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Consent by Concession: Paternalism and the Management of Dissent in the Chenab Canal Colony

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Abstract **Original Research Article**

Punjab came under British colonial rule in the mid-nineteenth century after the Second Anglo-Sikh War of 1849. The colonial administration was quick to recognise the province's strategic and economic importance. Between 1885 and 1940 the British constructed nine canal colonies in western Punjab, converting arid and semi-arid wasteland into one of South Asia's most productive agricultural tracts. This was also the world's largest contiguous network of irrigation canals. Official narrative always framed this as a benevolent, paternalistic agrarian improvement. This paper tests that rhetoric against the colonial state's own administrative record for the Chenab Colony. Chenab Colony was the first and largest of the nine canal colonies. This study focuses on the Settlement Officer's 1915 Final Report, the 1904 Gazetteer of the Chenab Colony, the Punjab Colony Manual, and the Colonization of Government Lands Act of 1912, and reading it alongside the existing historiography of Imran Ali, Neeladri Bhattacharya, and Indu Agnihotri. It finds that colonist selection, tenurial conditions, succession rules, and the state's own memory of the 1907 Colony Bill agitation reveal an administration that managed consent as cautiously as it managed land and water. Any concessions like, full proprietary rights, a more favourable law of succession, statutory limits on fines, were granted only once authority was directly contested between 1907 and 1912, and organised grievance was officially read at the time as externally manufactured disloyalty rather than engaged as legitimate. Paternalism and extraction, the paper argues, were not opposed currents in colonial Punjab but two faces of one administrative project, and the 1912 Act that is usually read as a reform was, on this evidence, paternalism's most effective instrument of control.

Keywords: Colonial Punjab, canal colonies, Chenab Colony, paternalism, social engineering, agrarian settlement, Colonization Act 1912, 1907 disturbances.

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INTRODUCTION

The word "Punjab" derives from the Persian *panj* (five) and *ab* (water), the land of five rivers, the Jhelum, the Ravi, the Beas, the Sutlej and the Chenab (Nijjar, 1996). The province lies between the Himalayan ranges to the north and northeast, the Salt Range bordering Afghanistan to the northwest, and Sindh and Rajputana to the south, its alluvial plain divided by its rivers into five doabs. On the eve of British annexation in 1849 this was a province of stark regional contrast. It had a flourishing, densely settled centre, and a sparsely populated, arid west given over largely to pastoralism (Ali, 1988). The British annexed Punjab in 1849 after defeating Ranjit Singh's Sikh Empire, and retained rather than displaced the erstwhile landed elite. The British intended to treat them as intermediaries between state and people. This developed a partnership that was tested, and confirmed, when Punjab supplied the British with logistical and manpower support during the uprising of 1857 (Ali, 1988). The administrative style that followed has been described by Bhattacharya (2019) as an ideology of 'masculine paternalism.' This school of thought can be traced to Henry Lawrence's 1846 fictional account of an English horseman, Bellasis, besting an accomplished Sikh rider on his way to Ranjit Singh's court. This reflected the ingrained belief that horsemanship stood for capacity to rule, and rule was imagined as paternal authority earned through restless, visible activity e.g., through surveying, mapping, and reordering the lives of the colonised. Out of this ideology grew the Punjab School of administration, eager above all to secure a frontier province whose loyalty and agricultural surplus would ensure the empire's longevity.

That anxiety produced two major interventionist projects. The first was a body of land

legislation, most notably the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900, that divided the rural population into legally consequential ‘agricultural’ and ‘non-agricultural’ castes and tribes. This enabled the state to keep land in the hands of those classes who were judged loyal (Barrier, 1966). The second, and the subject of this paper, was direct state involvement in irrigation and land development through the canal colonies project. Between 1885 and 1940 nine canal colonies were established in the inter-fluvial tracts of western Punjab (Table 1). The irrigated area served by the major canals grew from 1,423,000 acres in 1887 to 10,402,000 acres in 1921, by which date the total sown area in the province stood at 31,026,000 acres, roughly 34 percent of it under canal irrigation and by 1939 that figure had risen to 47 percent (Darling, 1928; Islam, 1997). Between 1885 and 1947 canal-irrigated area in Punjab as a whole grew roughly fourfold, from about 3,000,000 to 14,000,000 acres (Talbot, 1988). Over a million Punjabis, coming mostly from the congested central districts, were resettled on this land (Ali, 1988).

