BETWEEN THE PEASANT AND THE RAJ: SIR CHHOTU RAM, THE UNIONIST PARTY AND THE AGRARIAN POLITICS OF SOUTH-EAST PUNJAB (1881–1945)

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Abstract

Chaudhary Chhotu Ram (1881–1945) is remembered in Haryana as the great champion of the peasant, and in much of the older writing he is praised without question. This paper asks a more careful question: whom did his politics and his laws actually serve? It follows his life from a poor, debt-ridden farming household in GarhiSampla (Rohtak) to the ministries of the Unionist Party, and then studies four areas of his work: party politics, agrarian legislation, education and rural industry. The paper shows that Chhotu Ram's achievements were real. He made the villager a political force, opened the government's purse to rural schools, and passed laws that restricted the powers of the professional money-lender. But it also shows that the same laws, in practice, often helped the larger landowner and the agriculturist money-lender more than the small and marginal farmer, that many measures were slow or incomplete in execution, and that the British had their own reasons to support a rural programme of this kind. The paper draws on the Punjab Legislative Council and Assembly debates, official reports and confidential files, and the work of Prem Chowdhry and other historians, as used in a recent doctoral study of Chhotu Ram's role in South-East Punjab.

Keywords: *Chhotu Ram, Unionist Party, South-East Punjab, Haryana, agrarian legislation, indebtedness, Alienation of Land Act, rural education*

1. Introduction

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Punjab was ruled for long periods by a party that spoke in the name of the "agriculturist". The Unionist Party, formed in 1923, brought together Muslim, Hindu and Sikh landowners, and it governed the province under the Government of India Act of 1935 until the end of Chhotu Ram's life. Within this party, Chhotu Ram, a Jat of Rohtak district, was the leading voice of the Hindu cultivators of what is now Haryana, then called the South-East Punjab. To his admirers he was *Rahbar-i-Azam* and *Deenbandhu*, a friend of the poor. To his critics, especially the urban Hindu press of Lahore and the Congress, he was a loyalist who kept the villagers away from the national movement.

Both views need testing. The older biographies, many of them written by admirers, present him as the peasant's saviour.[1] A second line of work, led by Prem Chowdhry's study of Rohtak district, uses the archives of the

[1]Madan Gopal, *Sir Chhotu Ram: A Political Biography* (Delhi, 1977); Balbir Singh, *Sir Chhotu Ram: The Man and His Mission* (Rohtak, 1995); Hari Singh, *Deenbandhu Chaudhary Sir Chhotu Ram: Jeevan Charitra* (Rohtak, 1984); Tika Ram, *Sir Chhotu Ram: A Biography* (Gurgaon, 2008). These works are reviewed in Ravinder Singh, "Re-examining the Role of Sir Chhotu Ram in the South-East Punjab" (Ph.D. thesis, Panjab University, Chandigarh, 2019), pp. 4–12.

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colonial state to look at who gained from his politics.[2] Shorter studies look at his links with the Congress, his land revenue ideas, his place in industrial policy and his place in the Punjab's communal politics.[3]

This paper joins the two traditions. It uses three questions. First, how did a small farmer's son from GarhiSampla become the leader of the rural Punjab, and what choices did he make on the way, such as his break with the Congress in 1920? Second, what did his laws on debt, land and markets actually change in the villages of Rohtak and the neighbouring districts? Third, how far did his work in education and industry reach, given the limits of the colonial state and of the Unionist coalition? The paper does not try to give a final verdict. Its aim is to separate what the evidence shows from what the legend says.

A note on the sources. Most of the key facts come from the proceedings of the Punjab Legislative Council and Assembly (cited as PLCD and PLAD), the annual reports on land revenue and the administration of the Punjab, the report of the Punjab Provincial Banking Inquiry Committee, the Census, and confidential files from the Commissioner's and Deputy Commissioner's offices, as well as private papers of Governors and Viceroys. Chhotu Ram's own newspaper, the *Jat Gazette*, is a valuable source for his public statements. Many of these materials are used here as they were collected in the doctoral study by Ravinder Singh, and the footnotes give his page numbers so that readers can trace them.

2. A Farmer's Son: Early Life and Education

Ram Richpal, later known as Chhotu Ram ("the little one", as the youngest child), was born in GarhiSampla village of Rohtak district. The most widely accepted date is 24 November 1881, though the sources disagree: his mother is said to have placed it on *Basant Panchami*, the *Tribune* of 7 March 1937 gives 1883, and a biography of Fazl-i-Hussain gives 1882.[4] His father, Sukhi Ram, was a small farmer and an illiterate but shrewd man. The family held about 48 *kacche bighas* of ancestral land, while about 60 *kacche bighas* had been mortgaged, and a long litigation after the death of his grandfather in 1875 left it in debt to the village *sahukar*. A loss in cotton dealings between 1874 and 1877 deepened the debt.[5] The family tradition, which Chhotu Ram himself later used in his speeches, said that he first learned the power of the money-lender as a boy, when the lender of Sampla treated his father rudely, and that he swore to end such humiliation. Historians should treat these stories with care, because they were told and retold by admirers, but they show how Chhotu Ram's followers wished his life to be understood.

His education was a series of struggles. He studied at the village school, then at the middle school in Jhajjar, where he stood second in the province in the middle examination of 1899. For higher studies he went to Delhi, to St. Stephen's, with help from his uncle Raje Ram and friends, a small scholarship and fee remission. He passed the F.A. in 1903 and took his B.A. with honours in Sanskrit in 1905, standing second in the university.[6] A well-wishing trader, Seth Chhaju Ram of Hissar, supported his studies, and the two remained close for life.

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[2]Prem Chowdhry, *Role of Sir Chhotu Ram in Punjab Politics: A Case Study of Rohtak District* (Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1979); also her *Punjab Politics: The Role of Sir Chhotu Ram* (Delhi, 1984).

[3]Yashpal Bajaj, "Chaudhary Chhotu Ram and the Indian National Congress", *The Punjab Past and Present*, vol. XII, part I (April 1978); Yashpal Bajaj, "Land Revenue Reforms of the Unionist Party", *The Punjab Past and Present*, vol. X, part II (October 1976); D. S. Nandal and A. K. Rathee, "Role of Sir Chhotu Ram in Industrial Development of Punjab", in *Deenbandhu Sir Chhotu Ram Commemoration*, vol. IV (Hisar, 1995); Paul Wallace, "Peasant Mobilization in India and the Contemporary Political Significance of Sir Chhotu Ram", *Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 41 (December 1980), pp. 683–693.

[4]Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 14, n. 18, which lists the sources for each date, including the *Jat Gazette* of 31 January 1913 and 22 January 1964, D. C. Verma, *Sir Chhotu Ram: Life and Times* (New Delhi, 1981), p. 33, and Chowdhry, *Punjab Politics* (1984), p. 1.

[5]Ranjeet Singh, *Chhotu Ram Gaurav-Gatha* (Rohtak), pp. 14–15; Raghubir Singh Shastri, *Chaudhary Chhotu Ram: Jeevan Charitra* (Delhi, 1965), p. 30; Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 15–16.

[6]Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 16–21, citing Gopal, *Political Biography*, pp. 11–15; Verma, *Life and Times*, pp. 34–40; Hari Singh, *Jeevan Charitra*, pp. 2–7.

