
Social Background of Followers of Sodhis of Guru Har Sahai in Punjab

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ABSTRACT:

In this paper an attempt has been made to trace the social background of the followers of Sodhis of Guru Har Sahai. As noticed earlier there are some works which give brief information about the followers of Sodhis of Guru Har Sahai but of 18th century. We have some references that these followers belonged to the Khatri and Arora castes. Majority of them were non-agriculturists. Since then there should have several changes in their background. However, there is no work which gives information about these changes. We are told that by the patrons of Pothimala that these followers are in thousand and are spread over to the different towns and villages in India. In Punjab, there are some major concentrations of these followers in Amritsar, Jalandhar, Khanna and Ferozepur. For want of time and space and sources at our disposal, we could not conduct a comprehensive survey of followers in the Punjab. Majority of them came from Pakistan during and after the partition and have settled in the urban centres of Punjab.

INTRODUCTION:

The *Mina* sect starts with Prithi Chand, the elder son of Guru Ram Dasⁱ. Guru Ram Das had three sons: Prithi Chand, Mahan Dev and Guru Arjanⁱⁱ. Guru Ram Das descendants reverently called Sodhi Sahibzade. Guru Ram Das appointed his younger son Arjan to succeed him as guru. His elder son Prithi Chand offended by what he considered an unjust confiscation of his right, declared himself as the sect called by the rightful Guru and established a separate sect called by the mainstream Sikhs, *Minas*ⁱⁱⁱ. Thus the descendants of Guru Arjan came to be called Sodhi Sahibzade of *vadde mel* and those of Prithi Chand Sodhi Sahibzade of *chhote mel*. The principal seat of Sodhis of *vadde mel* are at Anandpur sahib in Ropar district and Kartarpur in Jalandhar district and those of *chhote mel* at Guru Har Sahai, Kotha Guru, Dhilwan and Muktsar, all in the Malwa region^{iv}. The Sodhis of Guru Hari Sahai in Ferozepur district manage a shrine called *Pothimala*, so named because according to Sikh tradition it contained a *Pothi* or sacred scripture and a *Mala* or rosary belong to Guru Nanak^v.

During 1947, when the British Punjab was divided by the award of Boundary Commission headed by an English Barrister Sir Cyril Radcliffe. The award was enforced by the Punjab Boundary Force comprising over 50,000, Indian troops of mixed units. According to this award, the boundary line of East Punjab of India and West Punjab of Pakistan existed around River Ravi down to Ajnala Tehsil in the Upper Bari Doab and dividing line between the tehsils of Ferozepur and Lahore in Lower Bari Doab.^{vi} It was badly equipped Boundary Force which failed to check the general slaughter and prevent a complete holocaust in Lahore and Amritsar.^{vii} “After 15 August, the rioting in both halves of the Punjab set going a vast movement of mass migration which nobody had foreseen and nobody could arrest and which in three months emptied East Punjab of all Muslims and west Punjab of all Hindu and Sikhs”. The mass migration took place

by Railways and motors.^{viii} The railways trains carried the largest number of refugees. It is estimated that more than two million people crossed the border by trains within two months or so. About five or six trains crossed the border everyday and ever train crossed was full to capacity.^{ix} Thus in 42 days, 24 non Muslim foot columns, 8,49,000 strong with hundreds of bullock carts and other head of cattle, crossed the border into India under difficult and hazardous conditions.^x

It was estimated that nearly 21 lakh of Muslim refugees had moved into the West Punjab since 1 August, 1947 and during the same period 20 lakh of non-Muslim had left for the East Punjab. The non-Muslim population of the West Punjab, according to the 1941 Census, was 38 lakh and the Muslim population in East Punjab was about 53 lakh. The balance to be moved, therefore, was 32 lakh Muslims and 18 lakh non Muslims.^{xi}

The cross-migration of the population created a number of problems for the newly born states of East Punjab and West Punjab. The refugees in the West Punjab were mostly concentrated in fourteen refugee camp located between Kasur and Attock, their main camps being at Lahore, Lyallpur and Montgomery. By January, 1948, the number of the refugee camps rose to seventy-five.^{xii} The East Punjab Government set up 21 refugee camps in different districts in the East Punjab. The refugees were to first report at Transit Camps opened at the entry points like Fazilka, Ferozepur, Khem-Karan, Atari, Amritsar and Dera Baba Nanak, from where they were to proceed to the area allocated to them under the central plan. They could stay in the refugee camp of the area till alternative arrangements for their settlements were made for them either by the state or by the friends and relatives.^{xiii} The population of these refugee camps had risen above 7½ lakh in November, 1947. A separate Rescue Home for women was also set up at Jalandhar, with accommodation for 800 to 900 women.^{xiv}

Both the governments of India and Pakistan had to open Rehabilitation Department for the care and rehabilitation of refugees.

