

**Mapping Love for Land among Punjabi Peasants in the Colonial Era:
A study of Sant Singh Sekhon's *Blood and Soil* (1949)**

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Abstract

For Punjabi peasants, land determines socio-cultural and economic status, providing a level of financial security. It determines the magnitude of a family legacy. Thus, land has been more than a simple asset or source of livelihood for Punjabi peasants during the Colonial Era. For the Indian peasant, the land is the underpinning of the quality of life; all social and economic concerns as well as the individual's stature in public life ultimately revolve around land tenure. Ian Talbot writes particularly about the sentiments of colonial Punjabi peasantry when he observes, "Colonial Punjab had a rural society and an economy based on agriculture as around two thirds of the total population was dependent on agriculture for its livelihood" (p. 6). The present paper is an attempt to trace the Punjabi peasants' attachment and love for their land during the colonial period with particular reference to Sant Singh Sekhon's *Blood and Soil* (*Lahu Mitti*).

Keywords: agrarian society, agriculture, canalization, colonial period, culture, economy, heritage, land, love, peasant, Punjab

Introduction

Historically, land has played a significant role in all social, economic and cultural activities in the lives of Punjabi peasants. Consequently, the Punjabi peasant's dependence upon the resources provided by land tenancy presents manifold features. The land determines their socio-cultural and economic status. Besides, the land provides economic wellbeing and safety. Family legacies depend upon the land, and it has been more than an asset or source of livelihood for Punjabi peasants, especially in the Colonial Era. Qadeer Ahmed states: "land was of real significance to practically every one of the general population of the India in light of the fact that most of them relied upon agriculture for their subsistence" (p. 15). As such, social, economic and political transformation depends largely on changes in land relations. Karna writes, in this regard, "It is the land which saves the peasant. Historically, for the Indian peasant, land is his hope and glory. From time immemorial, land continues to be the mainstay of the people and it constitutes [...] the structural feature of the Indian countryside" (p. 70). Ian Talbot writes particularly about the sentiments of colonial Punjabi peasantry when he observes: "Colonial Punjab had a rural society and an economy based on agriculture, as around two thirds of the total population was dependent on agriculture for its livelihood" (p. 6). The present paper is not an attempt to quantify intangible sentimental attachments, as that would be essentially fatuous; the idea is to describe the Punjabi peasants' attachment and love for their land during the colonial period as expressed in a work of fiction: Sant Singh Sekhon's *Blood and Soil (Lahu Mitti)*. Keeping in mind that the relationship between land and peasants has been ever evolving and dynamic, the study will focus on exploring the Colonial Era.

The Historical Background

In 1849 the British annexed Punjab; this annexation brought many socio-economic and cultural changes to the state. The effect and influence of British rule on Punjab can be seen in Punjabi folk culture and literature. The major economic resource, land, was not properly managed or utilized before canalization. The *Raj* recognized the significance of land and introduced a canalization policy in Punjab. The policy had its positive effects and the land that was out of use was made to produce once more (Thorburn, 1904, p. 279).

Some new crop patterns and more productive methods of cultivation were introduced during the colonial period to increase the production and to improve the miserable condition of the poor and marginalized peasants, but their condition did not appreciably improve. The government gave important monetary support for use of these new techniques; these efforts increased the production in the agrarian sector but, as a corollary, the traditional style of agriculture gave way to a commercial one and a new type of commodity production began to emerge. The changing pattern of the agrarian economy created a new allurements for the ownership of land. It has been established, in the words of Walter C. Neal, that to own "land is to rule". According to Neal, the person "who has land" is a powerful entity of village community life and "can do anything" in rural society (p. 47). With the changing patterns of agricultural production, the moneylenders, supported by the westernized legal system, began to mortgage the land belonging to marginalised farmers. Rekha Bandyopadhyay observes that "colonial land settlement led to the creation of a large agrarian proletariat. The beneficiaries of this change were the moneylenders and traders. They had a parasitical attitude to agriculture" (p. 151). This phenomenon necessarily led to a generalised feeling of insecurity among marginalised peasants.

