The cultivation of wheat in the Punjab dates back to pre-historic times. Some forms of wheat which were originally cultivated in Afghanistan and adjacent countries beyond probably spread through the Punjab to the southern part of India. A species locally known as makini was grown in the south-western districts of the Punjab. Excavations at Mohenjodaro have revealed that the same species of wheat was grown almost 3,000 years ago. Under the Great Mughals the province of the Punjab (suba Lahore) remained important for its agricultural production and trade. Under Ranjit Singh and his immediate predecessors during the late eighteenth century agriculture and regional trade are reported to have been revived in the central Punjab.

After annexation in 1849, the Punjab became an integral part of British India’s foreign and internal trade. With rapid industrialization in the West a need arose for new sources of raw materials and India was considered to be a potential source. With its vast alluvial plains and rivers, the Punjab promised to be a rewarding province if agriculturally developed. It became a test case for huge British investments in canal irrigation in the semi-arid western and north-western Punjab which bore substantial results by the turn of the century.

The present work is an extension of the researcher’s M.Phil dissertation submitted to the Department of History in 1994. In the context of commodity production, the present study attempts to focus on the production and marketing of wheat in the Punjab during the latter half of colonial rule. Most studies of the British Punjab assume the importance of wheat production, but do not examine it as a factor in socio-economic
change within the colonial situation. Similarly, the studies of the contemporary Punjab assume the relevance of the colonial background, but overlook the wheat angle. This inter-disciplinary study, which borders on the disciplines of history, geography, economics and sociology, attempts to focus upon wheat in the wider socio-economic context.

By the turn of the century, irrigation, agriculture, commerce and exports of the region came to centre on wheat. Before the end of British rule, the Punjab had come to be regarded as the 'granary' of British India which fed the domestic as well as the foreign markets. It was during this period that the port of Karachi acquired an edge over Calcutta and Bombay in the export of wheat as most of the Punjab wheat was exported through this port. In fact, nearly half of the wheat exported from India comprised of wheat from the Punjab. After Independence, particularly after 1966, it was the Punjab which became the locus of the green revolution. Even in the past two decades it has contributed as much as 60-70 per cent of wheat to the central pool. The present Punjab State has only 1.5 per cent of the geographical area of the country but it produces over twenty per cent of the total wheat produced in the country, and two per cent of the wheat produced in the world. Wheat still continues to be the chief crop of the Punjab and even in 1995 out of a net sown area of 4,202 thousand hectares, wheat covered 3,282 hectares which is seventy-eight per cent. The antecedents as much of the green revolution as of several problems besetting the Punjab economy on both sides of the border could perhaps be traced back to the colonial period, if not earlier.

The things taken for granted at the end of the century long colonial rule evolved gradually as a result of experimentation and improvisation, and it took perhaps more than a generation for the people associated with agricultural production and marketing to
somewhat absorb the new standards and techniques. It is quite possible that some pockets of the region covered by the present Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh and some other parts of India are still continuing with the traditional practices which the Punjab was able to gradually shed by about the middle of the present century, more certainly with the green revolution.

Focusing on the first half of the twentieth century, this study broadly encompasses the entire Punjab. The Punjab for the purpose of this study means those territories which were under the direct administration of the British from 1901 to 1947. It therefore does not include the North West Frontier Province or Delhi. Furthermore, as the canal colonies and the central Punjab were the nucleus of wheat production and were the bases of turning the Punjab into the biggest wheat producing province of British India, they figure more prominently in the present work even though it attempts a comparative study of different sub-regions of the province.

The study is illustrated by five maps and over forty Tables and Graphs. Notes and references have been supplemented by thirteen Appendices. The Glossary gives the meanings of the non-English terms specific to the present work. The Bibliography lists the sources actually used by the researcher.

This study is based mainly on the annual issues of Estimates of Area and Yield, Seasons and Crops Reports, Irrigation Reports, Revenue and Administration Reports, various Reports of the Department of Agriculture, and publications of the Board of Economic Inquiry. Other serial publications like the Settlement Reports, Gazetteers, Census Reports, the Legislative Assembly and Council Debates and contemporary newspapers have also been used, in addition to works by British administrators and other
contemporaries. Notwithstanding the discrepancies in the data available in different serial publications, an attempt has been made to understand the framework and processes involved and identify the broad trends.

The source material was scattered in different libraries. For necessary facilities for this work the researcher is indebted to the staff of the Haryana State Archives, Panchkula; Punjab State Archives, Patiala; Punjab State Archives, Chandigarh; Central State Library, Chandigarh; Dwarka Das Library, Chandigarh; the Rare Books Section of the Panjab University Library, besides the libraries of the Department of History at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar and Panjab University.

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