Table 1: The nine Punjab canal colonies

Colony	Period	Doab	District	Area (acres)
Sidhnai	1886–88	Bari	Multan	250,000
Sohag Para	1886–88	Bari	Montgomery	86,300
Chenab	1892–1905, 1926–30	Rechna	Gujranwala, Jhang, Lyallpur, Lahore, Sheikhupura	1,824,745
Chunian	1896–98, 1904–05	Bari	Lahore	102,500
Jhelum	1902–06	Jech	Shahpur, Jhang	540,000
Lower Bari Doab	1914–24	Bari	Montgomery, Multan	1,192,000
Upper Chenab	1915–19	Rechna	Gujranwala, Sialkot, Sheikhupura	78,800
Upper Jhelum	1916–21	Jech	Gujrat	42,300
Nili Bar	1916–40	Bari	Montgomery, Multan	1,650,000

The Chenab Colony, settled between 1892 and 1906 (with later extensions to 1930), was the first sustained colonisation effort in west Punjab. With over 1.8 million acres, it was also the largest of the nine canal colonies. Ali (1988) and Bhattacharya (2019) have given this process its standard historiographical reading. According to them, the colonies were instruments of political entrenchment, which were designed to anchor a rural elite’s loyalty to the Crown. Contrary to the official paternalistic narrative, the project was geared to discipline a rapidly transformed agrarian world into the categories of settled village, demarcated field, market towns and the registered tenant, all of which required colonial rule. This paper does not contest this reading. It asks instead how far this survives contact with the colonial state’s own administrative record for the one colony that documented itself most extensively, between 1892 and 1912. Also how and where the gap between the colonial state’s paternalist rhetoric and its practical management of land, people, and dissent becomes visible in the state’s own words.

METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on four colonial administrative sources, none of which have been seriously dealt with in the scholarship. The *Gazetteer of the Chenab Colony, 1904* (Government of Punjab, 1904) is an official compendium compiled while colonisation was still under way. It records the names of the Colonization Officers responsible for settlement and the local memory of their administration. The *Final Report on the Chenab Colony Settlement* (Dobson, 1915), written by the Settlement Officer E. H. Dobson at the close of the colonisation process. This report represents the most comprehensive single account of how the colony was planned, populated, and governed, including the administration’s own narrative of the 1907 crisis. The *Punjab Colony Manual* (Wace, 1933) lists the actual statements of settlement conditions and the lease forms issued to land grantees. The *Colonization of Government Lands (Punjab) Act, 1912* (Punjab, 1912) supplies the statutory framework that resulted from the crisis of 1907. These are state documents, written by and for the administration; they are read here not as neutral statistics but as evidence of how the colonial state described, justified, and adjusted its own conduct. The analysis is confined to the Chenab Colony and should not be read as a claim about the other eight. The study in this way offers a close case study against which the broader secondary literature, Ali (1988), Bhattacharya (2019), Agnihotri (1996), can be tested.

Selecting the colonists

Dobson’s *Report* identifies three classes of peasant land grantees. Primarily the immigrants were drawn from the congested central and eastern districts of Ambala, Ludhiana, Jullundur, Amritsar, Gujrat, Lahore, Hoshiarpur, Gurdaspur and Sialkot. These immigrants were selected by district officers, who gave preference to ‘hereditary landowners, practically acquainted with agriculture, of known skill and industry.’ The nomads of the west, the aboriginal pastoralists of the Bar known as Janglis, were selected separately by the Colonization Officer. Dobson admits this was ‘a highly invidious task’ in the absence of documentary proof, with grazing-tax receipts, land-revenue records, and even criminal records ‘adduced as evidence of Jangli origin,’ supported only by the ‘dubious oral testimony of local notables,’ so much

so that, in his words, officers 'erred deliberately on the side of generosity' in doubtful cases. A third class, Hitharis, were hereditary riverain landowners compensated with colony grants for the loss of *sailab* land, tenants, and grazing grounds to the canal itself (Dobson, 1915).

The 1904 *Gazetteer* credits this work to named officers: Mr. E. D. Maclagan, who began the substantive colonisation of the Rakh Branch in February 1892; Captain (later Major) F. Popham Young; Chaudhri Aurangzeb Khan, who rose from Assistant Colonization Officer to a senior post in the apparatus he had helped build; and Lala Pindi Das, Tahsildar of Lyallpur. Within a decade or so, the colonial state through its canal colonies project became all-prevasive in this part of Punjab. A vernacular ballad recorded in the *Gazetteer*, sung by a blind local poet on Popham Young's departure from the colony in 1899, addresses Aurangzeb Khan as a 'Raja'. This is a small but telling evidence of how thoroughly the colonisation apparatus had become entangled with locally legible idioms of authority (Government of Punjab, 1904).

