

## **Fazl-i-Husain's Plural Approach and the Punjab Politics: Re-contextualizing the Foundation of the Unionist Party**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Sir Mian Fazl-i-Husain, generally speaking, is overlooked by the historians therefore by revisiting the main characteristics of Fazl-i-Husain's political leadership, one can have a better understanding of the role of Muslim leadership like that of Mian Fazl-i-Husain in the colonial Punjab. He struggled to free India from the foreign rule as early as possible but he believed that without better understanding and communal harmony among the Muslims, Hindus and the Sikh, this freedom cannot be achieved. Montagu-Chelmsford Reform of 1919 provided the opportunity to those leaders who wished to work under the constitutional umbrella, to achieve independence with peaceful means. The newly enforced Act opened the doors for electoral politics and helped the elected members to join the executive council and to serve their nation as parliamentarians and some as ministers. Thus political vacuum created by the rejection and boycott of the conventional political parties such as the Congress and the League was filled up by the provincial parties, political elites, and groups. This phenomenon suited the most to Mian Fazl-i-Husain who undertook the responsibility of cementing the gulf among the religious communities by his ideas and actions. No doubt the emergence of the Rural Group was the political expediency and spontaneous to the political situation but the foundation of National Unionist Party was the brainchild of the philosophy of Sir Fazl-i-Husain. This party was a party with secular representation and program. It included main leaders of the Muslims, Sikhs and the Hindus and remained dominant on the political landscape of the provincial politics from 1923 to 1947. Therefore, it is important to understand the political philosophy of Fazl-i-Husain and his main objective behind the foundation of the National Unionist Party. This paper will try to emphasize the point that Fazl-i-Husain got the Charismatic traits that helped him to persuade the Punjabi political leadership to establish a provincial political party on the secular basis. He was a strong believer in establishing a plural society and for that matter, he worked for the common welfare of all the religious communities. This paper will also develop the argument that Fazl-i-Husain, in an atmosphere of religious separatism in India, was successful, to a great extent, in establishing a party with a secular program, which enabled him to pursue a party program for creating a plural society. Though much has been written on the foundation and working of the Unionist party, very few have academically focused on the ideas and thoughts of Fazl-i-Husain for laying the foundation of the party and by producing this piece of paper it is felt that it will fill the gap in the

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historical literature of the Colonial Punjab.

**Key Words:** Fazl-i-Husain, Unionist Party, Rural Party, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Pluralism.

### **Introduction**

The literature on Sir Mian Fazl-i-Husain and the Unionist party can be categorized into two types: firstly, deals with biographies on Fazli and unionist party's history. Azim Husain (1946), Syed Nur Ahmad (1936) and (Tanwar: 1999) discuss dynamics of Fazl-i-Husain leadership and history of Unionist party but they overlook the vision of Fazl-i-Husain and causes of establishment of his party. Second category of literature deal with the political development of period (Page: 1982) that provide useful information on the communal tangle in Punjab (Brass: 1974) but they do not academically analysed the theme which this paper will address. Therefore, there is a considerable research gap on the topic under discussion. This paper is written in the light of the primary and secondary sources including correspondence of Sir Fazl-i-Husain letters, diaries of Daultana (1936), Noon (1966), *Shamsul Hasan Collection* (2005) and letters and diaries (Ahmad: 1976), etc.

### **Causes of Establishment of the National Unionist Party 1923**

In 1923 Fazl-i-Husain established the Unionist Party. Followings were the main causes for the formation of the new party that would be narrated briefly.

Punjab was the important province of India because of its agricultural resources and share in the British Army. To encourage the agriculture and to protect agrarian classes, the Land Alienation Act 1900 was passed that helped British to collect a large amount of land revenue but some leaders of religious communities including the Sikhs and Hindus protested against it and considered it pro-Muslim reforms, thereafter the communal tangle sharpened in the Punjab. It led to the creation of the Muslim League in Punjab in February 1906. Provincial branch of All India Muslim League was also opened in 1907. Mian Fazl-i-Husain along with Justice Shah Din and Mian Mohammad Shafi were the main leaders who founded and shaped the policies of the Punjab Muslim League. The Morley-Minto-Reforms of 1909 enshrined the separate electorate but this right of separate electorate was not acceded to the Muslims of Punjab which benefited to the elite classes of the Hindus and the Sikhs to take political mileage over the Muslims. Mian Mohammad Fazl-i-Husain was one who suffered from the joint electorate and even being the most suitable candidate could not win the election only because he was Muslim and Electoral College mostly consisted of the Hindus. After the end of the World War I, dissatisfaction and unrest amongst the people of Punjab was increased. The issue of Khilafat and the Rowlatt Bill intensified the circumstance in Punjab. Continually increasing costs of wheat, rice, and other food

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items were another issue blowing the fire. The implementation of Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms in 1919 and boycott of the Congress and League, created a political vacuum for provincial leaders like Fazli Husain to play his role in regional politics.

