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Architectures of Control: Paternalism, Agrarian Order, and Militarization in Colonial Punjab

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the foundational mechanisms of British colonial governance in Punjab from its annexation in 1849. It details how early British administrators utilized a system of bureaucratic paternalism to pacify this strategic borderland, prioritizing order and agrarian stability over democratic representation. By examining structural policies such as the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900 and the Canal Colonies, the paper illustrates the calculated co-optation of landed elites and the creation of a loyalist political class. Furthermore, it investigates the institutionalization of religious and communal identities via census and separate electorates, alongside the profound militarization that transformed Punjab into the "sword arm of the Raj," effectively stifling inclusive political development in favor of imperial control.

Keywords: Architecture, Control, Paternalism, Agrarian Order, Militarization, Colonial.

Introduction

Punjab was annexed by the British in 1849 as a "governable frontier," a strategic borderland that the colonial state sought to pacify and harness rather than treat like a typical Indian province. Early British administrators in Punjab, notably the Lawrence brothers, developed an ethos of muscular paternalism: they rode across rural Punjab on horseback, dispensing personal justice and cultivating loyal local intermediaries. This style, later formalized as the "Punjab School" of governance, prized energetic bureaucracy and close supervision of villages over any notion of representative politics. British officials after 1857 lauded Punjab as the "sword arm of the Raj"—a province uniquely loyal, militarized, and agriculturally productive, critical for the empire's stability. The colonial state's perception of Punjab thus emphasized order, loyalty, and agrarian stability above all.

Yet the central argument of this chapter is that colonial Punjab's politics were shaped far less by democratic institutions than by an architecture of control: a system of bureaucratic paternalism, landed elite mediation, and communal management designed to maintain British dominance. Unlike provinces where Indian nationalism made early inroads, Punjab's public life was channeled into loyalty rather than dissent. The colonial government governed through a tight-knit cadre of officials and collaborators, preferring "order" over "participation" in administration. Elected councils, when introduced, had minimal power, and popular politics were subordinated to bureaucratic rule. Influential landlords, chiefs, and *pirs* (Muslim spiritual leaders) became brokers of state patronage, linking the colonial state to rural society in exchange for titles and rewards. Meanwhile, the British institutionalized religious and communal identities through censuses, legal categories, and separate

electorates as a deliberate strategy to segment Punjab's society and preempt any united challenge to colonial authority.

Situating Punjab within South Asian colonial historiography raises the question of exceptionalism vs. integration. Older colonial narratives long held Punjab to be an exceptional case: a loyal bulwark of empire relatively untouched by the Indian National Congress and "sedition". Indeed, Punjab's experience can seem exceptional; it largely escaped the 1857 Rebellion (instead supplying troops to quell it), and until the 1940s it saw less mass nationalist agitation than Bengal or the United Provinces. Some British officials touted Punjab as a model, crediting their paternalist policies for its stability. However, recent scholarship challenges the notion that Punjab was merely a "favored child" of an empire insulated from the pressures of colonial underdevelopment. Historians like Imran Ali and Mridula Mukherjee argue that beneath Punjab's veneer of prosperity lay the same extractive economics and social stresses found elsewhere. Furthermore, the late but accelerated politicization of Punjab in the 1940s—culminating in the province's central role in Partition's tragedy—suggests that Punjab was not outside the main currents of South Asian history, but rather on a delayed timeline. In this chapter, we integrate Punjab's story into the broader colonial context while recognizing its distinctive features. We examine how British rule in Punjab constructed an elaborate architecture of control and how this architecture, seemingly solid for decades, ultimately collapsed in crisis. Punjab's experience offers a crucial lens on colonial governance, communalism, and state formation in South Asia, underscoring why understanding Punjab is vital to understanding the subcontinent's political history.

The Colonial State and the Logic of Control

From the moment of annexation, the British treated Punjab as an administrative laboratory where new methods of control could be tested. Lord Dalhousie set up a special Board of Administration in 1849, headed by Henry and John Lawrence, granting them extraordinary powers to reshape governance. In these early years, Punjab became a showcase for highly centralized bureaucratic rule. John Lawrence, who became the first Chief Commissioner and later Lieutenant Governor, famously preferred "writing to riding," instituting formal rules and reports to replace his brother's informal charisma. This system placed the bureaucracy firmly above politics: district officers (deputy commissioners) wielded near-autocratic powers in their domains, and the ordinary Punjabi had no recourse to any representative body. As historian Rajit Mazumder notes, colonial Punjab's administration combined civil and military authority in an unusually integrated way, blurring lines between governance and garrison. The overriding logic was preventive control to preempt dissent by tightly regulating rural life, dispensing patronage to loyalists, and enforcing laws that buttressed the social order.

