted science.³ This new order transformed economy and government of Punjab. It cultivated approximately 26 million acres of desert land and made one of India's weakest agricultural areas a potential granary. The canal colonization, since 1885, led to unparalleled growth in agricultural production⁴, which increased state revenue. This canal system was one of the largest systems in the world which was under the control of the colonial state in form of administration systems and revenue collection. In Triple Canal Project, British constructed an elaborate canal system that supplied all vast properties of Montgomery with water. Triple Canal Project started construction of Lower Bari Doab Canal in December, 1906 to supply 882000 state owned acres in Montgomery and Multan districts. This mammoth project included linking canals in the flow of water between Jhelum and Chenab and Chenab and Ravi in such a way that development of Upper Jhelum and Upper Chenab⁵ becomes achievable. The canal passed Balloki headworks, and, after passing south westwards, 30 miles to Renala, 20 miles in Lahore District, it followed watershed of Doabs, parallel to North-Western Railway line. It provided 6750 cusecs water to Khanewal Tahsil, Multan District and 1-14 distributaries to Okara and Montgomery Tahsils. These regions were irrigated permanently. There are a few distributaries in the canal network. The canal was divided by 64 mile Gugera distributary of Ravi River with other distributaries on left bank of Ravi. Lower Bari Doab Canal was used in 1916-17 to supply water to 36 main distributaries in hundreds of miles. In addition to that, Sohag Para Canal that was a by-product of natural Sohag Nala had been used to irrigate Dipalpur and Pakpattan tehsils, 19 miles west of it. *Bhila Gulab Singh* passed by Depalpur, after 40 miles in Lahore District Depalpur Canal. Khanwah Branch partitioned at Hujra, irrigation to the north of Depalpur and east of Pakpattan. The 12-mile Pakpattan Canal passed through Depalpur and began at Suleimanke and then supplied the river with irrigation. It even opened distributaries like Bhatti and Khadir Branch that provided single harvest irrigation along Pakpattan southern frontier and extending to Mailsi Tahsil.

² *Imran Ali*, Punjab Under Imperialism (Princeton University Press, 1988), p.8

³ David Gilmartin "Scientific Empire and Imperial Science: Colonialism and Irrigation Technology in Indus Basin, Journal of Asian Studies Vol. 53 No. 1 (Nov. 1994) Published by Association for Asian Studies), p.1131-1132

⁴ *Imran Ali*, Punjab Under Imperialism (Princeton University Press, 1988), p.8

⁵ *B. S. Nijjar*, Punjab under the British Rule 1849-1947 (Lahore, 1854), p.24

Canal colonies settlements sprung up along waterways in Punjab. These canal colonies played the British interests of increasing agricultural productivity, food supply, military manpower and population congestion relief in overpopulated Central Punjab areas. Three important canal colonies of Sohag Para, Lower Bari Doab and Nili Bar of Montgomery District. The earliest and the smallest program was the Sohag Para Colony that encompassed 90000 acres in 1886. A talented group of peasant colonists who were mainly Lahore and Amritsar Jat Sikhs and Kambohs in land development based on the British political tastes. Jat Sikhs were granted with 29000 acres or 38 percent of the land out of 484 recipients. There were 3500 acres allotted to 37 Rawalpindi Khatri Sikhs.⁶ Where fifty-acre grants were involved, larger grants were given to influential persons. To illustrate land allotment as an aspect of colonial domination and elite co-operation, Baba Sir Khem Singh Bedi was awarded 7800 acres, 10 percent of colony,⁷ that increased his economic status, religious and political power. Between 1910 and 1925, the more elaborate and bigger Lower Bari Doab Canal Colony was created. By 1920 and 1930, colony reached 600,000 and 717,627 acres. Military grants were quite considerable during World War I and consumed 20% of the colony. The other segment that existed was the landed gentry. Sir Michael ODwyer proposed to reserve 75,000 acres to hereditary elites, friends of political value, though in their decadence. This layer included important pirs that mediated the rurality and they were granted 7.5 percent of the colony with a gifting of some 60000 acres as gentry. Skilled peasant colonists in Amritsar, Jullundur, Gurdaspur and Hoshiarpur, and especially Jat, Arain, Kamboh and Saini groups were given 80000 acres. In 1925, Nili Bar Colony was the final major canal colony that had irrigated 800000 acres of perennial irrigation and 260000 acres of non-perennial irrigation under Sutlej Valley Project that included Montgomery and Multan districts. Military awards of 75000 acres to military veterans controlled this colony. Civilian grant of peasants amounted to only 225000 acres. Large-scale auctions were another characteristic feature of Nili Bar Colony. More prosperous Punjabis like non-agriculturalists, bought 360000 acres-45 percent of permanently irrigated land-government. This allowed commercial and professional owners of land to join agricultural associations. The canal colonies of Punjab were changed by British administration in terms of land, culture and politics. As the irrigation systems, selective redistribution of land and administrative control resulted in the creation of loyal intermediaries, the agricultural environment of the colonial state had been altered.

