INTRODUCTION

The undivided Punjab covered an area of 1,48,610 square miles with agriculture as the mainstay of the majority of its people. The total cultivated area in Punjab was about 2.3 million acres in 1901-1902. Food crops accounted for about three-fourth of the total sown area. The non-food crops occupied the remaining one-fourth area of the food crops and food grains covered over 70 percent of the total area with cereals alone accounting for over 50 percent. The other food crops (sugarcane, fruits, vegetables, condiments, spices and miscellaneous) were sown on only 2 or 3 percent of the total area under crops.\(^1\) The major portion of the Punjab plains thus contained a deep alluvial soil which could be irrigated with great advantage. With a moderate and well distributed rainfall the Punjab was capable of growing a wide variety of crops. In this context the province was singularly blessed and its agriculturists were more fortunate than those of many other parts of India.\(^2\)

During our period of study Punjab was mainly inhabited by three major religious constituents: the Muslims, the Hindus and the Sikhs. Despite the racial, cultural, religious and linguistic diversities, these communities presented a perfect blend and lived in relative cohesiveness. Majority of the population lived in the countryside and mainly depended upon agriculture while the urban population engaged in commerce, manufacturing and other occupations. Villages were by and large self-contained. Most needs were fulfilled in the village itself and they seldom looked towards the urban areas for their needs.

Chhotu Ram: Introduction

The early nineteenth century witnessed India’s immense agricultural indebtedness. Indebtedness continued to increase at an alarmingly abnormal

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speed, with the government practically doing nothing. It was on this account that Chhotu Ram emerged as a friend of the under-dog and the peasantry. He came to oppose exploitation wherever it existed and stood for the rights of those who were themselves too weak to fight. His attitude towards the weak and the poor was one of support and sympathy. He himself was born and brought up amidst poverty and it was, therefore, his genuine mission to eradicate it. But he had to fight against heavy odds and as a practical visionary he did not bite more at a time than he could chew.

Chhotu Ram did not believe in communalism or the mixing of religion with politics. This is apparent from the long record of his public career. The Unionist Party is perhaps the best example of this. It is noticeable that on the one hand he is painted as being pro-Muslim and anti-Hindu, while at the same time he is supposed to be a communalist. Yet, he was proud to be a Jat, but he at the same time always emphasized the undesirability of one community dominating the other.3

Chhotu Ram was undoubtedly one of the great leaders of Punjab of his time. He rendered distinguished services as a lawyer, as a publicist, as a legislator and as a minister, but his main contribution was in his championing the cause of the peasant and the down-trodden.4 Chhotu Ram’s fame and dominance in the pre-independence Punjab for nearly a quarter of a century is widely recognized. He was the principal architect and also the spokesman of the Unionist Party.

The first half of the 20th Century has been quite an eventful period in the political history of India. It witnessed, among other things, what virtually was a clash between the exponents of a one-nation theory and those of the two nation theory. There was, on the one hand, the Congress thesis of nationalism,

and the Muslim League’s antithesis on the other. However, Chhotu Ram was silently working to cleanse Punjab of its problems. While he held Gandhi in high esteem, he did not see a bright future for the peasantry in the Congress’s creed of non-cooperation and resigned as the President of the Rohtak District Congress Committee in 1920. It was thus clear that he had deliberately debarred himself from the mainstream of national political life so as ostensibly to do what none in his view intended to do, namely, the economic liberation of the rural masses in Punjab.

Chhotu Ram remained prominent in public life for more than two decades. He played a key role in the formation of the Unionist Party in 1923 that dominated the politics of the province from 1923 to 1926. He was appointed as a minister of Agriculture in the Punjab Government from September 1924 to December 1926. During this period he was also given the additional charge of the Education Department. After the 1937 election, when the Unionist Party came to power in the province, he was inducted in the Council of Ministers and was given the charge of the Departments of Development and Revenue. He held this office till his death.

