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## **Political Transformation in Colonial Punjab: The Role of the All-India Muslim League in Montgomery District**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article examines the political transformation of colonial Punjab through a microhistorical study of Montgomery District (present-day Sahiwal) between 1930 and 1947, focusing on the rise and consolidation of the All-India Muslim League. While Punjab has often been characterized as a stronghold of the Unionist Party and agrarian conservatism, this study challenges that narrative by demonstrating how the Muslim League successfully penetrated rural political structures in the late colonial period. Drawing upon electoral data, colonial administrative reports, and secondary scholarship, the paper highlights the League's strategic mobilization through religious networks, particularly Sajjada Nashins (hereditary custodians of shrines), biradari (kinship) structures, and agrarian elites. The transformation of shrine-based authority into a political instrument, especially in Pakpattan and Shergarh, played a decisive role in shaping rural political loyalties. The 1937 elections marked the League's marginal presence, but by 1946 it had emerged as a dominant political force, reflecting a broader shift from localized patronage politics to ideological mobilization centered on Muslim nationalism. This study contributes to debates on colonial governance, rural politics, and the sociology of nationalism by illustrating how local dynamics intersected with all-India political developments to produce a decisive transformation in political allegiance in Punjab.*

**Keywords:** Muslim League, Montgomery District, Colonial Punjab, Shrine Politics, Biradari, Elections 1937–1946, Pakistan Movement

### **1. Introduction:**

The political history of colonial Punjab has often been interpreted through the dominance of agrarian elites and the resilience of the Unionist Party, which maintained a cross-communal alliance under British patronage. However, the decade preceding independence witnessed a profound transformation in political alignments, particularly with the rapid rise of the All-India Muslim League. This transformation was neither uniform nor inevitable; rather, it emerged through complex negotiations between local social structures and broader nationalist ideologies. Montgomery District (modern Sahiwal), located in the canal colony region of Punjab, provides a compelling case study for examining this transformation. Known for its agrarian economy and influential shrine networks, the district exemplified the interplay between land, religion, and politics. The presence of major shrines such as Pakpattan Sharif and the influence of Sajjada Nashins created a unique socio-political landscape in which spiritual authority could be translated into political capital. This article seeks to answer the following central question; How did the All-India Muslim League transform its position from a marginal political force in 1937 to a dominant electoral power in Montgomery District by 1946? In addressing this question, the study explores the role of religious authority, biradari networks, colonial administrative structures, and electoral strategies.

### **2. Literature Review**

Scholarly literature on Punjab politics during the colonial period has traditionally emphasized the dominance of the Unionist Party and the role of agrarian elites. Early works such as Talbot

(1988) and Malik (1995) highlight the stability of rural political structures under British rule, attributing it to patronage networks and the strategic alliance between landlords and the colonial state. David Gilmartin (1988) offers a seminal analysis of Punjab politics by examining the role of religious leadership and the concept of “political pirs.” He argues that the British institutionalization of rural authority allowed religious figures to mediate between the state and the peasantry, thereby shaping political behavior. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding Montgomery District, where shrine-based authority was deeply entrenched. Ian Talbot (1996) further explores transformation of Punjab politics in 1940s, noting the gradual erosion of Unionist dominance and rise of Muslim League. He attributes this shift to changing socio-economic conditions, wartime pressures, and League’s ability to mobilize Muslim identity. More recent scholarship, including Jalal (1985), emphasizes role of high politics and constitutional negotiations in shaping trajectory of Pakistan movement. However, such approaches often overlook micro-level dynamics that facilitated the League’s success in rural areas. Studies focusing specifically on shrine politics, such as those by Ewing (1997) and Ansari (2005), highlight the importance of religious authority in political mobilization. These works demonstrate how Sajjada Nashins could influence electoral outcomes by mobilizing their followers. Despite these contributions, there remains a gap in literature regarding detailed district-level analyses that integrate electoral data, social structures, and religious networks. This study seeks to fill that gap by providing a comprehensive examination of Montgomery District as a microcosm of broader political transformation in Punjab.