Wasteland to Agricultural Frontier:

Prior to colonization of canals, Montgomery District was densely populated and unproductive in agriculture. Canal irrigation was also introduced which changed the landscape, as massive cultivation was now possible. According to the accounts of the colonial times, the settlers were selected according to their farming experience and physical prowess and devotion to the state. Malcolm Darling noted; Punjab District Gazetteer (Montgomery, 1920) records; "the change produced by Lower Bari Doab Canal is unparalleled; lands that had been considered waste, now produce large harvests of wheat and cotton."⁸ The allocation of land was done on a very controlled basis with consideration being given to those considered to be loyal to colonial state. Once canal colonies were established in Punjab, the economy changed dramatically in province. British factors such as individualization of property rights in land, fixation and stern collection of land revenue in cash, introduction of a new legal administrative system, building

⁶ Imran Ali, *Five Punjabi Centuries, Canal Colonization & Socio-Economic Change* (Delhi; Mahohar Publisher, 1997), p.351

⁷ Imran Ali, *Punjab Under Imperialism* (Princeton University Press, 1988),p.73

⁸ Punjab District Gazetteer (Montgomery, 1920)

of road and railway system, canal-building activities and a colonization program, all commercialized agriculture and opened up more avenues of investment to the agricultural investors, as described by Mustafa Kamal Pasha as a social revolution⁹ in land relations.

Planned Settlement through Chak settlements

Innovation in the establishment of chak villages was an extreme break with the ancient settlement pattern. These villages were planned in grid form, which was a rational planning of the colonial administration. In a Canal Colony Report (1905), it was noted: Every village is an administrative unit, with boundaries drawn and its population chosen, its duties well defined. This system enabled colonial state to have unprecedented control over society in rural areas. Rationalization of planning of colonial administration was reflected in the creation of so-called chak villages, which were the numbered settlements arranged in lines of canals. This system substituted the old village systems with uniform units that were aimed at effective governance.

Land, Water and Production of Intermediate Elites

Distribution of land in canal colonies was not a fortuitous happening; it was a political decision. Military veterans, powerful landlords and loyalists were granted large tracts of land. According to the Settlement Report (1916): Preference has been shown to classes whose loyalty to Government has been tested and proven. This policy helped to keep the new agrarian elite dependent on the colonial state. After annexation of Punjab, British rule in the Montgomery District deliberately created a framework of local cooperation in the countryside to stabilize and extend its rule. The 1857 uprising (War of Independence) experience made the colonial officials think that they cannot rule the country without the support of the locals. Therefore, since 1860s, British have been actively searching across villages to find powerful families, and developing them as allies. The loyalty in 1857 was the main factor of promotion: people who assisted British were granted land (jagirs), pensions, and honorific titles like Khan Bahadur, Rai Sahib, and Nawab. These rewards were not just ceremonial ones; they put loyal people into the administrative and economic organization of the district. Over time, this policy produced a tiered system of rural intermediaries. On local level, people were put in position of zaildars, lambardars and tehsildars whose duty was to collect revenue, to ensure order and to enforce government policies. The roles came with both power and status, and were frequently awarded to families who had been loyal in 1857.

On a broader level, British included powerful individuals in the divisional and provincial darbars, forming a wider web of political cooperation. They were not represented in the colonial councils, but rather guaranteed loyalty by being included. At the provincial level, such leaders as Dewan Said Mohammad Chishti of Pakpattan and Raja Fazal Dad Khan were incorporated into formal systems of government, usually as honorary magistrates or on councils. These positions did not have much decision-making authority; nevertheless, they were associated with prestige and served as a sign of strengthening the relationship between local elites and the colonial state. Another aspect of the British system that was especially important was the incorporation of the religious power into the colonial rule. British did not openly depend on religion but over time it came to realize the huge power of local Sajjada Nashins (custodians of shrines). Colonial state became closely associated with these religious leaders in areas such as Pakpattan where the shrine of Baba Farid was the seat of large-scale religion. Land and money were generously given to shrines and their governors, in effect making religious power parallel to the administrative goals.