The resulting demography

The census figures reported by Dobson for the Chenab Colony's settled population show no single dominant group, instead it showed a carefully engineered mosaic (Table 2). Jat Hindus, together with Jat Musalmans (12.31 per cent) and Arains (10.7 per cent), formed the immigrant agricultural core that the colonisation scheme was designed to reward. The various Jangli sub-groups, like the Kharrals, Wattus, Chaddhars, Khichis, and miscellaneous others, together accounted for roughly a fifth of the recorded population. These along with Balochis, who stood at 5.25 per cent, formed a substantial minority. In contrast to the popular belief that they were excluded, these groups were absorbed as grantees through the very attestation process Dobson himself called invidious. Of the nomads who initially resisted colonisation by harassing the new settlers, Dobson records that they ultimately, in his words, 'ma[de] a virtue of necessity' and 'vindicated the confident hope of the Colony officers that they would forswear their evil ways and develop into useful citizens' (Dobson, 1915). This sentence does as much to describe the administration's self-image as it does the nomads themselves.

Table 2: Composition of the Chenab Colony population by selected caste/tribe groups, as recorded by Dobson (1915)

Group	Share of population (%)
Jat Hindus	23.67
Jat Musalmans	12.31
Miscellaneous Janglis	12.65
Arains	10.70
Balochis	5.25
Rajputs (Musalman)	3.54
Kambohs	3.01
Kharrals (Jangli)	3.00
Pathans	1.43
Gujars	1.22
Wattus (Jangli)	0.95
Chaddhars (Jangli)	0.85
Sainis	0.87
Khichis (Jangli)	0.59
Christians	0.61

(Figures as reported by Dobson, 1915; categories overlap with the religious and Jangli/non-Jangli classifications used elsewhere in his Report and do not sum to 100 per cent in this selection.)

Tenure and succession: the limits of customary recognition

The Colonization of Government Lands (Punjab) Act, 1912, changed the rules of succession favourably for the colony tenants. This was strikingly different to the previously applied rules under the Punjab Tenancy Act of 1887 (Colonization of Government Lands Act, 1912). Dobson records the reasoning that the earlier 'doctrine of lapse to Government,' by which a holding could revert to the state on a grantee's death without male issue, was 'clearly repudiated,' and a tenant without male issue could now nominate an heir, with the Collector's office invoked only 'where direct issue, widows and nominated heirs were alike wanting.' Widows themselves were granted 'a life interest as occupancy tenants,' but were explicitly barred from converting that interest into full proprietary right where there was reason to suppose they intended to alienate the holding to anyone outside the recognised legal heirs (Dobson, 1915; Colonization of Government Lands Act, 1912). This shows how the colonial state ensured that the land stayed with the family members who were next in line to inherit it, and further how the colonial state in a way micromanaged the demographic composition.

This is neither blanket dispossession nor genuine equivalence with male succession. It is a calculated concession, generous enough to keep land within a male-defined kinship structure and to spare the administration the burden of escheat. Administrative recognition of female occupancy ceased precisely at the threshold of alienation, thereby preventing widows from exercising the comprehensive proprietary authority that would have enabled the independent sale or gift of their holdings. The same logic of conditional, administratively bounded recognition governs proprietary rights more broadly: peasant grantees who acquired them in 1912 paid a commutation fee of roughly Rs. 12.50 per acre for land already worth, by Dobson's own estimate, Rs. 150 to Rs. 300 per acre on the open market, a transfer of value from the state to loyal, compliant grantees that no contemporary land sale in Punjab could have replicated (Dobson, 1915).