Legal and institutional innovations underpinned this architecture of control. A prime example was the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900, a landmark law born of bureaucratic anxiety over rural unrest. In the late 19th century, Punjab's agricultural economy boomed; improved irrigation, railways, and high prices led to soaring land values. But prosperity brought peasant indebtedness: many cultivators, enticed by easy credit, mortgaged fields to moneylenders to finance weddings or farm improvements. By the 1890s, colonial officials grew alarmed as "land began to pass into the moneylenders' hands at an alarming rate," especially in western Punjab. Officers like Denzil Ibbetson and Sir Sydney Thorburn warned that if "absentee" urban moneylenders (often Hindu or Sikh) dispossessed the peasant proprietors (often Muslim or Sikh Jats), the resulting social upheaval could threaten British rule. The solution was bold social engineering: the 1900 Land Alienation Act "prevented the urban commercial castes from permanently acquiring land held by the 'agricultural tribes,'" essentially freezing land

ownership within designated farming communities. This paternalistic law was explicitly designed to maintain rural stability at the expense of free-market forces. British officials hailed it as having “achieved its main objective” of stopping distress sales of land and curbing the Punjabi peasant’s “habits of profuse extravagance”. By protecting the yeoman farmer from bankruptcy (and protecting the state’s “loyal” recruitment base from disruption), the Act epitomized the colonial preference for order over economic liberalism. It also effectively bailed out the landed classes and tied their fortunes to the regime. The Land Alienation Act became, in one official’s words, the “Magna Carta of the Punjab’s peasantry,” binding them to the colonial state in gratitude and expectation of protection.

Another instrument of control was the development of the Canal Colonies, a massive state-directed agrarian expansion that served both economic and political ends. Beginning in the 1880s, the British built giant canal networks to irrigate the arid plains of Western Punjab, creating nine “canal colony” settlement areas by 1940. These colonies, carved out of so-called wastelands, were settled by Punjabi farmers relocated from overcrowded districts. While boosting agricultural output and revenue, the colonies were also “destined to...create loyal support amongst peasants or landholders”. The government carefully managed allotments of the newly irrigated land, using them as rewards for loyalty. Large tracts were reserved for loyalist landlords and retired soldiers; for example, 7.5% of the Lower Bari Doab colony lands were granted to big landholders like the Noons and Tiwanas, families with distinguished records of service to the Raj. These patronage grants cemented a class of influential colonists who owed their prosperity to British favoritism. More broadly, every ordinary peasant selected for colony settlement had to meet criteria (often including a record of good behavior) and became beholden to the state for his holding. As one scholar observes, “loyalty clauses were written into” the colony contracts—a settler who joined seditious agitation could theoretically lose his plot. The Canal Colonies thus embodied paternalistic interventionism: the Raj presented them as benevolent investments in Punjab’s progress, even as it harnessed them to social engineering goals. By populating the frontier with contented farmers and demobilized sepoys, the British hoped to secure a “loyal peasantry” that would stick with the status quo. Indeed, the colonies were touted as proof of Britain’s gifts to Punjab, a narrative that fostered pride and loyalty among beneficiaries. Critics later argued that this policy left a legacy of political underdevelopment, concentrating land and influence in a few hands and discouraging challenges to colonial authority. But from the rulers’ standpoint, the Canal Colony strategy was a triumphant melding of economic and political control.