Earlier he was bestowed the little of Rao Sahib in 1916, of Rao Bahadur in 1930 and knighted as Sir in 1937.\(^5\) His main aim in the Legislature was to root out the past anomalies on the basis of equal distribution of taxes between agriculturists and non-agriculturists and spending of provincial revenue for reconstruction and social welfare activities in the rural areas proportionate to their contribution to the provincial exchequer. His fiscal remedial measures clashed with the interests of the moneylenders as well as the British Government.

Chhotu Ram is mainly remembered by the peasantry for the Golden Agrarian Acts like Punjab Revenue Act, Restitution of Land Mortgaged Act,\(^5\)

Chhotu Ram undoubtedly played an important role in the pre-independence politics of Punjab. His political, social and economic ideas made a profound impact on the politics of the province during that phase. His ideas are essentially integral to the political heritage of the major movements of the peasantry in the northern India during the post-independence period. His success, in this connection, was the fruit of his genuinely secular politics, the distinguishing mark of the Nationalist Unionist Party of which he was the main ideologist. His premature death removed from the Indian political scene the only man who, with his courage and influence, could have prevented the partition of Punjab. It is little realized that among the Indian politicians of the day Chhotu Ram had the largest following among the Muslim masses, inhabiting the United Punjab.

He worked for the peasantry and sought to politicize them, to organize them, and to prepare them for a struggle for their rights. He brought education to them. He strove to lower the rate of revenue and to bring relief to the poor peasants. The following Acts were passed by the large under his guidance after the Unionists came to power from 1937 to 1945:

i. The Punjab Restitution of Mortgaged Lands Act IV, 1938

ii. The Punjab Alienation of Land Act V, 1938

iii. The Punjab Alienation of Land (Amendment) Act II, 1938

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6 Ibid.
7 K. C. Yadav, ‘Sir Chhotu Ram and the Peasantry: An Assessment’, Deenbandhu Ch. Chhotu Ram Smriti Patrika, Chhotu Ram Chair Agriculture Economics Department, Haryana Agriculture University, Hisar, 1992, pp. 42-44.
iv. The Punjab Registration of Mortgaged Lands Act IV, 1938
v. The Punjab Debtors Protection Act IX, 1939
vi. The Punjab Alienation of Land Act X, 1939
vii. The Punjab Agricultural Produce Markets Act V, 1939
viii. The Punjab Debtors Protection (Amendment) Act X, 1939
ix. The Punjab Consolidation of Holdings (Amendment) Act IX, 1940
x. The Punjab Relief of Indebtedness (Amendment) Act XII, 1940
xi. The Punjab Agricultural Produce Market (Amendment) Act IX, 1941
xii. The Punjab Weights and Measures Act XII, 1941
xiii. The Sugarcane Punjab (Amendment) Act, 1942
xiv. The Punjab Relief of Indebtedness (Amendment) Act, 1943

When Chhotu Ram entered public life, he began as a social reformer also. He became a member of the Arya Samaj which was the spearhead of the revolutionary religious movement and he also became a member of the Congress. Though Sir Chhotu Ram served his connection with the Congress in 1920, when under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, he was never tired of praising Mahatma Gandhi and declaring that the Congress was his first love.8

In the field of politics, Chhotu Ram’s goal was complete independence of India, but without its being bifurcated. He furthered this task by awakening and uplifting educationally, economically and socially exploited and backward agricultural community whose handicaps, difficulties, trials and tribulations were well understood by virtue of his rural birth and nature.9

Chhotu Ram was a self-made man, who loved mankind. During his lectures and speeches to his audiences he often recited, “Khuda ke bande to

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Thousands of God’s worshipers are aimlessly wandering about in the woods; I shall worship him who loves God’s people alone.”

From a very humble beginning Chhotu Ram emerged as one of the great leaders of undivided Punjab during the early half of the 20th century and became a legendary figure of his life time.

Chhotu Ram was a staunch Arya Samajist and did not believe in distinguishing between people on religion base. Arya Samaj’s work in social welfare appealed to Chhotu Ram to join the movement and worked for it seriously. He was born and brought up in the surrounding which helped him to embrace the reformist cult of Arya Samaj. Despite his deep involvement in political activities, he found time to propagate and popularize the tenets of Arya Samaj.