Most of the followers of Sodhi Guru Har Sahai have migrated from Pakistan after the partition of Punjab in A.D. 1947. Before partition they had been residing in Kabul, Pak-Pattan, Bahawalpur, Vazeerpur, Peshawar and Lahore. In terms of numbers, the position of these followers was vulnerable particularly in the North-West Frontier. According to the Census of 1941, the total population of the North-West Frontier Province was 30.38 lakhs of which 91.79 per cent were Muslims. The districts of Dera Ismail Khan and Bannu had the largest proportion of non Muslims who comprised 14.2 and 13 per cent respectively. In the rural areas the Hindus formed a very small and helpless minority of the population. The members of their community were mostly petty shopkeepers and traders. The position of the Hindus in the cities was stronger. Their business was more lucrative.^{xv}

The rioting, killing and anti-Hindu activities in the North-West Frontier passed through three successive phase: (1) from the beginning of 1946 till about the third week of February 1947; (2) from February 20, 1947, till August 22, 1947, and (3) from August 22, 1947, till the beginning of 1948.^{xvi}

Rioting began in a number of villages in the beginning of December 1946. The shops of Hindus and Sikhs were looted and set fire to. In some villages a few non-Muslims were murdered. There were instances of desecration of Gurdwaras and temples, but the energies of the Muslim mobs

were concentrated chiefly on looting and burning. A Sikh woman whose husband was murdered by the rioters was abducted in the end of December, and forcibly married to the Muslim.^{xvii}

On May a number of villages in Kohat District was attacked by Muslims mobs. The casualties in these villages were not large because the number of non-Muslims was extremely small.^{xviii}

In the last week of August rioting on a very large scale broke out in the town of Haripur. Almost the entire Hindu property in the town was destroyed. The Hindu population, numbering several thousand, was taken to a refugee camp was attacked by Muslims and three hundred refugees were killed. In the beginning of September, arson, looting and killing started in Peshawar city. Muslims looted and burnt shops houses belonging to non-Muslims. The attack this time was more determined. In order to ward off this attack, the Muslims were asked to arm and collect themselves in large numbers. The mob proceeded against the imaginary Sikh assailants and attacked the suburbs of Peshawar. They invaded the city and went about looting, burning and killing. Some of the rioters were seen going about in jeeps and cars. During that time there was a lot of violence in everywhere. It is difficult to assess the total number of deadhead loss of property.^{xix}

Seen in the wake of communal violence which engulfed the entire region, one is tempted to conclude that the followers of the Sodhi Har Sahai too suffered. However, experiences narrated by some of these followers of Pishauri Nagar, Chheharta Amritsar partly confirm the story of communal holocaust. To begin with, these followers had accommodative relations with the Muslims. They used to attend the marriage ceremonies and other festival ties with specific managing of dinners and launches. After the partition, the attitude of the Muslims underwent a radical change and they became hostile. The inter-relations between the two Muslim and non-Muslim communities were disturbed and extended to ravage the non-Muslims. During and after the partition, the followers of Sodhis were compelled to leave their native villages and towns. The basic reason for their ultimate migration was, that the Muslim elites, wanted to grab their households and business. They began to create troubles for the Hindus. The mischievous Muslim element began to torture them by various wicked ways.

These followers felt fear of death and capital loss from Muslims and considered better to move to India. Surprisingly, these people suffered no loss of life and arrived into India safely on different occasions. They moved in numerous groups of 50-100 persons. They had to leave their trade, land, business centers, homes and liquid capital including gold and silver ornaments. Most of them crossed the Radcliff line from the border areas of Amritsar and Ferozepur.

In general sense, the pattern of the migration of the followers of Sodhi's during partition times was not different from the pattern of migration of the Hindus and Sikhs. For they were the part of long caravans facing the natural calamities and marauding columns of the Muslims in west and Muslims facing similar calamities of the hands of the Hindus and Sikhs in East Punjab. An interesting feature of their migration was that they came to India in phases. First their migration continued until A.D. 1974. Even some of such families migrated to India during the year 1980-84. Similarly, like their counterparts they stayed in the refugee camps temporarily raised by provincial government of Punjab in the towns of Amritsar, Jalandhar and Ferozepur. In these camps, thousand of these refugees took shelter for some weeks and months and then moved to those different places where either they could stay with their relations or with their biradarries they belonged to. Mostly they stayed there for some months. The Government of India provided

them necessary requirements like beds and other necessities of daily life. Afterwards, the government issued them a grant of Rupees two thousand per family to resettle themselves. These people who had already borne the crisis of political upheavals collectively or in groups, purchased some land to build houses to reside in. They established specific localities in numerous cities of Eastern Punjab and outside Punjab i.e. *Pishorian da Mohalla* in Amritsar, *Bhargo camps* and *Model house* in Jalandhar, *New Model Town* in Khanna, *New Janta Colony* in Faridabad. The migrants who arrived through Ferozepur, they settled at Guru Har Sahai, Fazilka, Abhor and Sri Ganga Nagar. The people who arrived through this way did not settle in specific colonies or localities i.e. Mohalla.

While leaving their mother land in Pakistan, these people suffered financially. They had to leave their shops, residential houses and cultivation lands. They could not receive sufficient claims for want of their lost claims. For example, the family of *Janak Lal Matta* suffered a big loss. He had landed property and was a richman of the area. His father was illiterate and could not get his land entered in the border records. Due to this omission, he got no claim or financial help from the Government of India. He had to do the manual labour to fulfill the needs of his family. Janak Lal was no exception. Almost all the followers of Sodhi Guru Har Sahai, suffered financially like their counterparts, Hindus and Sikhs. These followers were forced to quit their homes and build up new homes in the land of strangers. The natives of villages and towns of east Punjab did not accept these migrants as their own co-religionists but addressed them as *pnahgeers* or refugees. In this hour of crisis, Guru Jaswant Singh, offered lands at Guru Har Sahai to settle his followers but they did not accept the Guru's offer. They believed that guru was authorized to receive gifts from followers. They followers have no right to use the guru's belongings.

The men and women and grown up children, strove hard to keep life going on. They did not have any option but to do 'work' which included manual labour (skilled and unskilled) running petty shops and performing domestic chores. In this sense, the experiences of followers of Sodhi and other migrants were common.

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