CHAPTER VII
AN OVERVIEW

The Punjab province in the colonial period is seen as an outstanding example of agricultural growth and an unrivalled region of canal irrigation in the world. The cultivated areas increased from 23 percent in 1849 to 53 percent by 1947. This was a net increase of 30 percent. The total cultivated area rose from 1.27 crore acres in 1855 to 3.10 crore acres in the 1930s. All this was viewed as an exceptional situation with probably no parallels. A new agrarian frontier that surpassed all expectations of its founding fathers. In a recent work, Mridula Mukherjee, Colonializing Agriculture, this exception is seen as a myth and its validity questioned. In actual fact, the exception is not the Punjab province but the south-eastern districts of this region.

The southeastern parts of the Punjab region comprised of the districts of Ambala, Karnal, Rohtak, Gurgaon and Hissar. In pre colonial times it was referred to as Haryana believed to be derived from ‘Hari’, which indicates that at one time it was a rich and fertile land. The name may have originated on account of the fact that dense forests (Haryal Ban) at one time covered this region. During the colonial period, the expansion of agriculture which transformed the Punjab province by-passed this dry south eastern tract almost completely. This area was labeled ‘backward’, ‘under developed’ even ‘barren’. Surprisingly, vast parts of this very area had once been the prized ‘khalisa’ lands of the medieval times. When this change took place may not be very specific, but it was obviously perpetuated with the establishment of British rule in the early years of the 19th century.

The British viewed the south eastern areas as being distinct from the Punjab proper. M. L. Darling, in Wisdom and Waste in the Punjab Villages, remarked that the south eastern tract was ‘only administratively a part of the province’. It was believed to be a ‘famine stricken region’ with dry barren plans and low economic potentialities. Although these areas were of fertile alluvium,
the erratic and low rainfall, lack of an adequate river system, and the destructive effect of the seasonal torrents or "choes," did not allow for good cultivation. The agrarian policy of the British kept this fact and their own requirements or 'needs' uppermost in their minds in their dealing with the agrarian future of this region.

British agrarian policy towards the south eastern areas was largely a continuation of their agrarian policy elsewhere. There is also an impression that they were influenced by the fact that the people of this sub-region 'had participated in the rebellion of 1857 in an enthusiastic manner' and were politically more conscious, therefore, even dangerous. British agrarian policy is reflected in their 'irrigational' policy in these parts, emphasis on low value crops and on retaining the region as a cattle breeding ground. The high rate of revenue, rigidity in collection and shift to cash payments were features similar to other parts in Punjab. Land revenue was in fact, higher at 50 per cent of the output, in comparison to the usual 40 per cent in other parts of British India. The land revenue also increased alarming over time through new assessments by up to 85 per cent. This extreme proportion however, could not always be collected and deficits of over 37 per cent accumulated even in 1860. In this 'famine stricken area' the government permitted suspensions and remissions in extreme situations but after the crisis, restored not only existing revenue rates but enhanced rates too. This policy led to serious oppression and impoverishment of agricultural groups. As in other regions, the government made some efforts at irrigational developments by way of repair of canals, taccavi loans; and improvements through credit societies and experimental farms. Both attempts however, were only marginally successful. The government in fact continuously delayed the proposed Bhakra Dam Project ostensibly, due to adverse reports of its being detrimental to the area, but in reality because they wanted no setback to their provision of draught animals and recruitment from this sub-region. Official reports declared the project economically not viable. This 'exceptional' policy can be seen in the 'identification' of the area as a 'cattle breeding ground' and the insistence on maintaining it for animal husbandry, though not dairy farming. British policy
towards animal husbandry was such that it did not allow it to become a paying proposition or emerge as a supplement to the region's low level agricultural economy. Hardly any encouragement was given to subsidiary trades like diary, hides and bones, or meat and ghee. Official reports agreed that there was lack of an efficient marketing system for such activity. The British government did not want to compromise the 'draught' provision at any cost. This led to small and hazardous returns from animal husbandry, frequent cattle mortality and stagnation in cattle breeding. It is obvious that this policy was designed to meet only the colonial 'needs' of draught animals and 'recruits' for the army, which were being adequately met by the south-eastern areas of the Punjab. This further added to the problems of the low subsistence level economy of the south-eastern region.

