

THE ROLE OF THE PUNJAB UNIONIST PARTY IN THE ELECTION OF 1923

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Fazal-i-Husain and Chhotu Ram worked together to form the Punjab Unionist Party in 1923. They issued an election manifesto which defined its aim as being to assist and encourage the backward classes and communities of the province¹.

Under the Montague - Chelmsford Reforms next elections to the Legislative Councils were due in 1923. Steps were taken by Fazl-i-Husain from the northern Punjab and Chhotu Ram from South-East Punjab to form the Unionist Party. It asked the voters to cast their votes on the basis of a candidate's party and not to an individual member.² The Punjab Unionist Party had the aims and objectives. The Unionist Party issued an election manifesto which held out a promise. The aims and objects of the Unionist Party were :-

- i) To promote temperance;
- ii) To preserve intact the Punjab Land Alienation Act as a measure of protection to backward classes;
- iii) To attain dominion status within the British Commonwealth of nations by constitutional means at as early a date as possible;
- iv) To demonstrate by a statesman like working of the Reforms; that given suitable opportunities and reasonable facilities, Indian are capable of shouldering the responsibilities of self government;
- v) To prove that constructive effort if directed in a spirit of good will and earnestness to the working of reforms can produce results of greater benefit to the community than a case of disdainful aloofness and destructive criticism;
- vi) To provide equal opportunities of advance to all and to direct, in an increasing measure, the beneficent activities of Government to backward classes and areas with a view to enabling them to make good the leeway produced by an ill-conceived or inadvertent policy of neglect in the past;
- vii) To secure a fair distribution of the burden of provincial taxes between agricultural and other classes;
- viii) To secure a just and fair representation of all classes and communities in the public services of the province;
- ix) To check the exploitation of economically backward classes by economically dominant classes;
- x) To promote indigenous industries and to encourage the use of Swadeshi articles;
- xi) To banish illiteracy from the province;
- xii) To encourage a policy of decentralization;

- xiii) To encourage the growth of local self-governing institutions;
- xiv) To suppress corruption and bribery;
- xv) To secure an economy in the administration; and
- xvi) To diminish litigation.³

Besides the aims and objects of the Punjab Unionist Party, the chief plank of the Unionists was "to uplift of the backward classes and backward areas, wherever they exist, no matter whether they exist among the Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs among agriculturists in rural tracts or urban tracts."⁴ Chhotu Ram remarked : "The door of admission to the party is open to all those who subscribe to the views and policy of the party and none who has a genuine feeling for the backward classes and a true sympathy with those whom the changes of life have subjected to the economic exploitation and political domination of more favoured classes of the Punjab Unionist Party."⁵

The Unionist Party led by Chhotu Ram promised to work for the development of backward classes and areas in rural population whereas the Congress was the champion of urban people. In 1923, the Unionist Party came into being which fought general elections to the Legislative Council, Central and Provincial and it was the Congress versus the Unionist Party affair.

The Unionists swept the Punjab Legislative Council elections from South-East Punjab. It captured 7 of the 8 constituencies. Coming to the Legislative Council as a whole, the Unionists swept the elections of 1923.⁶ Out of the 71 elected seats the Unionists was able to secure 33 seats in the Punjab Legislative Council in 1923.⁷ The Hindu Mahasabha could not get even a single seat. Several independents who contested were defeated badly.⁸

The Governor recognized the Punjab Unionist Party as the majority party. Fazl-i-Husain was reappointed the leader. He reappointed as Minister of Education and asked to select his colleagues from among those selected. He selected Lal Chand as Minister of Agriculture. Lal Chand a Jat agriculturist from Rohtak was elected as a supporter of the Unionist programme and enjoyed the confidence of several rural Hindu members of the Punjab Legislative Council.⁹

Chhotu Ram, the co-founder of the Unionist Party was appointed as minsiter. Sir Chhotu Ram remained the Minister of Agriculture for about six months. He handed over this ministry to Sardar Joginder Singh and served as the Minister of Education from 1925 to 1927.¹⁰

It is obvious from the foregone discussions that the brief history of the South-East Punjab as outlined here shows it constantly changing politically with the changing times best still its agrarian identity responding to tradition and the national movement. The constructive works of the Unionist Government provided them an edge over the other political parties i.e. Congress, Muslim League, Hindu Mahasabha, Nationalists and Akali Dal etc.

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