Through measures like the Land Alienation Act and the Canal Colonies, the colonial state in Punjab privileged “order” over “participation”. Instead of empowering a representative public sphere, it doubled down on technocratic control and “protective” laws to prevent any destabilizing social change. Taxes were kept relatively light and grain prices stable to avoid peasant unrest. The legal system in Punjab took on a dual character: modern in criminal and commercial law, but markedly “traditional” in personal and land law. Customary law (often specific to each tribe or locality) was codified and enforced in matters like inheritance—a conscious choice to buttress the “indigenous” social hierarchy rather than impose egalitarian principles. For example, under many tribal customs, women’s inheritance rights were weaker than under Islamic law, which the British preferred since it preserved patriarchal authority in the village. Such policies were part of what scholar David Washbrook termed a “Janus-faced” legal order: one face promoting commerce and a modern economy, the other shoring up feudal-style “primordial” relations. In Punjab, the “private,” traditional side was unusually prominent, reflecting the regime’s deliberate alliance with rural power-holders. The British

believed this approach kept the countryside quiescent and loyal. They were not entirely wrong; for decades, Punjab remained relatively free of the tumult that visited other provinces. But, as later sections will explore, the long-term costs of sidelining political participation were immense.

Land, Loyalty, and the Making of a Political Class

Colonial Punjab's agrarian order was the bedrock of its politics. In a province where over 80% of the population lived by farming, control over land was tantamount to control over society. The British understood this well and, after some early hesitation, embraced Punjab's landed elites as indispensable partners in governance. The Punjab of Maharaja Ranjit Singh had been a patchwork of feudal chiefs, many of whom the British had initially dispossessed upon annexation in 1849. But faced with the challenges of ruling a frontier province and the shock of the 1857 rebellion elsewhere, the colonial state soon moved to "co-opt and reward local elites". During the 1857 uprising, Punjab's landlords and princes famously rallied to British support, raising "about 14,000" irregular troops to help crush the rebellion. Even before the fighting ended, the British had begun lavishly rewarding those Sikh and Muslim chiefs who remained loyal; "dozens were given honorific titles, cash gifts, *jagirs*, pensions, and land grants". This aristocratic alliance marked a crucial turning point. After 1857, British policy across India swung toward conciliation of traditional elites (the so-called "aristocratic reaction"), and in Punjab especially, the old ruling families were largely restored to prominence under imperial patronage. As one observer put it, Punjab's once-dispossessed chiefs were "resurrected" by British policy converted from semi-sovereign princes into loyalist landlords who wielded local influence but depended on colonial favor.

Over the late 19th century, the British systematically manufactured a collaborative political class atop Punjab's agrarian hierarchy. They did so by formalizing the role of landed intermediaries in administration. New local offices were created explicitly for respectable natives: Zaildars, Honorary Magistrates, *Jagirdari* (estate) magistrates, and so forth. The zaildar in particular—a rural overlord appointed to oversee a "zail" (a group of villages)—was "unique to Punjab's local administration" and reflected how crucial co-opting village notables had become. Chosen for their loyalty and social standing, zaildars were paid a small stipend and given police and revenue duties, essentially becoming the eyes and ears of the Raj in the villages. They and other "intermediaries" mediated disputes, delivered revenue, recruited soldiers, and ensured order, blending colonial authority with indigenous legitimacy. At the district level, influential landlords were nominated to District Boards and given seats on the governor's legislative council (when it was established). "Every tier of this administration from top to bottom" integrated trusted locals, as the Punjab School of administration held that personal ties with native society were key to stability. The British also cultivated the religious gentry, the *pirs* and *sajjada nashins* (hereditary shrine custodians) who commanded spiritual followings among Muslim peasants. Granting these clerical landowners large *jagirs* and allowances, the government enlisted their influence to keep the rural folk loyal and quiescent. Notably, Muslim *pirs* in west Punjab and Sikh religious leaders in east Punjab often urged their flocks to support British war efforts or refrain from joining nationalist agitations. In return, the Raj heaped them with honors.

Indeed, titles and honors became a veritable currency of colonial politics. The Punjab administration distributed an impressive array of titles (Rai Bahadur, Khan Bahadur, Sardar Bahadur, etc.), orders of merit, and honorific offices to loyal individuals. By the early 20th century, the province had a dense constellation of titled gentry, proudly flaunting these marks of British favor at public gatherings. The colonial government also wasn't shy about old-

