



COLONIAL PUNJAB: NATIONALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Civil Disobedience Movement was a pan-Indian movement, which was started by a central strategy of Mahatma Gandhi. But, mass movement could never be organized in a cohesive manner. It always takes its own path when executed. Therefore, in a vast country like India one would see different distinctiveness and improvisations of the Movement. In the present research paper, I have discussed 'regional' characteristics of the Civil disobedience movement.

I have made an attempt to discuss 'Historiography of Civil disobedience' by prominent nationalist historian S. L. Malhotra. The latent cause of choosing this historian is their diverse background. S.L. Malhotra is Retired Professor, Dept. of Gandhian Studies, Punjab University, Chandigarh and Former Vice-President of Indian society of Gandhian studies. His notable project '*Gandhi and Punjab*' was published by Panjab University in four volumes.

Introduction

Civil Disobedience Movement was a pan-Indian movement, which was started by a central strategy of Mahatma Gandhi. But, mass movement could never be organized in a cohesive manner. It always takes its own path when executed. Therefore, in a vast country like India we see different distinctiveness and improvisations of the Movement. In this research paper, I have mentioned those 'regional' characteristics of the movement.

According to Oxford Dictionary, 'Region' is

"An area, especially part of a country or the world having definable characteristics but not

*always fixed boundaries.”*¹

Following this definition, we can draw many regions in Indian subcontinent- like North, South, Northeast, East and so on. India is such a multicultural country, that it changes its history, geography, weather, language, and culture in every two miles and if one travel whole of India, he/ she will wonder whether he/ she is travelling one ‘nation’, because it has so distinct region wise variations. If we read the activities of Civil Disobedience Movement India-wide, we can find this kind of region-wise uniqueness.

As, for Area Studies Research, knowing a region including its culture, language and history is very much important; I have chosen British ‘Punjab Province’ as my Study Area. The Punjab was a land locked region in the North-west corner of India with an area of 3, 54, 736.76 sq. kms.² It is bounded on the north by a portion of the Himalayas and Kashmir, on the west by the Indus, on the south by Sindh and Rajputana and on the east by the river Jamuna.

There are plenty of researches on the regional historiography of Civil Disobedience Movement of British ‘Punjab Province’ as this is the ‘Capital’ and central region of importance and attraction of British India. Therefore, any blow on British Empire most effectively done in this region. But, for sake of this chapter, I will concentrate on illustrations of eminent nationalist historian -S. L. Malhotra (*Gandhi - An Experiment with Communal Politics, From Civil Disobedience to Quit India*). But, before going to their narratives, I want to say a few words on the definition of ‘region’.

What is Historical ‘Region’?

The fundamental principle underlying in the definition of *Historical regions* is that older political and mental structures exists, which exercise greater influence on the spatial-social identity of individuals than is understood by the contemporary world, bound to and often blinded by its own worldview - e.g. the focus on the nation-state.³ If we look at the definition, then it says,

“Historical regions are geographic areas which at some point in time had a cultural, ethnic, linguistic or political basis, regardless of present-day borders. They are used as delimitations for studying and analysing social development of period-specific cultures without any reference to contemporary political, economic or social organisations.

Regional Historical Writings of India

In India, from ancient times, we see regional history was propped up by regional dynasties. But the most remarkable work was done by British historians, who compiled and maintained a thorough regional history of India for their own administrative convenience. Because they always think that to administrator a region, knowing its history is very much important.

In this regard, the most remarkable name is British historian-cum-administrator James Tod (1782-1835), who wrote history of Rajputs, which is called the first modern history of Rajasthan. His book is not only a classic regional survey but also representative of a phase in the study of Indian antiquity, ethnology, religions and sociology. As Crooke observes,

*“When, if ever, a new history of the Rajputs comes to be written, it must be largely based on Tod's collection, supplemented by under historical, antiquarian, and epigraphically research.”*⁴

Another notable British historian-cum-administrator is Joseph Davey Cunningham (1812-1851), who appointed as the political agent at the Sikh Frontier. This had brought Cunningham into close association and deep concern with the Sikhs, and, during eight years of his life at political service in Punjab, he was able to obtain that thorough knowledge of their manners and customs, which made his book, *History of the Sikhs*, one of the most valuable books ever published on Indian History.⁵ His work is mostly based on official records of the political department.⁶