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After his father's death in 1905 he left further study and worked as private secretary to Raja Rampal Singh of Kalakankar, who edited the Hindi paper *Hindustan*. He then worked as a teacher and advocate at Lahore and Agra, took his law degree from Allahabad, and in 1912 settled in Rohtak as a lawyer in the civil courts.[7] His Arya Samaj connections and his work among the Jat community in Agra prepared the ground for the career that followed. Table 1 gives a short timeline.

Table 1. Principal events in the life and career of Chhotu Ram

Year	Event
1881	Born at GarhiSampla, Rohtak (date disputed in the sources)
1899	Second in the province in the middle examination, Jhajjar
1905	B.A. (Sanskrit honours), St. Stephen's College, Delhi; death of his father
1912	Settles in Rohtak as an advocate; joins Arya Samaj work
1914–18	Works for war recruitment in Rohtak under Deputy Commissioner Harcourt; receives honours from the government
1916–20	President, Rohtak District Congress Committee
1919	Active in the Rowlatt agitation in Rohtak; the local administration proposes his deportation
1920	Breaks with the Congress over non-cooperation and refusal to pay land revenue
1923	Unionist (National Unionist) Party formed with Fazl-i-Hussain
1924	Minister for Agriculture, for a short term; Education Minister, 1925–27
1927–36	Leader of the Unionist Party in the Legislative Council
1936	Elected President of the Punjab Legislative Council
1937	Unionists win 95 of 175 seats; Chhotu Ram becomes Development Minister
1941	Becomes Revenue Minister
1945	Dies in January

Source: Ravinder Singh, thesis, chapters 1 and 2, drawing on Gopal, Verma, Chowdhry and the Punjab Administration Reports.

[7]Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 21–23; Gopal, *Political Biography*, pp. 22–31.

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3. War, Congress and the Break of 1920

When the First World War broke out, Chhotu Ram was still building his practice. Like Gandhi and the Congress, he gave full support to the war, and he explained that India's help would strengthen its claim to self-government. He said that the Indians should assist the British so that German power would not reach the East, and thereby strengthen their right to home rule.[8]In Rohtak the Deputy Commissioner, H. Harcourt, made him Honorary Secretary of the district recruiting committee. Rohtak sent a large number of recruits, and the government rewarded Chhotu Ram with titles and a grant of crown land. A special instruction of 1915 that the interests of the peasantry be kept in mind in filling vacancies shows that war service could be turned into gains for the Jat cultivators.[9] The sources are not exact about the year of his title (the thesis gives both 1916 and 1918), so this paper leaves the date open.

The post-war years changed his position quickly. Harcourt left, and his successor, R. C. Bolster, regarded Chhotu Ram with open distrust. Chhotu Ram had taken part in the agitation against the Rowlatt Act in Rohtak in 1919, and the local administration proposed his deportation, though higher officials were unwilling to risk further trouble. Bolster believed that he had helped the war effort only for personal gain, and he tried to stop the land grant promised to him.[10] His difficulty was that he was between two worlds. As a Congress president of Rohtak he was expected to support Gandhi's call, but he saw the Congress in his district as an urban party dominated by the town traders and lawyers.

The break came over non-cooperation. At the Ambala Division conference in Bhiwani in October 1920 and again at the Rohtak conference in November, Chhotu Ram objected to two parts of the Congress programme: the boycott of schools and colleges, and the refusal to pay land revenue. His reasoning was simple and rooted in his rural experience. If peasants refused to pay revenue, their land could be confiscated and sold, and it would pass cheaply to the money-lending classes. Peasants would then be reduced to tenants and labourers.[11] He wrote in his paper that the villagers were being asked to give up military jobs, boycott education and refuse revenue, and that all this would end in the loss of their lands.[12] He also said that he could not believe a mass campaign of defiance would remain non-violent.[13] The sources give different dates for the resignation, from August to November 1920, so the exact date should be checked against the originals before it is quoted.

The decision had a price. Chhotu Ram lost support among the Jats of Rohtak for some time. The Jat High School in Rohtak, which was his project, fell for a while into the hands of the non-cooperators, and in the first council election after the reforms he was beaten by a Jat Risaldar, Rai Bahadur Sarup Singh, by only 26 votes.[14] He recovered his position later with the weakening of his rivals, the Sanatan Dharm faction of Jats led by the Mahant of Bohar. In his own mind and in his later speeches, he could say that the break with the Congress was a break with a party of towns, not a break with the nation. Many Congress workers in Rohtak and Hissar, in later movements, were themselves Jat villagers, a fact which the thesis uses to argue that neither the Unionist

[8]*Jat Gazette*, 30 April 1918, p. 4; Chhotu Ram, *Bechara Kisan* (tr.), p. 20, cited in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 57.

[9]Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 57–58, citing Balbir Singh, *Sir Chhotu Ram: In Thought and Deeds* (New Delhi, 1994), p. 29, and Ikram Ali Malik, *The History of the Punjab, 1799–1947* (New Delhi, 1983), pp. 324–326.

[10]Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 36–38 and 59, citing Disorders Inquiry Committee, evidence, Ambala Division, pp. 336, 478; Home Office notes of H. A. Casson, 1919 and 1921; Sen (ed.), *Punjab's Eminent Hindus*, p. 21.

[11]Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 61–62, citing *Jat Gazette* (tr.), 8 September 1920 and 23 August 1921; Balbir Singh (1994), p. 34; Agnihotri and Malik, *A Profile in Courage* (New Delhi, 1978), pp. 20–21.

[12]*Jat Gazette*, 23 August 1921, p. 4, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 62.

[13]Ganda Singh, "A Speech of Sir Chhotu Ram: 1 March 1942", *The Punjab Past and Present*, vol. VIII, no. 1 (April 1974), p. 223.

[14]Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 38–39, citing IOR: L/P&J/6/1925, file 3302, and Chowdhry, *Role of Sir Chhotu Ram* (1979), pp. 34–35, 49–50.

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Party nor Chhotu Ram was against freedom.[15] Critics replied that Chhotu Ram's constitutional path placed him close to the colonial administration and kept rural Punjab away from mass agitation.

4. The Unionist Party and the Ministries

4.1 How the party was made

The party that Chhotu Ram joined had grown out of the constitution itself. The Reforms of 1919 gave the Punjab a council in which rural members were a majority, and officials such as Michael O'Dwyer had earlier argued for political groupings by "race" and not by religion as the best solution for the province. Fazl-i-Hussain gave shape to the idea by gathering the rural Muslim members into a "Rural Bloc", which was widened by Hindu rural members under Lal Chand and by Sikh members.[16] A British official described it as "a local moderate party mostly comprising landowners of Punjab". Its stated aim was to place economic interest, not caste or creed, at the base of politics.

The relation between Chhotu Ram and Fazl-i-Hussain was not smooth at first. In the *Jat Gazette* of January 1921 and again in 1923, Chhotu Ram wrote that Fazl-i-Hussain had done little for the zamindar and worked for Muslim non-zamindars only, calling him a communalist and an urbanite.[17] Within a year he sat in the same group, and the two together became the pillars of the party. The thesis points out how much the two men shared: both were landlords, both distrusted the urban Hindu money-lender, and both saw the rural vote as their strength. The change from critic to partner shows that Chhotu Ram's politics were guided by an assessment of power as much as by principle.