⁹ Mustafa Kamal Pasha, *Colonial Political Economy: recruitment and under-development in the Punjab*, (Oxford University Press, Karachi), p.163

The canal colonization also supported this strategy. Influential religious families received substantial land grants in irrigated colonies, transforming them into agrarian elites with both spiritual and economic power. An example of this is when prominent Sikh leader Baba Khem Singh Bedi was awarded large plots of land, thousands of acres, in schemes of canal colonies, as well as becoming an honorary magistrate and a provincial councilor. Equally, Muslim pirs in the Montgomery District were a beneficiary of the received "landed gentry grants, some of them becoming zaildars and progressive agriculturalists. Sajjada Nashin of the shrine of Hazrat Daud Karmani in Shergarh, even participated in colonial developmental plans in agricultural improvement, including cattle breeding projects, showing how religious authority was also entangled in developmental as well as administrative projects.

Administrative Collaboration and Intermediate Elites

The British system in Montgomery developed into a three-level system of cooperation: local functionalities (zaildars, lambardars), regional elites (divisional darbaris) and high-status people (provincial darbaris). Land, titles, and administrative positions were shared at each tier as a tool of control so that the local sources of power were always subject to colonial state. A combination of agrarian patronage, bureaucratic inclusion, and religious influence enabled British to establish a long-lasting system of intermediaries that served as a pillar of governance in the district. British gave out land to the chosen ones, military veterans and powerful families, forming a group of loyal landlords. These elites were middlemen, who collected revenue and ensured social stability. Canal colonies were characterized by the rise of landowners of large sizes. These elites were intermediaries, who helped to collect revenues and keep social order.

Intermediaries of Religion (Sajjada Nashins)

Sajjada Nashins were instrumental in facilitating colonial rule in places like Pakpattan. Their religious ability enabled them to enlist rural people to support colonial policies. The shrine has an effect more temporal than spiritual; it influences the temporal loyalty of people. In some parts like Pakpattan, custodians of shrines were instrumental in organizing people in the countryside. Their religious power was incorporated into colonial rule whereby state was able to manipulate masses indirectly. British tried to reach out to rural religious leaders.¹⁰ At first, British did not want religion to be used to implement their official state system, but later came to rely on religion to approach state power with allies of state in rural areas. British formed shrine contacts in order to alleviate tensions among natives in rural areas. There were numerous Punjabi sajjada nishins that had local authority during annexation. This local power continued to exist even after fall of Mughals and Sikhs.¹¹ This local authority is shown by Baba Farid shrine in Pakpattan. The mid-eighteenth century *sajjada nishin* was independent of Mughals and fought against the local tribal and Sikh chieftains, setting up governmental control of a vast area. The British realised that sajjada nishins were important to government. O' Dwyer argued, in case a man has political influence, and was it well, the fact that he is a member of a religious organization and even to some extent receives his influence because of such a connection must not serve as an obstacle to receive a grant.¹²

To stabilize the society, state control was adopted through reinforcing powers of religion. Granting of Holy sites in area was done to ensure their finances were secured. In the meantime, venerable caretakers of shrines were endowed with individual grants. They were granted landed gentry such as larger landowners in district. British appointed many Sajjada Nishins as local representatives of rural government as Zaildars, honorary magistrates and

¹⁰ Imran Ali, Punjab Under Imperialism (Princeton University Press, 1988), p.105

¹¹ Montgomery District Gazetteer, 1933 (Lahore, 1935), p.38

¹² David Gilmartin, Empire and Islam Punjab and the Making of Pakistan (London, 1988), p.51

district board members. He was a local leader of Darbar such as Diwan of Pakpattan.¹³ In this way, British increased their support to religious leaders in the area. *Sajjada nishins* were in support of British agendas and they used religious power to enhance their societies. With their religious significance in their regions, Sajjada Nishins had an easy time governing the state. Dewan Said Mohammad was significant as in Pakpattan. Each great Muslim zamindar possessed his Murid (follower) and *Manika* family was the most remarkable.¹⁴ British officials resolved to establish rapport with Sikh religious leaders. Even holy ones in their own neighbourhoods were rewarded individually. Baba Khem Singh Bedi, patriarch of a large Sikh family, also was given 7800 acres by Sohag Para, one of largest allotments of colony to any individual.¹⁵ David Gilmartin writes that in Montgomery, Muzaffargarh and Multan districts in south-western Punjab, Muslim families of religious influence formed one third of locally influential families who were awarded landed gentry grants.¹⁶ These grants of landed gentry were given to *Pirs* at canal colonies, some of whom acted as Zaildars and liberal landlords and achieved greatest possible land productivity. There was the Sajjada Nishin, at Shergarh, in the district of Montgomery, a shrine of *Hazrat Daud Karmani*, which was a part of a scheme to make Montgomery Cattle popular in the Lower Bari Doab canal colony, and his brother operated a dairy business there.¹⁷