In his speech on March 1, 1942 at Rohtak, he said, “I have chosen the path of serving the weak and saying the fallen according to my own light and have selected the agriculture classes as the symbol of weakness and as the standard bearers of the army of rescue and relief against the forces of tyranny and economic exploitation.”

Chhotu Ram’s political ideas were based on economic issues. He was fully aware that to defeat the forces of exploitation all agriculturists would have to embrace each other irrespective of religion.

When we try to analyze the whole course of his life we find that the period between 1926 to 1936 is important for the development of Chhotu Ram as a leader of the masses. During this period he remained out of political

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power. It is also during this period that the Unionist Party developed its field organization – the *Zamindara* League, which made Chhotu Ram popular all over Punjab particularly in the villages.\(^{15}\) In Punjab, apart from Lala Lajpat Rai, who was a front-rank national leader, no one was there in the province that attracted crowds to the extent that he did.\(^{16}\)

It was not only in the Punjab province but in the whole of India that the agriculturists were ruthlessly ignored and exploited for centuries. The innovative measures Chhotu Ram introduced in the legislature stunned and even shocked those who had been building their political fort with the help of the urban populace. The personality of a rustic leader (Chhotu Ram) and his radical ideas, ideals and ideologies could not easily be digested by his detractors.\(^{17}\)

**Review of the Existing Literature:**

There are a large number of works on Sir Chhotu Ram. Most of these, however, are biographical in nature and fail to pass the accepted tradition of historical assessment. The first work on Chhotu Ram was penned by his apprentice Tika Ram, who replaced Chhotu Ram as a Revenue Minister of the Unionist Party after his death. ‘*Sir Chhotu Ram – An Apostle of Hindu Muslim Unity*’ (*Lahore, 1946)*, was the first book on Chhotu Ram. It questioned the charge that Chhotu Ram was a stooge of British imperialism and that he worked against the nationalist cause. Tika Ram argued that Chhotu Ram was a nationalist to the core and politician with progressive approach. The author praised him as an uncrowned king of the have not’s, the poor helpless peasants of united Punjab. According to Tika Ram, ‘His gaze had been fixed on a definite objective’. That was the objective of uplifting the *zamindars* and other down trodden section of the community. He never hesitated to make the

\(^{16}\) Ibid, p. 85.
\(^{17}\) Balbir Singh, *Deenbandhu Chhotu Ram – A Forgotten Statesman of our Times*, New Delhi, 1999, p. 17.
greatest possible sacrifices for the ideal and cheerfully bore all the hardships and adversities that every new path finder meets in the way. To support his argument he lists his achievements such as organizing the zamindars on a non-religious, non-sectarian and exclusively economic programme, drastic retrenchment in the expenses of the Government, reducing taxation on the peasantry and providing relief from crushing indebtedness.

He also defends Chhotu Ram’s decision to leave the Congress in 1920 and to oppose the Non-Co-Operation Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi. Tika Ram holds that social-economic and political policies of Chhotu Ram always aimed at upliftment of the poor and down-trodden. According to him Chhotu Ram regarded the end of economic exploitation of the poor by the rich as a pre-requisite for a genuine unity between various sections of society.