### **3. Historical Background of Montgomery District:**

The British established a district between the Ravi and Sutluj rivers to protect their interests and improve administration. It was a district with Pakpattan as capital.” Pakpattan lost its district status in 1852 when its headquarters moved to Gogera. They added 20 Lahore villages to Gogera. The headquarters moved to Sahiwal in 1864. Sahiwal became Montgomery in 1865. The district originally had Gogera, Sayyedwala, Hujra, Pakpattan, and Harappa tehsils. Gogera, Hujra, Pakpattan, and Montgomery tehsils. Hujra moved to Depalpur in 1871, Gogera to Okara in 1872. Many district boundaries were changed by Board of Administration (BOA). Sayyidwala split from Jhang and joined Pakpattan. The district's inaccessibility and poor administration made Pakpattan unsuitable for administration.

Montgomery District, established during British rule, was a key part of canal colony system that transformed Punjab’s agrarian landscape. The introduction of irrigation canals facilitated agricultural expansion and attracted settlers from other regions, leading to the formation of new rural communities. The British administration relied heavily on local elites, including landlords and religious leaders, to maintain control. Land grants were often awarded to Sajjada Nashins and loyalist families, reinforcing their authority. This system created a hierarchical social structure in which political power was closely tied to landownership and religious influence.

### **4. Muslim League in District from 1919 to 1936-37 Elections:**

After the 1919 Reforms, Syed Rahim Bakhsh Shah was unopposed for Multan, Sahiwal, Dera Ghazi Khan, and Muzaffar Garh Imperial Legislative Council seats serving for sixteen years to the cause. Montgomery Congress Party Muslim-Hindu propaganda was influenced by Hindu lawyers and businessmen. This district Hindu party included Muslims. Anjuman-i-Islam was Muslim. Religious fields hosted public meetings and festivals. Congress alone represented Montgomery District Muslims and Hindus until 1923. Political activity in the district was low in 1924 Punjab Legislative Council elections. Sher Garh's Pir Muhammad Hussain and

Kamalia's Nawab Sadat Ali Khan Kharl ran for the district's single seat. Both candidates owned large district properties. All major local landlords backed Nawab Sadat Ali Khan Kharl. Pir Muhammad Hussain visited Sher Garh. Local landlords supported him, but he was weaker than Nawab Sadat Ali Khan. Despite his good oratory and sincere leadership, settlers and learned district class liked Pir Mohammad Hussein. In election, settlers helped him defeat Nawab Sadat Ali Khan. Mohammad Hussain opposed 1925 Punjab Legislative Council civil judge appointments. He wanted fair Muslim judges. He lauded the government for suspending a Civil Judge accused of appointment irregularities. Montgomery's provincial representative oversaw district welfare. Government always accepted his good ideas. His contributions to district Muslim politics were known by the educated class but not by the masses. New politics and nationalism changed society in the 1930s.

Mass electoral participation began in 1936-37 provincial elections, changing Indian politics. Muslim League won few seats in Punjab. Unionist candidates dominated Montgomery District politics, making it hard for the League to establish a presence. Multiple factors caused this initial failure. First, League rural organizations lacked infrastructure. Second, its leadership was seen as urban and unagrarian. Third, biradari networks and local elites rooted for Unionist candidates. The League learnt from 1937 elections despite these obstacles. Knowing the value of local alliances, party began working with rural power structures. Montgomery District Unionists won big in 1936-37. They also succeeded because "people voted for individuals, not political parties."<sup>1</sup> Locals didn't elect settlers. Local versus settler has always been a major District political issue. Locals could always tip the scales in favor of candidates because they were in majority. The 1937 provincial elections saw only the Unionist Party win 99 of 175 seats. Muslim League and Congress won only 19 seats in elections, proving that "in new era of provincial autonomy, level of power remained firmly in hands of rural collaborators with British rule."<sup>2</sup> Professor Copeland said, "The election manifesto of Muslim League, prepared under leadership of Mr. Jinnah had no difference in any matter with that of Congress."<sup>3</sup> Ian Talbot also noted that Muslim League was "being nothing more than a small clique of Lahore lawyers rather than a political party"<sup>4</sup> and could not resist Unionists. Its parent body relied almost entirely on Unionist Party support in All-India politics. In his book, famous columnist Zahid Chaudhary wrote, "One reason Muslim League failed in 1937 was that few lawyers and scholars of cities raised Muslim League flag. They were unconnected to rural people. Jagirdari peaked in villages with state support. Peasants and skilled laborers could not vote against Thanidar and Tehsildar. The big landlords considered the assembly seat their family property and forbade urban political workers from entering their constituency."<sup>5</sup>