Village-Level Officials:

The lambardars and zaildars were the stalwarts of the colonial government at the village level. They were the ones who collected taxes, settled disputes and also communicated between the state and the villagers. Being the lowest level of administrative cooperation, people were named as zaildars, lambardars and tehsildars, whose duties were to collect revenues, keep order and enforce the government policies. These posts were not only authoritative, but also prestigious and were usually offered to families who had been loyal in 1857. As an illustration, the administrative positions of Lala Charn Das (a zaildar and Rai Sahib), Teja Singh (lambardar) and Hukam Singh (zaildar of Dipalpur) represent a tendency of administrative positions to be concentrated in the hands of loyalist families. Equally, those families such as the one of Jive Khan who supported the British in times of rebellion were promoted to hold positions and take part in the district boards and local governments, and this guaranteed an influence that cut across generations. In this way, administrative authority became hereditary and closely tied to colonial patronage.

Case Studies of Pakpattan, Shergarh

Pakpattan: Shrine Authority and Colonial Governance:

Pakpattan, home to the shrine of Baba Farid, was a center of religious influence. The British recognized the importance of Sajjada Nashins and incorporated them into administrative networks. Land grants and titles were used to secure their loyalty, enabling state to control rural populations through spiritual authority. Pakpattan emerged as a critical site where religious authority intersected with colonial governance. The shrine of Baba Farid served as a center of spiritual and political influence. Colonial records indicate: "Sajjada Nashin's cooperation is indispensable; through him the Government reaches the hearts of the people." Land grants to shrine custodians reinforced this relationship, ensuring their loyalty.

¹³ Saeed Ahmed Butt, Colonial Montgomery 1857-1947, Unpublished M.Phil thesis, GCU Lahore

¹⁴ Mahinder Singh Bedi, *Yadon ka Jashan* (Educational Publishing House, 1986), p.43

¹⁵ *Imran Ali*, Punjab Under Imperialism (Princeton University Press, 1988), p.73

¹⁶ David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (London, 1988), p.51

¹⁷ Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj 1849-1947* (Manohar publications 1988 New Delhi), p.59

The example of Pakpattan provides an extremely good example of how religious power, agrarian reforming and colonial rule became closely inseparable in Montgomery District. At the center of this process stood shrine of Baba Farid, whose custodians Sajjada Nashins possessed long-standing spiritual influence over a wide rural constituency. This moral and devotional authority, which already existed under British rule, was not swept away but was tactfully brought into colonial system of administration. As Montgomery Gazetteer (1920) explicitly observed, influence of shrine extended across a broad agrarian landscape and allegiance of cultivators could be channeled through its custodians in ways that aligned with governmental interests. This acknowledgment reveals that colonial officials did not rely solely on bureaucratic instruments but actively engaged indigenous structures of authority to stabilize their rule. The integration of shrine authority into colonial governance was materially reinforced through patterns of land allotment during canal colony phase. Of irrigated land in the Pakpattan tract an estimated 15-20 percent was directly transferred to estates of shrines. This percentage is considerable compared to 30–35 percent of large zamindars and loyalist elites, implying that religious intermediaries were ranked almost on same level with large agrarian stakeholders in colonial hierarchy. These grants were not merely symbolic; they provided Sajjada Nashins with sustained economic resources derived from canal-irrigated agriculture. Conversely, peasant proprietors, although constituting a large portion of 2530 percent, were structurally reliant to water access, as well as patronage system of elites. The agrarian structure was further diversified by military grantees (10-15 percent) and smaller service groups (5-10%), although these did not compete with the joint power of landlords and custodians of shrines. This distribution demonstrates that colonial state deliberately transformed spiritual capital into administrative capital. By granting custodians of shrines with fertile lands and entrenching them in irrigation economy, British made sure that religious authority would be in concert with colonial aims. In this way, Sajjada Nashins were able to become economic beneficiaries as well as political brokers, who would mediate between the state and the rural community.

The canal irrigation system itself reinforced this arrangement. The main canal of agricultural transformation was the Lower Bari Doab Canal which served to irrigate 120,000-150,000 acres of Pakpattan tract. Under this primary channel, 40,000-60,000-acre distributary networks extended irrigation up to village level, and smaller watercourses linked individual fields with larger hydraulic network. This network was designed and controlled by colonial government, but its day-to-day operations were very reliant on local intermediaries. Zaildars, lambardars and powerful landholders were very instrumental in distribution flows of water and in settling the water distribution disputes. The Canal Administration Report of 1907 makes this dependency explicit by noting that, while equitable distribution was formally ensured through official regulation, its practical implementation relied on cooperation of local headmen and influential proprietors. This was not only in Pakpattan but also in other parts of the country, but in this case, there are secular elites, as well as shrine custodians who had the social legitimacy to affect compliance and control order among rural societies. Hydraulic control was, therefore, never entirely technical, socialized and its success relied on how well the local structures of power fit colonial rule.

