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Role of Muslim Collaborators in Socio-Economic Transformation of District Gujrat During 1849-1947

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the role of Muslim collaborators in socio-economic and political transformation of district Gujrat under the British rule. It argues that the British government's political control through 'collaboration' significantly influenced District Gujrat's socio-economic transformation from 1849 to 1947. The cooperation of local elites was instrumental in strengthening the British control in Punjab. The case study draws on sources from Punjab Archives Lahore, district records, and official family documents. These sources highlight not only the significance of the District Gujrat in annexation of Punjab but also the role of local collaborators in establishing British rule.

Keywords: collaboration, Gujrat district, Muslim elites, political control, socio-economic transformation

INTRODUCTION

Punjab received special attention from the British colonial government due to its strategic and political significance to the empire. The British adopted the district as the primary administrative unit to implement policies aimed at transforming various sectors, including education, justice, agriculture, social institutions, transportation, and irrigation. By the mid-nineteenth century, colonial policies had fostered a class of rural leaders who collaborated closely with the administration. From the 1860s onward, the British actively cultivated alliances within the rural

population, meticulously identifying influential families and biradris (kinship networks) in each community. These selected individuals served as collaborators for the colonial regime. This dependent class—whose jagirs and privileges were tied to the colonial government—became instrumental in sustaining British rule in Punjab (Ali, 1996: 12). Through these collaborators, the British secured political stability and drove socio-economic transformation. In Gujrat District, the Muslim elite emerged as key supporters of colonial authority.

Studying political control under British rule requires an examination of the foundation of the collaboration network and an explanation of the role of mediators in shaping the politics of District Gujrat. This transformation was rooted in British influence and their model of collaboration (Robinson, 1972, pp.117–142), which functioned as a two-way ‘patron-client relationship’ [It was a structural relationship between the two. The patron-client system can be defined as a mutual arrangement between a person who holds authority, social status, wealth, or another personal resource (the patron) and someone who benefits from their support or influence (the client).] (Gamer, 1982). Consequently, British relied on local elites in the administer the region effectively. This study applies the theory of collaboration to the socio-economic and political transformation of Gujrat District during the colonial period. As Ronald Robinson argues, ‘[the] secret of a successful system from the European standpoint lay in this variety of choices and combinations, for the chances of achieving influence, keeping political control, promoting changes and of containing xenophobic reaction’ (Robinson, 1972, pp.117-142). The British identified influential local elite groups—including village chiefs, landowners, and traders—and secured their loyalty through patronage. In return, these elites supported governance and maintained law and order (Darling, 2017, p.116). The Muslim rural elite played an active role in this collaborative system, serving as honorary magistrates, district board members, and legislative council members. C. A. Bayly analyses the methods and political consequences of colonial control, particularly the role of local elites and their loyalty to the colonial state. Scholars like T. R. Metcalf (on Awadh’s taluqdars), Sarah Ansari (on Sindh’s pirs and Sufis), and Ian Talbot and David Gilmartin (on Punjab’s landed and religious elites) demonstrate how collaboration varied across regions. Their 1980s studies revealed that Punjab’s collaborating elites had a cross-communal composition. (Ansari, 2003; Bayly, 1975; Metcalf, 1979; Seal, 1971).

The British introduced new policies that influenced and shaped the transformation of Gujrat District through a structured political power system administered by the district board. Political power was primarily exercised by Muslim jagirdars. The British established the administrative board in Gujrat District in 1846, creating four municipalities: Gujrat, Jalalpur Jattan, Kunjah, and Dinga. According to the 1921 census, the district had a total population of 745,634, with Muslims constituting 87 percent, while Hindus and Sikhs accounted for 6.62 and 5.99 percent, respectively. No community benefited more from British rule than the Muslims of Gujrat District (Williamson, 1921). Their trade interests were secured, moneylending was protected by civil laws, and they held numerous government