The 1937 elections showed that Muslim League could not "undermine Unionist Party's entrenched position in the countryside,"<sup>6</sup> which prevented it from benefiting from India's new phase of autonomy. After 1936-37 elections, district residents became politically aware. Political activity increased in Montgomery District a year after election. Political party workers spread their agendas. District Muslim League formed. Unionist Party and Congress increased political activity. These political parties met more in tehsils and districts. People now

<sup>1</sup> Noraiz Shakoor, *The History of Muslim Politics in Montgomery District 1907-1947*, P.45

<sup>2</sup> Ian Talbot, *Second World War and Lord Indian Politics 1939-1947* International History Review Vol. 6 (International History Review Nov. 1984), p. 596

<sup>3</sup> Zahid Chaudhary, *Muslim Punjab ka Siyasi Irtiqa 1849-1947*, Vol.5 (Lahore, 1991), p.214

<sup>4</sup> Ian Talbot, *The Second World War and Lord Indian Politics 1939-1947*...p. 597

<sup>5</sup> Saeed Ahmed Butt, *British Colonial Montgomery (1857-1947)*

<sup>6</sup> Ian Talbot, *Provincial Politics and Pakistan Movement Growth of Muslim League in North-West and North-East India 1937-47*, Oxford University Press, 1988), p.86

understood electioneering. District constituency members began touring their constituencies to solve voter issues. Elections in 1936 sparked this political awakening. In 1938, the Unionist Party attacked moneylenders by introducing agrarian reforms that reduced their influence and strengthened the party in province. The district power pattern showed that personalities dominated politics and won elections over party manifestos. No rural masses supported the League politically. League was unfamiliar to villagers, so it was important for League to strengthen its position and possibly gain a rural base for future elections.<sup>7</sup>

### **5. Transformation in District Montgomery between 1937 and 1946:**

The period between 1937 and 1946 witnessed a dramatic transformation in Punjab politics. The Muslim League undertook a systematic effort to expand its influence in rural areas, including Montgomery District. In 1939, Britain entered a crucial period. One party initially supported Britain. "Local landlords mostly recruited for Punjab's National War Front, often coercively."<sup>8</sup> Given Punjabi landlordism towards British, prominent Unionist Party families were expected to help the British in times of trouble, even against Congress's propaganda. Punjab Assembly member Sir Sikandar introduced Recruitment Bill. In a Punjab assembly speech, he pledged "fullest cooperation in the event of war, standing by the British through thick and thin, with its manpower and all its resources."<sup>9</sup> The Party's war efforts sparked outrage and were seen as government intrusion into citizens' homes.<sup>10</sup> The death of Sikander Hayat strained Unionist-League alliance. Khizr Hayat Tiwana's Punjab premiership estranged Sikandar Hayat-Daultana-Shahabuddin faction, which younger generation sought to align with Muslim League. The Unionist Party's war efforts hurt its popularity. It severely hurt British rural collaborators in Punjab. Rural allies unexpectedly supported Muslim League and Congress's political detachment helped it thrive. Unionist members faced a choice: align with League at expense of Party or face political irrelevance in changing political landscape. The Muslim League focused on political influence.<sup>11</sup> To play a major role in politics, League leaders acknowledged the need to reconcile with Punjab's Muslim landlord class.<sup>12</sup> Sir Sikandar disapproved of League's approach of negotiating with government during difficult times and Congress' unambiguous opposition. He repeatedly urged both parties to reconcile and support government. Second World War showed Unionist Party's ineffectiveness as landlords' representative.<sup>13</sup> Party leaders worried that passing legislation in the province to benefit their rural allies while neglecting the urban business community, such as Sikhs and Hindus, would jeopardize their war effort. Unionists were afraid to risk their support at this crucial point in the war, so they lacked the courage to propose such legislation. Unionist Party support from rural villages has declined due to urban business class support. Linlithgow visited Montgomery, Multan, Muzaffargarh, Dera Ghazi Khan, Lyallpur and Shahpur in Western Punjab in March 1940 and received large war fund donations from Unionist Party loyalists. Due to his British loyalty, Sikandar Hyat Khan joined National Defense Council.<sup>14</sup> The Governor and Premier of Punjab realized that Punjab loyalty, not Congress propaganda, secured India.<sup>15</sup> By 1946, the Unionist Party mediated rural enlisted soldier and food needs. Unionist Party's