**Vision and Goals of Sir Fazl-i-Husain**

The boycott of Congress and League to the new electoral reforms namely, 'Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms' provided Fazl-i-Husain a chance to emerge as a key political leader. He contested and won the elections of 1919 held under the Montagu Chelmsford reforms and became the first Minister under the system of dyarchy introduced in the 1919 Act. Giving reward for his great services for the promotion of democracy and rejecting the politics of the reactionaries that the Edward MacLagan Governor of the Punjab appointed Fazl-i-Husain a minister in the transferred department under the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919. (Reading Papers, 1922) He was also permitted to recommend the name of another minister in the provincial executive Council. Therefore, Lala Harkishan Lal, a very rich industrialist belonging to urban classes, became the first choice of Fazl-i-Husain and on Fazl-i-Husain's recommendation Lala Harkishan Lal (Hussain, 1946) was appointed by the Governor as minister of agriculture. Given that the elections were contested without political labels, there was a huge room for Sir Fazl-i-Husain to exercise his political influence. He got charismatic political qualities and a situational leader like him always tries to capitalize the situation to translate his ideas into action. Thus he formed a united group of thirty-five Muslim members and named it as the 'Rural Block'. Though it included elected members of all the classes, creeds and social strata yet most of them belonged to the rural areas of the province of Punjab. A common political platform for the elected members provided Fazl-i-Husain an opportunity to unite various interest groups for the national cause and also to pressurize the colonial government to devolve more powers to the provinces. Sir Fazl-i Husain and Lala Hari Kishan Lal were elected as ministers on the communal seats.

Fazl-I-Husain was the individual who genuinely worked for the downgraded classes with no communal inclining. He introduced various reforms including: establishment of schools, colleges, and new dispensaries. He tried to make the bureaucracy as the servant of the public and thus the district boards and municipal committees, which were under the trustees felt relief from the too tight official control. He also controlled the unjust behavior of moneylenders to the peasants and the laborers and as result they were forced to lower the rates of loan. He introduced reforms on the centuries old Panchayat System so that petty disputes of masses should be settled by their own elders in a Panchayat in the village or country side. Similarly the Land Alienation Act of 1900, 1907 was revisited to

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dispense with particular blunders and charges of income and Indian Abiana were minimized.

For smooth working of the legislature, the Rural Party was formed by Fazl-i-Husain which was comprised of the members of Punjab Legislative Council. The Rural Party aimed at protecting the interests of the peasantry particularly very unjust treatment of the moneylenders. The Party also focused on the public works and therefore neglected rural areas began to get their due share from the government development scheme. Rural Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus also supported this approach as their socio-economic and political condition was not different from the Muslims and they found themselves equally backward in education especially and got poor represented in the local councils and government jobs services. According to Fazl-i-Husain this was a party of 'have-nots.'

### **A solid step to achieve the Goals: Foundation of Unionist Party**

Mian Fazli-Husain was aware of the fact that if Punjab was to march towards progress and India to attain independence, a joint cohesion of the religious communities of Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims should be made. In the preliminary stages, it appeared as if the Rural Block would extinct with the passage of time but the more the members assembled and met in the Legislative Council or in a private capacity or in the platform of the party, their political awareness was more improved. They discussed and debated on disputed points and arrived at some acceptable solutions. So successful was their experience of the political platform of the 'Rural Block' that contributed mainly to the birth of the Unionist Party. In fact, it was magic of the leadership of Sir Fazl-i-Husain that the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim members from rural Punjab began working as a team for the betterment of the rural population across the religious divide.

