

Fazl-i-Husain and the Muslims of British Punjab

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ABSTRACT

Fazl-i-Husain, transformed the Punjab into a modern Muslim province. He changed the infrastructure of development from grassroots level and introduced projects for the development of the rural community. He took advantages from the aftershocks of the World War-I. The people of the land of the five rivers supported the British when they needed the young blood and fresh force from the Punjab. That was the time for Fazl-i-Husain to materialize his ideas. Following the footsteps of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (the father of the modern Muslim India), he opted the policy of cooperation with the British and formed a platform in the name of 'Rural Block' to protect the rights of rural community. It proved successful experience to form 'Rural Party' which became the Punjab National Unionist Party in 1923. Taking full advantage from the Lucknow Pact (the symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity), he reserved the quota of seats in all the departments. He guided the Muslim community in a crucial period of its time in the political history of India. As a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council from 1930-35, he materially prepared the

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basic forces which ultimately led to the establishment of Pakistan.

Introduction

In the history of Indian subcontinent and particularly in Punjab, Sir Mian Fazl-i-Husain is a person who held a remarkable place in the India's political and administrative history. He was a figure who materialized the dream of bringing revolutionary changes in the educational, economic, political and social life of the Punjab. Belonged to an influential Punjabi family of Rajput Bhatti clan, he was born in 1877. His father Sir Mian Muhammad Bukhsh served as Extra Assistant Commissioner during the British Raj. After graduating from the Government College, Lahore in 1897, he went to Britain for higher studies and graduated in 1901 from the Christ's College, Cambridge. In the same year upon returning to Punjab, he started practicing law in Sialkot and then in Lahore till 1920. Meanwhile, he also joined the Indian National Congress and was elected as member of the Punjab Legislative Council. He was great proponent of the Indian Muslims to participate in the political and administrative affairs of India. He, later on, parted his ways from the Indian National Congress for the reasons that the non-cooperation movement was against the interests of common people as they were the major losers to be affected by the movement. In his view, education was the main area that was suffering because of the non-cooperation movement of the Congress. After the launch of Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms in India, Sir Fazl-i-Husain was elected as Muslim Landowners' representative in the Punjab Legislative Council in 1920.¹ In the meantime, he emerged at significant political stature in Punjab and served as minister of education, health and of local government.

1 Muhammad Khurshid, *Feudal Ascendancy and the Role of Sir Fazl-i-Husain in the Punjab Politics (1901-1936)* (Lahore: National Book Foundation, 2014), 319-21.

Meanwhile, Sir Chottu Ram, who was also an activist who advocated rights of the peasants in Punjab, was close acquaintance of Sir Fazl-i-Husain. They both formed the Unionist Party together in 1923. The Unionist Party was basically formed to serve and safeguard the interests of the agriculturists of the Punjab besides creating political consciousness among common masses. The party mainly was a communal union of Hindu and Muslim agriculturist class. The Unionist Party mainly focused on defending the interests of the landlords of Punjab in the British Court. The Unionist group consisted of 30 members—24 Muslim landlords and 6 Hindu Jatts—mainly focusing on the agenda of non-communal politics. The status of Punjab was predominantly of an agricultural province greatly influenced by the politics of the landed aristocracy, as the majority of Muslim population was under the sentiment of being marginalized.²

Serving Muslim Community

Sir Mian Fazl-i-Husain initially held the communal harmony at high esteem as he believed that the Indian National Congress represented the interest of Hindus and the Muslim League focused mainly on securing the interest of Muslim community. There was no other political entity that could think and strive for the common people, regardless of their religious belief and social status. Particularly, the people of Punjab who mostly consisted of agriculturist class where peasants and the landowners had common interests and had strong affiliations to the Punjabi identity.³ The Muslim League and the Congress thus, were regarded irrelevant to the political discourse and dynamics of the Punjab. Since both political parties had forged their agendas around community politics at large, therefore, the gap in the political

2 Balbir Singh, *Sir Chhotu Ram - A Saga of Inspirational Leadership* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting India, 2009), 71-73.