appointments, including provincial darbari positions. This privileged status enhanced their political influence but also led to inter-community competition and conflict (Williamson, 1921). The British managed these tensions through political control to ensure economic and administrative transformation across Punjab's colonial districts. They delegated authority to local elites for both economic and administrative purposes. These collaborators played a crucial role in Gujrat District's development by implementing social and economic reforms while maintaining political stability. The district's historical significance includes being the site of the 1849 Chillianwala War.[The Second Anglo-Sikh War was fought in January 1849 in the Chillianwala region of Punjab (Mandi Bahauddin), located in the Gujrat District. This war, between the British and the Sikhs, resulted in the annexation of Punjab by the British East India Company.] Additionally, the British introduced a 'preferential allotment' system in Gujrat District, allocating 6,000 acres in the Upper Jhelum Canal Colony to individuals who had assisted criminal administration. The British viewed land grants as the most effective incentive to secure local cooperation in crime prevention (Jahangir, 2018).

The literature on political and administrative reforms, particularly the concept of 'collaboration' in colonial Punjab, provides critical insights into understanding British political control in Gujrat District. Ian Talbot offers a detailed examination of the collaborative relationship between the British and local allies to establish control in Punjab. His analysis focuses on British alliances with rural elites, landowners, pirs, and Jat peasants, while highlighting both the nature and limitations of imperial control through these local partnerships for maintaining economic and political stability (Talbot, 1988). David Gilmartin argues that the British exercised their authority as the central organizer and protector of an indigenous kin-based social structure (Gilmartin, 1992, p. 13; Talbot, 2007, p. 4). In contrast, Tahir Mahmood presents a distinct perspective on collaboration politics and military recruitment during colonial rule, using Shahpur District as a case study. He asserts that "collaboration was a dynamic two-way process, rather than, as it is often portrayed, a top-down one-way relationship" (Mahmood, 2016). Ranjit K. Mazumder expands the discourse by analyzing collaboration, military recruitment, and agricultural expansion in Punjab (Mazumder, 2011; Tan, 2005). Hassan Javid investigates this theme through the lens of mutual interests between the landowning class and the British state, emphasizing institutional development processes (Javid, 2011, pp. 337–369). Imran Ali underscores Punjab's strategic importance and its economic development under British rule, particularly through large-scale canal networks in western Punjab. He also traces how this infrastructure amplified local elite power and political development (I. Ali, 1988). Drawing on these works, this study examines administrative systems and political control in Gujrat District."

Local and Municipal Governments

The British colonial government decided to provide Muslims with opportunities in government service and introduced separate electorates in municipal committees. The Gujrat Municipality was established in 1867, and its

structure evolved over time. The committee was responsible for administering municipal taxes and ensuring proper fund utilization (Report of the Colonies Committee, Punjab, 1907; The Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1908). Before the municipal committee's establishment, communities relied on their own communal bodies to advance their interests. Gradually, the committee introduced elections to select its members. In 1918, the Punjab government clarified to the Lahore Municipal Committee that it would not oppose the municipality's authority to elect its non-official president (Choudhry, 2013; The Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1908). The District Committee comprised chief executive officials and leading landowners, with the Deputy Commissioner as its chairman. Since Muslims largely controlled the district administration, the Punjab government ordered the local government department that 'the Assistant Registrar of Cooperative Societies for Gujrat Circle shall cease to be a member of the Gujrat District Board' (Nawaz, 1963; The Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1908; Williamson, 1921). This was essentially a power-sharing measure to consolidate political and administrative control over public works—such as engineering establishments, veterinary hospitals, schools, and roads.

The district of Gujrat was divided into geographic circles, each containing 64 villages per 100 square miles (Williamson, 1916). It was further subdivided into 47 zails across eight regions. The zail system served as an administrative link between local communities and colonial management. The district's population was predominantly rural with minimal variation. Under the collaboration policy, the colonial government delegated significant authority to local collaborators. Initial incentives included land grants and positions in local government to secure the support of influential townsmen. Their participation proved crucial in addressing administrative and financial challenges, particularly in managing municipal and town funds. (I. Ali, 1975; Williamson, 1916)

The colonial administration employed a deliberate strategy to maximize support and goodwill by awarding honorary titles and prizes to notable Gujrat elites. Choudhary Hussain Khan Warraich of Hariawala served as both divisional darbari and an 'assessor' in the Session House of Gujrat, presiding over 302 cases. The nature and objectives of such appointments were meticulously outlined in an official notification letter addressed to Hussain Khan, which explicitly maintained.