British policy towards agriculture was also modified for the south eastern tracts. Agrarian policy with regard to extension of cultivation, commercialization of crops, was largely missing in the south eastern districts where no direct attempt was made for either. This modification in agrarian policy accounted to a large extent, for the restricted kind of agricultural development in the region. Agricultural growth in the south eastern areas was uneven, erratic, unpredictable and had no definite pattern. The agricultural areas consistently fluctuated and exhibited sharp regional disparities. Cultivated acreage in the region showed a moderate increase (11.8 percent) in 1886-87, and a sizeable jump (21 percent) by 1907. This process of growth however, became stagnant between 1907-22 and then declined by 11.5 percent by the 1940s. The overall growth was a moderate 23 per cent, far from the spectacular 53 per cent growth of the Punjab province as a whole. From 48 lakh acres in 1867-68, it increased to 65 lakh acres around 1900. By the 1940s, however there was a contraction to 59 lakh acres. At the district level this growth was not uniform and all districts did not develop at the same rate, nor did they have the same conditions of growth. Over the period of colonial rule, Karnal increased its cultivated areas by 54 per cent, Hissar by 47 percent, Rohtak by 30 percent and Gurgaon by 23 percent. Ambala district on the other hand had a decline of 5 percent during the same time. In the period between
the 1890s and late 1920s, Rohtak was the only district which showed an increase of about 13 percent in its cultivated area. It may be pointed out that this increase was half of the minimum rise in the Western districts of the province. In the other districts, there was a decline in cultivated area ranging from 3 - 31 percent, the maximum being in Ambala. When compared with the central district of the Punjab the decline in the Ambala district was twice the maximum decline in the central parts (16 percent in Lahore). Karnal had a minimal decline of 3 percent, Gurgaon 6 percent and Hissar 8 percent. These districts were close the picture of the central districts of the province.

The increase in cultivated area however, did not translate itself to change in the cropping pattern or a commercialization of agriculture but remained stuck, in the traditional pattern of ‘inferior crops’. In 1890 about 70 percent of the areas were under ‘inferior’ crops like bajra, jawar and gram. This proportion increased to 85 percent by the 1940s. The south eastern tract did not shift to cultivation of wheat, rice and cotton which remained minor crops while the food-cum-fodder crops were extended to meet colonial created requirements. The south eastern region thus, did not benefit from the commercialization of agriculture nor did it switch to more remunerative crops. Bajra increased the maximum among the dominant crops while cotton the least. Both in 1890 and 1940 the prominent crops remained the same – bajra, jawar and gram. There were however fluctuation of acreage within these crops. In 1890, bajra was cultivated in about 12 percent of the south eastern areas which rose to almost 38 percent by 1940, with an increase of more than 25 percent. Gram and Jowar however, though the prominent crops at 14 percent and 15 percent of the cultivated area in 1890, actual decreased by 1 percent in the case of gram and 6 percent in the case of jowar in 1940. In the case of wheat the same period shows a 5 percent increase. Barley, maize and cotton were virtually stagnant, increasing by less than 1 percent. On the other hand rice and mung showed marginal decline.

At the district level it seems that some minor fluctuations took place as bajra was the only crop which substantially increased in Gurgaon, Hissar and Rohtak to replace jawar and become the dominant crop in 1940. The
cultivation under wheat increased in Ambala, Karnal and Rohtak during 1890-1940. Rice increased in Ambala but in Karnal, it decreased. Gram increased in Ambala and Gurgaon, whereas it decreased in Rohtak, Hisar and Karnal. The cultivation of jawar decreased all of the districts where it was cultivated during 1890-1940.