This political implication of this system manifested especially in electoral arena during late colonial period. Unionist Party, which had strong ties to landed elites and agrarian interests, dominated Pakpattan area in 1937 elections. The pivotal role of mobilization of voters was played by shrine custodians and rural pirs, who usually provided electoral support based on a set of patronage systems and spiritual loyalty. But by 1946, there was a major change that took place. The identical intermediary elites, such as powerful Sajjada Nashins, shifted back to the

All-India Muslim League. The shift was a breakthrough in getting overwhelming electoral votes by the League in Muslim constituencies. Notably, this change cannot be seen as an ideological change. Rather, it reflects flexibility and strategic positioning of intermediary elites within a changing political landscape. The systems of influence which were based on land ownership, irrigation control, and spiritual control were not changed much. What changed was the political direction in which this influence was mobilized. The same networks that had served the Unionist Party before were turned to benefit of Muslim League and it proved that the electoral results were entrenched in socio-economic and administrative structures laid down in the colonization of the canals.

Shergarh: Formation of Loyalist Elites

In Shergarh, canal colonization facilitated the emergence of new landed elites. These elites were closely aligned with colonial administration, benefiting from land allocations and irrigation access. A Settlement Report notes: "Grantees of Shergarh have shown commendable loyalty, their prosperity being directly linked to the success of canal irrigation." The experience of Shergarh within Montgomery District provides a clear illustration of how canal colonization was used by British colonial state to manufacture a loyal agrarian elite whose authority rested not on traditional lineage alone but on state patronage mediated through land and water. Unlike older settled regions where landed influence evolved gradually, Shergarh represented a more controlled colonial experiment in which the social hierarchy itself was, to a significant extent, engineered.

The Montgomery Settlement Report of 1916 explicitly acknowledges this transformation, noting that the prosperity of Shergarh's grantees was directly tied to canal irrigation and that these beneficiaries demonstrated consistent loyalty during periods of political unrest. This statement is revealing because it highlights a deliberate causal relationship: economic dependence on irrigation translated into political allegiance. The colonial state did not simply reward loyalty; rather, it created the material conditions through land grants and irrigation access—that made loyalty both rational and necessary for local elites. The structure of land allotment in Shergarh reflects this strategy in concrete terms. Large landlords, who held between approximately 150 and 500 acres, occupied the apex of agrarian hierarchy. These were not merely economic actors but political intermediaries who functioned as the primary link between the colonial administration and the rural population. Their substantial holdings, made viable through canal irrigation, enabled them to exercise both economic dominance and social authority. Beneath them were military grantees, typically holding between 50 and 150 acres. These individuals were often retired soldiers who had been rewarded for their service to British Empire. Their presence added a layer of disciplined, state-oriented loyalty to the agrarian structure, reinforcing stability in the colony.

Peasant settlers, with holdings ranging from 25 to 50 acres, formed the productive base of the rural economy but remained structurally dependent. Their relatively smaller plots, combined with reliance on irrigation and credit, tied them to the patronage networks of larger landlords. Religious endowments, typically ranging from 50 to 100 acres, further integrated spiritual authority into this agrarian framework, although their role in Shergarh was less dominant than in shrine-centered areas like Pakpattan. Collectively, this distribution reveals a carefully calibrated hierarchy in which land size corresponded not only to economic capacity but also to political influence and proximity to colonial state. The irrigation system itself reinforced and sustained this hierarchy. Approximately 60 percent of cultivated area in Shergarh fell under major canal irrigation, which remained under direct colonial supervision. This ensured that the state retained ultimate control over most critical resource water. However, remaining 40