<sup>7</sup> Ashiq Batalwi, Iqbal K Aakhri Do Saal, (), p.298-299

<sup>8</sup> Ian Talbot, Punjab and the Raj 1849-1947 (Manohar publications, New Delhi, 1988), p.143

<sup>9</sup> Qalb-i-Abid, Muslim Politics in the Punjab 1921-47 (Vanguard Books Pvt Ltd, Pakistan, 1992), p.225

<sup>10</sup> Muhammad Waseem, Politics and the State in Pakistan, p.69

<sup>11</sup> Ian Talbot, Punjab and the Raj 1849-1947, p.238-239

<sup>12</sup> Saeed Ahmed Butt, British Colonial Montgomery (1857-1947)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ajeet Javed, Leftist Politics in Punjab (India, 1988), p.157

<sup>15</sup> S. Qalb-i-Abid, Muslim Politics in the Punjab 1921-47, pp.225

wartime involvement incited opposition to government intrusion into rural life, weakening it.<sup>16</sup> District Montgomery residents were deeply affected by Lahore Resolution. *Mian Abdul Haq* of Okara supported a Muslim identity in 1940 Lahore Resolution. Mian Sahab's London initiative led to the Lahore Resolution. After this resolution spread near Pakpattan, middle-class Muslim families of the tehsil united under Hazrat Syed Asghar Ali Shah and his son, Syed Haider Imam. Also notable were district league leaders Syed Mohammad Shah Advocate, Sheikh Mehboob Jilani Advocate, and Khan Mohammad Zaman Khan.<sup>17</sup> Unionist Party landlords in Punjab included Noons, Daultanas, and Hayats now joined the League. They had significant socio-economic influence in their communities "Unionist Party was crippled and never recovered."<sup>18</sup> In 1944, newly appointed Muslim League landlords like Mian Mumtaz Daultana and Shaukat Hayat spread Pakistani propaganda across the countryside. They spoke at Muslim League Conferences in Montgomery, Lyallpur, Sheikhpura, Sargodha, Jhang, Sialkot and Rawalpindi in June and July after visiting all five Divisions. Over 15,000 people attended Multan meeting and 10,000 in Montgomery.<sup>19</sup> The League justified Pakistan by equating the demand for Pakistan with Muslim community satisfaction, which depended on its ability to foster a communal identity that would make a Muslim state appealing and necessary for Punjabi Muslims.<sup>20</sup> In 1944, Abdul Satar Niazi made offensive remarks about Punjab Premier at a Muslim League meeting in Montgomery. "During these meetings, speakers condemned the Unionist Ministry and the Zamindara League, stating their unconditional support for Pakistan."<sup>21</sup> Nawab of Mamdot, Mian Mumtaz Daultana, and Raja Ghazanfar Ali addressed Provincial Muslim League leaders at five Montgomery locations in January 1945. "A truck with a gas apparatus and a loudspeaker accompanied them."<sup>22</sup> They established three village branches, but Communist workers helped their meetings succeed. The provincial league leaders explained Britain's post-war support for Indian independence. They explained Jinnah's desire for Pakistan to protect Muslims from Hindu hegemony. They called Punjab Premier "a traitor to Islam, who has contributed nothing for Muslims, Zamindars, or any community class" and Unionist Party. The Provincial Muslim League's July 1944 meeting in Montgomery and League leaders' visit energized the movement. People now express themselves openly and trends have changed.<sup>23</sup> Leading Unionist Party members joined the Muslim League, revitalizing it. Their impact in rural areas impressed the League, which welcomed them. Some genuine conversions risked official disapproval. However, many acted opportunistically in response to rising pressures from below and the League's new central authority.<sup>24</sup> Including Sajjada Nashins in League politics was crucial. Famous Pakpattan pirs and shrine priests supported the League to rally support. Ideology replaced local patronage. Punjabi pirs helped Unionist Party win 1937. The Muslim League copying the 1946 Unionist strategy created *Masheikh* Committee of religious leaders to gain Sufi support for its agenda. The Muslim League used Montgomery, Rawalpindi, and Jhang mosques for propaganda. Montgomery district branch staff collected two Annas from Muslim bazaar