4.2 Office and its limits

Chhotu Ram's first period in office was short. When Lal Chand lost his seat after an election petition, Fazl-i-Hussain proposed Chhotu Ram, and Governor Hailey appointed him Minister for Agriculture in September 1924, though Hailey did not think him a very distinguished politician. The urban Hindu press opposed the appointment on communal grounds. He then served as Education Minister in 1925–27.[18] In January 1927 Hailey dropped him in favour of the urban Hindu leader Manohar Lal. Lord Irwin explained the reason in a letter to the Secretary of State: Chhotu Ram had been accepted as a minister by the Muslim party for the few extra votes he brought, but after the 1926 elections he had lost two followers, and the Hindus, who had been in permanent opposition, needed to be brought closer to the government.[19] The episode shows that his place in the cabinet depended on the arithmetic of communal blocs, as the British saw it.

Between 1927 and 1936, Chhotu Ram led the Unionist Party in the Council. In these years he became known for his command of budget figures and for his attack on the urban bias of government spending. In a speech on the land revenue system in 1928 he compared the exemption of small incomes from income tax with the absence of any similar exemption for small landholders, asking whether zamindars did not need food. He also criticised the rigidity of revenue, which had to be paid whether or not the crop failed, and complained that

[15]Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 3–4.

[16]H. K. Trevaskis, *The Punjab of To-day*, vol. I (Lahore, 1932), p. 148; Macnab Papers, p. 103, cited in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 39.

[17]*Jat Gazette*, 12 January 1921, p. 2; 4 April 1923, p. 4; 25 July 1923, p. 2, quoted in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 40.

[18]Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 41–43 and 66–67, citing PAR 1923–24, pp. 3, 24; PAR 1926–27, p. 2; *Tribune*, 12–17 September 1924.

[19]Birkenhead Collection, MSS Eur D. 104/M2/10/5L, Irwin to Birkenhead, 13 January 1927, quoted in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 43.

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officers always reported crops as worth twelve or fourteen annas in the rupee when they were not worth four.[20] In 1934 he claimed that rural people paid most of the revenue but received little in return.[21] In 1936 he was elected President of the Council.

After the elections of 1937, held under provincial autonomy, the Unionists won 95 of the 175 seats and the Congress only 18, and Chhotu Ram became Development Minister under the premiership of Sikander Hayat Khan. After Sikander's death in December 1942, Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana succeeded him, and Chhotu Ram, who became Revenue Minister in 1941, remained in the cabinet until his death.[22] The British valued the Unionist ministry as a steady example of working parliamentary government, and Linlithgow said in 1943 that the Punjab government was a true example of parliamentary government in India. The ministry's survival in 1943, when the Sikander-Jinnah pact and the food crisis threatened it, was credited by the thesis to Chhotu Ram's skill.[23] His importance for the coalition was well known: the Hindu weekly *Haryana Tilak*, a bitter opponent, admitted in September 1939 that without the support of South-East Punjab, where at least eight to twelve members stood with Chhotu Ram, the Unionist government could not remain in power.[24]

Table 2. Offices held by Chhotu Ram

Office	Period	Remarks
President, Rohtak District Congress Committee	1916–1920	Resigned over non-cooperation
Minister for Agriculture	From September 1924	Short term, succeeding Lal Chand
Minister for Education	1925–1927	Dropped in January 1927
Leader, Unionist Party in the Council	1927–1936	Succeeded to the leadership with Fazl-i-Hussain often absent
President, Punjab Legislative Council	1936	Elected after 1936
Development Minister	From 1937	Under Sikander Hayat Khan
Revenue Minister	1941–1945	Until his death

Source: Ravinder Singh, thesis, chapter 2, pp. 41–43, 66–71. The dates of some offices differ slightly among authors.

[20] PLCD, vol. XI, 22 February 1928, p. 82, quoted in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 68.

[21] PLCD, vol. XXV, 28 June 1934, p. 333, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 69.

[22] Craig Baxter, "The 1937 Elections and the Sikander-Jinnah Pact", *The Punjab Past and Present*, vol. X, no. 2 (October 1976), pp. 356–366; Amarjeet Singh, *Punjab Divided: Politics of the Muslim League and Partition, 1935–47* (Delhi, 2001), p. 45; Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 70–71.

[23] Linlithgow Collection, 92: Linlithgow to Glancy, 17 August 1943, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 56.

[24] *Haryana Tilak*, 22 September 1939, p. 4, quoted in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 56.

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5. The Agrarian Background: Prices, Debt and the Alienation Act

To judge Chhotu Ram's legislation we must first look at the problem he faced. Punjab's farmers had gone through a boom in the years of the First World War. Prices rose sharply from 1916 to 1929, and the buying power of the rupee fell. The Banking Inquiry Committee found that agricultural debt grew by about half between 1921 and 1929, and the official report on the working of the agrarian acts noted that mortgage debt rose faster between 1919 and 1929 than it had in the previous twenty years.[25] The crash came in 1929–30. In Rohtak the price of wheat, cotton and *gur* in the early 1930s fell to a fraction of what it had been in 1924, yet the money rates used to fix the land revenue stayed the same. The real burden of the revenue, and of every debt fixed in rupees, rose heavily. A debt taken in 1921–22 would, by 1931–32, have needed about three times as much wheat to repay it.[26] The total agricultural debt of the province was estimated at Rs 135 crores in 1929–30.[27]

The legal framework was the Punjab Alienation of Land Act of 1900. It divided the population into "agricultural tribes" and others, and it allowed land to be sold or permanently mortgaged only within the agricultural tribes. Its aim was to protect the cultivator from the professional money-lender, usually a Bania or Khatri. The Unionist Party, in the words of the thesis "by and large the creation of this Act", called it its Magna Carta.[28] Yet the Act had an unintended result, which official reports of the time themselves noticed. By shutting out the non-agriculturist buyer, it handed a semi-monopoly of land purchase and mortgage to the richer members of the agricultural castes. The Collector of Rohtak wrote in 1934 that such cultivator money-lenders could dictate terms and take land from small owners at a price far below its open market value.[29] The number of agricultural money-lenders in the province is said to have grown from about 8,400 in 1902 to 15,000 in 1917 and to about 40,000 in the 1930s, and the Banking Inquiry Committee estimated the whole body of money-lenders at about 55,000 in the late 1920s.[30] More than three-quarters of the land mortgaged in the previous twenty-five years had been mortgaged to agricultural tribes, and Rohtak had emerged as the leading district in money-lending business.[31]

Table 3 gathers some of the figures for Rohtak district. They suggest a district in which smaller owners were losing ground. Sales and mortgages of land rose fivefold in thirty years. The share of cultivated land held under usufructuary mortgage rose between 1921–22 and 1939–40. The average holding was only 5.7 acres, against an "economic" holding of about 12 acres, and only a small number of owners paid land revenue of Rs 100 or more. At the same time, the number of ordinary cultivators and agricultural labourers grew rapidly in the census figures.

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[25] *Report of the Punjab Provincial Banking Inquiry Committee*, vol. I (Lahore, 1930), p. 165; CFRR Rohtak, file P. XIII-209, "Review of the working of Agrarian Acts in Punjab", 2 April 1942, pp. 3–4, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 77.