The foundation of the National Unionist Party in December 1923 was laid from the ashes of the 'Rural Party' which was quite a natural amalgamation and culmination of the process of building a political consensus and creating a strong political party from the platform of the Rural block. Sir Mian Fazl-i-Husain was the driving force to enlist membership from all religious and social groups. There was a sizeable proportion of the Hindu and Sikh population of Punjab. Most important of them was the inclusion of Sir Chattu Ram, who belonged to Jats of Rohtak of Ambala division, in the Unionist Party. All of the members strongly felt that the Hindu money lenders are exploiting the rural classes especially the peasantry.

Therefore, the rural block party was turned into the Unionist Party soon after the election and creation of the 1923 Legislative Council. The party started its career only with the modest member of 39. There were three main religious communities of which 32 were Muslims 7 Hindus and Sikhs. (Tanwar, 51). The main leaders who laid its foundation were Mian Fazl-i-Husain, Sundar Singh Majithia and Sir Chhotu Ram.

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Again having the support of the 39 Muslim members, Sir Fazl-i-Hussain secured his seat as a minister even after the great opposition of the rural Hindus. He was also successful in taking his trusted Hindu member Sir Chothoo Ram as agriculture minister against the wishes of the Rural Hindus. It was considered a better strategy to address the issues of the rural classes first and to focus the issues of urban classes later. (Verma, 1981, 81)

The rural areas were underdeveloped and needed instant attention to be addressed, more importantly, rural areas were less experienced and exhibited less sectarian sentiments and separatist views as compared to the urban areas. Fazl-i-Husain tried to enlist support from the Muslims but also from the Hindus by emphasis on the issues of peasantry and rural class. Chhotu Ram, who was critical of Sir Fazl-i-Husain's communal approach finally was convinced of Sir Fazl-i-Husain's secular program and pluralistic approach and joined hands with him. (Prem Chaudhry: 1979, 121) how

### **The composition of the Party**

From the start, the country gathering of officials was by and large isolated into two, with a past filled with recurring solid political and non-political competition. The Daultana faction and the other gathering drove by the Noon and Tiwanas met up just incidentally. This was an on a very basic level defective characteristic element of the 'Rural Block'. With these elements Fazl-i-Husain made a modest beginning and seemed working satisfactorily in the early years of its foundation of the rural party. (Husain, 1946, 156)

It was quite but natural to enlist the political support from the Muslim members of the Punjab Legislative Assembly. He started by emphasizing addressing the issues related to the Muslims such as utilization and guaranteeing that Muslim business and different quantities were not abused or left empty. (Malik, 26)

One such segment of Muslim pioneers who upheld Fazl-i-Husain and furthermore assumed an essential part in setting up the availability of the Party was the Peers and Sajada Nashins. (Gilmartin, 1979, 494) Being an average medieval society the impact of such conventional pioneers in Punjab's general public was significant. With their vast landed homes and in view of their broad social, religious, and all the more significantly, financial clout the majority energetically acknowledged them as their pioneers even in issues, which were not related with religion.

His canny political foresight, nonetheless, influenced him to understand that this help if confined only to the Muslims, couldn't bear proper fruits and his ideals of plural society will remain unfulfilled, (Ahmad, 1977, 2) therefore, he decided to broaden his vote bank and fan club by increasing the composition and size of the rural party. Like true believer of inclusive policy in the political game he struggled

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to secure political support from the Hindus and Sikhs with the 'Rural Block'. (Jalal, 2002, 322) By introducing reforms beneficial to all religious communities and especially for the rural classes he seemed successful

### **Main Objectives of the Unionist party**

The Punjab National Unionist Party emerged from 'Rural Block' in 1923. In fact this party consisted of those elected members who had won election in the same year which were held under the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms. Fazl-i-Husain and his supporters being the member of the Punjab Legislative Council and as ministers worked for the backward areas. The coordinated efforts to work for the downgraded classes specially the rural class helped Fazl-i-Husain to persuade members of various religious communities namely, Hindus, Sikhs and the Muslims to not only contest election in close coordination and cooperation but also form an independent and secular party in the province. (Malik, 30). Fazl-i-Husain endeavored not only to uplift the Muslims which had been backward in every field but also tried to remove this misconception that his group and party was of predominantly Muslim. Sir Sunder Singh Majithia, convinced by the thoughts and actions of Sir Fazl-i-Husain joined hands with him and his party. However, Fazl-i-Husain also made special efforts to dilute the impression that the Unionist Party had pre-predominantly Muslim character. Therefore, in the election of 1923, Fazl-i-Husain the issued an election manifesto emphasizing on the secular and economy based program irrespective of caste, creed and religion. The Sikhs under the leadership of Sir Sunder Singh Majithia supported the election manifesto and also the aims and objectives of the Unionist Party. He also reposed full confidence on Fazl-i-Husain's leadership as a Unionist head. (Javid: 2012, 135-140)

Following are the salient features:

1. Attainment of self-government.
2. The welfare of the rural inhabitants of Punjab
3. To secure an equitable and reasonable representation of all the classes and groups in the public administrations of the region.
4. To elevate indigenous businesses and to energize the utilization of Swadeshi articles.

