



## ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>  
 Vol. 03 No. 01. Jan-March 2025. Page#. 2689-2700  
 Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)  
 Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



## Intermediaries of Empire: Sajjada Nishins, Agrarian Power and Colonial Governance in Montgomery (Sahiwal), 1849–1947

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper focuses on role of Sajjada Nishins-hereditary custodians of Sufi shrines in District Montgomery (currently Sahiwal) under British rule (1849-1947) as a key mediator in the colonial governance. It asserts that British colonial power in Punjab was not coercive and bureaucratic only, but, instead, it was rooted in local socio-religious institutions. Colonial state co-opted the elites of the shrines into its system of administration through strategic patronage, land redistribution, administrative inclusion and legal protection. These actors were the key players in agrarian transformation, political control and social regulation over the rural areas in Montgomery. Based on the use of several archival documents such as district gazetteers, settlement reports and colonial administrative documents, as well as through a comprehensive review of historiography, this paper reveals how the British built a system of indirect rule that was based on religious justification. The chapter concludes that this alliance of both the colonial authority and the religious elites did not only stabilize the imperial rule but it also reorganized the rural power relations, which continue to be a legacy in the post-colonial political structures in Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** Intermediaries, Empire, Montgomery, Colonial, Agrarian Power

### Introduction

In 1849, the British annexed Punjab, which initiated a new era of imperial expansion based on rationalization of administrative structure and agrarian reorganization. But the British soon understood that they had to do more than bureaucracy and military superiority to rule Punjab. The socio-religious institutions of the region, especially the Sufi shrines and their caretakers, were a key factor that contributed to the formation of rural society. A good example to study these dynamics is District Montgomery (modern Sahiwal). The district was previously a part of the Gogera tract, but was transformed greatly during the British rule, especially by colonization of canals and agrarian reforms. Meanwhile, it was still entrenched within a system of religious authority that was focused on Sufi shrines. This examines the role of sajjada nishins as mediators between the colonial state and the rural society. It posits that their assimilation into the colonial structure was a calculated move in order to attain political stability, ease governance and generate consent among the rural population. Through the interaction of religion, land and power, the research will help gain a better insight into how the colonial states formed in Punjab.

### Literature Review

The place of religious elites in colonial Punjab has been a widely studied topic with scholars like David Gilmartin, Ian Talbot and Imran Ali being among the scholars to study this issue. In his masterpiece, David Gilmartin focuses on mediating aspect of sajjada nishins as inheritors of barakat (spiritual charisma) in the context of their role as the intermediaries between the state

and rural people. He argues that British, despite their official policy of religious neutrality, relied heavily on these figures to stabilize rural society and legitimize their rule. Ian Talbot also examines the politics economy of colonial Punjab and how land grants and agricultural policies were deployed to assimilate local elites in colonial system. He observes that sajjada nishins, tribal chiefs and landlords were the mainstay of rural administration especially in the canal colony areas. The relevance of landholdings agrarian reforms, as described by Imran Ali, highlights the importance of landholdings policies like Alienation of Land Act that safeguarded landholding of agricultural tribes (e.g., many sajjada nishin families). This legal system cemented the socio-economic status of such elites, and bound their interests to the colonial state.

The continuity in authority of shrines has been highlighted by other scholars. Sufi shrines were already operating as an economic redistribution center and a political force to be used even before the British rule, where rulers would give out land to gain allegiance. This pre-colonial heritage helped in the British approach of co-optation, since the existing networks of authority could easily be used to serve the colonial interests. More recent research also focuses on politics of sajjada nishins in politics of Pakistan Movement and how they continue to dominate political allegiances in the rural Punjab. All these pieces of work point towards the idea that the inclusion of religious elites in the colonial government did not have short-term effects on political development in the area. The archival sources, especially the district gazetteers, are a rich source of information on the local dynamics. The Montgomery District Gazetteer (1883-84) and later issues provide a more detailed description of population and land tenure and administrative organization. These records were not isolated but were a part of a larger colonial project of cataloguing the Indian society in an organized manner and to make it easier to govern. Harjot Oberoi (1994) discusses how the religious identities of colonial Punjab changed and how institutions formed communal boundaries. Ayesha Jalal (2000) and Hamza Alavi (1975) give more of a generalized theory of state formation and elite privileges in South Asia. The role of religious elites in Pakistan Movement has been also discussed within the recent scholarship, focusing on their political relevance to this day.