The Novel

Blood and Soil (Lahu Mitti), written by Sahitya Akademi awardee Sant Singh Sekhon, is set in rural Punjab during the Colonial Era in the first quarter of the twentieth century. It begins with the establishment of canal colonies in the 1880s and ends with the martyrdom of Bhagat Singh in 1931. The novel, revolving around the rural contours of Punjab, aims to illustrate the dreams, pain and suffering of the peasant community. In the colonial period, peasants from eastern Punjab were eager to migrate to a new environment, that of western Punjab (present day Pakistan) for the improvement of their livelihood. Some migrated in search of work while the others sought productive land in newly colonised tracts. One reason for the migration was, that peasant landholdings in eastern Punjab were rapidly vanishing. At the same time, the productive value of land in the western Punjab was relatively higher, “[t]he soil was virgin, colonized only three years since. Crops had all been bumper, and that poverty under whose blows father and son had been buffeted for the last twenty years and more seemed after all to be taking its leave” (Sekhon, p. 1). Therefore, Jagat Singh, the father of the protagonist Baij Singh, had to leave his village *Rawelpur* because his land was mortgaged by the moneylender. They migrated to a *Chak*, a locality set up by the colonial rulers. Tejwant Singh Gill, in his work entitled *Sant Singh Sekhon*, examines the reasons behind the migration, the significance of land and the changing character of human relations in the peasants’ life:

Due to some legal wrangling, his land in his native village has got mortgaged, but to save him from destitution, his *jawai* (son-in-law) gives him land he has got in excess and the old man is able to settle the newly wedded couple there. In a subtle way, this arrangement shows that in the rural life then, the sense of *bhaichara* (fellow-feeling) has given way to ill sense of *sharika* (jealousy) as a result of which even petty issues become bone of contention between the collaterals. (p. 59)

Under financial compulsion and endemic poverty, Jagat Singh has lost his small ancestral holding and he is left with no other option than to work for Hari Singh, who, being a *namberdar*, has got land in the canal colonies awarded by the colonizers. The chief concern behind the foundation of canal colonies was to attract the local Chiefs/*Chaudharies*. Being pro-British, such Chiefs/*Chaudharies* got land in the canal colonies as a token of their service to the *Raj*. The British land distribution policy was selective. Every person from the *Jatt* community did not get land under the policy. Consequently, a sense of dissatisfaction began to emerge among those who were neglected or excluded. Agriculture has been the mainstay of the majority of people of the area from times immemorial. In the Colonial Era, peasants were not skilled to do any other work except cultivation. As M. Darling’s encounter with a *Jatt* confirms:

Jatt: ‘Why does the *Sirkar* not give me land? Our work is cultivation. What else can we do? Where else can we go? We must have land.’

Darling: ‘The *Sirkar* cannot give land to everyone. *Jats* are many, and the land is limited.’ (p. 24)

The British land distribution policy not only polarized society between the haves and have-nots but it also divided the peasant community between the *Bisvedar*, *Mujahra* and *Siri*. The policy, furthermore, created new modes of exploitation between the landlords and the peasants. The policy widened the gap between the rich and the poor and also created economic boundaries among the peasants. Neeladhari Bhattacharya explains this phenomenon in detail:

The Colonial state classified North Indian rural society into the three categories: *zamindari*, *pattidari*, and *bhaiachara*. Nineteenth century revenue manuals defined these categories for the benefits of administrators, and official tables annually enumerated the number of village tenures in each of these classes. As the categories gained currency, their truth was taken for granted and their validity continually affirmed. (p. 109)

It can be said that these categories are colonial constructs. These categories redefined the meaning of custom, the shape of social relations, and the nature of property. Under the *Zamindari* system, landlords grew richer, the intermediaries continued to flourish, the state was deprived of its share of legitimate increase in revenue and the peasants lived a hand to mouth existence. Mridula Mukherjee claimed that in the Colonial Era “the peasantry’s agricultural prosperity was misconstrued because taxation and debt burden had broken the spine of the peasant” (p. 2). In the areas where the *Zamindari* system was operative, the peasants lost their lands and became subtenants of the moneylenders. “One estimation indicates that in the year of 1911 the total debt on peasants amounted to Rs 300 crore, which increased to Rs.1800 crore by 1937. The whole procedure turned into an endless loop” (p. 17). The condition of peasants deteriorated under British rule because British rulers were only concerned with the revenue of the state. Sahib Khan, a peasant from the old district of Salivahnkot, composes a couplet: “Take care of your turban, O peasant, take care of your turban; You lost your *Raj* (Kingdom of the Punjab); not long before now you are losing your land (p. 33).