In the south-eastern areas the yield from land was also lower than that of the Punjab province. For example, wheat was 12 maunds per acre as compared to 19 in the Punjab as a whole; cotton was only 4 maunds per acre in comparison to 8 in the province. Though the process of cultivation was similar to that of the Punjab region, but agricultural implements were somewhat of traditional pattern as compared to the ‘technologically’ advanced Punjab as a whole. The iron ploughs were only one percent in south eastern Punjab, as compared to 4 percent in the central Punjab. With the advent of farm machinery too the south-eastern areas were at a disadvantage. For instance, only 22 tractors were in use in south eastern Punjab while 558 were operative in central Punjab in 1945. Agricultural growth thus, got little support from new technology in the south-east Punjab.

One of the main factors accounting for the lack of agricultural development was the absence of irrigational facilities to the parched south eastern areas. This part of the Punjab had poor water resources since it was located away from the ‘five rivers’. The Jumna also touched only the eastern boundary of this tract. The seasonal Ghaggar also actually caused damage to agriculture, as did other monsoon streams and rivulets. Since irrigation was limited, production of land was low. Irrigation through wells was limited as the water table in many areas was as deep as 150 feet. In the area where sub soil water was available at about 25 feet, water was brackish; cost of sinking a well was high and its operation was restricted. In most parts well sinking was a ‘gamble’. Within a short time these wells produced ‘gara’ or liquid mud. An official of Rohtak district estimated that in 1906, a well irrigated only 1/5 of an acre per day.

Irrigated areas had increased by 6 percent from 1886 to 1935-6. In 1886, about 9 percent of the areas were irrigated by additional water resources, while
in 1935-36 this proportion was around 15 percent. At a district level, Karnal was utilizing more irrigational facilities, covering 38 percent of the area, followed by Hissar (20 percent) Rohtak (24 percent) while Ambala (8 percent) had the lowest water resources in the late nineteenth century. Towards the end of the period, Karnal maintained its position as the maximum irrigated area, about 45 percent, followed by Rohtak at 37 percent, Hissar and Gurgaon had between 14 to 17 percent irrigated areas while Ambala (5 percent) remained the lowest. Traditional water resources – wells, tanks, ponds jhallers, dhenkli and canals – were not equally utilized in the sub-region. In the late nineteenth century, wells were the largest source, providing half of the additional irrigation. Canals contributed 41 percent towards irrigation, tanks less than 2 percent while other source accounted for 6 percent of total irrigation. By the 1930s, canals were providing the largest share of irrigated water covering more than 70 percent of the total irrigated area while the contribution wells declined to 27 percent. The irrigation from tanks fell to 0.3 percent and of other sources to 1 percent only.

The district wise position of different systems of irrigation also varied with time. The Karnal district which had been largely depended on well irrigation in the 1880s came largely under canals by 1930s. Incidentally, canal irrigation had been less than half of well irrigated area in the 1880s. In Gurgaon, canals and wells had provided an almost equal share in the 1880s. By the 1930s however, the position changed and well irrigation was close to double the area under canal irrigation. Ambala shows the reverse of this situation and shifted from largely well irrigation in the 1880s to canal irrigation by the 1930s. Rohtak district showed a substantial increase in both well and canal irrigation. In Hissar on the other hand, though canal fed areas increased substantially well irrigated areas declined. A review of different modes of irrigation also reveals that in 1880s tanks provided water largely to Ambala and also Karnal. By the 1930s however, despite of the overall decrease in tank irrigation all districts were receiving some share of irrigation through tanks. In the case of ‘other’ sources of irrigation also, there was shift from Ambala and Rohtak to all the districts by this time. In the western districts 10 million acres were brought under
cultivation during 1860-1920, by the canal projects; bringing a marked disparity in the eastern and western parts of the province. A comparison in the 1920s shows that the percentage of irrigated area in central and western Punjab ranged from 50 to 82 percent from all sources. In the south eastern districts, this percentage was 4 to 28 percent only. The contribution of canals to irrigated area ranged from 34 to 63 percent in other parts of the province, while their proportion was only 4 to 16 percent in the south eastern districts.

