IDEOLOGY, ACTIONS AND LEGACY: A STUDY OF CHHOTU RAM

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SUMMARY

The last decade of pre-independent Punjab played a crucial role in the history of independent India. The Punjab as we know played an important role in the fight for freedom. Interestingly, it was also in the Punjab that an experiment in conciliatory politics was seen. This politics initial meant that along with political freedom economic freedom was also essential. It is in this context the name of Chhotu Ram figures in our political discourse. Chhotu Ram played an important role in the politics of pre-independent Punjab. He was a catalyst in making *Golden Laws* in the Punjab Legislative Council and Punjab Legislative Assembly. These laws proved to be a boon for the peasantry of Punjab, and as such played a significant role in the amelioration of the peasantry of his time. His politics and vision are integral to the movements and politics of the peasantry of contemporary India. The study of ideology, actions and legacy has been made keeping in view the socio-economic and political setting of Punjab during the first quarter of the 20th century.

The present thesis has been divided into five chapters:

Chapter I: First Phase: Struggle.

Chapter II: Economic and Social Ideology.

Chapter III: Speeches and Writings as Minister.

Chapter IV: Legacy of Policies and Ideologies.

Chapter V: Conclusion.

The first chapter deals with the first phase of struggle of Chhotu Ram, and his role in the politics of Punjab during the pre-independence period i.e.,
from 1923 to 1945, as a co-founder of the Unionist Party, a powerful minister in the Punjab Government and Chairman of the Punjab Legislative Council. The condition of the Punjab peasantry was such that the concepts of social rights, democracy and equality were almost unknown to them. It was in this backdrop that Chhotu Ram was born, brought up and got education. During his childhood he had seen and even experienced realities of the life of a poor peasant. Born in a poor peasant family, he was well versed with the problems of his community. He emerged from an illiterate, backward and rustic family and measured his way to the ministerial berth by dint of hard work. At that time, most of the political leaders in Punjab were from rich land owning families and from higher classes of the urban Punjab. The rural background of Chhotu Ram prompted him to work for the upliftment of the rural people. He devoted himself to the task of improving the lot of the agriculturist community. He pursued various policies and programs for the betterment of the rural people. In this effort, he was assisted by Mian Fazl-i-Husain, and formed the Unionist Party to work together for the upliftment of the rural folk.

The main focus of the second chapter has been on the depiction of the plight of the poor peasantry, which was oppressed by both the colonial administration by imposing heavy burden of land revenue and exploited by the traders and moneylenders. These forces made the peasantry a backward section of the society of Punjab. In this chapter his economic and social ideology is described by focusing on his works especially in the economic and social field. His actions for economic and social upliftment are also discussed. Through the Unionist Government he got several legislation passed for bringing empowerment in the life of peasantry. The Punjab Regulation of Account act I (1930), in which the moneylender is required to maintain a regular record of loans and furnishing of six monthly statements of accounts in respect of loans to the debtor. The Relief of Indebtedness Act VII (1934) made provision that interest on loan could not exceed the principle. The
debtor stood discharged of the loan if he had paid the creditor twice of the principle. The Punjab Debtor Protection Act II (1936) prohibited the attachment of the execution of a court decree, the land on which the debtor and his family depended. Nobody could grab standing crops, standing trees, dwelling, one third output of food grains, bullock cart, milch cattle etc. The Punjab Consolidation of Holdings Act (1936) was passed to remove the hundreds of countless boundaries, irrigation channels and supervision. This act was passed with the amendments in 1940 and again in 1945 and the job of consolidation was assigned to the Department of Co-Operation. The Punjab Registration of Moneylenders Act (1938) directed the moneylenders except landlords who lent money to their tenants for the purpose of agriculture, to get themselves registered and obtained licenses from the District Collector and loan entries could be made only in the register certified by the government so that they could charge only the regulated rate of interest. Unlicensed moneylenders were debarred from the claim of getting loan re-payment. The Punjab Agriculture Produce Act (1939) was passed to ensure proper returns to the farmer. It also made mandatory for the traders to keep proper account of purchase and sale of agriculture produce. The Punjab Relief of Indebtedness (Amendment) Act was passed in 1940, under this act, Debt Conciliation Board were constituted at District Headquarters for settling debt of long standing duration in order to save both the creditor and debtors from litigation and such cases were not allowed to be taken to civil courts. The Punjab Weight and Measurement Act 1941, led to establishment of regulation of marketing system in the province. This Act made the provision of certification of all weight and measurement units from the government necessary, and weight and measurement inspectors were appointed to implement the provision of the Act. The Punjab General Sales Tax Act, (1941) was passed to divide the burden of taxation equally between agriculturist and traders. Apart from these Acts many other important works have been described. In this chapter social ideology of Chhotu Ram has also been analyzed. His works
towards the social upliftment of the rural class such as emphases on education, women empowerment, and equality among rural and urban class, views against corruption, providing facility to rural population, criticism of communal forces as well as of untouchability have also been discussed.

In the third chapter Chhotu Ram’s speeches and writings as a minister have been described. His speeches in the Punjab Legislative Council and the Punjab Legislative Assembly on important issues such as speeches on ‘Golden laws’, speeches about education, women education and technical education, speeches about the need of industrialization and upliftment of the labour class, speeches about irrigation and speeches about communalism have been dealt in detail. He was a prolific writer, his writings during his student life and as a minister, his letters to Gandhiji, letters to his friends and some other letters that reflect on his ideology have been discussed in this chapter.

The fourth chapter focuses upon the legacy of his politics and ideology. Chhotu Ram gave primacy to political development of Punjab as the first step for the independence of India. However, instead of using the word ‘independence’ he used the word ‘political salvation’ since he realized that the cooperation of the colonial administration for the upliftment of peasantry was essential. He believed in constructive politics and politics of power. He believed in secularism. The central argument of the chapter is that the social, economic and political ideas of Chhotu Ram formulated during the colonial period continue to have relevance even in the present times because of the crisis in the development model on the one hand and the growth of communalism on the other. We can trace the influence of his ideas on the politics of peasant leaders like Charan Singh and Devi Lal. The emergence of farmer movements in various parts of India also reflects the continuing relevance of his ideology. His impact is also evident on the governments of various states in formulating their education policy, rural development policy, women empowerment policy and maintaining co-operation among the various
religions. Several steps by his party had far reaching consequences. These went a long way in protecting the interest of the agriculturists and promoted the growth of agriculture in the province. We can also indeed find the roots of ‘green revolution’ in Punjab and Haryana to the works and policies of Chhotu Ram.

The last chapter is an overview of the ideology, actions and legacy of Chhotu Ram. It is concluded that whatever Chhotu Ram did was in response to the prevailing socio-economic conditions of the peasantry of the province. His efforts were directed towards the amelioration of the peasantry and to free them from the clutches of moneylender, to restore self-respect and free them from indebtedness, poverty, corruption, lack of irrigation facility, heavy burden of taxation, and corruption etc. Chhotu Ram was an astute political tactician. Being a peasant himself, he could at the same time, successfully claim to represent rural areas and agriculturists drawn from all rural socio-economic classes from different social strata. This argument has been accepted by the majority of the rural inhabitants in Punjab and Haryana of his time and even today. His politics and ideology are still visible in the contemporary movements of peasantry launched against the forces of globalization in Haryana in particular and in north India in general. However, we have to be very cautious while researching for the adoption of his legacies as the contexts have changed to a large extent. Yet it can be suggested as based on the sources of this study that the relevance of political, economic and social legacy of Chhotu Ram is increasing. The present day peasantry is, infact confronted with an insecure future. This is what, Chhotu Ram fought for all his life.