It gives me great pleasure to record that I found him to be an assessor of exceptional ability. He took keen interest and was taking notes of the evidence recorded. At the close of the trial, he delivered his opinion in a very impressive manner and was anxious to support the same by argument some of which he advanced in a very able manner. If assessor were all as intelligent and as qualified as Ch. Hussain Khan, am I thinking the session judges would find their task much facilitated. (Khan, 2005)

Session judges made final decisions based on assessors' recommendations (Khan, 2005). The introduction of zaildars, village headmen, municipal committee members, and honorary magistrate boards into local administration represented a deliberate government effort to strengthen political control by connecting district

administration more effectively with Gujrat's local population. Their influence often extended beyond zail boundaries. Through incentives and revenue-free grants, these local leaders became integral to the district administration. In 1890, the Deputy Commissioner declared that 'in revising zail boundaries during settlement, preference should be given to zaildars who owned land.' This policy maintained that wealthier zaildars could exercise greater governmental influence (Fox, 1985; Government of India, 1902). This official approach is exemplified by the certificate awarded to Raja Sultan Khan, a jagirdar of Pothi, which states.

This certificate is presented to Raja Sultan Khan Jagirdar Pothi by order of the honourable the lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab, in recognition of the good and willing service he rendered in the census operations of 1891, and as a mark of approbation. (Maclagan, 1891)

Power Politics Through Collaborators

The British policy for structuring power in the local administration of Gujrat District was not fundamentally different from that in the rest of India. However, certain unique characteristics emerged due to local socioeconomic and cultural patterns. This highlights the importance of examining previously undiscussed aspects of power politics in Gujrat. Institutionalized authority in developing nations has popularized concepts like 'power politics.' These political tactics represent a phenomenon of power personalization, often rooted in socioeconomic underdevelopment. Consequently, unfair resource distribution occurs, fostering the rise of various power elites. Multiple social groups - including kinship networks, caste systems, and biradaris - actively shape and regulate this power dynamic. (Talbot, 1988, p.17)

The primary task of colonial administration - what Ronald Robinson called its 'true genius' - 'was to identify and win local allies to its side.' (Robinson, 1972, pp.117-142) This was accomplished through liberal patronage distribution and economic/agrarian policies favouring native social groups whose support proved essential for maintaining order. These groups voluntarily became collaborators, as the arrangement enhanced their influence within rural client networks. Talbot argued that the British carefully considered the political and social significance of tribal and kinship groups, actively working to strengthen them. (Talbot, 1988, p.17) Mahmood maintained that beyond patronage, the British political control system in Punjab relied on mediatory politics, which institutionalized civil-military cooperation - a system where both departments worked in concert. (Mahmood, 2016, p.1474-1500)

Under the Punjab District Boards Act of 1883, the British government appointed Khan Bahadur Chaudhry Sultan Ahmed, a retired Deputy Commissioner from Hariyawala, as a member of the Gujrat District Board. In recognition of his loyalty and service, the British awarded him the title of Khan Sahib. (Commissioner of Rawalpindi division, 1926) This strategy of administrative control through collaboration with local elites is meticulously documented in the following official correspondence.

I am directed to forward herewith, for communication to the leading gentlemen of your division, a copy of a letter from the secretary to the government of India's, expressing the part of Governor-General in council his appreciation of the loyal feeling shown by the chief and leading men of the Punjab on the occasion of the recent assemblage at Rawalpindi. The portion of the India letter which bears directly on the excellent attitude observed by the native chiefs of the province has been communicated to them through their Motamids in attendance on the government. (Letter from the Secretary to the Government of India, 1885)

This cooperative relationship between the British government and the Muslim elite reveals the traditional collaborative networks in Gujrat District. Official correspondence, including letters and certificates, demonstrates the British government's appreciation for the district's prominent leaders and their exemplary service. These documents highlight both ceremonial recognition and material connections - particularly through land grants in areas like the Jhelum Canal Colony - that strengthened ties between the colonial administration and its rural allies.