The other overbearing characteristic of Fazl-i-Husain's political announcements going before the 1923 when they formally established the Unionist party, like true pluralists who wishes to include all people across class, creed and religion, therefore, he committed himself and his supporters to the cause of the downgraded class particularly rural area of the Punjab. The Punjab legislature had provided them a solid platform to gather, discussed and deliberated on various challenges and their province and people. They also worked together tried to find out the solutions. All these activities enabled them to win the 1923 elections. The inclusion of Chhotu Ram in the Unionist Party increased the credibility of the Party as a secular and broad based party. (Thorburn, 1983, 13). Though the leaders

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of the urban class unleashed propaganda against the Rural party (later Unionist Party) for being communal and safeguarding the interests of the rural class but the rural Party of Fazl-i-Husain won the election.

Congress and Muslim League once again boycotted the elections in 1923, but Swaraj Party made by the Congress (The Civil & Military Gazette ,1923) and League member and also was being supported by the Congress members contested the elections. (Latif, 1891, 575).

While declaring the establishment of the Party, the Unionist Party issued its political program and manifesto and following a brief of the party program:

1. To improve the condition of the peasantry backward classes and backward communities living in rural Punjab.
2. To stop the exploitation of moneylenders
3. To improve the backward areas(rural areas)
4. To introduce reforms in the education sectors, social sector, health sector and political sectors by opening dispensaries, schools, colleges, Panchayati system etc.

With such program, the Unionists party gained political mileage as she won elections on the basis of rural economic development. The British wished to see peaceful political atmosphere province that had been badly suffered from the Jallianwalla Bagh tragedy when hundreds of innocent people were brutally killed by the general Dyer and as a result the province of the Punjab was showing the signs of resistance and revolt. While the All India National Congress and the All India Muslim League had vetoed the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 and boycotted the provincial elections of 1920 that contributed to a political impasse in India and in the Punjab as well. The Khilafat movement was quite popular in the Punjab where the government machinery was badly affected owing to the non-cooperation movement started by the Khilafatists under the leadership of Gandhi Ji. (Shan, 1983, 37) Therefore, in this crucial period when peace and prosperity of the province was at stake the Punjab colonial administration would not mind the establishment and working of a secular party with the development program of ignored and rural population. The British government also lent its generous support to the Unionist party, which created an impression that it is a party of establishment and the unionist leaders merely are collaborators. But Fazl-i-Husain was exceptional and did not serve as stooge, rather tried to benefit from the constitutional and political reforms introduced by the British government in India.

### **Consequences**

Following were the immediate effects of the establishment of Unionist Party. The Unionist Party emerged as the majority party in the Council and therefore as principal of the democracy the Governor of Punjab, Maclagan was obliged to request Mian Fazl-i-Husain to form the ministry again. Having the support of the

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39 Muslim members, Sir Fazle Husain secured his seat as a minister even after the great opposition of the rural Hindus. (Rizvi, 1978,9) He was also successful in taking his trusted Hindu member Sir Chothoo Ram as agriculture minister against the wishes of the Rural Hindus. Again Fazl-i-Husain was authorized to recommend the name of other minister/ministers. Fazl-i-Husain's charismatic leadership played a key role in bringing together the important leaders of different religious communities including Hindus, Sikhs and the Muslims into the Party. He also capitalized the aggrieved classes from the rural population and thus the leaders from the rural areas joined the Unionist party to serve their constituencies.

Though the main focus of Unionist Party and Fazl-i-Husain was to protect and promote the rights and interests of the rural population but Fazl-i-Husain did not ignore the urban classes. He recommended the name of Lala Hari Kishan Lal as a Minister. He was a Hindu industrialist and from the urban classes. These were the peasantry and laborers which were at the receiving ends because of high compound money loan taken from the Hindu money lenders and they were to great extent Muslims of rural areas. Given that the money lenders mostly were Hindus and from the urban classes, therefore an impression, though wrongly, was built that Unionist Party was against the urban classes and working against the interests of the Hindus.