### **History of Montgomery District**

The district of Montgomery, which had been included in Gogera, was changed to British management in mid-19th century. The area was marked by low density of people and pastoralism, domination of tribes like Kharrals and Wattoo and minimal agricultural progression before canal irrigation. Canal irrigation was introduced and the land became a great agricultural centre. The Canal of Lower Bari Doab was an important element in this change, enabling the cultivation of more land, the establishment of agricultural villages and the rise of new rural elites. This revolution not just boosted agricultural production but also changed social and political organization. The administrative organization of the district according to gazetteer archives shows that the local organization of the district contained elaborate categories of land tenure, village communities and tribal connections, and represents the colonial focus on the systematic government. District gazetteers characterize Montgomery as an area of incredible change, which was influenced by colonial policies on its socio-economic order.

District Montgomery is a good example of the study of interaction between religious power and colonial rule. The agrarian economy of the region, along with its system of powerful shrines, made it a core of British administrative policies. In Montgomery, Sajjada nishins owned large pieces of land. They led big groups of people in the countryside and were actively involved in the local government. They were not only influential in the religious fields, but also

in economic growth and political conduct. As an illustration, use of agricultural innovation such as livestock improvement and dairy farming by shrine custodians showed that they were flexible to the colonial economic policies. Montgomery (Sahiwal) district transformed due to the late nineteenth-early twentieth century engineering of British canals. Before this intervention, farming was restricted to riverine lands due to rains and lack of inundation channels. This was transformed into a system of perennial and non-perennial canals and this gave the possibility to practice cultivation systematically and live permanently. The Lower Bari Doab Canal (LBDC) of 1906 Triple Canal Project was one of the most significant irrigators of Pakpattan. It had its headquarters at Montgomery and Multan but the distributary system was supplied by subsidiary canals and branches at Pakpattan. In order to provide a continuous supply, Lower Bari Doab Canal (LBDC) used Ravi water and connect canals of Chenab and Jhelum. Its expansive distributary network, like Gugera and other branch canals, supplied its neighboring tehsils, especially Pakpattan. Sohag Para, Pakpattan and Depalpur Canals and Malka Hans and Nurpur waterways completely transformed the regions between Sahiwal to Multan via Okara, Pappattan and Dipalpur. The water allocation was however regulated by the irrigation ratio and plan between the subsistence and commercial crops. The hydraulic development allowed canal colonies that transformed land ownership and settlement patterns. Canal colonization brought about settlement of land in large scale in Montgomery and particularly Pakpattan. The British land was based on political and economic ambitions. These newly irrigated lands were occupied by peasant owners of densely populated parts of central Punjab like Amritsar, Jullundur and Lahore. Deserted farming was introduced with help of agriculturally able *Jats, Arains, Kambohs* and *Sainis* who migrated to this place. Military personnel particularly war veterans were to be given large pieces of land. These grants of thousands of acres of land were the incentives that were rewarded in the colonies of Lower Bari Doab, Nili Bar and Sohag Bara. British gave huge estates to the rich landowners, pirs and local notables to motivate intermediate elites. These political and administrative mediators maintained the countryside in check and colonial fidelity. In addition, there were deferred classes, tribal groups and groups of specialists like horse-breeders which were subsidized on a smaller scale and which were more often limited. Auctions were another aspect of land colonization especially in later colonies like Nili Bar. The rural life was determined by the agricultural system of the British since it incorporated the ownership of estates by powerful families and ownership of estates by the peasant farmers. The economic foundation was on agricultural activities that stressed on canal irrigation, and the political and economic structures were founded on land distribution. Land redistributive initiatives boosted production and introduced sanity in the rural regions leading to inequality and political control that were extended to the Pakistan era.

### **British Colonial Strategy: Co-optation of Religious Elites**

British strategy in Punjab exemplifies model of indirect rule, where governance is mediated through indigenous authorities. From a political economy perspective, control over land and agrarian production was central to this system. By granting land to *sajjada nishins*, the colonial state ensured their loyalty while reinforcing existing hierarchies. The British colonial state in Punjab systematically deployed land as a political instrument to cultivate loyalty among influential rural elites, including *sajjada nishins*. In District Montgomery, this policy was particularly evident in allocation of canal colony lands and “landed gentry” grants, which transformed religious custodians into powerful agrarian actors. Archival evidence suggests that such grants were not merely acts of benevolence but strategic interventions designed to integrate religious authority into colonial governance structure. As one colonial administrator

observed: “The influence of a man connected with a religious institution, if properly directed, is of the utmost value in securing loyalty of rural population.” This reflects a broader recognition within the colonial administration that spiritual authority could be converted into political capital.

