Cultivation and Conversion in Multan

The recent scholarship on the process of Islamization in India has stimulated a debate on the connections between cultivation, sedentarization and conversion in South Asia. Recent studies in Punjab do not seem to be connected with cultivation and sedentarization, which developed only in the late 19th century under the British colonization schemes. The process seemed to take place in an environment which remained largely nomadic or semi-nomadic until the colonial period.

Islam and the territory

The British district constituted approximately a triangle delimited by the rivers of Muzaffargarh, Jhang, Montgomery, and the State of Bahawalpur. The total area of the district in 1881 was about 5,880 square miles. The basic element of the environment was the scarcity of rain, which made irrigation central to the agricultural life of the district. The territory of Multan was traditionally classified on the basis of the availability of water, in terms of riverain areas (ahs), the further lands, which were primarily cultivated through artificial irrigation (aurat), and the central, and lands, considered uncultivable (bar).

Most of the villages and ghost towns were situated near the river courses, while the bar lands were mainly inhabited by nomadic tribes that lived on pastureage and trade. However, settled and nomadic peoples did not live in separate worlds. The bar lands were not only used by the nomadic tribes of the district but also by the people of the settled areas for the pastureage of their cattle. In Multan pastureage and breeding integrated the income of the settled areas. Moreover, given the scarcity of food, traditionally the cattle had to ‘wander over the tracts in search of food’, a fact which made a conflict possible between settled and nomadic people.

The relevance of the Sufi dargahs in southern Punjab lies exactly in the need for the Sufis to explain the early belief in the sanctity of the tombs born near the confluence of the rivers of Multan district with the Sidhnai Colony (from 1866 to 1888), the Lower Bari Durb Colony (from 1914 to 1924), and with the Nulli Bar Colony (started in 1926 and concluded in the 1940s). By promoting cultivation into the highlands and, more importantly, by creating colonies of cultivators from different areas of the Punjab, the social and ecological configuration of the district, and the traditional relationship between the pastoral tribes and the environment were ultimately transformed.

Notes


5. W. P. Andrew, India and its Provinces: Their Political and Commercial Opinions, 1830–1911


7. Irfan Habib as an important factor of change in the case of Multan, where Islam proceeded to be placed in a context where sedentarization and conversion tended to proceed with greater difficulty than previously suspected. Of course the situation was to change radically, very soon the beginning of the Canal Colonies’ projects that interested the Multan district with the Sidhnai Colony (from 1866 to 1888), the Lower Bari Durb Colony (from 1914 to 1924), and with the Nulli Bar Colony (started in 1926 and concluded in the 1940s). By promoting cultivation into the highlands and, more importantly, by creating colonies of cultivators from different areas of the Punjab, the social and ecological configuration of the district, and the traditional relationship between the pastoral tribes and the environment were ultimately transformed.

An urban settlement of considerable antiquity in the lower Indus valley, Multan was originally close to the confluence of the Chenab and Rawi rivers, a fact which could explain the early belief in the sanctity of the place by the Hindu population. The city has been for centuries a centre of Hindu pilgrimage, thanks to the presence of two famous mandirs, the Temple of the Sun and the Phraladpuri temple. Multan was also the centre of a large commercial and agricultural system. During the reign of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (1658–1707), it was the capital of one of the main subahs (provinces), originally comprising three sarkars (districts) and 88 paragraphs (administrative sub-divisions). The Mughal province covered the entire southern Punjab, part of eastern Baluchistan and northern Sind. Annexed by the Sikh state in 1818, Multan was the capital of a largely autonomous province, particularly under the dawans Sawai Mal and Mul Raj. Both belonged to the kshatriya Hindu caste that has played an important political and economic role in southern Punjab. However, the growing rivalry between Multan and Lahore in the 19th century and the British interference in the Multani political scene provoked the revolt of the Multan garrison in 1848 and the annexation of the British officers Vans Agnew and Anderson, finally causing the second Sikh war and the annexation of the Punjab to the Raj.