Despite the low development of water resources, the government increased water taxes or abiana from Rs.18 in 1905 to Rs.37 and 12 annas by 1924-25. Abiana rates in 1905 ranged from rupee 1 and 12 annas (bajra) to Rs. 5 and 10 annas (sugarcane). The cultivation of rice in canal irrigated area was charged Rs. 4 and 2 annas while cotton, wheat and rape seed paid Rs. 2 and 8 annas. In the 1920s the range was between 3 rupees 4 annas (bajra) to 12 rupees (sugarcane). The tax on cultivating rice increased to almost double, as did the rates on other crops. The rise in canal water rates contributed to the additional burden on and indebtedness of, the peasants in the south eastern canal districts.

Low agricultural development combined with a modified government policy to the agrarian sphere in the south-eastern parts led to a change in the traditional agrarian relations. Both individual and collective rights in land continued under four kinds of tenures – Zamindari, Pattidari, Bhaichara, and Mixed Pattidari or Bhaichara. The Sirsa area was dominated by Zamindari (85percent), Pattidari existed in 40percent of the Delhi parts, around 60 percent of Hisar was covered under bhaichara. In Karnal (93percent) and Gurgaon (60percent) mixed tenures were prevalent. Three broad categories of cultivators were active, as in other parts of the Punjab region. The large land holder/landlord, the peasant proprietors and the tenant. Peasant proprietors were of 2 further types, superior and inferior owners. Whereas tenants, according to their long association with a particular land, were occupational tenants or tenants at will. The last group increased with time in the south eastern areas. From being 27 percent of the cultivating group, tenants at will formed 35 percent by the mid twentieth century. Occupancy tenants during the
same time increased from 16 percent to 29 percent. In the Punjab province as a whole a similar development had taken place. The position the tenants however, was precarious, facing continuous enhancement of rent and threat of ejection from land holders. In 1876, 540 notices of ejectment were issued, while in 1881 this number was 1882, an increase of 248 percent.

The large mass of cultivators was the small peasant proprietors who were found in all districts and were largely from the Hindu caste. This reflected the broad picture of the south-eastern areas were Hindus dominated being 70 percent of the population, in contrast to 35 percent in the province as a whole. Muslims formed only 51 percent of the provincial people though their average for the south-eastern region was 28 percent. The Muslim agriculturists were found in Gurgaon and Karnal. Sikh cultivators were in large proportion in Ambala and Karnal. On a caste wise basis the Jats and Rajputs were the dominant agriculturists. The Jats were most prominent in Rohtak, Hisar and Sirsa. Rajput in Sirsa, Hisar and Karnal. Gujars were numerous in Ambala, Hisar and Karnal while Rors and Sainis were largely located in Karnal and Ambala.

As a result of the cumulative impact of the British policy and legislation and the restrictive development of agriculture in this sub region, agrarian relations shifted from cordial and amicable to marred by friction and conflict. With the increase in land revenue imposed by the State, there was a corresponding increase in rents and even local dues – like chowbacha known to the south-eastern tracts. Chowbacha were payments on four accounts. On the first, it was 'per house' and every chula or fire place was looked upon as a unit. The 2nd count was per head of cattle, because they grazed in the common lands. Third collection was per pagri of every male individual above 12 years of age. The fourth tax was imposed when there was a 'good' harvest from land. There were also increased incidence of notices of ejectment to tenants. Land owners also insisted on cash revenues instead of kind, especially in non-irrigated areas. In zones under irrigation, and better output, kind rents were common and even useful.
These issues between peasant proprietors and tenants escalated to such an extent during this phase that several Kisan movements and demonstrations were seen in the south eastern Punjab. The Congress organized a conference at Rohtak in 1929, attended by prominent national leaders and local activists. They supported the kisan against beggar, enhancement of revenue and redressal of grievances. In fact, a Gandhian type satyagraha was organized at Skinner estate in Hansi where Congress interventions brought about a compromise but did not solve the problem. The Congress leadership in south eastern Punjab took up the cause of the suffering tenants, such as the Ahirs of Chhuchakwas. The Congress organized a large Panchayat here on March 9, 1930. Panchyats were organized also on 10th, 11th and 13th March, 1930, to deal with instances of rent enhancement, and additional payments to land owners. Confrontations were thus seen between land owning groups and peasants in several instances. The Zamindar also came into conflict with agriculture laborers for instance, the odes who the Zamindar’s claim, had burnt their crops. This led to classes between both groups in 1937 resulting in police action. Agrarian relations between the agrarian groups thus, became marked by suspicion and tensions in an environment struggling for its survival.