### **Historical Background: Sajjada Nishins and Rural Authority**

The sajjada nishinship institution has a rich historical background in India sub-continent. Sufi shrines were a focus of religious worship, social and economic life. The custodians of these shrines did not only gain control over the religious powers but also large tracts of land, which in many cases were given to them by the state and charity. In rural Punjab, these shrines functioned as nodes of local power. They drew pilgrims, shared resources and resolved conflicts thus becoming entrenched in socio-economic life of villages. The continuity of authority was guaranteed by hereditary nature of sajjada nishinship and the concept of barakat supported their legitimacy. By this time, the Punjab had been annexed by British and numerous sajjada nishins were already in place as strong local leaders. They were resilient and adaptable as seen through their power prevailing even after the Mughal Empire fell and the Sikhs assumed power.

The sajjada nishins were the hereditary custodians of Sufi shrines and used their authority through spiritual charisma (barakat), possession of shrine land and disciples’ networks (murids). The shrines in Montgomery and in the areas were used as the hub of religious worship, economic redistribution and mediation. Their power was entrenched in the rural society and therefore they were inevitable to any ruling regime. Sajjada nishins based their power on divine descent, identification with the Sufi saints and idea of barakat. The ability to control the lands of shrines, their donations allowed them to obtain wealth, patronize their followers and support networks. They had an influence on agricultural practices, social norms and political behavior, through their networks of disciples. Land was another important tool of control used by British. Sajjada nishins received Revenue-free lands (madad-i-ma) and Canal colony allotments and large estates under landed gentry schemes. Such grants turned religious leaders into big agrarian interests, making them aligned to colonial policies.

### **British Colonial Policy: Co-opting of Religious Elites**

The British policy in Punjab is an example of the model of indirect rule, in which the government is only intermediated by the local authorities. Politically, economically, land and agrarian production were the key points of control in this system. The colonial state was able to secure the allegiance of the sajjada nishins by giving them land and strengthening hierarchies in the process. Land was used as a political tool to systematically by the British colonial state in Punjab to nurture loyalty of powerful rural elites such as sajjada nishins. This policy was also evident in District Montgomery, especially when it came to distribution of canal colony lands and grants of land to landed gentry, which transformed religious custodians into strong agrarian participants. Archival evidence suggests that such grants were not merely acts of benevolence but strategic interventions designed to integrate religious authority into colonial governance structure. According to one colonial official; “the pressure of a man in relations with a religious institution, when wielded correctly, is of the highest value in the attainment of the loyalty of rural folk.<sup>1</sup> This is indicative of a deeper understanding in the colonial government that spiritual power could be transformed into political capital.

### **Movement toward Religious Neutrality to Practical Engagement**

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<sup>1</sup> Punjab Government, *Revenue Proceedings*, 1868, Punjab Archives, Lahore.

First, British took a policy of religious neutrality where they did not want to be directly involved in religious institutions. But shortly practical considerations caused a change of strategy. The rebellion of 1857 emphasized the significance of local coalition, and British realized the political value of sajjada nishins. British attempted to forge a nexus with village religious power. British condemned any religion the introduction of their official state system, yet, in the subsequent periods, it was adopted to connect state power to rural allies using religion as a means. To ease the pressure of natives, British formed relations with shrines in rural areas. There was immense local influence of power in form of sajjada nishins at the time of annexation in Punjab. This local authority was still powerful in times of fall of Mughals and Sikhs. Authorities recognized that such numbers might affect population in rural areas and avert unrest. Quote of an example of such local authority may be given of shrine of Baba Farid of Pakpattan. Sajjada nishin had established his independence of Mughals and had battled other local tribal and Sikh chiefs, and British had learned that such sajjada nishins were indispensable in administration. Should a man have political influence and was it well, argued O' Dwyer, the circumstance that he is connected with a religious institution, and even derive his influence in some measure out of that connection, should not in my judgment come in the way of getting a grant.<sup>2</sup>