Collaboration emerged as a product of the prevailing socioeconomic and political conditions. British patronage enhanced the influence and power of local collaborators, who were motivated to elevate their social standing through this system. (M. Ali, 1996, p.12)

Muslim Collaborators

Several collaborators played vital roles in the socioeconomic and political transformation of Gujrat District. Nawab Sir Fazal Ali, commonly known as Sultan Ali, was the chief of Ajnala village in Gujrat during the 1857 War. He supported British troops with his own men against Jammu raiders. In recognition of his services, the British government granted him extensive revenue-free lands. His son, Fazl-e-Ali, also contributed significantly to the district's development. Appointed honorary magistrate in 1900, he received the title 'Khan Bahadur' in 1906. The British later conferred upon him the titles 'Sir' and 'Nawab.' He established cooperative societies and a bank to support local farmers, serving as president of Gujrat District's Central Cooperative Bank and as Chairman of the District Board from 1931 to 1942. In 1914, he founded the Zamindar Educational Society, through which he established Zamindar High School (1915) and Zamindar College (1936). His remarkable services earned him the nickname 'Sir Syed of Punjab.' He also served as a member of the Punjab Legislative Assembly and as a permanent member of the Governor's Council. (Rahi, 2011; Rose, 1990). Chaudhry Hussain Khan Warraich was another influential British collaborator in Gujrat. Born in 1886 in Hariawala, Gujrat, he was the son of Chaudhry Muhammad Hayat Khan. (Meer, 2002, p.222). Hussain maintained a cordial relationship with Sir Chotu Ram and co-founded the All India Jat Sabha to protect Jat community interests. In 1921, he was appointed divisional darbari at the Lahore Darbar. His connections and service to the British government are documented in the following 1916 certificate.

The Hussain Khan of hariawala Gujrat district by order of this excellence the Commander in Chief in India, in recognition of service he rendered in assisting to

obtain recruits for the Indian Army during the Great War and as a mark of approbation, a silver watch is also presented. (Vohra, 1986, pp.336-343)

Raja Muhammad Khan Chib Rais of Rajgaan Pothi Jaaghiir,[Rajgan Pothi Jagir descended from Raja Mil Khan II, son of Raja Shadab Khan (Baba Shadi Shaheed). Raja Muhammad Khan Chib Rais of Pothi belonged to the Chib clan, an ancient Rajput community settled along the Jhelum River amidst small mountain ranges. The Chibs controlled fifty-one predominantly Muslim villages, while the Hindu Chibs of Kangra and Jammu maintained their traditional faith.] was another British collaborator from Gujrat. The Chibs, an ancient Rajput tribe, were settled throughout the low hills between the Jhelum and Beas rivers in Gujrat District. His father, Sultan Khan Rais Pothi, was a nobleman from the Chib tribe who received a jagir worth Rs. 1692 and the title Khan Bahadur from the British government in recognition of his services during the 1857 War (Rahi, 2011). After his death in 1902, his son Raja Muhammad Khan continued supporting British rule. He served as provincial darbari, while his brother held the position of honorary magistrate in Sialkot. For his support during World War I, Raja Muhammad Khan was awarded a sanad (certificate) that affirmed.