The agrarian situation was further impacted by the increase in the proportion of money lenders in this region. A staggering 64 percent of the money lenders of the Punjab province were located in the south eastern districts, especially Karnal, Rohtak and Gurgaon. Of the 1559 money-lenders in the area, 36 percent were in Rohtak district, 33 percent in Karnal, 29 percent in Gurgaon, 22 in Hissar, and Ambala had the minimum of 5 percent only. 1901 however, marked a change in which the traditional money lender declined in numbers and also migrated to areas outside the Punjab. They were replaced by a category of agriculturist money lenders as a consequence of the Land Alienation Act. The money lender imposed a high rate of interest at 24 percent, since the value of land in these areas was low, and extended their grip to cover the whole agrarian community. The situation in the entire Punjab province was much the same, but more intense in the south eastern districts
due to the poor agricultural development, low production, high debt and the hold of a sizeable money lender group. The total capital employed in this area in 1927-28 was 434 lakhs as compared to 201 lakhs in the rest of the Punjab. Out of this capital the maximum was in Rohtak (147 lakhs), followed by Karnal (120 lakhs). In Gurgaon and Hisar, the capital was 70 lakhs while the least was in Ambala, only 23 lakhs. In the central Punjab districts, the highest was 90 lakhs (Ferozepur) while the lowest was 10 lakhs (Hoshiarpur).

The artisan and menial groups (kamins) had a somewhat different proportion in the south eastern districts. In contrast to the proportion of 18 percent in the Punjab province, artisans constituted 32 percent of the population in this tract in 1881. By the twentieth century, there was a reversal again. While the numbers of artisans increased to 27 percent for the province, the south eastern parts had only 21 percent of the artisan group. The decline in agricultural activities and absence of agricultural growth was partly responsible for the decline in the numbers of artisans, who moved to other avenues of employment as agricultural labour or to the urban centres.

The jajmani system that linked the artisan to the land owners became somewhat loose in the changed milieu and lost some of its traditional elements. Artisans were more mobile than before and sought cash returns rather than kind, and new occupations as agriculturalists or labour. The agrarian environment and administrative and judicial machinery contributed to this weakening of the jajmani system.

The proportion of agriculture labour had also increased, with time. Their numbers in the four districts of Hissar, Rohtak, Gurgaon and Karnal was 9.4 percent of the total population in 1881; this proportion had doubled by 1931 in the case of male labourers. At this time 15 percent of the labour was in Gurgaon, 10 percent in Karnal, 8 percent in Rohtak and 4.5 in Hisar. By 1931, these proportions were highest in Karnal at over 25 percent; Gurgaon had 21 percent of the labourers, Rohtak 16 and Hisar 14 percent. This growth in agricultural labour reflected in their wages which ranged from 1-5 annas/day. The average wage was 3-4 annas. In Gurgaon however, it was even as 1 anna, though in Rohtak, Karnal and Delhi areas, it was generally 2 annas.
Agrarian labour too followed greater mobility which was a break with earlier tradition.

