

ROLE OF UNIONIST PARTY IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR 1939-1945

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Abstract-The Unionist Party played a major role in the politics of colonial Punjab during the period of the Second World War. Dominated by Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh landlords, the party maintained political stability in Punjab while assisting the British war effort. Under leaders such as Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan and Khizar Hayat Tiwana, the Unionist Party became the principal ally of the British administration in India. The party contributed to wartime recruitment, agricultural production, and provincial governance. At the same time, the war weakened the Unionist Party politically by strengthening communal politics and enabling the growth of the All-India Muslim League. This paper examines the origins, wartime policies, political strategies, achievements, and decline of the Unionist Party during the Second World War.

Keywords-Second World War, Unionist Party, Sikander Hayat Khan, Khizar Hayat, Khan,

Objective of Study

1. To examine the origin and political ideology of the Unionist Party in Punjab and understand its socio-political base.
2. To study the contribution of Punjab in military recruitment during the war under the leadership of the Unionist Party.
3. To understand the impact of Second World War on Punjab politics and the rise of communal politics in the provinces.
4. To assess the causes behind the decline of the Unionist Party after the death of Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan and during the 1940.
5. To examine the historical importance of the Unionist Party as a cross-communal political organization in pre-partition Punjab.

Introduction-The world has witnessed two wars in which not only two specific regions or countries, but almost all the countries of the world took part. The first war lasted from 1914 to 1918 and the second was fought in 1939 to 1945.¹ The Second World War is also called a Global War or Total War. This war started on 1st September, 1939 at 4'o clock with Germany's chancellor Adolf Hitler's attack on Poland. For the safety of Poland European countries like England, Russia, France and America (United States) and other countries announced war against Hitler on 3rd September, 1939. Not any single country, but the whole world was taking part in this war directly or indirectly.²

England was a powerful country and had established its colonies in various continents. India was one of those countries where England had established its control. Under the control of England, India became indirectly a part of the Second World War.³ On 3rd September, 1939 India's Viceroy Lord Linlithgow announced on radio from Shimla at 8.30 p.m. that India is also taking part in this World War.⁴ Before this announcement the Viceroy

¹ Balwinder Singh Chahal, *Sikh Soldiers in Italy (Second World War)*, European Punjabi Sath, Walsall England, 2017, p.17.

² Winston S.Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol.1, Cassell and Co. LTD, London, 1948, p.61.

³ Johannes.H.Vought, *India in the Second World War*, Arnold Heinemann, New Delhi, 1987, p.59.

⁴ *The Times of India*, Delhi, 4 September 1939, p.1.

Lord Linlithgow did not consult any Indian political party as the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League, the Unionist Party, and the Shiromni Akali Dal Party. That is why Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the leader of the Indian National Congress and Mahatma Gandhi refused to support.⁵ At that time it was only Punjab State that extended economic, political help to England alongside help with man power matters as compare to other States. The Unionist party was governing Punjab during the Second World War. This party openly supported England.⁶ The Unionist Party was the biggest party in Punjab at that time. It was formed by Fazal-i- Hussain and Chaudhary Chhotu Ram in 1923 in Lahore.⁷ Its full name was Punjab National Unionist Party or Zamindara Party. They formed it with their vision to attain rights of the backward classes, labourers and farmers. Although a majority of the Unionist party workers were Muslims, yet the party had support of Hindus and Sikhs in large numbers.⁸

Under the Government of India Act of 1935, the British Government handed over the Provincial powers to the Indians. In 1937, British Government held first Provincial Elections in India. In these elections the Unionist party won over 99 seats out of 175. The Indian National Congress and the Muslim league won 19 seats only.⁹ That is why during the time of state leadership people had the greatest village co-ordination and power control along with the British kingdom. The Unionist Party consolidated its strong position in 1938 by embarking on preparations for agricultural reforms. In 1938, 150,000 (one hundred fifty thousand) people attended the Agriculturalists Conference in Lyallpur, including Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. The Unionist Party leader Chaudhary Chhotu Ram and Sikandar Hayat Khan also attended the conference. It tried to control the influence of landlords. Because of this work the Unionist Party became famous worldwide.¹⁰ The British Government took advantage this popularity of the Unionist Party in 1939. The British Government has already taken farmers of Punjab to their side by making some improvements in the agriculture system. Apart from it, the British Government had earlier seen the courage, fearlessness and honesty of the Punjabis in many wars. That is why they needed full co-ordination and support of Punjabis.¹¹