Raghubir Singh Shastri’s book, ‘Choudhary Chhotu Ram: Jeevan Charit’ also supports the thesis of Tika Ram that Chhotu Ram was a patriot. The author justifies the honour given to Sir Chhotu Ram by the peasantry. He was Deenbandhu and Rehbar-i-Azam because he supported the down trodden people against the mahajans and government officials. His jat closeness has been highlighted by the author and lists his works such as starting of Jat Gazette and educational institutions. He recalls with pride, the support extended to him by Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya and his brilliant note as suggestion on the Lee Commission Report. Not only has the author credited him for his work in the field of agriculture, irrigation but also for the reservations of seats in educational institutions for agriculturists. His initiatives for the establishment of Agriculture College and Dairy Farm at Lyallpur and support to gardening and poultry farming and also setting up to cottage and rural industry also have been emphasized. The author cites many facts to prove that Chhotu Ram stood for national unity and opposed communalism. He has also highlighted Chhotu Ram’s role in the formation of
the Unionist Party. The author projects Chhotu Ram as a leader who turned down many lucrative offers of position outside Punjab because he wanted to serve the poor peasantry of Punjab. Shastri has given a graphic account of Chhotu Ram’s opposition to Jinnah’s ‘Two Nations Theory’ and his fight against the demand of Pakistan as a separate nation.\(^{18}\)

Madan Gopal, a contemporary of Chhotu Ram and the founder editor of the *Dainik Tribune* (Chandigarh), in his book, *Sir Chhotu Ram: A Political Biography*, has also supported the views of Raghbir Singh Shastri and Tika Ram. Madan Gopal further extends the scope of his claim as a great spokesman of the backward classes and backward areas. According to him the chief plank of Sir Chhotu Ram was ‘the uplift of the backward classes and backward areas’, wherever they exist, no matter whether they exist among the Hindus, the Muslims, or the Sikhs or others, he focuses attention on his work for animal husbandry, rural co-operative societies and village *panchayats*. He also says that Chhotu Ram worked hard to get the lands allotted to the lender Harijans. This was perhaps, the first time in India that the Harijans were made landlords.’ With the credibility of serving on the editorial staff of the *Civil and Military Gazette* (Lahore), he highlighted Chhotu Ram’s opposition to Jinnah. He says that Chhotu Ram basically perceived the communal problem as an economic one, and the author also revealed that Chhotu Ram was of the view that religion should never be the basis of politics. According to him, Chhotu Ram always advocated the formation of political parties on economic instead of religious basis.\(^{19}\)

Madan Gopal in his another book, *Sir Chhotu Ram: The Man and The Vision*, writes that Chhotu Ram was the dominating figure of pre-independence Punjab. Here he deals with the role of Chhotu Ram in the foundation of the Unionist Party. He argues that Chhotu Ram was influenced

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\(^{19}\) Madan Gopal, *Sir Chhotu Ram: A Political Biography*, Delhi, 1971, p. 76.
by the reformist nature of the *Arya Samaj*. He also points out that Chhotu Ram was vehemently opposed to communalism.

H. L. Agnihotri and S. N. Malik note in their book, *A Profile of Courage: A Biography of Choudhary Chhotu Ram*, that Sir Chhotu Ram richly deserves a permanent place as a spokesman of the poor peasantry and the down-trodden village masses. They highlight his work in the Legislature and outside the Legislature. They also highlight Chhotu Ram’s controversial role on the Rural Poor Unemployed Relief Bill of 1940.

Hari Singh reflects similar views in his book, *Deenbandhu Sir Chhotu Ram: Jeevan Charit*. He defends Chhotu Ram’s support to British rule as a strategy through which he wanted to help the peasantry. The author has highlighted Chhotu Ram’s stand regarding the reservation of seats for the rural areas in the Punjab legislature. He has also tried to establish that Chhotu Ram was a great nationalist.

D. C. Verma in his book, *Sir Chhotu Ram: Life and Times* has also projected Chhotu Ram as a great leader of his time. He defends the decision of Chhotu Ram to quit the Congress. According to him Chhotu Ram was the leader of the peasants and the have not’s. Chhotu Ram, he says was not only a good administrator and veteran parliamentarian but also a great leader of the peasantry. As the author worked as Chhotu Ram’s Public Relation officer, he narrates many anecdotes. The book of D. C. Verma is significant as he analyses the various dimensions of Sir Chhotu Ram’s ideology as a peasant leader. According to him, the theory of class-war, clash between the have’s and have not’s accepted by Chhotu Ram in his basic approach which considered a war between the exploiters and the exploited unavoidable.