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.602

<sup>17</sup> Allah Bakhsh Tariq, *Tehrik-i-Pakpattan* (Sahiwal, 1996), p.125

<sup>18</sup> Ian Talbot, *1946 Punjab Elections* (Modern Asian Studies, Vol.14 No. 1 Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.68

<sup>19</sup> Saeed Ahmed Butt, *British Colonial Montgomery (1857-1947)*

<sup>20</sup> David Gilmartin, *A Magnificent Gift: Muslim Nationalism and Election Process in Colonial Punjab July 1998*, p.421

<sup>21</sup> Saeed Ahmed Butt, *British Colonial Montgomery (1857-1947)*

<sup>22</sup> Riaz Ahmad, *Punjab Muslim League 1906-1947 Secret Police Abstracts* (NIHCR, 2008), p.212

<sup>23</sup> Noraiz Shakoor, *The History of Muslim Politics in Montgomery District 1907-1947*, p.57

<sup>24</sup> Ian Talbot, *Provincial Politics and Pakistan Movement*, p.96

shopkeepers to start a small enrollment campaign. After Friday prayers, a mosque maulvi urged Muslims to join Muslim League for Allama Iqbal's Pakistan. In April 1943, the Muslim League urged "pirs of Muslim India" to pray and inspire their followers to work for Muslim independence. Sajjada Nishins of various shrines accepted this appeal after Simla Conference because League represented Muslims. Following their reservations, prominent Montgomery landlords endorsed the League after League canvassed and mobilized. At *Sher Garh*, Pir Syed Ashiq Hussain, Rais Sher Garh, his brother Syed Mohammad Hussain Sajjada Nishin and Sahabzada Mohammad Abbas held large public meetings. The League received significant funding from three individuals. "Pirs' spiritual and temporal influence over their many village followers helped the League succeed."<sup>25</sup>

### **6. Shrine Politics and Sajjada Nashins:**

The Punjab Government classified Pirs as part of the landed gentry, a significant political maneuver that created a convergence of interests between feudal lords and Pirs in the future political landscape of Punjab. Pirs and Sajjada Nishins, as Islamic religious leaders, interconnected local social structures with the broader political and ideological framework of British rule. The most direct response to the British originated from Sajjada Nishins of the older shrines, whose local interests closely aligned them with British administration and the Unionist Party. The role of Saiyyid Muhammad Hussain, sajjada nishin of the Qadri shrine in Shergarh<sup>26</sup> (Montgomery District), exemplified the political functions of these sajjada nishins. Upon joining the provincial legislative council, Pir Muhammad Hussain, as a prominent religious figure, attained significant representation for the Unionist Party. He articulated no distinct religious affiliations in council, aside from his endorsement of the Land Alienation Act and the Unionist Party. He endorsed the overarching Unionist stance regarding the advancement of agricultural tribes. The ideological framework of British authority fostered the religious influence of local leaders and incorporated them into the imperial power structure. With a stable religious foundation in the rural areas, they perceived minimal justification for promoting a uniquely Islamic political stance.<sup>27</sup> Shrine politics significantly contributed to the League's success in the Montgomery District. The shrine of Pakpattan Sharif, linked to Baba Farid, was a significant religious hub in Punjab. The Sajjada Nashins of this shrine exercised considerable influence over their adherents. By aligning with the Muslim League, these religious leaders converted spiritual allegiance into political endorsement. Their endorsement held significant influence in rural communities, where religious authority was highly esteemed. The British had formerly depended on these individuals as intermediaries, bestowing upon them land and privileges. By the 1940s, numerous Sajjada Nashins realigned their loyalty to the League, indicating evolving political dynamics.