British historian Captain James Grant Duff was renowned as ‘*Historian of the Marathas*’. Although it is doubtful whether he could follow Marathi documents written in Modi script, but he learnt Marathi to write regional history. On the basis of valuable sources from Satara, he wrote Maratha history. He had acquired a number of Marathi chronicles from the Chitnis family as well as from the Deshmukhs and Deshpandes of various villages.⁷

Another British historian Mark Wilks wrote *History of Mysore*.⁸ Imperialist historian William Wilson Hunter wrote two very valuable books – viz. *Annals of Rural Bengal*, in which he gave a fresh interpretation of Indian History; and *The Indian Musalmaans*, where he courageously recognized Muslims’ share in the Government and protection of their Country.⁹

Indian historians also contributed in regional historical writing, some notables of which are *History of Rajasthan* by Gauri Shankar Ojha; *History of the Sikhs* by Khushwant Singh; *Rise of the Maratha Power* by Justice Ranade, and *Shivaji and His Times* by Jadunath Sarkar etc.

History of Punjab

In this genre of Regional Historiography, Punjab region occupies a special position. Both historically and geographically, it has a unique solidarity, which makes its different regional identity.

The word ‘Punjab’ is a compound of two Persian words –viz. ‘*Panj*’ and ‘*ab*’ - which mean the land watered by five rivers. These five rivers – viz. Sutluj, Beas, Ravi, Chenab and Jhelam –became the

backbone for economic prosperity through providing vast fertile plains and abundant water resources.¹⁰

As a gateway of Aryans and other migrant population, historically, Punjab occupied an important position. It was here that the arrays of Vedic times first made their home. The hymns of the Rig-Veda were chanted here. Here was the great university of Taxila where knowledge- seekers flocked from various parts of the world. The great heroes of the Mahabharata - viz. the Pandus and the Kauravas - fought out their great battles in this area.¹¹

Punjab was taken over by the British Government on the 29th March, 1849. However, until the end of the nineteenth century the pressure of Western ideas was not intense on the life in Punjab as it had been in the case of Bengal and Western India, particularly Bombay in the twenties of the nineteenth century.¹²

The Punjab lay between 27°39 and 34°2 N and the population was 2, 84, 90, 857.¹³ Geographically, the Province was divided into four divisions – viz.

1. *The Himalayan Region;*
2. *The sub Himalayan Region;*
3. *The Indo-Gangetic Plains;*
4. *The North West Dry Area.*¹⁴

The first two regions had a fewer population as the nature of the area prevented growth of large town. However, last two divisions were Indo-Gangetic plains, where lied the most important regions, comprising western plains, eastern plains, Malwa region and the south-eastern tract, known as Haryana. Soil was good in plains. Water was available through Canals. So the possibility of agriculture was increased here and a good amount of wheat, rice and other crops produced here. The activities of trade and commerce were here also satisfactory in two divisions.

The North-West dry area comprised the districts like Shahpur, Mianwali, Montegomery, Ujalpur, Jhang, Multan, Muzzafargarh, Rohtak, Karnal, Gujranwala etc. As population largely depended on climatic conditions like fertile plains, alluvial soil, good source of water, secure life and property, economic resources and other material resources, these districts were densely populated.¹⁵

According to the Census of 1931, the proportion of the major communities per 10,000 of the population was – 5340 (54.40 percent) Muslims, 3018 (30.18 percent) Hindus and 1429 Sikhs (14.30 percent). Hindus were majority in the districts of Hisar, Gurgaon, Rohtak, Karnal, Simla and Kangra, Ambala and Hoshiarpur.¹⁶

The Sikhs were the third largest community in the Province, concentrated in the Jullundur and Lahore divisions and Montgomery and Lyallpur districts of the Multan division. They were divided into two categories – viz. Keshdharis and Sehajadharis. The Sikhs, who followed the rules of Guru Gobind Singh, known as Keshdharis and remaining were Sehajadharis. They gradually strengthened themselves and acquired large amount of lands, entered into professional and administrative services and also joined the armed forces in large number.¹⁷