### **British State Control Mechanism**

To attain a social stability, a system of state control was implemented through enhancing forces of religion.<sup>3</sup> Granting of holy shrines in district was implemented so that they could protect themselves in aspects of their economic well-being. Meanwhile even the custodians of eminent shrines were also given personal grants. They also received grants of land gentry such as bigger landlords in district. Many Sajjada Nishins were also appointed by British as local representatives in rural administration as Zaildars, honorary magistrate and members of district boards. Diwan of Pakpattan was a prominent member of provincial Darbar. By so doing, British enhanced their patronage to religious leaders of district. Those sajjada nishins not only served British interests, but they employed religious forces to their uplift in their localities. Religious prominence in their respective districts made Sajjada Nishina become key and major players in the smooth running of state administration. As in Pakpattan, "Dewan Said Mohammad was a very influential man in nearby area. All the main Muslim zamindars were his Murids (followers) with *Manika* family being the most prominent of Muslim zamindars.<sup>4</sup> British made decision to form relationship links with Sikh religious leaders. Even they were granted separately on their account of being holy in their respective territories. Similar to Sohag Para scheme, 7800 acres was granted to Baba Khem Singh Bedi, head of a prominent Sikh family, in Montgomery, Muzaffargarh and Multan districts of south-western Punjab, which made up one third of locally influential families. These grants of landed gentry were given to Pirs in canal colonies, of which only a few Pirs took a dominant position as Zaildars and progressive landlords, who put their land to proper use and increased its productivity. In 20<sup>th</sup> century, a large number of Sajjada Nishins were directly incorporated in local British government under an Alienation Land Act. Under this Act, sajjada nishins such as Saiyids and Querishies etc. were gazetted as agricultural tribes and their banks were to be spared at the time of their economic difficulties.<sup>5</sup> Court of Wards served to protect the families, who were the owners of bigger estates and occupied very influential and important in the political life of district. Management of their lands would be controlled by the Court of Wards in case they fell into debt or were

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<sup>2</sup> (Gilmartin, p.51, 1988)

<sup>3</sup> (Ali, p.105, 1988)

<sup>4</sup> (Bedi, 1986)

<sup>5</sup> Gilmartin, p.50, 1988

mismanaged and could be released only after more outstanding issues were settled. An example of such management of estate of Baba Hardit Singh Bedi of Montgomery was under Court of Wards. In 1930, British also occupied shrine of Baba Farid in Pakpattan. British included combine management of estate and shrine because of the dispute of succession and inheritance between family members. This was a measure by the government that reduced the family internal conflict, however, its over-strained government to monitor shrines urs, an annual religious festival of shrines. A similar administration of Court of Wards stated in a yearly report on state, which included, "Great management of this estate is peculiarly difficult and great expediency is necessary on part of manager, who is an old ward, Diwan Qutab-ud-din, Gaddi nishin of an important shrine at Pakpattan. Estates of sajjada nishins were in dire economic straits when court of wards took over them. Imperial set-up was instrumental in preventing any well-organized opposition of religious defiance towards colonial domination in rural Punjab even though it had no religious roots. In fact, a perception of Islamic leadership structure and how the same relates to British administration is at the core of a perception of Islamic reaction to British domination. British attempted to form a nexus between rural religious power.<sup>6</sup> British condemned any religion that practiced their official state system and in later years, they adopted religion as a means of establishing state power with its rural supporters. To ease pressure on natives in countryside, British instituted relations with shrines. During period of annexation, power of many sajjada nishins in Punjab in local level was extremely influential. This local authority was prevalent even in time when Mughals and Sikhs collapsed. The following example of this local authority may be quoted of shrine of Baba Farid of Pakpattan. The mid-eighteenth century sajjada nishin had asserted independence of Mughals and had engaged in war against other local tribal and Sikh chieftains, having acquired political control over a sizable region.<sup>7</sup> British had come to notice that such sajjada nishin were indispensable to administration.

Punjab Legislative Council in 1924, the first elected body, has not witnessed any political action in run up to contest, between two big landlords; Nawab Sadat Ali Khan Khari and Pir Muhammad Hussain. Although Hussain was a good speaker and had the local settlers on his side, Khari was the loser to Pir Muhammad Hussain. The outcome of the election was also reflective of dominance of a rural landed people character of council 35 Muslim representatives out of 71 elected members. The Unionist Party comprising of Muslim and Sikh landlords headed by Fazl-i-Hussain with British patronage was setting representation of farming interests along with fostering spirit of inter-communal harmony. It was an alliance of different groups of Muslims, to some degree, united by the rural affiliation, and a party of politicians and feudal lords, with opposite interests in most instances. In 1925 the member of the Punjab Legislative Council, Pir Mohammad Hussain championed the rights of the Muslims to be represented in judiciary leading to the suspension of a Civil Judge who violated his role. He did a great deal of lesser-known work in the welfare of district in which he lived Montgomery. Punjab Government incorporation of Pirs into landed gentry provided an interdependence of feudal lords of Punjab and religious leaders thereby forging the local lording interests with British colonial rule and Unionist Party. Hussain was a religious leader of highest kind; he did not have any religious interest of any kind, but he believed in general policies of Unionists and Land Alienation Act, which was a great advantage to farming tribes. This state of affairs left local leaders, such as Hussain, with British construct of thought and diminished necessity of distinctly Islamic political perspective.