### **7. Biradari Networks and Rural Mobilization:**

In addition to religious authority, biradari (kinship) networks played a central role in shaping political behavior. The role of biradari networks and rural mobilization in the tehsils of Okara, Depalpur, Pakpattan, and Montgomery within the larger Montgomery District (present-day Sahiwal) underwent a profound transformation between the elections of 1937 and 1946. These networks influenced voting patterns and facilitated collective decision-making. The

<sup>25</sup> Ian Talbot, *The 1946 Punjab Elections* (), p.69 Sahabzada Syed Mohammad Abbas, son of sajjada nishin of Shergarh shrine which had extensive influence in Lower Bari Doab Canal Colony, was the Divisional Organizer of the Montgomery Muslim League.

<sup>26</sup> David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (London, 1988), p.62

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Muslim League strategically engaged with biradari leaders, incorporating them into its organizational structure. By addressing local concerns and offering political representation, the League was able to secure their support. This approach allowed the League to penetrate rural areas and challenge the dominance of the Unionist Party. This transformation did not involve the disappearance of traditional social structures; rather, it reflected a significant shift in how these structures were politically mobilized. In both elections, biradari (kinship-based social organization) remained the central mechanism through which rural society functioned. However, the nature of political authority, direction of mobilization and ideological framing of politics changed dramatically over time. In the 1937 elections, Okara tehsil represented a classic example of canal colony politics shaped by British colonial policies. The region had been developed through irrigation projects and populated by agricultural tribes such as Jats, Arains, and Rajputs, many of whom had been granted land by the colonial state. These land allotments created a hierarchy of influence in which large landowners, often designated as *lambardars* or local intermediaries, exercised considerable control over rural society. Biradari networks in Okara functioned primarily as instruments of economic coordination and social cohesion, but in electoral politics, they became channels of patronage. The Unionist Party, which dominated Punjab politics at the time, relied heavily on these structures. Its candidates were typically drawn from influential biradaris and used their economic leverage control over land, water distribution, and credit to secure votes. In such a context, rural mobilization was not ideological but transactional. Voters did not perceive elections as expressions of political preference; instead, they were embedded within systems of obligation and loyalty. Consequently, the Muslim League found little success in Okara in 1937 because it lacked both organizational presence and access to these entrenched networks.

By 1946, however, political dynamics of Okara had shifted significantly. While the same biradari structures remained intact, their political orientation had changed. The Muslim League had learned from its earlier failures and began systematically engaging local leaders within these kinship networks. Rather than attempting to dismantle the existing system, the League inserted itself into it. Younger members of influential biradaris, many of whom had been exposed to new political ideas through education or urban connections, became active supporters of the League. At the same time, League reframed political discourse in religious terms, presenting the demand for Pakistan as a collective Muslim cause. This ideological appeal resonated across biradari lines, allowing the League to unify otherwise fragmented groups. Rural mobilization thus expanded beyond the control of landlords and incorporated religious leaders and political activists. In this transformed environment, biradari cohesion was not weakened but redirected, enabling the Muslim League to secure widespread support. Depalpur tehsil, in contrast to Okara, represented a more traditional agrarian society with deep-rooted landholding patterns and long-established biradari hierarchies. In 1937 elections, Depalpur was firmly under the control of Unionist elites. Biradari networks functioned as tightly organized voting blocs, with allegiance determined by lineage and reinforced by economic dependence. The dominant groups, including Rajputs and Jats, exercised control over agricultural resources and labor, ensuring that political loyalty remained closely tied to local power structures. Elections in this context were less about competition between political parties and more about reaffirming existing hierarchies. Rural mobilization was orchestrated by landlords who leveraged their authority to maintain cohesion within their biradaris. The Muslim League, lacking both local leadership and credibility among rural populations, was unable to penetrate these networks.