percent of irrigation was distributed through channels that were increasingly mediated by local actors. Distributary canals, covering around 30 percent of the area, were managed through cooperation of local elites such as zaildars and large landlords. These intermediaries played a crucial role in regulating water flow, resolving disputes and ensuring compliance with irrigation schedules. Minor channels, accounting for roughly 10 percent, operated at an even more localized level, often influenced by informal arrangements and personal authority. Importance of this local mediation is underscored by a canal officer's observation from 1910, which emphasized that the efficiency of irrigation depended as much on local cooperation as on engineering design. This statement captures a central feature of colonial governance in canal colonies: technical infrastructure alone was insufficient; it required a social framework of collaboration to function effectively. In Shergarh, this framework was provided by the newly created agrarian elites, whose authority was both enabled and constrained by their relationship with state. These socio-economic arrangements had direct political consequences, particularly in context of late colonial electoral politics. In 1937 elections, Unionist Party emerged as dominant political force in Shergarh. This outcome reflected the party's strong base among landed elites, who benefited from and were deeply embedded in the canal colony system. The dominance of landlords ensured that electoral outcomes were largely shaped by elite consensus rather than mass political mobilization. By 1946, however, a significant shift had occurred. The same class of intermediary elites began to realign their political loyalties toward the All-India Muslim League. This transition was decisive in altering the electoral landscape of Shergarh. Importantly, this shift did not represent a fundamental restructuring of power relations; rather, it was a reorientation of existing networks of influence. The landlords who had previously supported the Unionist Party now mobilized their dependents and clients in favor of the Muslim League, demonstrating the adaptability of intermediary elites within changing political contexts. Thus, the case of Shergarh illustrates how canal colonization created a durable system of agrarian and political control rooted in land distribution, water management, and elite collaboration. The colonial state's ability to link economic prosperity with political loyalty ensured stability during its rule, while the flexibility of intermediary elites allowed this system to persist and adapt in the face of emerging nationalist politics. In this sense, Shergarh exemplifies the broader dynamics of colonial Punjab, where hydraulic infrastructure, social hierarchy, and political authority were deeply interconnected, and where the legacy of these relationships continued to shape political behavior well into the final decade of British rule.

Okara: Military-Agricultural Colonies

Okara became a key site for military-agricultural settlements. Land was allocated to retired soldiers, creating a loyal population that supported colonial policies. A Canal Colony file records: "The soldier-settler combines discipline with industry, making him an ideal colonist." The development of Okara within Montgomery District represents one of the clearest examples of how the British colonial state deliberately fused military discipline with agrarian settlement to produce a stable and politically reliable rural society. Unlike other canal colony regions where traditional landed elites or shrine-based authorities dominated, Okara was distinctive in that a substantial proportion of land was systematically allotted to ex-servicemen, creating what may be described as a *military-agricultural colony*. This model was explicitly designed to ensure both economic productivity and political loyalty. Colonial officials articulated this objective quite clearly. Punjab Canal Colonies Report of 1905 characterized "soldier-settler"¹⁸

¹⁸ Punjab Canal Colonies Report of 1905

as industrious, disciplined and inherently loyal, emphasizing that his presence contributed directly to the stability of colony. This statement reflects a broader colonial assumption that military training instilled qualities obedience, organizational discipline and allegiance to authority that could be effectively transferred into agrarian life. By settling such individuals in newly irrigated lands, the British sought to create a social base that was both economically productive and politically dependable.

The structure of land allotment in Okara demonstrates the extent to which this policy was implemented. Military grantees constituted largest share of landholders, receiving approximately 40 to 50 percent of total allotments. This made them the core settlement group and ensured that the social and economic character of colony was fundamentally shaped by individuals with direct ties to the colonial state. These ex-servicemen were not merely cultivators; they were also informal agents of stability, whose loyalty could be relied upon in times of unrest. Alongside them, civilian landlords held between 20 and 25 percent of land. These individuals formed a supporting elite that complemented the military settlers. While they lacked the same direct institutional connection to the colonial state as the ex-servicemen, they nonetheless benefited from the irrigation system and participated in broader network of administrative collaboration. Peasant farmers, who accounted for roughly 20 to 30 percent of landholders, formed the labor base of agrarian economy. Their smaller holdings and dependence on irrigation tied them to both military grantees and civilian landlords, reinforcing hierarchical relations within the colony. The remaining 5 to 10 percent of land was allocated to various service groups artisans, laborers, and functionaries whose roles were essential for sustaining the rural economy but who possessed limited political influence.

This pattern of distribution reveals a carefully engineered social order in which the majority of productive land was concentrated in the hands of groups closely aligned with the colonial state, particularly ex-servicemen. The resulting hierarchy combined elements of military organization with agrarian production, producing a community that was both structured and disciplined. The irrigation system in Okara further reinforced this arrangement. Lower Bari Doab Canal served as the backbone of the colony, irrigating over 200,000 acres and transforming the region into a highly productive agricultural zone. This large-scale irrigation infrastructure was supplemented by branch canals covering an additional 80,000 to 100,000 acres, and by minor channels extending irrigation to smaller plots at the local level. While the major canal system remained under direct colonial supervision, the distribution of water at the secondary and tertiary levels increasingly involved local actors. This layered system of irrigation had important political implications. Control over the main canal ensured that the colonial state retained ultimate authority over water supply, while the management of branch canals and minor channels allowed military settlers and local elites to exercise influence within their communities. In practice, this meant that access to water and therefore agricultural success was mediated through a combination of state regulation and local authority, reinforcing patterns of dependency and cooperation.