During the Second World War, the main reason to support the British Government by the Unionist party was the trust of Punjab Chief Minister Sikandar Hayat Khan to get co-operation of the British Government against Germany, because they believed that this co-operation would be beneficial for India. They also believed that after the war it would play a great role in attaining freedom for India.¹² The majority of Indians especially Punjabis were serving in the British Indian Army. Therefore, the Muslim League also co-operated with the Unionist party's decision. They also announced to support the British Government completely to achieve their purpose.¹³

The Unionist party held many meetings, conferences in support of the British Government in the Second World War. The Unionist party did more than hundred meetings only in Amritsar district and these meetings received great support from the people. As a result, the hopes of the Indian National Congress for support from the villages received a major blow. To challenge the popularity of the Unionist party, the Punjab Muslim League was nothing more than a small group of lawyers and a weak political party.¹⁴ The Unionist party helped British district officers as honorary Magistrates or Zaildars. It was the duty of Zaildars to keep between ten to thirty villages officials of circle under control to help. It also had the heads of the villages

⁵ Manzoor Ahmed, *Indian Response to the Second World War*, Intellectual Publishing House, 1987, p.117.

⁶ *Ibid*, pp.118-119.

⁷ Harchran Singh Bajwa, *Fifty Years of Punjab Politics 1920-1970*, Modern Publishers, Chandigarh, 1979, p.48.

⁸ Azim Husain, *Fazal-i-Husain A Political Biography*, Jumhoori Publications, Bombay, 1946, p.42

⁹ *The Akali*, Lahore, 3 March, 1937, p.1

¹⁰ Mughees Ahmed, Political Outfits of Political Parties in British India A Study of Unionist Party, *Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol.29, No.2, July, 2014, p.538.

¹¹ Kaushik Roy, *India and World War II -War, Armed Forces and Society 1939-1945*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2016, p.86.

¹² *Ibid*, p.87.

¹³ Lajpat Rai Nair, *Sikandar Hayat Khan :The Soldiers State Man of the Punjab*, Institute of Current Affairs, Lahore, 1943, p.15.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.16.

(Numberdars) under control and worked as honorary police officers.¹⁵ The British Government had already formed an alliance with the landlords and this alliance proved to be helpful during the Second World War.¹⁶

The Unionist party's leaders were owners of numerous acres of land. This relation between the British officers and owners of lands maintained stability of Punjab in the First and Second World War.¹⁷ First of all the leader of the Unionist party Khizar Hayat Khan Tiwana decided to give his services as Second World War started.¹⁸ The Unionist Party leader Sikandar Hayat Khan made different teams of ministers and sent them towards the districts of Punjab. Khizar Hayat Khan Tiwana spent many days in different districts, he left from Rawalpindi,¹⁹ and organized a big Zamindara Conference outside Lahore in 1939. Sikandar Hayat Khan and Chaudhary Chhotu Ram reached to venue by riding an elephant. This conference's main aim was to show government's power and Punjab nationalism towards the British Empire. They appealed to the Punjabis to join the British Indian Army.²⁰ They also announced the listeners that it would end the communal feeling whether they are Hindu, Sikh or Muslims, because every Indian would be given a place in the British Indian army without any discrimination. One person from the family was made compulsory to join the army at that time.²¹ The Unionist party made dominance of Punjab National War Fronts to get co-operation of people of the Punjab. This war front that's president were Sikandar Hayat Khan and Khizar Hayat Khan Tiwana, different meetings were organized by them.²² In April, 1943, the Unionist Party organized different meetings in Montgomery and Rawalpindi. First public meeting occurred on 12 April, 1943 in Montgomery's animal fair ground. They explained National War Fronts and things to encourage people to join the army and golden watches were distributed to officers who selected extra subordinate. Deputy Commissioner Abdual Hamid collected one lakh rupees in this function to support during war.²³ After six days of the meeting, second meeting of Punjab National War Front was organized in Rawalpindi, Khizar Hayat Khan Tiwana joined this meeting. Old military vehicles' line was arranged (To get people's attention). He also mentioned in his speech that from now we should not hesitate to co-operate the British Government. Whoever have sacrificed they are laying foundation of freedom of India and every Indian should contribute in this work. It was said by him to try to categories a deserving place in constitution for Martial Castes (a designation which was created by army officials in British India after the Revolt of the 1857) during coming time.²⁴ The Unionist party leaders helped the British Government honestly during the Second World War. They helped to recruit almost one million soldiers in the British Indian Army and to save on large scale. The Unionist Party exported 23,624 tan of wheat and 12,392 tan of rice to help the England Government in 1943. The Special Wagon Vehicles were arranged to send them.²⁵