[26] PLCD, vol. XXIV, 5 March 1935, p. 115, and vol. XXIII, 21 March 1933, p. 645; CFRR Rohtak, file P. XIII-209, p. 4, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 77–78.

[27] Banking Inquiry Committee Report, vol. I, p. 16, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 86.

[28] PLRA 1929–30, p. 312, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 76.

[29] CFSO Rohtak, file no. M-1, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 80.

[30] Banking Inquiry Committee Report, vol. I, pp. 129, 139; M. L. Darling, *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt* (Bombay, 1977), p. 198, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 76–77.

[31] Banking Inquiry Committee Report, vol. I, p. 139, and Chowdhry (1979), pp. 21–28, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 77.

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Table 3. Selected indicators of agrarian change in Rohtak district

Indicator	Figure reported
Sales and mortgages of land, annual average	5,456 (1901–02 to 1905–06); 25,945 (1926–27 to 1930–31)
Cultivated area under usufructuary mortgage	7.9 per cent (1921–22); 13.9 per cent (1939–40)
Average landholding / economic holding	5.7 acres / about 12 acres
Owners paying land revenue of Rs 100 and above	Only about 358 owners
Ordinary cultivators in the census	99,355 (1911); growth of 30.76 per cent by 1921, 54.85 per cent by 1931 and 59.23 per cent by 1951
Agricultural labourers	Growth of 60.77 per cent (1911–21), and further growth in 1931 and 1951
Decrees obtained by money-lenders, April 1931 to August 1932	3,981 decrees worth Rs 21,03,594 (the largest figure in the province)

Source: Rohtak District Gazetteer, vol. II, part II (Lahore, 1936), table 21; Census of India, 1911–1931; Punjab Banking Inquiry Committee Report; CFRR and CFSO Rohtak files, as used in Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 80–83, 92. The percentage figures are reproduced as given in the thesis and should be checked against the original Census tables.

Official voices tried to explain these changes away. The Board of Economic Inquiry found that only 2.3 per cent of the land of small owners was sold to large owners in 1922–27, and 6 per cent in 1931–34. The Banking Inquiry Committee described such sales as the exchange of a bad farmer for a good one, and the Royal Commission on Agriculture of 1928 argued that it was a good thing if strong landowners grew stronger. But the thesis, following Chowdhry, shows that these surveys counted as "small owners" those who paid less than Rs 100 revenue, which in a district like Rohtak meant nearly everyone.[32] The point is important for the rest of this paper: the "agriculturist" whom the law protected was a legal category, and inside it there were large and small owners with opposite interests.

6. The Agrarian Legislation

Between 1930 and 1940 the Punjab passed a series of laws on debt, mortgage, land and markets. Chhotu Ram was the main architect and public defender of this body of legislation. Table 4 lists the principal measures.

[32]Board of Economic Inquiry, *Note on the Sale of Land between the Notified Agricultural Tribes*, 1922–23 to 1926–27 (Lahore, 1931) and *Sale of Land in South-West Punjab*, 1931–32 to 1933–34 (Lahore, 1936); Banking Inquiry Committee Report, vol. I, p. 117; *Royal Commission on Agriculture in India*, vol. VII (Bombay, 1928), p. 637; Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 83.

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Table 4. Principal agrarian measures of the 1930s and their working

Measure	Main provisions	Working, according to the sources
Punjab Regulation of Accounts Act, 1930	Money-lenders must keep proper accounts and give six-monthly statements to debtors; failure may lose them interest and costs	A rush of suits by money-lenders in 1931–32; Chhotu Ram wanted stricter penalties
Punjab Relief of Indebtedness Act, 1934 (in force April 1935)	Damdupat rule; debt conciliation boards; limits on arrest for debt; debts between Rs 250 and Rs 10,000; mortgages to Rs 10,000 / 50 acres may be redeemed	Little benefit for debts under Rs 250; boards slow; larger owners gained
Punjab Debtors' Protection Act, 1936	Land enough to maintain debtor and family exempt from attachment; limits on temporary alienation; houses and standing crops protected	Rohtak: of cases sued, 78 per cent unsatisfied; non-agriculturist credit shrank
Alienation of Land Act amendments, 1907, 1913, 1931, 1936	Occupancy rights, pre-emption, limits on temporary alienation; trees brought under the Act	Favoured agriculturist landowners
Punjab Registration of Moneylenders Act, 1938	All money-lenders must be registered and licensed; unregistered lenders cannot sue	Only 9,206 registered in 1939 and 8,232 in 1940; five licences cancelled in 1940
Punjab Restitution of Mortgaged Land Act, 1939 (in force 15 May 1939)	Mortgages made before 8 June 1901 ended; land returned without compensation after the mortgagee had recovered a fixed return	Slow; in Rohtak 547 applications by 1945 and "not a single case" disposed
Alienation of Land (Amendment) Act X of 1938 ("Benami Act")	Section 13-A allowed the Deputy Commissioner to void fictitious (benami) transactions, with retrospective effect	15,572 cases examined in 1937–38; stayed in 1942 pending a Federal Court ruling
Alienation of Land (Third Amendment) Act V of 1938	Agriculturist creditors need the Collector's sanction for permanent alienation of a debtor's land (after three years)	Called by critics an "eye wash"; temporary mortgage left open
Punjab Agricultural Produce Markets Act, 1939	Regulation of markets, weights and middlemen's charges	Hardly operative because of Hindu and Muslim opposition; amended 1941 and 1944
Punjab Relief of Indebtedness (Amendment) Act XII of 1940	Interest limits (7.5 per cent simple on secured, 12.5 per cent on unsecured debts); no arrest; protection of cattle	Further reduced court recovery

Source: Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 84–111, drawing on Punjab Government Gazettes, PLCD and PLAD, CFRR Rohtak files, IOR records and Chowdhry (1979).

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6.1 Debt relief: who was helped?

The two earliest big measures, the Relief of Indebtedness Act of 1934 and the Debtors' Protection Act of 1936, were sold to the villagers as a rescue from the money-lender. They did set limits. The Act adopted the old Indian principle of *damdupat*, under which no court decree could award more than twice the principal. It created debt conciliation boards to scale down debts, and it ended arrest for debt except in cases of contumacy.[33] The 1936 Act exempted from attachment enough land to maintain the debtor and his family, and Chhotu Ram proudly told a meeting of 20,000 farmers at Sirsa that the money-lender could attach neither the person nor the land beyond a limit.[34]

But the thesis argues that the benefits were uneven. Three clauses of the 1934 Act were of special value to the rich debtor: the exemption of houses not lived in, the raising of the upper limit of redeemable mortgages to 50 acres and Rs 10,000, and the ceiling of Rs 10,000 on the debts that could be dealt with. At the bottom, debts under Rs 250 were left out. Chhotu Ram objected to the narrow definition of "debtor" and asked for tenants and agricultural labourers to be included, and he called the Act "halting and half-hearted". But he made no comment on the lower ceiling of Rs 250, which meant that many of the poorest were outside the Act.[35] Under the 1936 Act, the Deputy Commissioner was asked to leave "enough land" with a debtor. In Rohtak, of the cases sued in the courts after 1936, about 78 per cent of the decrees were not satisfied, and in the remainder only about 18 per cent of the decretal sum was recovered.[36] The debtor was protected, but the lender was frightened away.