3 Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 34-36.

arena of Punjab was benign for the Unionist Party that greatly accommodated the influential political figures like Sir Fazl-i-Husain and Sir Chottu Ram. Fazl-i-Husain already had great say in the imperial court because of his family affiliation to the royal court and the loyalty to the British Raj. The family of Sir Muhammad Bukhsh was also a great landowner besides having strong tribal connection with the Rajput Bhatti tribe, therefore, the response of the people of Punjab was exceptionally outstanding for the newly launched Unionist Party.

Likewise, Chottu Ram, who had been a staunch campaigner of the peasants rights' held similar views with Fazl-i-Husain. In fact, the two figures significantly pledged greater political and social support from Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities of Punjab. The political patronage of the colonial rule for the Unionist Party was another reason that never let any other political power enter into the domain of Punjab politics.

All the members of the Unionist Party primarily belonged to the agricultural class, thus for them safeguarding the interests of agriculturists was top priority.⁴ No other political party was able to step in the Punjab's political arena because none was capable of securing 54 percent of seats on communal basis alone in order to form its unanimous government in the Punjab. It was the political wisdom of Unionist leadership that they had a foresight of gathering the support of all communities of the Punjab for the Unionist Party. The party was greatly hailed by the common masses of Punjab as it had no discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, social class or the religious affiliations, but what was important to belong to the agricultural background of Punjab. Moreover, the Unionist Party also represented the sentiments of the Punjabi people who by the time were not

4 Khursheed Kamal Aziz, *Britain and Muslim India: A Study of British Public Opinion Vis-a-Vis The Development of Muslim Nationalism In India, 1857-1947*, 1st ed. (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1963), 203-204.

pleased to the idea of division of Punjab on the communal basis. There was enormous opposition from the Unionist Party against Jinnah's views of dividing Punjab in the wake of separation of India to form a separate independent state for the Muslims of subcontinent. Fazl-i-Husain believed in the communal harmony, and was apprehensive that both the political parties of India i.e. the Congress and the Muslim League were fuelling religious and communal sentiments for their political interest and gains.⁵

Educational Services of Sir Fazl-i-Husain

In general, Fazl-i-Husain ran the Education Ministry on the similar patterns of conservative style of nation-building like the Congress. His visionary leadership had natural capabilities combined with commitment and the thorough insight into every minor and major detail that was centred on the betterment of common people. His attention was not merely focused on the wellbeing of middle or agriculturist class but it was for all from poor to rich and peasant to landowner and educated to uneducated.

The colonial administration was spending only two Anna per head on the education of the Indian people whereas civilized nations like the United States, Japan and England were spending more than eight rupees in a year on the education of their single person that auxiliary boosted the ratio of educated people in their countries marking them at 93 percent, 95 percent and 98 percent, respectively. The huge gap of government's educational expenditure allocations in India showed the ignorance of paying attention towards the education of people and it seriously undermined the nation building process in the country.

In a population of 20.3 million, hardly two percent of the Punjab's population was getting education. Most of these

5 Sunil Khilnani, Vikram Raghavan and Arun K Thiruvengadam, *Comparative Constitutionalism in South Asia*, 1st ed. (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2013), 321-27.

students were assembled in the primary or lowest classes where there was hardly any opportunity for them to further reach to the advance levels. People were so backward that the illiteracy in Punjab had reached at the disquieting levels. There was a dire need for someone to address the issues of the education of the people of Punjab in true letter and spirit. Realizing the fact that the education was a crucial area and only ground that could change the destiny of the people of India, Fazl-i-Husain prioritized the areas of his education programme with main focus on the allocation of significant funds, expanding the schools and educational institutions network to every nook and corner of Punjab. The efficiency and the quality were other principles to maintain and manage the educational standards.⁶

Sir Fazl-i-Husain was enthusiastic about changing the fate of nation through education. He had great support of his Council and successfully sowed the seed of sensitizing the people about importance of education. His expert team included Sir George Anderson, who was Director of the Public Instruction, worked closely with the guidance and confidence of Sir Fazl-i-Husain. It was heartening for him to successfully achieve the goals of education for the people of Punjab. Prior to this, the education department was merely confined to pay heed on urban areas with Anglo-Vernacular. Education was now guided towards the primary education in the rural areas. The students were granted financial aid covering almost 50 to 90 percent of their educational expenses based on the merits of their grades. Such measures encouraged and expanded with the double than the previously number of students of secondary and university education whereas the effects on primary education were manifold by increased number of enrolments of the students 10 times more than before Sir Fazl-i-Husain's assumption of charge as Education Minister. Parents were