The Unionist Party also focused more on recruiting centre. They knew that military vote can play a vital role in any election competition in future. In October, 1944, Rawalpindi district's Chief recruiting centre, Kathua was visited by the Unionist party leaders and it was told to be the best Tehsil related to recruitment.²⁶ The Unionist party demanded for the first time to make different and special areas for soldiers. In Zamindara meeting of January 1945, the promise to add the demand into futuristic Constitution of India was made surely.²⁷ But we see, as the time of Second World War was extended then the recruiting count and supply of

¹⁵ Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj 1849-1947*, Monohar Publications, New Delhi, 1988, p.146.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.147,

¹⁷ Ian Talbot, *The Second World War and Local Indian Politics 1939-1947*, Taylor and Francis, 1984, p.596.

¹⁸ Ian Talbot, *Khizar Tiwana The Punjab Unionist Party and the Partition of India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, p.133

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp.133-134.

²⁰ Kaushik Roy, *India and World War II - War, Armed Forces and Society 1939-1945*, p.139.

²¹ *Ibid*, pp.213-214.

²² Lajpat Rai Nair, *Sikandar Hayat Khan -The Soldiers State Man of the Punjab*, p.200.

²³ Ian Talbot, *Khizar Tiwana The Punjab Unionist Party and the Partition of India*, p.136.

²⁴ *Ibid*, pp.137-138.

²⁵ *The Daily Akali*, Lahore, 4 September, 1943, p.4.

²⁶ *The Akali*, Lahore, 10 October, 1944, p.4.

²⁷ Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj 1849-1947*, p.142.

other things and because of other prices, bad impact on it was being noticed.²⁸ Due to the damage in Second World War every country faced economic depression. The Unionist party from Punjab was being unable to cooperate or help. Till that time the power of the Unionist Party stated declining. There were many reasons of it, Punjab that was helping the British Government in economical way it also had to face financial loss. Apart from it, other political parties like the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League were again increasing their impact in Punjab.²⁹

During the last days of the Second World War, England Government could not help Punjab due to lack of funds. Apart from it, because of death of Sikandar Hayat Khan and Choudhary Chhotu Ram in 1942, the Unionist party conflicts started rising.³⁰ As the time of war kept increasing inflation in Punjab reduced the profit with the rise of prices for crops wheat, maize, rice and millet. Retail index point of Lahore has been risen to 398 till August 1945 that was standing on 100 in August 1939. The landlords were influenced badly with huge and continue decline in the price of agricultural commodities.³¹ Because of the stress between village labourers and Ludhiana's district farmers they said no to provide their services in 1944. On the other side, August 1945 America (United States) used nuclear bombs against two cities of Japan Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Japan's power was destroyed by using it.³² So, finally on 2nd September, 1945, the Second World War was ended up with death of millions of people, loss, increased inflation and unemployment. On the other side despite co-operating the British Government, the Unionist party had to face defeat in the elections of 1946.³³