The title of the novel clearly suggests a close bond between land and peasants. Land ownership has its cascading affect on other social institutions as well. The most affected institution is the institution of marriage. In the beginning of this period, economic disparities were not as important as they turned out to be for the second generation. Despite being the son of a *Mujhara*, Baij Singh got married to Daya Kaur, a member of a landholding family. As land is an important source of livelihood, so parents give importance to land-holding while match-making for the next generation. This results in problems in getting married for those prospective brides and grooms who have less land. Unable to find a suitable partner in their own caste, class or religion due to not having land, some people try to buy their brides among poor people of other states. Similarly, Prof. Rajesh Gill in *Gender, Culture and Honour* points out, “It was also observed that due to poverty and lack of property or resources, men remained bachelors till late age, as none was prepared to marry their daughters to them. In order to cope with the situation, one of the brothers would marry and others would share his wife” (*The Tribune*, October 30, 2019).

It was common among the families of marginalised peasants in Punjab province during the colonial period that the parents could afford to marry only one child, and the rest of the brothers or sisters would necessarily remain unmarried. Similarly, in the novel, the newly-wedded couple, Baij Singh and Daya Kaur, hailing from a peasant community in the first quarter of the twentieth century, struggle hard to survive. Baij Singh is a man of many qualities but none of his qualities count for anything because he does not own land and he is a *Mujahra* (tenant). This turns Baij Singh into a tragic character. His wife, Daya Kaur, condemns him for his bad traits as well as for all the mishaps that occur in their house. Madan, the elder son of Baij Singh and Daya Kaur, has received poverty, misery and pain as his family legacy. It is hard for Baij Singh and Daya Kaur to educate and marry both the sons (Madan and Sardul) due to their circumstances. Besides, the parents know that it is difficult to marry off both sons.

The criterion for marriage alliances changes in the second generation, and now people are even more conscious about a family's socio-economic status. The village barber (the main instrument in match-making), who was a close friend of Baij Singh, often suggests the house of Baij Singh to those who were looking for an acceptable bridegroom. Those people come and talk ten to fifteen minutes about boy's education, his maternal families, and their ancestral land at *Rawelpur*. Unsurprisingly, they all leave without even accepting water or tea. Daya Kaur knew that it was difficult to find an alliance in such situations. "When they would learn on further inquiry from someone in the village, the friendly barber himself, that Madan was a landless peasant's son" (p. 154), there was nothing more to say or do.

The protagonist, Baij Singh is a man who is lost in the changing mindsets of Colonial Era. The family are living at *Chak 22* because they know that they do not have land ownership at their native region, *Rawelpur*. The family feel that living in *Chak 22* is like living in *banwas* (exile). According to Ian Talbot, "land was the major source of an individual's *izzat* (honour, reputation) in traditional societies. Especially, Punjabis referred to their land as their *patlaj* (source of power and respect) even till today" (p. 20). Because of this emotional connection, both Daya Kaur and Baij Singh get nostalgic for the native village. Daya always asks Baij to return to their ancestral village *Rawelpur*, and she blames him for the fact that, among the women of *Chak 22*, her status is like a *Mujhara*'s (landless peasant's) wife. Being the *Mujhara*, Baij Singh is unable to save enough to buy the gold ear-ring for his wife. Once Daya Kaur asks:

"Can you bring me the same ear-ring which Nand Kaur wears"?

"You already have an ear-ring", Baij Singh answers as he does not know the difference between gold ear-ring and silver ear-ring.

I have a silver ear-ring and Nand Kaur has gold ear-ring, don't you know? (p. 28)

Daya Kaur is worried that their son Madan is not married yet. She constantly accuses Baij Singh for being a *Mujhara*. So here Baij Singh is a tragic character whose tragic anguish is due to his low status. For his entire life, Baij Singh has had the yoke of economic depression that his father had placed on his shoulders; when his sons Madan and Sardul become mature, Baij places the same yoke on their shoulders. Being landless, they know that education is the only panacea that can save their family, especially their children, from poverty. Therefore, Baij Singh and Daya Kaur want to educate their son Madan by any possible means.