The political consequences of this system became particularly evident during late colonial period. In 1937 elections, Unionist Party, which drew its strength from agrarian elites and emphasized rural stability, dominated the Okara region. Military settlers, benefiting from state patronage and aligned with existing agrarian order, supported Unionists through established networks of influence and patronage. Their disciplined organization and collective orientation made them an effective electoral base for the party. However, by the time of the 1946 elections, a notable shift had occurred. The same military settlers, along with other intermediary elites, began to align themselves with All-India Muslim League. This transition did

not reflect a sudden transformation in the underlying social structure but rather a strategic realignment of existing networks of loyalty. As political momentum shifted in favor of Muslim League, local elites including military grantees adapted accordingly, mobilizing their dependents and associates in support of new political force. This pattern underscores a crucial point: political behavior of Okara colony was shaped less by ideological commitments than by institutional and socio-economic framework established through canal colonization. Military settlers, whose livelihoods depended on land and water granted by colonial state, were predisposed to follow elite cues and maintain alignment with dominant political currents. Their role in both 1937 and 1946 elections demonstrates how colonial strategies of settlement and resource distribution created enduring mechanisms of political mobilization. In sum, Okara exemplifies the broader logic of British rule in canal colony Punjab, where hydraulic infrastructure, land allocation, and social engineering were combined to produce a stable and loyal rural order. The creation of a military-agricultural colony ensured that economic productivity was matched by political reliability, while the integration of irrigation systems with local authority structures reinforced both dependency and collaboration. The legacy of this arrangement extended beyond the colonial period, shaping patterns of political behavior and elite influence that persisted into era of independence.

Dipalpur: Electoral Politics and Elite Mediation

In Dipalpur, intermediary elites played a decisive role in electoral politics. The 1946 elections demonstrated how landlords and *pirs* mobilized voters in favor of Muslim League, reflecting enduring influence of colonial structures. The influence of landlords and *pirs* determined outcome more than any political manifesto. The case of Dipalpur within Montgomery District represents culmination of socio-political processes set in motion by canal colonization, where agrarian restructuring translated directly into highly mediated forms of electoral politics. By 1930s and 1940s, institutional arrangements of land distribution, irrigation control, and elite patronage had matured into a system in which political behavior was not primarily shaped by individual choice or ideological persuasion, but by collective alignment under authority of landlords and religious leaders (*pirs*). The observation recorded in Punjab Police Abstracts of Intelligence (1946) that rural voter in Dipalpur followed the direction of their landlords and *pirs*, with political propaganda playing only a secondary role captures the essence of this system.¹⁹ It suggests that electoral outcomes were largely predetermined by the structure of rural society itself. Rather than competing for votes through modern campaign techniques, political actors relied on existing hierarchies of authority, where influence flowed downward from elite patrons to dependent cultivators. This pattern can be directly linked to landholding structure established under canal colonization. Large landowners controlled between 45 and 55 percent of land in Dipalpur, making them dominant economic and political actors. Their extensive holdings were made viable through canal irrigation, which not only increased agricultural productivity but also consolidated their control over tenants and smaller cultivators. Medium farmers, holding around 20 to 25 percent of the land, occupied an intermediate position; while they possessed some degree of autonomy, they remained dependent on larger landlords for access to resources, credit and protection. At base of hierarchy were smallholders and tenants, comprising roughly 20 to 30 percent of agrarian population. These groups were highly dependent, both economically and socially and were therefore most susceptible to elite influence in matters of political allegiance.

¹⁹ Punjab Police Abstracts of Intelligence (1946)

The irrigation system in Dipalpur reinforced these relationships of dependency and control. The major canal network, which provided the primary source of water, remained under direct state administration, ensuring that the colonial government retained ultimate authority over most critical resource. However, the distribution of water at local level was mediated through distributaries and minor channels. Distributary canals, which covered a significant portion of cultivated area, were often managed in practice by local elites-particularly large landowners and influential inter-mediaries, who could influence timing and allocation of water. Minor channels, serving smaller plots, operated within even more localized and informal frameworks, where personal relationships and social hierarchy played a decisive role. This multi-tiered system of irrigation meant that access to water and by extension, agricultural success was deeply embedded in local power structures. Farmers who depended on irrigation were therefore compelled to maintain good relations with those who controlled or mediated access to water. In effect, hydraulic dependency translated into political dependency, reinforcing the authority of landlords and *pirs* over rural populations. These structural conditions were clearly reflected in electoral outcomes. In 1937 elections, Unionist Party secured a dominant position in Dipalpur, with vote shares estimated between 60 and 70 percent. This success was largely the result of support from landed elites, who mobilized their dependents through established networks of patronage. Unionist Party's emphasis on agrarian stability and its close ties to rural elites made it a natural choice within this system. By 1946, however, a dramatic shift had occurred. All-India Muslim League achieved overwhelming success in region with candidates such as Syed Ashiq Hussain securing approximately 68.3 percent of vote. While this result might appear to reflect a surge in popular support for League's ideological platform, a closer analysis suggests that it was largely driven by realignment of intermediary elites. Landlords and *pirs* who had previously supported Unionists shifted their allegiance to Muslim League, bringing their dependent voting blocs with them.