The frightened lender is the key to the story. The Governor's note of December 1936 said that money-lenders found it extremely difficult to collect their dues, and that landowners were driving hard bargains, with lenders prepared to take a mortgage for four or five years in full satisfaction of their claims.[37] The non-agriculturist lenders, who were often small traders, collected what they could and moved to the towns. The Collector of Rohtak reported that relations between the Hindu Jats and the Mahajans had become much worse after the legislation, in which Chhotu Ram had taken a prominent part, and that the Mahajans hated him.[38] The villager had less credit from the old source and had to depend more on the rich farmer and agricultural money-lender, who were not hurt by the new laws because they could recover their advances through possession of the mortgaged land, without going to court. A Deputy Commissioner of Rohtak noted that a class of money-lenders was growing among the agriculturists, including retired military officers, for whom lending was a lucrative business.[39]

The debt conciliation boards were also less effective than claimed. In Sonepat, 1,160 applications were received; the claims involved Rs 12,03,730, and only Rs 3,28,332 was disposed of. In Hissar and Gurgaon the disposal rate was about 20 per cent.[40] Chhotu Ram himself, speaking at Ropar in 1939, told farmers that he was not enthusiastic about boards, because the *sahukar* feared the courts, and because decrees were hard to get

[33] *Punjab Relief of Indebtedness Act*, 1934 (Act VII of 1934), part V; Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 88.

[34] Brayne Collection, 48: note of 1 February 1940, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 91.

[35] PLCD, vol. XXV, 15 November 1934, p. 976; GI: Home General, file 41/35, 1935, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 88–89.

[36] CFRR Rohtak, file P. XIII-209, p. 6, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 91.

[37] Linlithgow Collection, 112: Emerson to Linlithgow, 19 December 1936, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 91.

[38] Chowdhry (1979), p. 338, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 93.

[39] Chowdhry (1979), pp. 337–338, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 93.

[40] PLAD, vol. XIII, April 1940, question 6245; *Tribune*, 21 October 1938, p. 13, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 97.

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under the exemptions he had granted.[41] It shows that the Unionist government knew the real working of its own laws.

6.2 The money-lender and the "agriculturist money-lender"

A central question of the whole legislation is how the word "money-lender" was used. The official line since 1900 was that the *sahukar* was a non-agriculturist. Chhotu Ram, according to the thesis, helped to spread the same use, and when pressed he showed a kinder attitude towards the agriculturist lender, though in the Council in 1934 he had called such lenders more "rapacious" than non-agriculturist ones.[42] Most Unionist members were themselves rich landowners, with a sympathy for the agriculturist lender. The Registration of Moneylenders Act of 1938 was the party's reply: it required all lenders, whether agriculturist or not, to be registered, but it excepted landlords who lent to their tenants for farming. The opposition leader, Mukand Lal Puri, called Chhotu Ram the real author of the Act. Chhotu Ram defended it by saying that all lenders were under "equally severe restrictions", and told zamindar audiences that a decree against a debtor could now only be obtained if the lender was registered and licensed.[43] But the statistics told a different story. Against an estimated 55,000 money-lenders, only 9,206 registered in 1939 and 8,232 in 1940, and in 1940 licences were cancelled in only five cases in the whole province.[44] The Federal Court later struck down parts of the Act because of the Government of India Act of 1935.

6.3 Restitution of mortgaged land

The Restitution of Mortgaged Land Act of 1939 was the most popular of the measures. It ended all mortgages made before 8 June 1901, the date from which the Alienation Act took effect, and returned the land to the mortgagor without payment, because the mortgagee had in nearly all cases already earned far more than twice his principal. Chhotu Ram's own estimate was that the Act would benefit 13 lakh landholders and return 40 lakh *bighas* worth about Rs 16 crores.[45] The Act was the clearest case where he turned a debt of generations into a real gain for the peasant. He told farmers that the large landowners who had mortgaged land would also get it back, and that these same landowners, who might be creditors of small zamindars, would have to give back land without compensation. He named Sikander Hayat Khan and Khizr Hayat as men who would lose land worth Rs 5.5 lakhs and Rs 1.5 lakhs.[46] The Unionist leaders presented this as a "sacrifice" of the better-off for the poor, and used the figure that only about 5 per cent of the mortgaged land was held by agriculturists against 95 per cent by non-cultivators.

Yet the working of the Act exposes its limits. First, the ministry had gathered no statistics on how many mortgages the Act would affect; the Information Bureau published figures only in November 1938, after the Act was passed. Second, the Act was challenged in the High Court and the Federal Court, and work was suspended; by 1941, over 24,000 cases in the province lay before the Collectors and only a few had been decided. Third, the revenue staff could not cope. In Rohtak, 543 applications had been received by 1944, and by 1945 the number was 547, but "not even a single case" had been disposed of until an Extra Assistant Commissioner was appointed in September 1945, after which a few cases released 202 *bighas* of land and

[41] *Jat Gazette*, 26 April 1939, pp. 2, 7, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 97.

[42] PLCD, vol. XXV, 1 November 1934, pp. 842–843, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 85.

[43] PLAD, vol. IX, 24 June 1938, p. 335; *Jat Gazette*, 6 July 1938, p. 5, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 98–99.

[44] CFRR Rohtak, file P. XIII-209, p. 8, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 99.

[45] *Jat Gazette*, 25 January 1939, p. 6, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 103.

[46] *Jat Gazette*, 5 April 1939, p. 1, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 101.

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discharged Rs 9,903 of mortgage money. Chhotu Ram had by then been dead for nearly a year.[47] In the view of the thesis, the main benefit of the Act was its propaganda value. Farmers in some places took back their land directly and without waiting for the procedure, and Chhotu Ram himself warned the landowners of Rohtak against compromising with the *sahukar*.[48]

6.4 Benami transactions and the "Zamindar-Sahukar" Act

The Benami Act (Act X of 1938) added Section 13-A to the Alienation of Land Act. It tackled a long-standing trick: a non-agriculturist money-lender who took land from a debtor would put it in the name of a friendly agriculturist (a *benamidar*), and thus evade the Act. The new section allowed the Deputy Commissioner to void such transactions and to restore the land, with retrospective effect, and the Punjab ministry insisted on retrospection even though the Secretary of State objected.[49] The scale was large: special tehsildars were appointed in 1937, 15,572 cases were examined in 1937–38, and 7,964 were recommended for review. Chhotu Ram said that Hansi tehsil alone had fictitious transactions of Rs 10 lakhs, and in April 1939 he claimed to have secured for the zamindars land worth Rs 20 crores within twenty months.[50] The thesis points out that the Act also removed a rival for the agriculturist lender, since the non-agriculturist lender who worked through benami names could no longer compete.