6 Jagdish Chand, *Education in India during British Period* (Delhi: Anshah Publication House, 2007), 113-14.

sensitized with the importance of education and the primary schools saw unparalleled registration of children and the educational programme of Sir Fazl-i-Husain were reciprocated with unprecedented score.⁷

The Muslims of Punjab and India were far behind in education as compared to other communities, but Sir Fazl-i-Husain's efforts and enthusiasm pressed them forward to educate their boys and girls and overcome their past deficiencies so that they would become able to secure prestigious positions in the colonial administration. A remarkable amount of budget was allocated under his Educational Reform Program and the result was eminent that within a period of six years, the Punjab was ranked as one of the most advanced and educated provinces of the British India.

In 1926, when Sir Fazl-i-Husain ceased to be the Minister of Education, Punjab ranked higher than any other province of India particularly in the primary compulsory education which scored double as compared to the pupils of other provinces. His Educational Reforms Program was not confined within the boundaries of primary education rather it also prioritized the areas of adult education to give a chance to those who were ignored by the previous government and could not get opportunity of education. The results of Sir Fazl's struggle were so prominent that the Educational Commissioner of Government of India termed the Punjab as an extensive province for the adult education as no other province of the country was standing equal to break the illiteracy of the people. Before his taking the charge of ministry, the Muslims of the India and Punjab were passing through eras of disappointment and despair as they stood far behind in education than the other communities. In his special measures for the education of Muslims of Punjab, he took numerous initiatives including award of scholarships to the

7 Mian Fazl i Husain and Azim Husain, *Mian Fazl-i-Husain* (Lahore: Pakistan: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1993), 156-58.

military families and the Muslims were encouraged to enter Anglo-Vernacular schools where they were awarded scholarships. In the Muslim populated areas, he appointed teachers and headmasters from the Muslim community in order to address the sensitivity of the conservative Muslims.⁸

The religious bodies were also taken on board to make them equal stakeholders and the organizations like the Anjuman-e-Himayat-i-Islam was also supported through grants to expand its educational institutions. Within a short period of two years, the number of Muslim students in educational institutions raised to 42.3 percent whereas the Hindus hardly stood at 20 percent. Sir Fazl-i-Husain urged upon Muslims to come out of obsolete patterns of reaction against the modern education. He held the view that if Muslims were stuck to such ideas they would never realize his struggle for their interest and betterment. In spite of his clear stance over communal harmony in Punjab, he was great supporter of the wellbeing of Muslims of Punjab. His struggle was to create political consciousness in the Muslims through education and participation in the affairs of the government. His efforts rendered great support to the educated Muslims of India to become part of the prestigious civil services of the country. The previous quota of 40 percent was enhanced to the 50 percent for the Muslims because of his struggle.⁹

Social and Economic Services to Muslim Community

Sir Fazl-i-Husain considered that the wellbeing of the peasants was only possible through increased production and maximum yield of their fields. The country being mainly agricultural, he was aware of the economic stability which was closely related to the better economic policies. For the reason of better yield of crops, guidance to peasants for land

8 James Alexander Richey, *Grants-in-Aid to Schools in British India*, (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India, 1923), 77.

9 Kenneth W. Jones, *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 181-83.

cultivation and veterinary production he emphasized for the agricultural research through Imperial Council of Agricultural Research. The Research Council provided information to the house and acted as marketing section for organizing local agriculture products for the external market and assessment of the demand of products in the domestic and international markets. In addition, a scheme was formulated to involve trade agents for the supply of domestic production to the external markets. Fazl-i-Husain stressed over the need of government's patronage and encouragement to the peasant class.¹⁰

Though the efforts were well implemented yet the results could not be achieved to resolve the issues of the Indian peasants due to the economic depression of 1931 which gradually dragged the agricultural products at the record low price levels. Sir Fazl-i-Husain was eager to address the problems and for it he called a Crop Planning Conference in 1934 to formulate a comprehensive plan to decide about the prospects of high demand crops and their cultivation through introduction of modern scientific agricultural machinery. The conference warned the agriculturists of further increase of the rice and wheat crops as the growth of such commodities could further devalue the production price. It rather suggested that the linseed being high demand crop can benefit the landowners and the peasants, therefore, over two million acre of agricultural land should be devoted for the linseed production that would benefit the people without dragging the price of other commodities to further low.