fashioned material rewards: “dozens” of native aristocrats received annual pensions or lump-sum gifts; land grants (*jagirs*) that had been confiscated in 1849 were restored or newly awarded for service. The Punjab Chiefs’ College (Aitchison College) was founded in Lahore in 1886 specifically to educate the sons of the loyal elite, indoctrinating them in British values and grooming them for collaboration. As a result, by the early 1900s, Punjab boasted a confident landed class that saw itself as the natural intermediary between the colonial state and the people. These grandees—whether Muslim landlords of the western Punjab like the Tiwanas of Shahpur, Sikh princely families like the Phulkian royals of Patiala, or Hindu landholders of Jalandhar—served in the Darbar (court) of the Lieutenant Governor and on legislative councils, and were often invited to imperial Delhi Durbars to be publicly lauded for their loyalty. Their loyalism was not purely bought; many came to genuinely identify with imperial interests. For instance, the Tiwana family, once “beleaguered local notables under the Sikhs,” became by the 20th century “well-rewarded players in [the British] world system,” producing military officers and civil servants knighted by the Crown. Such families saw their destiny entwined with the Raj’s, a worldview reinforced by inter-generational ties (sons followed fathers into the army or administration in service of the Empire).

The creation of this collaborative landed elite had profound implications. These men (and they were almost entirely men) functioned as political intermediaries, insulating the colonial rulers from direct interaction with the masses. They often headed networks of patronage that could mobilize local support on the government’s behalf for example, rallying villagers to aid in war recruitment or opposing Gandhi’s calls for boycott. Their prestige in their communities meant that colonial directives could be framed as guidance from one’s own *zamindar* or *sardar*, not as diktats from a distant foreign regime. In the Punjab context, British authority thus acquired a “personalized” face, embodied in the person of the local magnate who was both of the soil and an agent of the state. This arrangement did foster stability—the countryside remained largely pro-government in times of crisis (such as 1857, 1919, and even 1942), thanks in no small part to these intermediaries. But it also entrenched feudal patterns and narrowed the basis of politics. Political influence became synonymous with land ownership. Unlike in Bengal or Madras, where an urban middle-class emerged as a vocal political force, in Punjab the landed oligarchy long suppressed or co-opted nascent urban intelligentsia. When limited elections arrived, rural landholders easily dominated the restricted franchise (more on that in Section VI). The British had intentionally “institutionalized the dominance of rural interests” to thwart urban nationalism. The downside was that Punjab lacked broad-based political institutions or inclusive participation; it was governed through fiefdoms of loyalty. The moral economy under colonialism—a tacit understanding—was that Punjabi landowners and their tenant and peasant clients would remain loyal in exchange for British protection of their status (e.g., through the Land Alienation Act) and material rewards. As one Punjab official noted in 1895, “the first duty of government is to secure the contentment and loyalty of the masses, especially the sturdy yeomanry from whom we draw our soldiers on that foundation our rule rests”. This formula largely held until the twilight of the empire, when the pressures of mass nationalist mobilization would finally test and break the bonds of patronage and loyalty.

Communal Categorization and the Colonial Imagination

One of the defining features of British rule in Punjab was the rigid categorization of communities, particularly along religious lines, and the use of these categories as administrative units. The colonial state approached Punjab’s social diversity through the prism of census and classification. Starting with the first comprehensive census of 1881 (and

even in earlier headcounts from 1855 and 1868), British officials systematically classified Punjabis by religion, caste, tribe, and ethnicity, reducing a fluid social landscape into discrete identities. "Our ignorance of the customs and beliefs of the people...involves a distinct loss of administrative power to ourselves," admitted Denzil Ibbetson, Punjab's chief census officer in 1881. To colonial administrators, the act of counting and categorizing was not a dry exercise it was a tool of control. They believed that by identifying the major religious and tribal communities, they could allocate representation, jobs, and resources in a way that would keep each community tied to the Raj and prevent any single group from dominating. Over time, religion became the master category. Administrators treated "Hindu," "Muslim," and "Sikh" as fixed, mutually exclusive identities, each with assumed characteristics and political interests.