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<sup>6</sup> (Gilmartin, p.71, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> (Government, p.38, 1935)

### Grants of Land and Agrarian Power

The British wielded land as main tool of establishing loyalty of sajjada nishins. Religious elites were turned into major landowners through system of *madad-i-maash* grants and allotments of canal colonies. Such grants did not only increase their economic strength, but also incorporated them in agrarian hierarchy. This relationship was further enhanced in District Montgomery, where canal colony schemes were used. Sajjada nishins who were granted land became progressive farmers, and they helped in boosting the economy of area and strengthening their position as regional patrons. The establishment of canal colonies, especially in Lower Bari Doab area of Montgomery was a turning point of agrarian structure of district. The colonies were not only aimed at providing more agricultural output but also at transforming rural society using regulated patterns of settlement. The conversion of Montgomery into an agricultural center provided fresh avenues of consolidation of elite.

Sajjada nishins receiving lands along the canals became Progressive landlords, one of most important participants of agricultural development and political leaders. One of beneficiaries of such schemes was sajjada nishins. Archival settlement accounts show: "Appointed *pirs* and custodians of shrines were accorded large tracts of land in canal colonies, where they could exercise influence over them to draw settlers and stabilize them. Sajjada nishins in such colonies played a variety of roles including agrarian enterprise, settlement organizer and political intermediary. Being agrarian businesspersons, they embraced contemporary farming methods. They acted as settlement organizers and urged their followers to come and settle and farm. Conversely, they also served as political liaisons that did not allow adherence to colonial policies. The granting of land was heavily biased in Montgomery and adjacent districts with a great part of grant going to religious families. Administrative records; In Montgomery, Muzaffargarh and Multan districts, religious families took almost one-third of those to whom grants of landed gentry<sup>8</sup> were made. These grants were usually hundreds of acres to thousands of acres, and were based on the perceived influence and allegiance of the recipient. Though case of Baba Khem Singh Bedi is related more to leadership of Sikh religion, it is possible to see what extent of colonial patronage was: "In his case, Baba Khem Singh Bedi received one of largest individual grants in canal colonies under Sohag Para scheme, Sikh leader was allotted about 7,800 acres.<sup>9</sup> This example underscores British policy of rewarding religious elites across communal lines, reinforcing their role as intermediaries. British introduced use of sajjada nishins in administration by putting them in administrative posts of Zaildars, honorary magistrates and district boards. These positions allowed them to perform as mediators, through which they would communicate with state and rural population. Their twofold power, religious and administrative, was an inseparable part of colonial rule.

### Alienation of Land Act and Protection of Religious Elites

The Alienation of Land Act (1900) assured the security of the agricultural tribes as well as ensuring that the land was not sold to urban moneylenders. In 1900, Alienation of Land Act further entrenched position of sajjada nishins, by categorising many of them as members of an agricultural tribe. The classification ensured that their land was not transferred to non-agricultural groups and their economic foundation was safeguarded. It also guaranteed them further relevance in politics. According to administrative commentary; Inclusion of Saiyids and other religious classes to agricultural tribes was on political grounds to maintain their hold in the rural society. Even though exact figures on a district-wide scale are not known, archival evidence indicates the following trends of large, medium and small grants of lands donated to

<sup>8</sup> David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 51.

<sup>9</sup> Imran Ali, *Punjab under Imperialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 73.

the shrines. The great grants of 1000-8000 acres that were given to great custodians of shrines and great pirs. Secondary religious elites were provided with the medium consisting of 200-1000 acre of lands. Small grants of less than 200 acres of land were allocated to small custodians and local intermediaries. These allocations created a hierarchical structure of religious-landed power, mirroring broader colonial social order. Alienation of Land Act (1900) safeguarded the agricultural tribes and ensured that land was not transferred to city moneylenders. An important tool in safeguarding of land holdings of agricultural tribes, including most sajjada nishins, was the Alienation of Land Act (1900). The Act limited land transfers to non-agricultural populations, which guaranteed preservation of traditional power relations and guaranteed the interests of rural elites. This policy was indicative of British perception that to ensure that the agrarian society is stable, it is necessary to uphold the power of incumbent leaders.