Medical Reforms

The medical field was also uplifted during the tenure of Sir Fazl-i-Husain's joining of Viceroy's Council and it was decided that the All India Medical Council was essential for the legislation of the medical education and practice in the country. In 1929, the provincial representatives decided

10 Richard Carr and Bradley W Hart, *The Global 1920s: Politics, Economics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2016), 46.

against the idea of such Council and it was later on also decided by the General Medical Council of the Great Britain for recognizing the award of degrees by the Indian medical colleges and universities. Sir Fazl-i-Husain with his firm efforts paved way for the conference of provincial representatives which successfully resulted in the consent of the representatives to the idea of creating All India Medical Council that was highly needed for addressing the concerns of medical awarding institutions and practitioners. Prior to that there were provisional medical councils functioning at the local standards of medical education. There was no uniform medical council at the national level which caused hindrance in the recognition of the medical degrees and the practice. The Indian students were faced with challenges as they had to seek higher qualification from the British medical universities.

Fazl-i-Husain successfully secured the assent of the Council; however, the Secretary of State opposed the idea on the point that there was no mechanism of recognition of the medical degrees awarded by the British universities. In fact, there was no room for the medical practitioners in India who qualify and secure their medical degrees from the British universities. Fazl-i-Husain was aware of the repercussions that the permission of practice and acceptance of British qualified medical professionals could become drastic move since it enabled the Indian Medical Council for the reciprocities to counter the moves of General Medical Council of Great Britain. Sir Fazl-i-Husain also secured the consent of the Secretary of State on the genuine reasons that the medical profession in India would face serious drawbacks if the Indian Medical Council was not let function well.¹¹ His firm commitment ultimately resulted in the promulgation and passing of the Indian Medical Council Act to set a body comprising representatives from medical

11 Imran Ali, *The Punjab Under Imperialism, 1885-1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 160-63.

universities, professionals and the local government. The Bill effectively paved the way for enabling the medical professionals and institutions work efficiently and attracted a number of medical scholars and experts from abroad.¹²

Conclusion

The strong political and family background along with his charismatic personality enabled Sir Mian Fazl-i-Husain to play an extraordinary role in the political, social, economic and administrative fields of India. He rendered all his services regardless of religious or class affiliations. India being an agricultural country, the uplift of peasants and the agriculturist class was reflected as his top priority as it in turn promised the economic wellbeing of the society. The education was only means to him that could change the destiny of the masses. He promoted primary compulsory education during his tenure as Education Minister and took literacy of Punjab at the record levels that any other province in the British India could dream of. He supported poor students for middle and higher education through studentships and scholarships at secondary and university levels and sensitized the parents for the importance of education in the lives of their children.

Sir Fazl-i-Husain was pioneer in setting up a functional All India Medical Council that greatly helped the medical students and the practitioners alike. Their degrees were recognized and they were able to easily practice their medical profession in every nook and corner of India without any limitations of provincial boundaries. Expert medical professionals and teachers were attracted to come and join medical education and profession in the country.

The people of Punjab gained unprecedented political consciousness during his political struggle and

12 Partha Sirathi Gupta, *Power, Politics and the People: Studies in British Imperialism and Indian Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 481-83.

establishment of the Unionist Party that never let any other political entity divide the people of Punjab in the name of religion, caste or creed. His services equally benefitted Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs of India in general and Punjab in particular.

In the political arena of Punjab, Sir Fazl-i-Husain stood as one of the highly influential political figures capable of challenging any major Indian political party for contestation in Punjab. He advocated the cross communal political manifesto through Unionist Party that equally served the interest of everyone living in the Punjab. His party was formed on secular grounds that supported the colonial cause besides safeguarding the rights of common people of Punjab in the imperial administration. The richness of traditions and culture of Punjab left very less contemplation for the Indian National Congress and the All India Muslim League to set their foot in this agricultural and rural province of India. For both political powers of India, it was really difficult to penetrate in the political arena of Punjab in the lifetime of Sir Mian Fazl-i-Husain.