Dr. Ranjit Singh’s book, *Chhotu Ram: Gourav Gatha* has tried to highlight the programmes and policies enacted and implemented by Chhotu Ram for the betterment of the peasantry. The author has dealt in details with
the laws made by Chhotu Ram for the amelioration of the lot of the poor peasantry and the rural classes.

Balbir Singh has written four books on Chhotu Ram. His first book, *Sir Chhotu Ram in Thoughts and Deeds*, 1994 deals mostly with the ideology and works done by Chhotu Ram. The author has attempted to remove some misunderstandings about Chhotu Ram and his way of working. He has tried to disapprove the proposition that Chhotu Ram was a stooge of the British. He disagrees with the view that Chhotu Ram was a *Bania-hater*. According to the author, Chhotu Ram was neither anti-Hindu nor pro Muslims, but a staunch supporter of Hindu-Muslim Unity.

His second publication, *Sir Chhotu Ram: The Man and His Mission*, discusses the philosophy of Chhotu Ram. The author holds the view that Chhotu Ram’s ambition was to restore the dignity of the common man. He gives credit to Chhotu Ram for conceiving the idea of construction of Bhakra Dam for irrigation and electricity. He projects Chhotu Ram as a great philosopher and legendary politician of his time.

Balbir Singh’s third book, *Sir Chhotu Ram: Selected Speeches and Writings* is a compilation of his speeches, articles and letters. He also included in this compilation an English Translation of Chhotu Ram’s monograph ‘*Bechara Zamindar*.’ In this book the author highlights the efforts made by Chhotu Ram in the Punjab Legislative Council and in the Punjab Legislative Assembly.

His fourth book, *Sir Chhotu Ram: A Saga of Inspirational Leadership*, deals with the works and ideas of Chhotu Ram for the upliftment of rural society. This book deals in details with the laws made by Chhotu Ram for the amelioration of the loot of the poor peasantry and rural masses.

The study of Ram Singh Jakhar, ‘*Rai Bahadur Sir Chhotu Ram Digdarshan*’ has severely criticized Chhotu Ram. He has not only condemned Chhotu Ram but also those writers who have praised Chhotu Ram in their
books and writings. Jakhar notes that Chhotu Ram was a stooge of the British. He notes that for the sake of wealth and land he worked against the Indian National Movement. He argues that to secure political gains Chhotu Ram divided Punjabi Society not only into different castes but in rural and urban also. According to Jakhar, the social base of the political support for Chhotu Ram was very narrow. It comprised of only Hindu Jats. According to him Chhotu Ram has done little for the nation and the peasantry.

Apart from the above mentioned writings, there are also some highly scholarly works on Chhotu Ram, namely Y. P. Bajaj and Prem Choudhary. The Ph. D. thesis of Y. P. Bajaj deserves recognition as the first scholarly work on Chhotu Ram. It is based on an in-depth analysis of the data collected from primary as well as secondary sources. Among the professional historians Y. P. Bajaj strongly supports Chhotu Ram as a peasant leader. Bajaj sees Chhotu Ram as a champion of down-trodden class and zamindar, a leader who relieved the rural folk from the clutches of the money lenders. Further, he brought the rural folk into limelight by starting an Urdu weekly ‘The Jat Gazette’. He touches on the fringe the contradiction of Chhotu Ram in relation to non-agriculturalist and moneylenders. He focuses on Chhotu Ram’s efforts to introduce many modern techniques for increasing the agriculture yields, consolidation of holdings, extension of co-operative societies, the reclamation of waste land, attention to the live-stock, the procurement of reasonable prices for the produce regulating the mandis, tackling the problem of unemployment in the rural areas, according to him Chhotu Ram was an undisputed leader of the peasantry who relieved the rural folk from the shackles of the moneylenders. He has deals with various issues in a highly systematic manner. By highlighting the works of Chhotu Ram, he projects Chhotu Ram as a leader of poor and downtrodden people.