This sanad is presented by the Punjab Government to Raja Muhammad Khan jagirdar of pothi Gujrat in recognition of valuable services rendered during the Great War (1914-1918). (Khan, 2005)

Socio-Economic Transformation

The socioeconomic transformation of Gujrat District under British rule was grounded in patron-client relationships. British interests relied heavily on Muslim collaborators, who played a pivotal role in the district's development. The recruitment of soldiers for the British Indian Army from Gujrat during World War I represents the first significant aspect of this collaboration. The Warraich, a Muslim Jat clan predominant in Gujrat tehsil, were most affected by this recruitment process (Williamson, 1921). During 1917-1918, when recruitment efforts intensified, the Warraich initially resisted enlistment - likely because their irrigated lands required more labourers than the rain-fed (barani) lands of other tribes. However, they ultimately provided their quota of recruits (Williamson, 1921, p.44). This dynamic elevated the local Muslim landlord class as key collaborators, enabling them to dominate the region's politics.

Most settlers for the Jhelum Colony were selected from Shahpur, Gujrat, and Gujranwala districts, chosen primarily from influential land-owning families such as lambardars, pattidars, and zaildars. These settlers were also tasked with maintaining law and order in the colony. The rural control system featured a well-organized hierarchy of authority and influence. The British strategically used land grants and honorary official positions to strengthen alliances with rural elites in the fertile Upper Jhelum Canal Colony region. (I. Ali, 1988; Gilmartin David, 1992; Talbot, 1988, 1996, 2007; Talbot & Thandi, 2004). In addition to land allocations, they awarded honorary positions and titles to prominent Muslim collaborators from Gujrat District, including Nawab Sir Fazal Ali and Raja Muhammad Khan. Official

British records certified in 1924 that Raja Muhammad Khan Sahib of Pothi belonged to the category of sardars and jagirdars specified in Entry 6(d) of Schedule I to the Indian Arms Rules.[Under Punjab Government Notification No. 10679 dated 6 April 1920, the Lieutenant-Governor was pleased to direct that all provincial darbaris be classified as 'Great Sardars and Jagirdars' of Punjab for the purposes of Schedule I, Item 6(d) of the Arms Rules, 1920.]

CONCLUSION

This study examines the pivotal role of Muslim collaborators in shaping Gujrat's socioeconomic and political transformation under British rule. These elites facilitated British administration through recruitment, education, transportation, justice, and irrigation systems, establishing Gujrat as a crucial military recruitment hub. By the early 20th century, the district's strategic significance had grown substantially, with colonial authorities increasingly dependent on Muslim elites and major landowners for governance. The collaborative dynamic created mutual benefits - rural families maintained strong colonial connections while gaining economic advantages through patronage networks. This symbiotic relationship, characterized by land grants and economic privileges in exchange for political support, drove significant transformation. A fundamental socioeconomic shift occurred as traditional river-based commerce gave way to railway infrastructure development. Key figures including Chaudhry Hussain Khan Warraich, Nawab Fazal Ali Gujjar, and Raja Muhammad Khan exemplified this collaboration, their influence producing enduring structural changes. The study ultimately demonstrates how British policies, enabled by local elite participation, reconfigured Gujrat's social fabric through calculated political control and strategic alliance-building.

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Notes

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¹It was a structural relationship between the two. The patron-client system can be defined as a mutual arrangement between a person who holds authority, social status, wealth, or another personal resource (the patron) and someone who benefits from their support or influence (the client).

²The Second Anglo-Sikh War was fought in January 1849 in the Chillianwala region of Punjab (Mandi Bahauddin), located in the Gujrat District. This war, between the British and the Sikhs, resulted in the annexation of Punjab by the British East India Company.

³Rajgan Pothi Jagir descended from Raja Mil Khan II, son of Raja Shadab Khan (Baba Shadi Shaheed). Raja Muhammad Khan Chib Rais of Pothi belonged to the Chib clan, an ancient Rajput community settled along the Jhelum River amidst small mountain ranges. The Chibs controlled fifty-one predominantly Muslim villages, while the Hindu Chibs of Kangra and Jammu maintained their traditional faith.

⁴Under Punjab Government Notification No. 10679 dated 6 April 1920, the Lieutenant-Governor was pleased to direct that all provincial darbaris be classified as 'Great Sardars and Jagirdars' of Punjab for the purposes of Schedule I, Item 6(d) of the Arms Rules, 1920.