Crucially, this imperial taxonomy was overlaying a far more fluid social reality. In pre-colonial Punjab, identities had often been lived as continuums: many Punjabis practiced syncretic forms of faith (e.g., Sufi traditions followed by both Muslims and Hindus, or the conflation of Sikh and Hindu practices in some families). Caste and tribe cut across religious lines; a Muslim Rajput might feel closer to a Hindu Rajput neighbor than to an unrelated co-religionist. The British, however, had an "obsession with categorization" that "froze fluid social practices into communal boxes". Each person had to be slotted as Hindu, Muslim, Sikh (or some smaller minority) in official forms. This reification of religious identity had profound consequences. As historian Peter Gottschalk observed, what began as "classifications of convenience" for colonial bureaucracy soon "became contested identities" embraced by Indians themselves. In Punjab, where roughly half the population was Muslim, the rest Hindu and Sikh, the census's numerical portrayal of communities injected a new competitive consciousness. For example, after each census, public debates raged in Punjabi newspapers about which community's numbers had risen or fallen Muslims might celebrate a slight increase in percentage, while Hindus fretted and Sikhs strategized to count *sehajdhari* Sikhs (non-baptized followers) to boost their tally. The 1911 Census notoriously decided to classify the Arya Samaj (a Hindu reform sect) as Hindus rather than a separate group, after fierce lobbying. Each colonial categorization, then, hardened identity boundaries that had once been permeable. Scholars note that by treating religion as an unchanging census category, the Raj "helped freeze" communities into formal blocs, giving new weight to the idea that, say, "53% Muslim" Punjab was fundamentally different from "37% Hindu" or "10% Sikh" Punjab.

The British did not stop at classification; they moved to institutionalize communal identities in politics. The Indian Councils Act of 1909 (Morley-Minto Reforms) introduced separate electorates, whereby Muslims in Punjab (and other provinces) voted for Muslim candidates for the provincial council, and similarly for other communities. This was explicitly a *divide et impera* strategy: "The British created separate communal electorates so that Muslim voters could vote only for Muslim candidates...The seeds of division were sown," as one analysis puts it. Punjab was a stronghold of this practice in the 1910s-1940s its legislative council (later assembly) seats were apportioned by religious community (with further reservation for Europeans, Anglo-Indians, etc.). By the 1935 Act, for instance, Punjab's provincial assembly of 175 seats included 86 Muslim seats, 41 Hindu, 8 Sikh, and the rest special categories. This system meant that communal representation was built into the political structure. A politician's primary identity (and voter appeal) was expected to be communal. As a result, even moderate politics took on a communal hue. For example, when rural leaders formed the Punjab Unionist Party in the 1920s (discussed in the next section), they had to negotiate how

many Muslim vs Hindu vs Sikh candidates to field, and how to balance communal interests because the electoral framework itself was communally segmented.

The British defended these measures as “protective” of minorities arguing that Punjab’s Muslims (a slight majority) or Hindus (a large minority) might feel insecure without guaranteed representation. But in practice, separate electorates “marked religion as the basis for politics”. It ensured that “politicians had to appeal to narrow religious identities rather than broad interests”. Over time, this encouraged the emergence of what Francis Robinson called “communal solidarities” political networks and organizations aligned by faith. By the 1920s, Punjab had distinct communal organizations: the Hindu Mahasabha active among urban Hindus, the Central Sikh League and later Akali Dal championing Sikh interests, and the Muslim separatist Khalsa Diwan in earlier years followed by increasing Muslim League influence. The colonial government often acted as a broker among these groups, reinforcing the notion that communities were the fundamental units of society. For instance, the Punjab Local Self-Government Act of 1911 mandated representation of communities in municipal committees. The bureaucracy even maintained informal ratios for hiring into government jobs (e.g., proportional recruitment of Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs in police or clerical posts) to forestall complaints of bias. All this solidified communal consciousness as a political reality.

Importantly, “communalism” in Punjab was in many ways a governed outcome not simply an age-old animosity. As historian Ian Talbot notes, the colonial practice of pigeonholing people by religion and governing through communal categories “constructed” the very Hindu, Muslim, Sikh communal identities that later came into conflict. Sugata Bose observes that Punjab’s late-colonial public sphere was suffused with “acrid communitarian discourses” rival religious leaders and writers each “underscoring differences” and claiming their community’s interests. The census, the electorate, and public rhetoric worked together to reshape identity. By the 1930s and 1940s, an average Punjabi increasingly identified in political terms as a member of a religious community with distinct rights and grievances, rather than as simply a “Punjabi”. The colonial state both enabled and managed this communalization. On one hand, it preferred to deal with petitioners and delegations that spoke in the name of Hindus, Muslims, or Sikhs since this validated the divide-and-rule logic and made mass unity harder. On the other hand, the government tried to balance the communities to prevent any feeling of gross injustice that might spark rebellion. In Punjab’s legislative council, seats were not allocated in exact proportion to population Sikhs, though ~10% of the populace, got special weighting at about 15% of seats after 1919, because the British felt Sikhs (with their military importance) must not feel slighted. In 1924, when Sikhs agitated for more representation, the British actually increased Sikh seats (at the expense of Muslims) to placate them. This constant communal calibration became the essence of politics.