Agriculture was the mainstay of economy of Punjab as the majority of its population lived in villages. Like other Provinces, Punjab was ill-equipped financially and technically for the task of industrial development. There were only 152 factories in Punjab in 1901-02 which rose to 673 in 1932-33. However, trade and commerce in the Province was fairly good.¹⁸

The socio-economic conditions of the people of Punjab had profound impact on the politics of the Province. Muslim landlords of the Western Punjab, Sikh aristocracy, enlightened and rich urban Hindus of the Central Punjab and caste-conscious Jat Hindus of eastern Punjab played an important role in the politics of the Province.¹⁹

Now I have concentrated on the effect of Civil Disobedience Movement of Punjab based on the writings of eminent historian– S. L. Malhotra.

Shadi Lal Malhotra

Eminent scholar, Shadi Lal Malhotra was Professor and Head of the Department of Gandhian Studies of the Panjab University, Chandigarh. His notable project, *Gandhi and Punjab*, was published by the Panjab University in four volumes. After being Vice President of Indian Society of Gandhian Studies for several years, he is currently engaged in writing a book on the relevance of Gandhi in the 21st century. For sake of this Study, I will discuss his opinion from his book, *Gandhi - An Experiment with Communal Politics*, where he explained Gandhian role in Punjab politics during 1922 to 1931.

According to S. L. Malhotra, the Civil Disobedience Movement was an all-India mass movement, launched by Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. It was decided at the Satyagraha Conference that, in accordance with Gandhi's programme, civil disobedience would be initially confined to the violation of Salt Law. April 13 was fixed for the inauguration of the Movement in the Punjab Province, though it started a day or two earlier at several places in the Punjab.²⁰ The salt was first manufactured at Jallianwala Bagh under the leadership of Kitchlew and Chaudhary Afzal Haq. Similar performances were made at Ludhiana, Ferozepur, Sheikhpura, Moga, Sialkot Bhiwani, Ambala and Tarn Taran.²¹

Programme of boycott of foreign cloths and picketing of liquor shops organized under the leadership of Mohd. Alam, Gopichand and Zutshi.²² Efforts were also made to popularize *Khadi* with a view to reducing the demand for foreign cloths. According to 'YoungIndia', "While all the provinces combined produced 68% *Khadi* more during the year ending September 1930", the increase in U. P., Andhra and the Punjab was 204%, 133% and 115% respectively.²³

Described the role of women and students, participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement, S. L. Malhotra wrote, they were not attending the meetings but were offering themselves for Satyagraha. At Ambala, some of them violated the Salt Law under the leadership of the daughter of Dunichand. Meeting convened to protest against the policies of Government. According to the P. P. C. C. report, 45 women were sent to jail and 53 women were arrested out of which 33 were convicted during the period between 1st January and 30th November, 1930.²⁴ No doubt, the Provincial Congress made some efforts to involve the students in this struggle. A special students' Satyagraha Committee was formed. But hardly any impact could be made on them.²⁵

S. L. Malhotra wrote that Sikhs did not take interest in the Civil Disobedience Movement. Kharak Singh refused to co-operate with its campaign of Civil Disobedience till the Settlement of the Flag issue.²⁶ The Sikhs wanted to represent their national existence by the introduction of their colour in the national flag.²⁷ Some members of the Sikh community demanded the inclusion of black colour.²⁸

Tara Singh claimed that seven thousand Satyagrahis were convicted in Punjab in connection with this Movement; amongst them, three thousand were Sikhs.²⁹ Several Muslim associations - such as *Muslim Volunteer Corps*, *Ghazi Muslim Volunteer Corps*, *Quami Daler Sabha* etc. - were formed to ensure Muslim participation in the Movement of Punjab.³⁰ But the All India Muslim League was opposed to the Civil Disobedience Movement and most of the Muslim parties and pressure groups gave unqualified support to the Round Table Conference, which was rejected by the Congress. Fazl - i - Hussain, who had guided Muslim politics in the Punjab as a Minister and a Leader of the Unionist Party, made all efforts to prevent the Muslims from joining the Civil Disobedience Movement. Therefore, unfortunately, the Muslim leaders of the Congress in the Punjab failed to direct Muslim political aspirations and forces to the nationalist channel.³¹