The same networks that had previously sustained Unionist dominance were now redirected to serve the League, demonstrating continuity of underlying power structures despite changes in political affiliation. In this context, Dipalpur exemplifies the broader dynamics of late colonial Punjab, where electoral politics was deeply embedded in agrarian and social hierarchies shaped by canal colonization. The combination of concentrated land ownership, mediated access to irrigation and integration of religious authority created a system in which political outcomes were effectively negotiated at level of elites rather than determined through individual voter autonomy. Thus, legacy of canal colonization in Dipalpur was not limited to economic transformation; it fundamentally reconfigured the nature of political participation. By linking land, water, and authority, the colonial state created a durable framework of mediated governance in which landlords and *pirs* acted as the primary conduits of political influence. The electoral shifts of 1937 and 1946, rather than signaling a break from this system, illustrate its adaptability demonstrating how entrenched structures of power could be reoriented to accommodate new political realities while preserving their essential character.

From Administrative Collaboration to Political Mobilization:

The structures of collaboration established through canal colonization extended into electoral politics. At a higher level, British incorporated influential figures into divisional and provincial *darbars*, creating a broader network of political collaboration. Divisional *darbaris* such as Malik Muhammad Fazil, Pir Mohammad Hussain of Shergarh and Mian Chirag Din of Okara represented regional elites whose loyalty had been proven during earlier crises. Their inclusion in colonial councils was less about representation and more about securing allegiance. At provincial level, figures like *Dewan Said Mohammad Chishti* of *Pakpattan* and *Raja Fazal Dad*

Khan were integrated into formal structures of governance often as honorary magistrates or council members. Although these roles offered limited decision-making power, they symbolized prestige and reinforced the connection between local elites and the colonial state. During 1937 and 1946 elections, intermediary elites played a crucial role in shaping outcomes. The rise of All-India Muslim League in Montgomery District was facilitated by these elites, who mobilized rural voters through networks of patronage and influence.

Conclusion

The transformation of Montgomery (Sahiwal) District under British rule illustrates how hydraulic engineering became a central instrument in constructing colonial political order. The introduction of canal irrigation and creation of canal colonies were not merely economic ventures aimed at increasing agricultural productivity; they represented a deliberate strategy to reorganize society through control over water. By converting vast semi-arid tracts into fertile agricultural land, colonial state initiated an agrarian revolution that replaced subsistence farming with commercial agriculture, while simultaneously expanding revenue extraction and administrative reach. At the heart of this transformation was the emergence of a “hydraulic society,” in which access to water and thus livelihood depended upon authority of colonial state. Control over canals allowed the British to regulate settlement, discipline cultivators, and structure agrarian relations in ways that reinforced state power. In Montgomery District, this control was further institutionalized through carefully planned canal colonies such as Sohag Para, Lower Bari Doab and Nili Bar, which became laboratories of social engineering.

A crucial dimension of this system was the creation and empowerment of intermediary elites. Through selective land grants, British cultivated a loyal class of military grantees, landed aristocracy, *pirs* and local notables who acted as agents of colonial authority in rural society. These groups were not only rewarded for loyalty and service especially during events such as World War I but were also integrated into administrative hierarchies as *zaildars*, revenue intermediaries, and political brokers. Colonial state ensured that its authority penetrated deeply into village life while maintaining a façade of indirect rule. Moreover, canal colonization reshaped demographic and social structures by encouraging large-scale migration from congested regions, thereby redistributing population and creating new agrarian communities tied to colonial economy. However, this transformation was uneven, as access to land and resources was structured by class, caste, and political loyalty, reinforcing new hierarchies alongside older ones. Ultimately, the case of Montgomery District demonstrates that hydraulic power was inseparable from political control. Canal colonies were not just sites of agricultural development but instruments of governance, where water, land, and authority converged to produce a stable yet unequal colonial order sustained by intermediary elites.