In short, religion in Punjab was transformed from a fluid cultural trait into a fixed administrative category and political identity under British rule. This does not mean Punjabis had no prior sense of religious difference of course, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim identities long predated the Raj. But colonial policies gave these identities sharper definition and higher stakes. A “communal award” or government decision could now directly elevate one community’s power over others (in jobs, votes, etc.), generating zero-sum competition. It is telling that major communal clashes in Punjab (aside from occasional skirmishes) really emerge in the 20th century, after decades of these policies. The 1920s saw worsening Hindu-Muslim riots in urban Punjab and tension over issues like cow protection, largely attributable to communal organizations asserting themselves. By the 1940s, as we shall see, these communal identifications carefully managed by the colonial state for years spun out of control

when the state's overriding authority waned. Thus, what was "governed difference" under British supremacy became "ungovernable difference" on the eve of Partition. In 1947, Punjab paid the terrible price for having had politics defined more by community identity than by any shared *Punjabiya*. But that was the culmination of a process that the colonial political imagination had set in motion long before.

Militarization and Political Privilege

Punjab's position as the military backbone of British India profoundly shaped its political landscape. After the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 in which Punjabi troops had helped suppress rebellion the British decided that henceforth the Punjab would be the empire's chief recruiting ground for the Indian Army. The logic was part racial theory, part pragmatic. The post-1857 Peel Commission and subsequent British commanders like Field Marshal Roberts argued that India's "martial races" hailed from the northwestern hills and plains, not from the "effete" high-caste Hindus of the Gangetic belt who had mutinied. According to the Martial Races theory, certain ethnic and religious groups Punjabi Muslim peasants, Sikh Jats, Hindu Jats and Rajputs, Pashtuns (Pathans) of the frontier, Gurkhas of Nepal, etc. were deemed to possess "more masculine character," innate loyalty, and soldierly qualities. Conversely, communities like "Bengalis" or "Madrasis" (South Indians) were stereotyped as non-martial, politically prone to sedition, and thus less recruited. This theory became an "important basis for recruitment policy" and was constantly manipulated to suit needs. In practice, by the late 19th century, the British had tilted Army enlistment heavily toward Punjab. As one statistic shows, by 1914 fully 57% of the recruits in the Indian infantry were from Punjab and the adjacent NW Frontier a huge jump from 28% in 1862. Punjab, with barely 10% of India's population, contributed nearly half of the Indian Army on the eve of World War I.

The effects of this militarization were multifold. First, military service became a path of mobility and state patronage for many Punjabi communities. Thousands of young men especially from rural Muslim and Sikh farming families enlisted, earned steady pay, pensions, and pride, and returned to villages as "ex-soldiers" with a favored status. Entire districts like Jhelum, Rawalpindi, Ludhiana, and Gurdaspur became known as "martial districts" supplying generations of loyal sepoys. The British reinforced this by design: they concentrated recruitment on "loyal" areas and even specific clans known for service. For instance, "the Salt Range (Gakkhars, Janjuas, Awans), the Sikh Manjha (central Punjab Jats), and certain Rajput clans" were heavily targeted. These groups benefited from the government's attention their villages got canals, roads, and schools preferentially, and their men gained a stake in the system. As historian Tan Tai Yong argues, Punjab evolved an "integrated civil-military regime": the civil administration worked hand-in-glove with military recruiting officers to ensure a steady flow of volunteers and to reward cooperating local leaders. During World War I, this integration reached its peak: Punjab's civil bureaucracy essentially became a recruitment machine. The Governor, Sir Michael O'Dwyer, marshaled the entire provincial administration to meet soaring quotas, coercing villages to send men to the army. "The entire muscle of the civil administration [was] brought to bear" along with a "network of notables" to fill the ranks. It worked: by war's end, Punjab provided over 50% of the one million Indians who served overseas in WWI. This was a staggering contribution, given Punjab's size. Villages that met recruitment targets were often granted rewards lowered land revenue, new canals, or grants for village schools further binding them to the colonial state.