However, the number of arrests continued rising till the suspension of the Movement as a result of Gandhi-Irwin Pact. Largest number of arrests was made in Lahore, followed by Amritsar, Gujranwala, Lyallpur and Ludhiana. According to Malhotra,

*“The Pact raised Gandhi’s stature in the country as, for the first time, the agent of the British Government condescended to negotiate with the accredited agent of the Indian National Congress on equal footing for the settlement of the terms of peace.”*³²

Malhotra remarked,

*“But the execution of Bhagat Singh, SukhDev and Rajguru neutralized this tendency. This event also damaged Gandhi’s prestige in this province since it was widely believed that he had so much influence over the Viceroy that he could persuade the latter to spare the lives of these young revolutionaries. The execution of Bhagat Singh gave a rude shock to all, especially to the youth of this land.”*³³

*“Congress leaders, particularly of this province, moved to save Bhagat Singh and his comrades from the gallows. Pressure had been brought upon Gandhi to intercede with the Viceroy for the commutation of their death sentence.”*³⁴

*“No doubt, Gandhi made earnest efforts to save the lives of these youngmen in spite of his disapproval of their reliance on violence for the liberation of their country. He pleaded with the Viceroy to the maximum of his ability to commute their death sentence on the ground that commutation was the general demand of the country and therefore any act to the contrary would endanger internal peace. He said, ‘I wrote a personal letter to the Viceroy on the morning of 23rd. I poured my soul into it, but of no avail’.”*³⁵

*“But most of the members of Naujawan Bharat Sabha were hardly aware of these facts. They blamed him for their execution. He was, therefore, greeted with hostile slogan and black flags by a group of Red Shirts, when he alighted at Malir, a minor Railway station, thirteen miles from Karachi, to attend the session of the Congress.”*³⁶

Malhotra wrote, in spite of all, Gandhi agreed to attend the Session of the Sikh League on April 8, 1931 at Amritsar. At this Session, in his Presidential Address, Master Tara Singh paid rich tributes to Gandhi for his leadership and great qualities. Singh justified the existence of the Sikh League as a separate body on account of the hold of communalism in India. Explaining the Sikh point of view on this issue he said, *“We are pledged to fight communalism tooth and nail.”* But Gandhi replied to Sikh leader that,

“The only way to fight communalism is by counter demands of the same nature ... You cannot fight communalism by communalism. But mine is the only solution, communal or national. The moment you realize that we do not want a third power to arbitrate for us, we will for the moment agree to surrender everything not because it is the ideal solution

*because it is the only expedient.”*³⁷

But, in spite of all, Gandhi failed to satisfy the Sikh leaders over the question of communal representations.³⁸ However, he succeeded to satisfy the Sikh leadership on the flag issue. The National Flag Committee, appointed by the Congress Working Committee, recommended that no communal interpretation should be attached to the colours in the flag.³⁹

In another book, *From Civil Disobedience to Quit India*, S. L. Malhotra deals the second phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Punjab. According to him,

*“The great speed with which the Government had moved against the Congress during this phase, gave no time to its leadership to plan the renewal of the campaign. The conflict was almost forced upon Gandhi on his return from England by the policies of the new Viceroy Lord Wellington and the Congress leadership, unreconciled to the conditions of peace following the truce between Gandhi and Irwin.”*⁴⁰

However, according to Malhotra,

“Gandhi laid down the some conditions and programmes for the movement which had the approval of the Congress Working Committee. Some notables of which were -

- 1. No province or district or tehsil or village is bound to take up civil disobedience unless the people thereof understand the non-violent nature of the struggle.*
- 2. All Congressmen and women are expected to use hand-spun and hand-woven Khaddar to the exclusion of even cloth manufactured in indigenous mills.”*⁴¹

Thus, Malhotra remarked that,

“The programme of the new phase was practically similar to that of first phase, though greater emphasis was now placed on the need of cultivating faith in non-violence.”