The Third Amendment (Act V of 1938), called by critics the "Zamindar-Sahukar Act", was the first law to admit officially that agriculturist money-lenders could be as rapacious as non-agriculturist ones. It required an agriculturist creditor to obtain the Collector's sanction for the permanent alienation of his debtor's land, but only after the debtor had defaulted for three years (reduced from five). The thesis notes that the definition of "creditor" was narrow, so that a farmer who habitually took land on mortgage was not caught, and that temporary mortgage with possession, which could last an indefinite time, was left untouched.[51] Chhotu Ram and Sikander Hayat Khan resisted every effort of the opposition to remove the distinction between agriculturist and non-agriculturist lenders. Sikander Hayat Khan's reply was that the Zamindar government would save the poor zamindar from losing his land, but would not throw the Sahukar-zamindar out of the zamindar community or deprive him of his privileges under the Alienation Act.[52]

6.5 The Markets Act, cooperatives and the question of the very poor

The Punjab Agricultural Produce Markets Act of 1939, or "Mandi Act", was advertised as bringing "higher prices for the cultivators". Chhotu Ram argued that the large zamindar had no need of the market, because the merchant came to his house, whereas the small zamindar was cheated by the *sahukar*.[53] The thesis comments that the marketable surplus of the small farmer was meagre, and that the surplus which existed was usually

[47] CFRR Rohtak, file O. V-27, DC Rohtak to Revenue Secretary, 11 November 1944, and statement of 30 September 1945; memorandum of Punjab Revenue Department, 23 June 1944, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 103–104.

[48] *Jat Gazette*, 6 July 1938, p. 5, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 105.

[49] IOR: L/E/9/567, 1940, minute of A. J. Morley, 30 September 1938; Zetland to Linlithgow, 13 December 1938, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 105.

[50] PLRA 1937–38, para 31, pp. 39–40; S. S. Majithia Papers, file 84, September 1938; *Jat Gazette*, 28 June and 5 April 1939, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 106–107.

[51] *Punjab Alienation of Land (Third Amendment) Act*, Act V of 1938, section 3-A; IOR: L/E/9/567, 1940; Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 107–109.

[52] *Jat Gazette*, 30 November 1938, p. 2, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 109.

[53] *Jat Gazette*, 23 November 1938, p. 8, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 110.

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taken at the threshing floor by his creditor. The Act met strong opposition from Hindus and Muslims alike and was hardly implemented before it was amended in 1941 and 1944.

The agrarian laws also had consequences for the cooperative movement, which Chhotu Ram had himself supported. The Registrar of Cooperative Societies wrote in 1942 that the indebtedness legislation, with other causes, had weakened the sense of moral obligation to repay, and that the movement rested on mutual trust, which was now in doubt because legal sanctions for petty debts had almost ceased.[54] The Deputy Commissioner of Rohtak in 1944 called the movement a failure in the district, partly because of overloading and partly because the relief legislation had made the indebted peasant defiant. Chhotu Ram himself told the Assembly in February 1940 that some members who owed a few hundred rupees to a society had bought land worth thousands, and had never repaid.[55] The defaulters were, in the thesis's phrase, from the higher strata of debtors.

Where did the landless and the Dalits stand? Chhotu Ram insisted that Harijans should be counted among the "debtor" class, but he could only say that they gained from the Acts "in the same way as all other castes", directly or indirectly connected with the agriculturist castes.[56] Agricultural labourers were mostly Dalits and were not allowed to hold land. The laws that protected property, whether land, houses or trees, could do very little for those who had none. When the opposition pointed to large landlords who would gain, Chhotu Ram replied that there were only 13 landholders who paid revenue of Rs 10,000 or more and only 23 who paid more than Rs 5,000, and asked whether the heavens would fall if they gained. His answer shows his larger idea: the interests of big and small landowners were, in his view, the same.[57]

6.6 Rural reconstruction and British purposes

One more feature of this period needs attention: the motives of the colonial government. As early as 1928, A. Hirtzel at the India Office wrote to Halley that the government had to counter communist and socialist influence by a progressive agricultural policy. In November 1934 the Government of India sent a circular to the provinces warning that Gandhi's rural reconstruction programme was meant to prepare volunteers to support civil disobedience at the right moment, and advising local governments to anticipate it with similar practical measures.[58] In 1935 the Punjab allotted Rs 8.5 lakhs to the programme known as *Dehat Sudhar*, for land consolidation, village sanitation, veterinary hospitals, wells, fruit farming, tanning and other items, and it was known that "good political effect" would come from the government appearing as the helper of the masses.[59] A confidential report of Lt. Col. D. H. Currie after a tour of Rohtak in January 1933 foresaw success for the "zamindar" candidates in the forthcoming elections. The thesis argues that officials designed these programmes in detail, and that Chhotu Ram, and the Unionist Party after him, claimed credit for them. Chhotu Ram's political rival, the *Haryana Tilak*, complained of the same.[60]

This does not mean that the legislation was only a bureaucratic design. The Governor of Punjab wrote to the Viceroy in 1938 that the prestige of the ministry stood extremely high throughout the province, largely because

[54]CFRR Rohtak, file P. XIII-209, p. 12, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 112.

[55]PLAD, vol. IX-A, 28 February 1940, p. 775, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 113.

[56]*Jat Gazette*, 14 December 1938, p. 1, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 111.

[57]PLAD, vol. XIII, 9 April 1940, p. 325, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 112.

[58]Halley Collection, 12C: A. Hirtzel to Halley, 6 July 1928; GI: Home Poll, file 3/16/34, circular of 23 November 1934, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 74.

[59]GI: Home Poll, file 11/1/35, letter of 3 March 1935; file 11/2/35, 13 November 1935, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 75.

[60]CFSO Rohtak, file M-1, report of Currie, 2–9 January 1933; *Haryana Tilak*, 3 May 1938, p. 25, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 76.

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of its agrarian legislation, and the Deputy Commissioner of Rohtak noted that Chhotu Ram was hailed as the champion of the "downtrodden and the have-nots".[61] The point is rather that the interests of the colonial state and of the rural elite met in these measures, which is one reason why they passed with so little resistance from the Governor, and why Chhotu Ram came to be seen as the Government's man in the countryside by his opponents.

7. Education

Chhotu Ram believed that the root cause of indebtedness was ignorance. In the Council he said that the neglect of rural education by the Government had thrown the villagers into the hands of the money-lending classes.[62] The state of schooling in the South-East Punjab at the time supports his concern. Table 5 shows the position in 1919 for five districts. Only about one in six school-age children in Ambala were in school, and in Karnal and Hissar the figure was below 10 per cent.

Table 5. Schools and pupils in the South-East Punjab, c. 1919

District	Area (sq. miles)	Schools	Population	School-age children	Pupils (% of school-age)
Ambala	1,872	221	6,89,970	57,498	9,559 (16.6)
Karnal	3,153	169	7,99,787	66,649	5,831 (8.7)
Rohtak	1,799	162	5,41,489	45,124	6,746 (14.9)
Hissar	5,217	154	8,04,889	67,074	6,521 (9.7)
Gurgaon	1,984	134	6,43,177	53,598	6,308 (11.8)

Source: Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 126, from the Imperial Gazetteer of India, Punjab. The percentage is calculated here. The thesis prints slightly different pupil numbers for Karnal and Hissar in a second table (p. 134); the figures in the first table agree with the printed percentages and are used here.