Prem Choudhary in her book, *Punjab Politics: The Role of Sir Chhotu Ram* demolishes Chhotu Ram and argues that Chhotu Ram was loyal to the
British Empire and served the British interest and purpose. She concludes that the rise of Chhotu Ram in the Punjab politics was with the active support of the colonial administration. According to her, Chhotu Ram’s politics of collaboration strengthened the hold of the British imperialism over India. She concludes that Chhotu Ram was a stooge of the British and his activities were focused for big landlords. She sees Chhotu Ram’s stand on the Hindu-Muslim unity in the context of the complicated and religious circumstances of the time.

Nonica Dutta in her research work, *Forming an Identity: A Social History of the Jats*, highlighted the role of Chhotu Ram as an ideologue. She had analyzed his role in a proper historical context. She concluded that Chhotu Ram was neither a stooge of the British, nor a traitor. She has also briefly discussed the contribution of Chhotu Ram in improving the economic status of the peasants through numerous Legislative measures.

Apart from the above mentioned scholarly studies on Chhotu Ram, the work of Raghuvendra Tanwar provides rich information on Chhotu Ram. In his research work, *Politics of Sharing Power: The Punjab Unionist Party, 1923-1947*, Raghuvendra Tanwar has discussed the role of Chhotu Ram in the Unionist Party as well as in the Unionist government in a highly systematic manner. According to the author Chhotu Ram was, undoubtedly, a powerful minister in a Muslim landlord dominated Unionist Government, which supported the colonial administration. But he has rightly pointed out that despite this, Chhotu Ram, always worked for the poor peasantry and was a widely popular peasant leader in his time.

The existing literature on Chhotu Ram needs a balanced assessment of the conflicting opinions on his economic, social and political vision. Without succumbing to the tendency of undermining or over-rating his contribution to the peasantry, there is a need to examine his ideological actions and legacy. This is the main inspiration for this study. The socio-
economic situations and circumstances of Chhotu Ram on one hand and the socio-economic position of his caste and class on the other have been taken into account while dealing with this study.

Chhotu Ram has been studied by a number of scholars. Writings on him can be put into two sections—first comes the writing which extols his virtues and enumerate his achievements. These are written largely with a view to praise him rather than to analyze or understand him or subject him to a critical assessment. There is, thus, not only a gap in our understanding of Chhotu Ram but also the need for further studies. Keeping in view, the above stated objectives, the study has been divided into five chapters.

In the first chapter an attempt has been made to acquaint his early life, his education and formation of ideas with regard to the condition of the time especially socio-economic condition of the peasantry. The polity and economy of the then Punjab has also been discussed.

In the second chapter an attempt is made to understand in more detail his ideology and new frame of thought, with special focus to understand his social and economic ideology. In this chapter his economic and social ideas as well as initiatives have been discussed. In this chapter his works for upliftment for the rural classes have also been explained.

The third chapter forms a detail review of Chhotu Ram’s selected speeches and writings that appeared in the early years of his political career. It is important to understand his thought process in this period, because it is during those years that he laid the foundation of the concept of economic improvement of the peasantry. The chapter also focuses on the writings and public speeches of Chhotu Ram during the period 1937-1945. His writing and speeches give a clear picture of his views and ideology.

The fourth chapter attempts to understand the legacy of his policies and ideology and relevance of his ideas in the present times. The impacts of
his policies and works on the economic, social, political and educational scenario have been discussed. This chapter mainly focuses on relevance of his ideology on the present Indian society in various aspects.

The fifth chapter attempts to record some conclusive views on his works and on some important aspects of Chhotu Ram.

The study is based on primary as well as the secondary sources. The primary sources include his speeches in the Punjab Legislative Council and in the Punjab Legislative Assembly, his writings, letters, official reports and unpublished documents of his times, files of contemporary newspapers and oral sources have also been richly consulted. Several key figures and authors have also been consulted for inputs.

The secondary sources used for this study cover a large number of published books and articles dealing directly or indirectly with Chhotu Ram.

An earnest attempt has been made to maintain a high level of objectivity by basing the arguments on available and historically dependable sources.