Despite providing their services during the war military had to face unemployment. By the end of 1946 only 20% registered retired military men could get work because of the exchange of employment. The government of the Unionist Party proposed with the bonus of only four rupees and fifty thousand acres of land for the half million soldiers of the State, who were returning back. Under the leadership of Khizr Hayat Tiwana, who also served on the Punjab War Board Committee, the government undertook the task of reintegrating soldiers into society, however this work stalled around 1946-47 due to political instability. During 1945-46 this effort was hampered by the large number of discharged soldiers and the growing influence of the Muslim League, which weakened the unionist party's hold in rural areas. Furthermore, many soldiers faced financial hardship immediately after the war. There was nothing under the scheme of reconstruction which they were hoping from Government to be arranged.³⁴ Country made soldiers' counting was 4, 86,000 up until March 1946 and till September 1946 it reached to 5, 29,000.³⁵ That is why during the elections of 1946 other parties elaborated the difficulties of ex-soldiers during election campaign. There could not be seen any success to prevent inflation, unemployment, profiteering by the Unionist party. That is why strikes against the Government were seen in big cities.³⁶

Conclusion:

The role of the Unionist party in the Second World War shows that even though it co-operated with the British Government so that England could face Germany, it could not keep hold of the events in Punjab. Even after the support of the Indians, opposite to the expectations of the Unionist Party, the British did not think about freeing the country. The Unionist Party was one such party in Punjab, which despite being a major party like the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League at that time, had a greater impact on the people of Punjab. This party not only made rapid progress but also tried to keep the political barrier and political strife in Punjab away from the initial hurdles. By the time party came into power, it was important not only for the

²⁸ *Ibid*, p.143.

²⁹ Kaushik Roy, *India and World War II - War, Armed Forces and Society 1939-1945*, p.142.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.144.

³¹ Ian Talbot, *Khizar Tiwana The Punjab Unionist Party and the Partition of India*, p.135.

³² *The Daily Akali*, Lahore, 9 August, 1945, p.1.

³³ D.K.Malhotra, *Annual Review of Economic Conditions of the Punjab 1945-1946*, BEIP, Lahore, 1946.p.4.

³⁴ *The Daily Akali*, Lahore, 19 September, 1945, p.5.

³⁵ Nandan Prasad, *Expansion of the Armed Forces and Defence Organization 1939-1945*, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2011, p.195.

³⁶ Manzoor Ahmed, *Indian Response to the Second World War*, p.20.

British but also for Pakistan's demand. This party played a dynamic role from the beginning of the Second World War to 1942.

The Unionist Party used its wisdom to increase the unity between Muslims and Non-Muslims and see the British gaining self-rule after the war. The leaders of party appealed from time to time to the people of Punjab for financial support and joined the British Indian Army. However, despite all this the Second World War not only weakened the local roots of British political power in India, but also shook the foundations of the Unionist Party. Although the British Government expressed its view on the Unionist party's major contribution in the Second World War. But the Second World War put so much pressure on the British Indian government that it was forced to desert its Unionist allies and ordered them to adopt unpopular rationing and requisitioning policies which undermined their position. Thus, the British Government bowed to the traditional policy by sidelining the Unionist Party's loyalty that put the party in a difficult position.

The hope for the unity of Hindu- Muslim began to fade. The Indian National Congress's power and the Muslim League's power of Pakistan were getting higher. The economic crises and unemployment affected the influence of the Unionist Party in Punjab. The downfall of the Unionist Party after the Second World War was not sudden, but rather the result of profound structural, political and ideological changes that transformed Punjabi society during the last decade of British rule. The party, once known as a successful model of inter communal cooperation, eventually fell victim to the shift from elite dominated colonial politics to a board democratic movement. The unionist system rested on a delicate balance of agricultural interest maintained by network of patronage, kinship and British administrative support. However wartime changes particularly economic instability conscription and growing political awareness were weakening this rural order. Many of the social groups that had formed the backbone of unionist. The Unionist party's leaders Sikandar Hayat Khan, Chaudhary Chhotu Ram, Khizar Hayat Khan Tiwana bore good behavior towards the British Government under their policy of wisdom. However, after the elections of 1946 the influence of the Unionist party vanished out in Punjab.

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