Chhotu Ram's own struggles for schooling gave the issue a personal edge. In Rohtak he was secretary of the Jat Heroes High School, which was set up in the troubled year of non-cooperation, and its enrolment of over 700 students in a short time was seen as a sign of rural hunger for schooling. He also travelled to Jodhpur in 1918 to raise funds for the Jat school at Rohtak.[63] Later the Jat Education Society of Rohtak grew into a network of schools and a college. His Arya Samaj background gave this work a reformist tone, and he said that he was a Jat by birth but an Arya Samaji by faith.[64]

As Education Minister (1925–27) and as an influential member of the Unionist government afterwards, he took several practical steps. He pressed for schooling in cheap buildings, saying in 1921 that the children could study under trees as their ancestors had, if money was lacking for buildings; supported adult and night schools;

[61] IOR: L/E/8/1038; Chowdhry (1979), p. 276, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 114–115.

[62] PLCD, vol. XI, 7 May 1928, p. 969, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 123.

[63] Raghubir Singh Shastri, *Jeevan Charitra* (tr.), p. 94; *Jat Gazette* (tr.), 9 January 1966, p. 6, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 135.

[64] Agnihotri and Malik, *A Profile in Courage*, pp. 50, 94, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 135.

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and worked to start at least one intermediate college in each district.[65] The record of the time shows rapid growth. The number of adults registered in adult schools reached about 62,000 in 2,400 schools by March 1925, and an educational commissioner of the Government of India said that no other province had made such extensive provision for adult education. Compulsory primary education was brought in for 42 towns and 452 rural areas in 1925–26.[66] Intermediate colleges numbered only five in 1923, degree colleges reached 38 by 1938–39, and the number of middle and high schools grew in the same period.[67] The thesis also credits him with about 2,000 village libraries by 1926, and with the reservation of a large share of seats for farmers' sons in the engineering school at Rasul and the Central Training College.[68] Some of the growth figures in the thesis, such as the very large percentage increase in girls' enrolment, look too high and should be checked before they are repeated.

Chhotu Ram also took a position on women's education. He opposed the confinement of women within four walls and the *purdah* custom, and favoured their going out without it. Yet he was against making girls' education compulsory.[69] The Ambala division in 1933 had only three of the 22 girls' high schools in the province, and the number of girls who passed the matriculation examination in the division rose from 336 in 1931–32 to 823 in 1935. Scholarship funds for women rose from Rs 6,000 in 1920 to Rs 79,000 in 1940.[70] A "Peasant Welfare Fund" also gave scholarships to deserving students from small farming families, and Chhotu Ram is said to have given monthly help to students from his own pocket.[71] One of his criticisms was about the grant-in-aid policy for private colleges, where a large part of the grant went to a few institutions.[72]

A historian should add one qualification. The expansion of schooling was not caused by Chhotu Ram alone. It took place in a province whose education department had a long record of growth, and the Unionist ministers came from several communities and worked under a Governor. At the same time, the thesis reports that in 1931 the great mass of the population, and about 98 per cent of the women, were still illiterate, and in the South-East Punjab, as Table 5 shows, rural schooling was thin even after his early work. His role is best described as that of a persistent advocate who got the rural interest into the budget, and not as a single founder of the system.

8. Industry and Rural Employment

Chhotu Ram also argued that agriculture alone could never make the province prosperous. In the Council in 1935 he said that industries independent of agriculture had to be started on a larger scale if the province was to have a decent comfort, and he promoted cottage industry as a supplementary income for villagers who had much idle time.[73] In May 1937, speaking to the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, he said that industrialization was the only promising answer to unemployment, since the raw produce of the province could be turned into finished goods that would employ the educated young.[74] He joined this with a policy of using

[65]PLCD, vol. VIII, part A, 6 May 1925, pp. 1067–1069; Shastri, *Jeevan Charitra*, p. 94, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 124, 135.

[66]*Punjab Administration Report*, 1925–26 (Lahore, 1927), p. 115; *Punjab Administration Report*, 1926–27, p. 17, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 141–142.

[67]Yashpal Bajaj, "Chhotu Ram and His Works" (Ph.D. thesis, Kurukshetra University, 1972), p. 352, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 136.

[68]A. K. Rathee and D. S. Nandal, op. cit., pp. 262–263; Bajaj, "Chhotu Ram and His Works", p. 352, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 136–137.

[69]PLCD, vol. III-B, 8 December 1925, pp. 1528–1529, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 137.

[70]PLCD, vol. XXXIII, 2 December 1933, p. 1072; PLCD, vol. XII, 13 January 1940, pp. 330–331, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 137–138.

[71]Rathee and Nandal, op. cit., pp. 263–266; Gopal, *The Man and His Vision* (Ghaziabad, 1977), p. 83, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 139–140.

[72]PLCD, vol. XXXIII, 2 December 1933, p. 1071, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 137.

[73]PLCD, vol. XXVI, 28 February 1935, p. 182, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 151.

[74]PLAD, vol. I, 22 June 1937, p. 501, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 152.

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the surplus labour of the villages: the thesis shows how he linked rural industry to the problem of over-population on the land.

The thesis and the authors it cites list his actions in this field. Table 6 summarises them. During his first ministry he is said to have started a modern tannery in 1924 and six industrial schools in 1925, and to have helped to get the Mandi hydro-electric scheme sanctioned in 1925, which was completed in 1933–34.[75] Under the ministry of 1937 he set up a Provincial Stores Purchase Department, which in its first year bought goods worth Rs 12 lakhs and gave local industries a guaranteed market. He ordered the first district-wise industrial survey of the province in 1938, and set aside Rs 1.5 lakhs for an Industrial Research Fund, which he compared to the soul in a body.[76]

Table 6. Chhotu Ram's measures for industry and rural employment

Year	Measure	Notes
1924–25	Tannery; six industrial schools for rural boys	As reported by Nandal and Rathee
1925	Mandi hydro-electric scheme sanctioned	Completed 1933–34, at a cost given as Rs 6.25 crores in the secondary source
1937	Provincial Stores Purchase Department	Purchases of Rs 12 lakhs in the first year
1938	District-wise industrial survey	Described as the first by a provincial government
1938	Industrial Research Fund of Rs 1.5 lakhs	Chhotu Ram admitted it was small, and hoped for private donations
1939–41	Support for State Aid to Industries and cottage industry	Large machinery could not be imported during the war

Source: Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 9, 151–155; PLAD debates of 1937–41. The figures for the hydro-electric scheme come from a secondary summary and should be checked.

The limits of this effort were clear to Chhotu Ram himself. In 1941 he told the Assembly that the new government had spent millions on famine and drought relief in only three years, that the war made it impossible to import heavy machinery, and that the House had not given a clear verdict on large-scale industry, so that planning had to be cautious.[77] The thesis also admits that funds were given in a piecemeal way, which limited results. The programme of small industries in villages was in line with his wider idea of how to relieve the

[75]Nandal and Rathee, "Role of Sir Chhotu Ram in Industrial Development of Punjab", in *Deenbandhu Sir Chhotu Ram Commemoration*, vol. IV (Hisar, 1995), as summarised in Ravinder Singh, thesis, p. 9.

[76]PLAD, vol. XVII, 20 March 1941, pp. 126, 128; PLAD, vol. VIII, 20 March 1939, p. 440; PLAD, vol. VI, 21 November 1938, pp. 484–486, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 152–154. The thesis gives 1958 as the year of the Research Fund, but its own citation is to the Assembly debates of November 1938, so 1938 is used here.