Unlike the resistance movement and non-cooperation movement adopted by Gandhi and other Khilafatists (Noon, 1966, 96) the Unionist Party employed constitutional methods to achieve their goals and seemingly this worked as they were successful in introducing reforms for their province. They emphasized upon transfer of power through peaceful and constitutional means. The British administration also accepted their demands which to them were justified. Probably the system of Dyarchy worked in a better shape in the province of the Punjab as there was hardly any significant confrontation between the ministers of transferred department and also disagreement between the ministers and governors. Though Fazl-i-Husain's confrontation with Governor Healey took place in the later period when Governor tried to dictate the elected member and the minister of Punjab unnecessarily on the appointment of the speaker.

Fazl-i-Husain as a minister at various capacities and head of the Unionist party tried to do justice to all religious communities including the Muslims, who had been marginalized under the British political system since 1857, because of different reasons. He tried to create space for the Muslims and other communities in the various departments according to the quota proposed and agreed upon in the Lucknow Pact 1916 between the All India National Congress and the All India Muslim League. (Robinson, 1979, 60). He also supported the rural population by launching numerous schemes to improve their socio-economic and political condition and as a result the privileged class, mostly consisted of the urban Hindus obviously turned against such policies of Fazl-i-Husain. They unleashed nefarious propaganda against Mian Fazl-i-Husain by declaring him pro-Muslim and anti-Hindu. It was quite natural when Unionist Party focused on the development of



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the rural areas it was blamed that the Unionist Party also protecting and safeguarding the political and social interests of landlords. Because of protection and promotion of the religious communities of Punjab, the Punjabi Muslim *peers* and the *sajjadanashins* (Qureshi,1972,282) also came out to play their political role in advancing the interests of their own in the name of common people.

## **Conclusion**

There were multiple factors including the socio-cultural, economic and political factors that led to the establishment of National Unionist Party in 1923 but the central figure behind its foundation was Mian Sir Fazl-i-Husain. He envisioned peaceful and prosperous Punjab and the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms provided him the opportunity to materialize his ideas in his province. Though the Rural Party had been established out of expediency to make more coherent and collective efforts, the formation of a political party was need of the hour. Therefore, he decided to establish a political party namely the Unionist Party in December 1923 from amongst the representatives of Punjab Legislative Council. Though he was a member of the Congress and the League parties, the political dynamics at the regional level made him go to a secular party. In fact, his early political career witnessed his political wisdom and efforts to get self-rule from the Raj by cementing unity between the Muslims and the non-Muslims. Whether it was Lucknow Pact or the Movement for the Home Rule League, anti-Rowlatt Act movement or Khilafat Movement, Fazl-i-Husain attempted to achieve these goals with the help of other religious communities. The program, goals, and objective of the Unionist Party also clearly reflects his secular outlook and approach. Socio-economic, religious and political awakening after the Land Alienation Act, First World War, Home Rule League, Anti-Rowlatt Act agitation forced the British government to introduce Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms in 1919. Landed aristocracy found in it the opportunity to maximize their interests and work for their communities. The Unionist party provided them a solid political platform where they advocate the rights and privileges of the rural areas purely on non-communal and secular basis.

In short, the foundation of the party was based on perfect ideals of Fazl-i-Husain that wished to enlist all religious, ethnic communities and groups of Punjab together to achieve the independence of India. In fact, this party produced wonderful results in the political field and there is no doubt that the Unionist Party from 1923 onward became the famous verdict of power and remained in power till 1947. These were thoughts and actions of Sir Fazl-i-Husain with unusual leadership qualities that he created a party with renowned Punjabi, Hindu and Sikh leaders like Sir Chottu Ram, Sundar Singh Majithia, and others to achieve his goals. Once the solid foundation of the Unionist party was laid down by Mian Fazl-i-Husain the success after success in the shape of various social, cultural, religious,

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economic, education and political reforms followed that benefited all the communities inhabited in Punjab. (hussain,196) Rather it seemed that his concept of secularism and plural society got currency among the three major communities, Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims who began to learn the art of living together with peace and tranquility. Neither the Congress nor the League could hold afoot in the province of Punjab until his lifetime. Rather after his death, the communal tangle reappeared in the Punjab as well.

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