The period between 1937 and 1946, however, brought significant changes to Depalpur's political landscape. The decline of Unionist patronage, exacerbated by wartime economic pressures, weakened the hold of traditional elites. At the same time, Muslim League intensified its efforts to engage with rural society. It began to incorporate biradari leaders into its organizational structure and used religious symbolism to appeal to a broader sense of Muslim identity. In Depalpur, this resulted in a gradual politicization of biradari networks. While kinship ties remained important, they were increasingly aligned with ideological commitments. Rural mobilization became more dynamic, involving public meetings, mosque-based gatherings and the dissemination of political messages framed in religious terms. By 1946, the Muslim League had successfully transformed biradari networks from instruments of elite control into vehicles of mass political participation. Pakpattan tehsil presents a distinct case due to its status as a major center of religious authority, anchored by the shrine of Baba Farid. In 1937, the political influence of the shrine was already significant, but it operated largely within the framework of Unionist Party and colonial state. Sajjada Nashins, or hereditary custodians of the shrine, commanded immense respect and loyalty among their followers, who were drawn from multiple *biradaris*. This created a layered social structure in which spiritual allegiance could sometimes supersede kinship ties. However, in 1937 elections, the political role of the shrine remained conservative. The Sajjada Nashins tended to support status quo, aligning with Unionist candidates and reinforcing existing power structures. Rural mobilization in Pakpattan was thus mediated through a combination of *biradari* networks and spiritual authority, both of which functioned to maintain political stability. The situation changed dramatically by 1946, when shrine politics became a decisive factor in success of Muslim League. The Sajjada Nashins of Pakpattan increasingly aligned themselves with League, bringing their followers with them. This shift had profound implications for biradari dynamics. Because the shrine's influence extended across multiple kinship groups, its endorsement of League effectively unified diverse biradaris under a single political banner. Rural mobilization took on a distinctly religious character, with political messages disseminated through sermons, religious gatherings, and shrine-based networks. The idea of Pakistan was framed not merely as a political objective but as a religious duty, thereby intensifying its appeal. In Pakpattan, transformation of political allegiance was particularly striking because it demonstrated how religious authority could transcend and reconfigure traditional social divisions.

Montgomery tehsil itself, which included the district's administrative center, exhibited a more complex interplay between urban and rural dynamics. In the 1937 elections, the presence of an urban population introduced a degree of political diversity that was less evident in the purely rural tehsils. While biradari networks remained influential in the surrounding countryside, urban voters were somewhat less constrained by kinship ties. Nevertheless, Unionist Party maintained its dominance, drawing support from both rural elites and segments of urban population. Rural mobilization in this tehsil followed patterns similar to those observed elsewhere in the district, with landlords and local leaders exercising control over voting behavior. By 1946, Montgomery tehsil became a crucial site for the expansion of Muslim League influence. The League's urban base provided a platform for political organization, which was then extended into rural areas. Urban elites, including professionals and traders, aligned themselves with League and played a key role in disseminating its message. At the same time, rural biradari networks were gradually incorporated into this expanding political framework. The result was a hybrid form of mobilization that combined urban activism with rural social structures.

Across all four tehsils, the comparison between 1937 and 1946 reveals a consistent pattern: the persistence of biradari networks alongside a transformation in their political function. In 1937, these networks operated within a system of patronage dominated by the Unionist Party. Political loyalty was localized, transactional, and mediated through economic relationships. By 1946, however, the same networks had been reoriented toward ideological mobilization under the Muslim League. This shift was facilitated by the League's ability to engage with existing social structures, incorporate local leaders, and frame its political message in terms that resonated with rural populations. The transformation was neither uniform nor instantaneous; it varied across tehsils depending on local conditions. In Okara and Depalpur, the change involved the gradual politicization of agrarian biradari networks. In Pakpattan, it was driven by the alignment of shrine authority with the League. In Montgomery tehsil, it reflected the interaction between urban and rural political dynamics. Despite these variations, the overall trajectory was clear: rural society in Montgomery District moved from a system of elite-controlled patronage to one of mass political participation shaped by religious and ideological appeals. This analysis underscores the importance of understanding political change in colonial Punjab as a process rooted in local social structures. The success of the Muslim League in 1946 was not achieved by dismantling these structures but by transforming their function. Biradari networks, far from being obstacles to political change, became the very instruments through which that change was realized.