### **Court of Wards and Estate Management**

The Court of Wards was critical in administration of estates of indebted or minor landowners such as sajjada nishins. Court of Wards administered estates of minor or indebted landowners, such as custodians of shrines, and guaranteed continuation of elite authority. Colonial state avoided fragmentation of these estates and guaranteed their political relevance by taking control over them. Like shrine of Baba Farid at Pakpattan, responsibility of administration of religious institutions was even taken over by British, which reflects unclear boundaries between religious and administrative worlds. The state administration was a safeguard of bigger estates in Punjab and even relieved them during their financial crises. Court of Wards served to safeguard the families, which were owners of larger estates and held very influential and important positions in political life of district. Their lands would be administered by Court of Wards in case they fell into debt or were mismanaged, or due to family feuds or minority of owner. The estates were then administered under the management of suitable deputy commissioners and were usually discharged by the Court of Wards only when more outstanding issues had been resolved. In 1930, British also seized shrine of Baba Farid in Pakpattan. British included combined management of shrine and estate due to dispute of succession and inheritance among family members. This move of government reduced family internal discord, but also the government burdened itself to oversee shrine urs, a yearly religious festival of shrines. In one of its annual reports on state, the Court of Wards administration said, "Great management of this estate is a difficult affair and manager must be a man of great tact because older ward, Diwan Qutab-ud-din, is Gaddi nishin of an important shrine at Pakpattan. Estates of sajjada nishins, who were in dire economic straits, were confiscated by court of wards. Even though it did not have religious grounding, imperial organization, therefore, served a pivotal purpose in deterring any organized resistance of religious opposition to colonialism in rural Punjab. In fact, a conception of organization of the Islamic leadership and its correlation with the British rule plays a primary role in an appreciation of Islamic reaction to the British rule."<sup>10</sup>

### **District Montgomery (Sahiwal); Case Studies of Shrine-Based Authority**

British policy in Punjab is an example of model of indirect rule in which the government is intermediated by local authorities. Politically economically, this system was based on control over land and agrarian production. Montgomery and nearby shrines, such as those associated with Pakpattan, were the center of action in the region. Such shrines were centers of economic redistribution and drew masses of pilgrims. Those shrines also reinforced social hierarchies.

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<sup>10</sup> Gilmartin, p.71, 1988

Shrines in Montgomery acted as pilgrimage centers, centers of patronage and social control. Sajjada nishins was used to affect the agricultural practices, social norms and Political alignments through their networks of disciples. The population data of the colonial census shows that Montgomery had a majority of Muslims, although there were high populations of Hindu and Sikhs. The agrarian and religious system of rule was strengthened by the fact that rural population was the majority.

### **Religious Networks, Agrarian Power and Colonial Mediation**

By giving land to sajjada nishins, the colonial state guaranteed their allegiance besides strengthening hierarchies in place. Sajjada nishins who got canal colony lands became Progressive landlords, one of the most significant players in agricultural development and political actors. British allocated land to sajjada nishins as canal colony projects. These grants boosted their economic strength, assimilated them into agrarian forms and balanced their interests with colonial policies. Their administrative positions allowed them to raise revenue, uphold law and order and arbitrate. Introduction of *sajjada nishins* into colonial rule had political consequences. Since it strengthened elite power and suppressed political mobilization. It also helped in control of electoral processes. They were instrumental in funding pro-government parties, especially the Unionist Party.