The 1907 crisis, in the administration's own words

By Dobson's own account, three grievances had accumulated among colonists by 1906: the system of cash fines used to enforce tenure conditions outside the courts; resentment at conditions; above all the residence requirement for yeomen grantees, applied, in his words, with 'apparent partiality'; and dissatisfaction at the Irrigation Department's necessary reduction of water supply as colonisation matured and competing demands on the canal grew (Dobson, 1915). When the Colony Bill of 1907 was introduced to address these grievances and the defects of the earlier Act of 1893, it became entangled, in Dobson's words, with 'an agitation of a political character in the Punjab,' whose leaders 'were quick to discern a fertile soil for the seed of sedition'; the colony's ties to 'nearly every district in the eastern and central Punjab and... all the Punjabi regiments,' he wrote, 'invested the agitation with an importance out of all proportion to the real merits of the case' (Dobson, 1915). The Governor-General withheld assent from the Bill, and a Colonies Committee was formed to investigate the causes of the agitation and suggest solutions. The committee had Sir Thomas Gordon Walker as its President, D. C. Baillie, Lt.-Col. E. H. Rivett Carnac, Major F. Popham Young, T. R. J. Ward as members, and with L. H. Leslie Jones as its Secretary. The committee deliberated on the issue from November 1907 to April 1908 (Dobson, 1915). Popham Young and Leslie Jones, the same officers who appear in the 1904 *Gazetteer* managing the colony's day-to-day settlement, were thus also the officers tasked with investigating the crisis their own administration had produced.

The Committee's recommendations, enacted in the 1912 Act, conceded almost everything the 1907 agitation had sought without ever conceding that the agitation itself had been legitimate. These concessions included full proprietary rights for peasant grantees, a more tenant-favourable law of succession, a statutory cap of Rs. 100 on tenancy fines, and protection of tenancies from summary attachment (Dobson, 1915; Colonization of Government Lands Act, 1912). Barrier's (1967) account of the same crisis from outside the administration confirms that the 1907 disturbances drew real, organised support across the colony districts and were taken seriously enough in London and Simla to force the Bill's veto. This shows us a scale of response difficult to square with Dobson's characterisation of an agitation 'out of all proportion to the real merits of the case.'

DISCUSSION

Bhattacharya (2019) has described the agrarian conquest of Punjab as a 'contradictory dialectic' between transformation imposed from above and forces working from below; the Chenab Colony's own documentary record makes that dialectic legible in a single, dateable sequence. Grievance accumulated from below over 1900–1906; the state's first instinct, recorded in its own report, was to read organised resistance not as evidence of unmet legitimate claims but as externally manufactured 'sedition' exploiting an otherwise contented peasantry (Dobson, 1915). It was only the scale of the response which can be confirmed independently by Barrier (1967), forced concessions that the administration then folded back into its own paternalist narrative as generous reforms voluntarily bestowed, rather than as ground conceded under pressure. Fox's (1985) contention that Punjab's agricultural colonisation answered to the imperatives of colonial political economy is consistent with this sequence. The reform as concession here served the political economy of continued control quite as much as the original conditions had served extraction.

This complicates, rather than overturns, two claims commonly made about the canal colonies. First, the displacement of the Bar's pastoralist Janglis was real, but the Chenab record shows it operating through an admittedly unreliable bureaucratic sorting process, attestation by tax receipt, criminal record, and 'dubious oral testimony' (Dobson, 1915), that absorbed a substantial minority of Janglis as grantees while excluding others on no firmer evidential basis. The category 'Jangli' was not simply imposed on a population from outside; it was actively, and imperfectly, manufactured at the point of allotment. Second, the common claim that Punjab's rural elite patronage produced a generally weak nationalist movement in the province needs a sharper formulation in light of the 1907 crisis: the agitation was real, cross-regional, and serious enough to reach the Governor-General's desk. What weakened was not the capacity for organised grievance but the colonial state's capacity to absorb it, through concession dressed as benevolence, before it could harden into a sustained nationalist constituency. The 1912 Act, on this reading, was not an alternative to paternalism but paternalism's most effective instrument.

CONCLUSION

The Chenab Colony's own administrative record does not contradict the existing historiography of Punjab's canal colonies; it supplies the documentary texture that synthesis alone cannot. Malcolm Darling's account of the misery he encountered touring Punjab's villages in 1946–47, and Frank Brayne's earlier confidence that the colonies were a modernising force for social good (Ali, 1988), describe the same administrative tradition visible here in 1907–12: a state that experienced its own paternalism as sincere even as it managed dissent, calibrated rights, and sorted populations with the same instrumental precision it applied to water distribution. Daechsel's (2012) and Talbot's (2011) accounts of an extractive colonial state operating beneath a developmentalist surface, and Mahmood's (2017) identification of profit motive as the underlying driver of this 'socio-economic engineering,' find in the Chenab Colony's record of its own crisis and its own concessions a single, well-documented case in which that surface and that substance can be read side by side. Progress and paternalism went hand in hand in colonial Punjab not because the colonial state was confused about its own motives, but because, as this case shows, managing the appearance of benevolence was itself one of the most effective instruments of colonial control.

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