

Secular and Nationalist Stance of Sir Chhotu Ram Vis-À-Vis Widespread Communalism in Erstwhile Punjab

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Abstract

Chhotu Ram was of the view that Punjab, with three major communities, was the “Cockpit of communalism,” and that “if the communal problem is solved” in Punjab, then it may be taken practically, as solved for whole of India.¹ Communalism in Punjab was a complex phenomenon. The Punjab was a Muslim majority province.

Keywords: *Secular, Nationalist, Communalism.*

The Description by Author

According to the Census Report of 1931, the Muslim population in the province was 56.24% followed by the Hindus (26.83%) and the Sikhs (12.98%).² The communal complexion of the province often posed problems for the settlement. The narrowness of Muslim majority and the presence of Sikhs as an important minority and the third competing force, often made the harmonizing of conflicting communal claims difficult.³ The Hindus and the Sikhs were educationally and economically more advanced than the Muslims. Chhotu Ram always adopted a secular and nationalist stance and criticized communalism in every form. His nationalist outlook and anti-communal, anti-sectarian stance was revealed in all his deeds and actions. To this end he always maintained a distance from and equally condemned the communally motivated Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League all through his life. He exhorted both Hindus and Muslims to accommodate each other.

Chhotu Ram was of the view that if we want to contain communalism, we must

divorce religion from politics and political organizations must proceed on the basis of economic rather than communal interests.⁴ He had an unshaken faith in the “Coercive force of common economic interests” as an effective cure for the malady of communalism,” and thus along with Fazl-I-Husain formed the Unionist party in 1923. It was Chhotu Ram’s policy of consistent secular outlook that had tremendous impact on Fazl-I-Husain and he did change, as demanded by the circumstances of the time and his high political stature. Chhotu Ram also warned Jinnah not to interfere in the religious affairs and other related matters of Punjab. It was due to Chhotu Ram that Punjab, though a Muslim majority province, didn’t come under the Muslim league like Bengal and Sindh after the 1937 elections. Jinnah tried his level best to bring the unionist leaders under influence by fair means or foul. Infact, “Jinnah’s failure in Punjab’s affairs was due to Sir Chhotu Ram.”⁵ In this way Sir Chhotu Ram effectively checked the tide of communalism in the province till the death of Fazl-i-Husain in July 1936. However, after the death of the later, communalism gradually started pouring in into the politics of the province. Though Sikander Hyat, after the 1937 elections started his government with a stern promise that he would root out communalism from the Punjab yet the years that followed witnessed a substantial increase in communal. With the signing of Sikander-Jinnah pact in 1937, all credentials of Sikander Hyat as a non-communal politician evaporated.

A long as Chhotu Ram lived, he tried his level best to check the tide of communalism and to keep the communal

fervour under control. While addressing a public meeting in 1943 at Karnal, he said that he was not communal rather he was determined to remove the communalism and the miseries of peasantry.⁶

Chhotu Ram believed in secularism. He stood for politics of accommodation instead of confrontation. Thus while addressing a gathering at Lahore in Feb. 1939, he said, "The Muslims are 9 crores in India. It is impossible for the Hindus to turn them out. Similarly it is not possible for the Muslims to destroy the Hindus. There is therefore no reason why they should not give proof of toleration and work shoulder to shoulder – like brothers – for the cause of India's freedom. To think in terms of hatred is absurd."⁷ while returning the allegations against the Muslim Badshah's that they favoured a policy of religious intolerance, particularly towards the Hindus, and that they were fanatics and bigoted Muslims, he said that the Muslim Badshahs, in fact followed the policy of religious tolerance and accommodated the Hindus as well as other religious and the 24 crores of Hindu population in the country even after the Muslim rule in India spanning over some centuries stand witness to this fact.

Conclusion

Chhotu Ram was of the view that religion should not be mixed with politics rather the basis of politics should be economy. Highlighting the non-communal stance of his party the Unionist Party, he once declared on the floor of the house: "The party to which I have the honour to belong, does not recognize narrow sectarianism, and it does not exist for the benefit of any one religion or caste. In fact it is the only one which can admit into its fold members of all communities-whether Hindu, Sikhs, Mohammedans or Christians."⁸ The Unionist Party was not based on religion and hence whenever any religious or semi-religious question came before the council, the members were left completely free to vote according to the dictates of their conscience. Thus Chhotu Ram adopted a secular, nationalist approach throughout his life. He always stood for communal harmony and whosoever tried to vitiate the communal atmosphere of Punjab,

through words or deeds, Chhotu Ram Vehmentally opposed him.

References

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