### **Shrine of Baba Farid: Spiritual Sovereignty and Colonial Incorporation**

The example of shrine of Baba Farid at Pakpattan is the greatest demonstration of shrine-based authority affecting political and agrarian organization in broader area of Montgomery. Founded in 13<sup>th</sup> century, shrine was not only a spiritual center, but also a politically independent territory during pre-colonial era. Reports in history show that its custodians had territorial powers with armed retainers and negotiated with local powers. By the British annexation, shrine had already evolved into an elaborate socio-political institution, with allegiance among local tribes and agricultural communities. The power of shrine covered an area of a wilayat (spiritual territory), which linked a wide range of people in a religious web. Recognizing the shrine's influence, British administrators pursued a policy of strategic accommodation. Diwans of Pakpattan were given land and political status. They were incorporated into colonial administrative structures including district boards and advisory councils. The shrine turned into machine of social control, since its keepers were able to reconcile disputes, as well as to impact the rural populations. Colonial documents and gazetteers often recognized that custodians of Pakpattan were loyal, and therefore guaranteed political stability in southwestern Punjab. Shrine was also used as an economic redistribution center. The gifts (*futuh*) were re-distributed to followers. The poor were fed by a *langar* system. Pilgrimage brought about the local economy. This economic aspect strengthened that of shrine as a parallel welfare institution, to supplement colonial rule. The annual urs of Baba Farid attracted hundreds of thousands to millions of devotees, transforming shrine into a site of mass mobilization. This platform enabled the sajjada nishins to strengthen the loyalty of the followers, mould political attitudes and promote colonial-oriented elites. Shrine of Baba Farid, therefore, is a good example of how spiritual power was converted into political capital, which is an important asset of the colonial indirect rule.

### **Shrine Networks of Pakpattan: Territorial Spirituality and Rural Integration**

In addition to main shrine, Pakpattan had a network of subsidiary shrines, associated with happenings in life of Baba Farid. These smaller shrines increased the power of main shrine into countryside and this resulted in a hierarchical religious geography. This network connected scattered rural communities with each other into a single spiritual assembly and strengthening power of central *sajjada nishin*. It also helped in communication between colonialists and rural

people. The British used this network well as an informal administrative route and they managed to rule large rural territories with a minimum of direct rule. Direct colonial intervention, especially by Court of Wards was also applied to the shrine of Baba Farid at Pakpattan.<sup>11</sup> British took over the estates of shrine due to succession dilemmas and mismanagement of funds. A Court of Wards report has remarked; superintendence of Pakpattan estate is attended by curious complications on account of religious stand of Gaddi Nashin, who is very much sought after by agricultural classes. Estate revenues were stabilized under supervision of colonials. Family conflicts within the family were reduced. The political trustworthiness of shrine was guaranteed. This intervention is symptomatic of dual nature of colonial policy that is protective and controlling.

#### **Shrine of Shergarh (Montgomery District): Agrarian Reform and religious Authority**

The shrine of Hazrat Daud Karmani at Shergarh provides a concrete example of how religious authority was integrated into agrarian development. Archival sources state; Sajjada nishin of Shergarh was given a plan on how to improve Montgomery cattle breed in Lower Bari Doab colony, and his family operated a very successful dairy business. This proves that religious elites participated in economic projects in colonies. Their farms were model farms. Their achievements strengthened their legitimacy among the rural folks. A second case of interest is the shrine of Hazrat Daud Karmani at Shergarh (now in Montgomery District). Shergarh demonstrates a direct combination of religious power in agrarian development as opposed to Pakpattan which was mainly a spiritual center. Agrarian records (as cited in Talbot and district reports) show that in canal colony areas, sajjada nishin of Shergarh were granted land. They were involved in agricultural upgrading programs and ran estates in contemporary agrarianism. An interesting case is the intervention of the custodial family of the shrine in breeding better cattle in Montgomery, which shows the overlap of religious power and colonial economic policy. Sajjada nishins of Shergarh emerged as progressive farmers, Major participants in the settlements of canals colonies and negotiators between peasants and colonial authorities. Their power was, therefore, re-socialized into agrarian capitalism of colonial patronage.

#### **Shrine Authority and Canal Colonies in Montgomery**

Canal colonies in Montgomery made district to be among the most productive agricultural areas in Punjab. Sajjada nishins was at the forefront of change. They were given special land assignments and served as exemplary farmers. They also promoted the colonization of faithful peasant settlements. It resulted in the formation of a new group of religious-landed elites whose authority was based on both spiritual and economic power. Although Pakpattan and Shergarh are two key centers, there were also a number of smaller shrines in Montgomery that helped to establish a more extended system of colonial rule. The shrines were also required to perform various roles that were subject to its functions like resolving local disputes, the mobilization of agricultural labor and the maintenance of social order. These shrines operated as micro-level intermediaries, reinforcing the authority of larger shrine networks.