Or, in other words,

*“Movement followed the pattern of the first phase. There were processions and ‘hartals’ in several towns of the city on the arrest of Gandhi on 4 January.”*⁴²

Malhotra narrated, Gandhi appealed to the people to accept the formula not because it was the ideal solution of the problem or it was in accord with the Congress ideal of nationhood but because it was the only possible solution in the existing situation. Women and some Ahrars largely participated in the programme of picketing. The Ahrars received greater notice as it demonstrated that Muslims were also actively on the side of the Congress. But, the Press notices announced the dissolution of the Provincial Congress Working Committee and District Committees and the appointment of Dr. Alam as the dictator.

However, it was denied by Dr. Alam himself.⁴³

Therefore, Malhotra remarked that,

*“The movement in the first half of the month of January showed only some kind of preparatory exercise, but it started picking up momentum in the second half.”*⁴⁴

Detailing the activities of the Movement in Punjab, Malhotra wrote,

*“In the towns of Rohtak and Sonapat, picketing of liquor and foreign cloth shops were assiduously carried on... The movement also appeared to be spreading to the mofussil areas of Karnal and Jullunder districts... At O’kara there was boycott of foreign sugar. At Amritsar, a rapprochement between the groups headed by Dr. Kitchlew and Ghazi Abdur Rahman paved the way for the Muslim participation in the picketing. The Majlis – i – Ahrar – i – Hind decided to join hands with the Congress. The Ahrar volunteers could be seen among the picketers of liquor and foreign cloth shops.”*⁴⁵

*“Similarly, among the Sikhs, the Akalis were induced by Sardul Singh Caveeshar and Master Tara Singh, who was then in jail, to participate in the movement. The Shiromani Akali Dal in its meeting held on 24th February at Amritsar allowed its members to join the Civil Disobedience movement. The Akali press urged Sikhs to take part in the struggle for freedom.”*⁴⁶

*“The Government of India indicated 196 arrests in the Punjab up to the end of January, 1932 as against more than twelve thousand all over the country. In Lahore alone, there were 327 arrests and processions and picketing of liquor and foreign cloth shops were organized daily.”*⁴⁷

Malhotra highlighted the noticeable fact that,

*“Women were appointed dictators at several places. Among them were Mrs. Gopi Chand and Mrs. Gian Chand as the 14th and 16th dictator respectively in Lahore. 55 ladies were arrested in Lahore during this month.”*⁴⁸

Provincial Political Conference was held at Hoshiarpur on 29th May, attended by about a thousand persons. Acharya Ram Dev, ex-principal of Gurukul Kangri, was elected its Chairman but he was nabbed before he could reach Amritsar in the absence of him S. Pratap Singh was elected President but he was arrested before he could finish his speech. Similar Conference was organized at Lyallpur and Lahore and students supported the activities of Swadeshi League.

The movement appears to have received some impetus as a result of the settlement of Daska dispute between a section of Hindus and Sikhs that made local authorities uneasy as it was likely to divert

some of the Akali volunteers from the Daska Morcha to the Civil Disobedience movement.⁴⁹

However, Malhotra remarked that, during the second half of the year 1932, the movement was overshadowed by the issues thrown up by the communal Award, Gandhi's fast and his campaign against untouchability.

According to him, diversions of the minds of the workers to programmes other than those directly connected with civil disobedience were considered as another cause for the decline of the movement.

Moreover, he remarked,

“The attention of the public as well as of honest workers was diverted to other side-issues and activities and organizations started some honestly, but mostly with idea of covering up one's weakness in not going to jail and putting high sounding programme which deceive the public in this province as well as outside.”⁵⁰

On the commencement of Gandhi's 21st-day fast from 8 May, 1933, the Movement was suspended for about three months.⁵¹ The intelligence reported that the Punjab contingent voted for the resumption of Civil Disobedience Movement with non-payment of land revenue as a prominent feature of the new program which they had decided at an informal meeting held prior to their departure to Poona.

In this way, Malhotra narrated how the impact of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Punjab varied from district to districts and gradually dried away during the second and third phases of the Movement. As a true scholar of history, Malhotra never tried to exaggerate the effect of Gandhi or the Movement on Punjab but just depicted the fact-findings.

Conclusion

In this way, eminent historian like S. L. Malhotra has discussed the effect of Civil Disobedience Movement in Punjab. Although all are discussing the same issue, but if we critically analyze their perspectives, then easily we can underline some characteristics of their narration. S. L. Malhotra has discussed all the historical events related to the Movement.

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