To get back their mortgaged land and to educate their son, Baij Singh and Daya Kaur decide to forgo all luxuries in their life. The family believes that there is no hope for anybody in the family except for Madan. They are willing to sacrifice much for his education. Madan is their only hope. It was their opinion that "one such soldier was enough, others might engage in the more immediately productive jobs" (p. 240). The younger son Sardul was yoked along with his father Baij Singh to Madan's future. They both work hard and Sardul takes up many responsibilities and burdens at the age of nine. Sometimes Madan was pained to see his younger brother labouring in the fields. Here, Sekhon compares poor and developing third world countries like India to the rich and developed countries of the world. He writes:

The weak and immature in civilization and the arts shall grow corn to fill the earth's pit of a stomach and cotton to cover its leper's torsos, while the strong, the grown up, the civilized will be busy in higher kinds of activities to raise its status. (p. 242)

In chapter twenty, entitled “The Sacrificed Kid”, Sekhon also illustrates the poor economic condition of Indian peasantry. Baij Singh is determined to go to any extent for Madan. We get a clear picture of his determination from Baij Singh and Daya Kaur’s dialogue:

Do you think that you have a house here and Madan will get an alliance? Daya Kaur repeated.

He said proudly, ‘you are right, I do not have any land but I will educate my son more than any landlord’. (p. 163)

Daya Kaur depends on Madan for an anticipated economic wellbeing. The ultimate dream of the husband and wife is that one day Madan will get the mortgaged land back. Baij Singh also believes that education can bestow more power on a person than even the land. In spite of it, the ultimate dream is to get their ancestral land back after Madan’s procurement of a lucrative job.

The novelist portrays the peasants’ economic crisis as so severe that they have to sell their livestock. They do not have any other option: Baij fell ill, “So the cow was sold. It brought three hundred rupees which was soon disbursed among the creditors” (p. 136). He explains Baij’s predicament in general terms:

The Punjab peasant has a permanent home, the permanence of which is endless as eternity. So long as the ancestral land is there, so long as the clan lives and his origin is traceable to it, so long as he looks to the village as his home. A generation, two or even more, may live outside, but whenever opportunity offers, the person will come back. It is only when he comes to own land at another place, that he takes root at that place. His land is his root, and you have to dig it up from a place and fix it somewhere else, this few acres of land, to transplant the peasant. (p. 274–275)

Land is identity. Land is survival. In Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*, Nathan the protagonist is a person who cannot see his life without land. He asserts, “If the land is gone our livelihood is gone, and we must thenceforth wander like jackals” (p. 48). So is the case with Sekhon’s *Blood and Soil*. Because they are landless, Baij Singh and Daya Kaur cannot fulfill their hopes and their dreams turn into nightmares. Tejwant Singh Gill states, in the Introduction to the book, that “Dreams are changing into nightmares and dispositions into obsessions” (p. XXII). The only reward for the family’s hard work was that they were able to educate Madan.

“This life”, he would tell one who passed by him, ploughing, hoeing or reaping, stopping to sympathize for his hard life. “This life I regard as a labour in the service of Madan. And only four years of active service are left for me. After that I will receive a pension”. (p. 222)

The novelist portrays Baij Singh as a man who deviates from his culture and tradition and subdues his ego in order to provide security to his child. In the end, Baij Singh builds a house by taking loan from moneylenders in his ancestral village of *Rawelpur*. Madan fulfills his parents’ dream by settling them back in their ancestral village. The family’s long-cherished desire to get the ancestral land back and build their own house on it is fulfilled at the end. The transformation happens when Madan becomes a lawyer and his education makes it possible to achieve what the family has desired for the last fifty years.

The study underlines that for a peasant, love for land in the Colonial Era is not necessarily spiritual, but rather the outcome of circumstances. Land is the principal source of production of the material means of subsistence; therefore, a peasant depends on land for his existence. Land is necessary for survival and owning it is a source of pride and honour for peasants during the colonial period. Robin Mearns states “Land plays a dual role in rural India: aside from its value as a productive factor, land ownership confers collateral in credit markets, security in the event of natural hazards or life contingencies, and social status” (p. 1). Besides, in the Colonial Era, people of the Punjab consider land as an integral part of their identity and their heritage.

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