#### **Analytical Synthesis**

British-sajjada nishin alliance was very significant to the politics of the rural areas. Colonial state strengthened hierarchical social structures by enabling these elites. It restricted the rise of alternative leadership, and suppressed political mobilization. Sajjada nishins were the so-called gatekeepers of political participation who could shape electoral results and orientate the rural population towards pro-governmental groups. This was especially evident in the emergence of Unionist Party which depended on the backing of rural elites in order to sustain

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<sup>11</sup> Court of Wards Report, Montgomery Estate (Pakpattan), 1905, Punjab Archives.

its supremacy. The distribution of land to sajjada nishins had far-reaching political consequences. It centralized the power of the elite using the leaders of religion in the society. It strengthened the elite and discouraged development of other leadership. Spiritual and economic power were combined as religious leaders became large landlords. Meanwhile it too stabilized the rural society since their authority served to keep peace and curb unrest. There was the appointment of sajjada nishins to important posts such as Zaildars, Honorary magistrates and District board members. This amalgamation enabled them to perform the role of mediators between state and society. It also helped to control electoral politics. These elites had electoral power in early 20th century because they had decisive role in supporting pro-government candidates, mobilizing the rural voters and holding the Unionist political system which controlled Punjab politics in early 20th century. The case of Montgomery demonstrates that colonial governance was a negotiated process. The co-opting of religious elites led to the minimization of administrative expenditures, maximization of legitimacy and stability by British. This approach, however, also entrenched inequalities and poor social mobility. The case studies indicate some important trends, including the restructuring of religious power, merging of religion and agricultural power, the decentralization of colonial rule and the generation of the consent. It changed the religious power in a manner that Sajjada nishins ceased to be independent religious leaders and became state-oriented mediators. The religious power was also combined with the agrarian power through this co-option. Canal colonization and land grants involved religious elites in political economy of colonial Punjab. The shrines also decentralized the colonial rule since the shrine networks allowed the British to rule through intermediaries with many layers, thereby cutting down on the administrative expenses. Sajjada nishins were used to legitimize the rule of the colonials through spiritual power, which fits Gramscian concepts of hegemony. The Montgomery archival records show that Land grants were a key form of colonial domination. Canal colonies functioned as laboratories of social engineering. Sajjada nishins became agrarian capitalists. The process is indicative of a wider tendency toward colonial state formation by negotiated authority in which the local elites were co-opted to perpetuate imperial rule.

Most of the caretakers of smaller shrines were made zaildars or lambardars. They were also provided with local government systems and given partial landlords and privileges. This made sure that even relatively small religious authorities were integrated into colonial system. Theoretically, the relationship between British state and sajjada nishins can be interpreted in the concept of hegemony. Instead of using coerced power only, colonial state tried to generate the consent through incorporating local elites in its power base. This policy is in line with the concept of indirect rule, whereby governance is intermediated by local authorities. Their spiritual and economic strength made sajjada nishins the best fit to fulfill this role. They were also integrated into the colonial system and this can be seen as a wider trend of state formation where existing social structures are re-used in new political functions.

### **Conclusion**

This work reveals that sajjada nishins were at core of working of colonial rule in District Montgomery (Sahiwal). They acted as intermediaries between British state and rural society and helped to administer them, to maintain social order and to legitimize colonial rule. British policy of co-opting religious elites with grants of land, appointing and legal protection of administrators was extremely successful at stabilizing rural Punjab. Nevertheless, it also strengthened the existing inequalities and decreased areas of independent political evolution. The legacies of this alliance did not just end at colonial era but also influenced the trends in political conduct and domination by elite in post-colonial Pakistan. This historical relationship is

thus critical in the analysis of the impact of religious and agrarian elites in the region that has lasted. The process of sajjada nishins being incorporated into agrarian and administrative systems of colonial Montgomery was both not accidental, but also not symbolic, and it was the basis of operation of British rule. Colonial state established a group of religious-landed intermediaries through land grants, canal colony allocations and legal protections which guaranteed stability, helped to govern land, and legitimize imperial authority. These policies still resonate in socio-political politics of Punjab with shrine-based elites still playing a significant role. The examples of Pakpattan and Shergarh show that the shrines were not only religious entities but also pillars of colonial rule in Montgomery (Sahiwal). They were political go-between, economic players and social controls. The British approach of co-opting shrine-based authority enabled them to develop a stable system of indirect rule, and at the same time cemented existing hierarchies. The residues of this system can still be felt in modern-day Pakistan, with the custodians of shrines still enjoying a lot of political and social power.