[77]PLAD, vol. XVII, 20 March 1941, pp. 126–128, in Ravinder Singh, thesis, pp. 154–155.

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pressure on the land, but it remained small beside the problem. Rohtak and the surrounding districts did not see an industrial change in his lifetime, and the thesis's claims about the value of his ideas for the present day, for example in relation to rural employment schemes, are statements of opinion and not of historical evidence.

9. Re-examining Chhotu Ram: A Critical Assessment

What conclusions can be drawn? The evidence does not support either the simple hero story or the simple story of a loyalist. Five points are worth making.

First, Chhotu Ram's achievement as an organiser is beyond doubt. He gave a voice to the Jat and other cultivating castes of the South-East Punjab, which had little influence in provincial politics before him. His consistent campaign, through the *Jat Gazette* and the Council, against the urban bias of the budget and the revenue system, brought rural demands to the front. The Unionist government could not have survived without his region's votes, as even its enemies accepted in 1939.

Second, the "agriculturist" in whose name he spoke was a legal and political category, and it hid deep differences. The Alienation of Land Act of 1900, which he and his party treated as their charter, had already given the richer cultivators a favoured position as buyers and lenders. The laws of the 1930s did tighten the rules for the professional Bania lender, but they left the agriculturist lender much less affected, because he lent against land that he could cultivate himself. The decline of non-agriculturist credit left the small farmer more dependent on the rich farmer. The thesis, following Chowdhry, sums this up in the statement that the large farmers, whether as creditors or as debtors, were the main beneficiaries.

Third, there was a gap between the law on paper and the law in the village. The Restitution Act produced hardly any relief in Rohtak before 1945. The debt boards were slow, and the Registration Act registered a small fraction of the lenders. These problems arose in part from the thin administrative machinery of the colonial state, and in part from the haste with which the laws were drawn up, since the ministry did not even have figures for the mortgages it wanted to end. Their public effect, as the thesis says, was often greater than their practical effect.

Fourth, Chhotu Ram worked inside a system and shared many of its aims. The British supported rural reconstruction partly as a barrier against the Congress, and they were content to let the Unionist ministers claim credit. His strategy of constitutional politics, his break with the Congress in 1920 and his place in a cabinet led by Muslim landlords all reflect this. His case that peasants would lose their land if they refused to pay revenue was serious. But his critics were right that the Unionist policy kept the countryside largely apart from the mass movements, even though many villagers of Rohtak and Hissar did join the Congress campaigns later.

Fifth, we should be careful about the evidence. Much of what is known about his speeches comes from his own newspaper, and much about the working of his laws comes from official files written by officers who had their own interests. The doctoral study that this paper draws on is generous to Chhotu Ram in its first and last chapters, and critical in its chapter on legislation. It contains several errors of date and figure, such as the year of the Research Fund and the dates of his resignation from the Congress. A fuller study would need the archival files and the *Jat Gazette* directly, and village-level evidence on whose land was actually redeemed.

10. Conclusion

Sir Chhotu Ram's political career offers an important insight into the possibilities and contradictions of agrarian politics in colonial Punjab. Emerging from a rural family familiar with the burden of indebtedness, he transformed his personal understanding of agrarian distress into a formidable political programme and became

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one of the most influential representatives of the cultivating classes in the Punjab legislature. His rise was particularly significant because it demonstrated how the expanding representative institutions of colonial India could be appropriated by a rural political leader to challenge established structures of economic power. Through his legislative interventions, budgetary priorities and association with the Unionist Party, Chhotu Ram sought to reposition the peasantry within the political and administrative framework of the province. His advocacy of rural education, the promotion of village-based industries, the regulation of professional moneylending and the restoration of mortgaged agricultural land constituted substantial interventions in the agrarian economy. These initiatives were not merely legislative achievements; they reflected an attempt to protect the productive resources of the countryside and to establish the cultivator as a more secure and politically consequential figure in colonial society. The enduring popular regard for Chhotu Ram is, therefore, rooted in material interventions that addressed some of the most persistent vulnerabilities of rural life.

Nevertheless, the historical significance of his programme becomes clearer when its achievements are examined alongside its social and political limitations. Chhotu Ram's agrarian vision was framed by a conception of rural society that privileged landholding cultivators and distinguished them from those classified as non-agricultural communities. The colonial state's legal and administrative categorisation of agricultural tribes provided an important institutional foundation for this politics. Although measures intended to protect agricultural land and restrict the operations of moneylenders offered relief to indebted cultivators, their benefits were neither equally distributed nor socially comprehensive. The stronger sections of the cultivating communities were better positioned to utilise the protections and opportunities created by these interventions, while landless labourers and Dalit communities remained largely outside the principal framework of agrarian representation. The distinction between the protection of the peasantry and the transformation of rural society consequently remained unresolved. Chhotu Ram challenged the economic power of professional moneylenders, but his politics did not fundamentally unsettle the unequal social relations within the countryside.

Equally important was the relationship between his agrarian programme and the colonial state. The Unionist Party's political strength rested upon its capacity to organise influential rural interests across communal divisions while maintaining a workable relationship with the provincial government. Chhotu Ram's politics should therefore neither be reduced to an expression of colonial loyalty nor interpreted as an unqualified struggle against colonial authority. He operated within the institutional structures of the Raj, using legislative negotiation, administrative influence and electoral mobilisation to secure concessions for the agrarian constituencies he represented. This position involved a persistent negotiation between the demands of rural society and the political requirements of colonial governance. His programme could challenge entrenched economic interests without necessarily challenging the larger political framework within which those interests operated. Indeed, the stability of the countryside, the protection of agricultural production and the political consolidation of influential cultivating groups could serve both the objectives of the Unionist leadership and the administrative interests of the colonial state.

The significance of Chhotu Ram, therefore, lies precisely in this intersection of reform, representation and accommodation. He was neither an unblemished champion of the entire rural population nor merely an instrument of British authority. He was a politically astute agrarian leader who recognised the possibilities of colonial representative institutions and employed them to advance the material interests of a substantial section of rural society. His achievements were real, but so were the exclusions embedded in his political vision. The distinction between those who owned land and those who worked upon it, between communities recognised as agriculturists and those placed outside that category, and between the protection of property and the redistribution of rural power reveals the boundaries of his agrarian programme.

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His death in 1945 left unresolved many of the questions that had shaped his political career: the indebtedness of cultivators, the security of agricultural land, unequal access to education, the weakness of village industries and the precarious position of those dependent upon agricultural labour. These questions did not disappear with the end of colonial rule; rather, they entered the political and developmental debates of independent India in new forms. A historical assessment of Sir Chhotu Ram must consequently move beyond the familiar language of commemoration and place his career within the wider history of agrarian power, colonial institutions and social inequality. His legacy reminds us that the protection of the peasant was not necessarily equivalent to the emancipation of the countryside. Between the demands of the peasant and the imperatives of the Raj, Chhotu Ram fashioned a distinctive politics that secured meaningful gains while leaving much of rural India's structural inequality intact. It is this combination of achievement, accommodation and exclusion that makes his career indispensable to understanding the political history of colonial Punjab.

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