The period of colonial rule did not bring about any structural changes in the agrarian relations of the south-eastern areas, there were however, several variations in their actual interaction. The position of landlords, peasant proprietors and tenants in each district did not reflect uniformity but rather differing degrees of change within the traditional pattern. Most significant was the conflict which emerged within these categories, as a element consequences of the agrarian legislations of this period.

A level of change can also be discerned in the social life of the villages. The overall increase in the number villages was only 7 percent during 1881 to 1931. The location and appearance of villages was rather the same but they saw several physical changes. The villages generally expanded in size. The structure of village was much the same with largely mud housing surrounding by a mud was and ditch as protection. The village had one or sometimes one or two gates called ‘phalsa’. The well to do groups had brick houses, sometimes two storeys high with lofty gates, called havelis. A majority of the villages lived in the huts made of straw, grass, mud and clay. Out castes lived outside the village in chappar. The houses had an open courtyard, the lawn, the store room and an inner room called bari and dobara.

The typical villages in this sub region consisted of many groupings of kinship and family. Various families together formed a khandan, who together formed a thok which usually settled in mohallas and tula in the village. Families were of four types - unitary, nuclear, supplemented nuclear and joint family. About 60 percent were joint families, 20 percent supplemented nuclear, 15 percent nuclear and 5 percent unitary, in the late nineteenth century.

As a result of the overall factors of the colonial milieu, a cumulative process of change started to become visible by the 1930s and 1940s. These changes were both physical as well as ideological. Physical change was seen in the construction of houses and material goods available, such as kitchen equipment and furniture. The kucha houses began to be replaced by pucaa
houses in some places. The new western items like cups, plates, tables, chairs, high heeled sandals may not have been common but were now familiar to rural society. The most significant change was from home spun to machine made cloth. British manufactured goods were much and prized in demand.

Several changes in attitudes, thinking and customs became visible in food, dress and social behaviour. New food items started to be used for example, vegetables, such as carrot and tomatoes, and tea. There was some change in apparel for men with the adoption of trousers, hats, shirts and hosiery items like gloves, socks and mufflers. In the social sphere, English words found their way in every day parlance. Mobility and social space, especially for girls, increased to some extent. The traditional lower groups also became mobile and took to new occupations. The distinction of caste however, through a minimal degree of change. Social customs also reflected subtle changes with the passage of time and the impact of colonial rule.

Agriculture in the colonial Haryana region did not see the transformation that changed the western parts of the Punjab province. Cultivated area remained low, increasing from 48 lakhs to 59 lakhs area only, a mere 11 percent. It did not see commercialization or significant changes in the cropping pattern either. The south eastern area, remained devoted to the cultivation of ‘inferior’ crops. Agriculture was also marked by significant fluctuation and was consequently, lopsided, unpredictable and erratic, with considerable intra-regional disparities. With the slow take-up of new machinery and implements, lower yields and the non-development of animal husbandry, despite British policy to develop the same, resulted in the perpetuation a low and subsistence level agriculture in this area. Water resources also were limited and their development restricted during this phase. Irrigation increased by a mere 6 percent. In comparison to the western districts, there was inequality and imbalance of water resources. This too was marred by reh, water logging and serious impact on the health of the people of the region. Agriculture growth remained constrained and minimal as a result of the British agrarian policies towards this region. Colonial interest which guided this policy undermined the level and potential agricultural growth that would have been
achieved in the south eastern tract. British policy which identified the south eastern districts as the ‘cattle rearing zone’ also forced on it the cultivation of food and fodder crops only, discouraged extension of improvements through irrigation and animal husbandry, thus arresting the potential agricultural growth of this area. The post colonial ‘white revolution’ and an emergence as a surplus producing state, belies the image of the sub-region’s subsistence level agricultural economy maintained by the colonial state. Agricultural development in south eastern Punjab was shackled by colonial rule and the product of its agrarian policy, which could have overcome the geographical limitations of this tract through investments, development of animal husbandry and shift to market oriented crops. All of these elements became reality in the post independence period, which then transformed Haryana.