The "soldier-peasant" nexus that emerged had significant political consequences. For one, it tended to depoliticize the rural population or at least redirect their loyalties. A peasant family with a son or brother in the British Indian Army had an incentive to remain loyal (his career

and pension depended on it). Across Punjab, returning veterans often acted as influential voices counseling against anti-government agitation, because they were effectively part of the establishment. The colonial authorities encouraged this status, celebrating veterans as pillars of the community. Many ex-soldiers were appointed zaildars or village chiefs. The British even created special “panchayats” (councils) of ex-servicemen to keep them engaged as loyalists in peacetime. All of this meant that in regions supplying troops, nationalism found hard soil. “Military service was [for many] the only means of livelihood,” especially for poorer Muslims of west Punjab and some Sikh Jats, so they were “more vulnerable to coercion and recruitment continued uninterrupted,” as one analysis notes of WWI-era Punjab. The same dynamic persisted into the 1920s-30s: despite the rise of Gandhi’s movement elsewhere, Punjab’s rural areas remained relatively placid or focused on parochial issues, partly because the population had been socialized into imperial loyalty through the military.

The Martial Races ideology also engendered a kind of political privilege for the communities labeled martial. The colonial state accorded them a heightened importance. For example, Sikh grievances were often heeded promptly because the British feared alienating this key martial race. (When Sikhs launched their Akali agitation in the 1920s, some British officials warned that upsetting the Sikhs could imperil the Army’s reliability, leading to a compromise in the form of the 1925 Sikh Gurdwaras Act - see Section VII). Punjabi Muslims too, being the largest share of recruits by the 1930s, found a sympathetic ear in the administration; their loyalty was considered the linchpin of Punjab’s stability. In essence, the British had politically incentivized military loyalty. Conversely, groups not favored by the recruitment policy urban trading castes, educated “non-martial” Hindus felt somewhat disenfranchised and resentful of the disproportionate influence of the martial peasantry. This sowed seeds of communal tension, as these communities saw the government bending over backwards for Muslim and Sikh villages while ignoring urban Hindu interests.

An important facet of militarization was its role as a check on dissent. If a particular community showed anti-British sentiments, the colonial regime could reduce its recruitment and the perks that came with it a form of punishment. This threat was implicit but understood. For instance, during the Khilafat and non-cooperation agitation (1919-22), when some Muslim agitators in Punjab protested, British recruiting officers quietly warned village headmen that continued disturbance would mean their areas lose out on enlistment benefits. Often the pressure of such warnings was enough to sap protests. Military service thus acted both as a means of upward mobility and a means of containment.

Nevertheless, reliance on militarization had its perils for the regime too. The heavy recruitment drive of WWI, carried out under coercion by O’Dwyer, strained Punjab’s society. Families hid eligible young men to avoid them being taken; there was trauma from war casualties and the 1918 influenza pandemic that ravaged soldiers’ villages. Some historians argue that the brutality of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919 (discussed next section) can only be understood in light of the tensions from the wartime recruitment frenzy Punjab was “war-weary,” and General Dyer feared a rebellion from a population taxed by plague and troop drafts. He thus acted with excessive force “calculated to strike terror”. In the long run, too, the Army’s Punjabi composition meant that when communal split came in 1947, Punjab’s own sons as soldiers and policemen sometimes abetted the violence on one side or the other, hastening the collapse of order.

In sum, colonial Punjab became a “garrison province” where civil administration and military recruitment were inseparably fused. The province’s politics were militarized in the sense that loyalty to the Raj was continuously reinforced by the prestige and economic stake of military

service. The “sword arm of India” not only defended the empire but, in doing so, helped lock Punjab into the empire’s embrace. For decades, this served British interests exceedingly well: Punjab remained a provider of men and grain, not unrest. However, this also meant that political modernization the development of broad civil institutions or democratic engagement was stunted. When the end of empire neared, Punjab had well-drilled regiments and proud veterans, but no tradition of mass political unity or accommodation. The martial ethos had kept politics parochial and loyalist, and in the climactic moments of 1947, that legacy would have ambiguous consequences.

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