#### **8. The 1946 Elections and the Triumph of Muslim League:**

The 1946 elections marked the culmination of the League's efforts. In Punjab, the party achieved significant success, particularly in Muslim-majority constituencies. In Montgomery District, the League's victory reflected the convergence of multiple factors, including religious mobilization, biradari alliances, and ideological appeal. The support of Sajjada Nashins proved **निर्णायक**, as their influence helped consolidate rural votes. The elections demonstrated a clear shift in political allegiance, with the League emerging as the primary representative of Muslim interests. The Unionists began rejecting the ideology, which had tied them to the British imperial structure. This phenomenon developed after the demise of Sikandar Hayat in 1942. "He himself expressed his solidarity with Muslims but at the same time he was against the idea of Pakistan, which he perceived as detrimental to the interest of Punjab and Punjabi nationalism particularly under the non-Punjabi rule."<sup>28</sup> The failure of Simla Conference (July 1945) gave a message to the British rural magnates, "that the receipt of high office in future would depend on collaboration with the Muslim League rather than the British. It was this new awareness, rather than League's renewed depiction of *Khizr* as a traitor to Islam which sparked off the rural elite's large-scale exodus from the Unionist Party during weeks which followed the Simla Conference. It had been looked to for patronage and to safeguard the landowners' local interests."<sup>29</sup>

In the elections of 1937, the Unionist Party achieved victory due to the much support of leading pirs in Punjab province. Therefore, "the Muslim League endeavoured to repeat Unionist formula for victory in 1946, when it created a committee of men of religious influence known as the *Masheikh* Committee to marshal Sufi support behind its cause."<sup>30</sup> In the district, Muslim League also introduced to achieve the support of other important segments of society. For this purpose, League leaders ordered to organize students and women's sub-committees in district. "Members of Punjab Muslim students' Federation who

<sup>28</sup> Iftikhar Malik, Sikandar Hayat Khan, a political biography, p.95

<sup>29</sup> Ian Talbot, Provincial Politics and Pakistan Movement, p.97

<sup>30</sup> Ian Talbot, the 1946 Punjab Elections (Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 14, No.1, 1980), p.69

did work on Muslim League's behalf were directed when they visited a village to find out its social problems and difficulties to tell them (villagers) that main cause of their problems was the Unionists (and) give them the solution-Pakistan."<sup>31</sup> Resultantly, the members of Muslim League enhanced a large in Montgomery district.

As Okara tehsil had no suitable candidate for 1945 elections, unionist politics were difficult. However, the All-India Muslim League chose Mian Abdul Haq as the most suitable and popular candidate. The Unionist Party chose a candidate with official support. The Montgomery Deputy Commissioner had to choose the right candidate for the elections. He wanted someone to challenge Mian Abdul Haq's personality cult. He made Rai Noor Mohammad Peroka concede Unionist Party candidacy. Former MLA Jahangir sought Unionist Party nomination. One group lobbied for Mr. Jahangir's candidacy, so the party high command named him its 1945 candidate, putting the Unionist Party's tehsil politics in a rut. After Mr. Jahangir was rejected for serious allegations, Unionist Party problems grew. Tehsil unionists lost hope. Later, Montgomery Deputy Commissioner convinced Rai Noor Mohammad Peroka to accept Unionist Party nomination. But "he was assured of all possible support by the district administration." Unionist Party candidate received election aids from the district administration. A comprehensive strategy was developed to win mass support for the Unionist candidate. Tehsil scoundrels and louts who hated Mian Abdul Haq were hired. The entire local administration was ordered to back the Unionists over the Leaguers. The Unionist candidate couldn't stop Mian Abdul Haq's charisma. The district's best debater was Mian Sahb." Police and revenue officers accompanied the Unionist candidate across the constituency. They "pressured the landowners (Zaildars, Lambardars) and Muslim League supporters to support Unionist candidacy, Rai Noor Mohammad" everywhere. P.C.S. Revenue Officer *Sardar Inder Sain* planned and monitored all political activities. The tehsil administration arrested deadly Mian Abdul Haq supporters like Omar Hayat, Omer's uncle, and Nazar Mohammad Lashari, who was close to Mian Abdul Haq in Okara. "The police offered the accused a quick release if he supported the Unionist candidate. They didn't gain weight and stuck to their mission." Police persecuted Mian Abdul Haq supporters. Even his uncle, Mian Abdul Wahab, was arrested for illegally attesting marriage sugar quota applications. He was removed as district board member and zaildar and had his weapons taken. Constituency voter lists were made by Kanoongos and Patwaris. Visits by League leaders and students popularized Pakistan. On August 12, 1944, Muslim League leader Shaukat Hayat Khan addressed a mostly Hindu and Sikh audience at Okara. At the railway station, local Muslim League workers and ten National Guard volunteers in green bush shirts, white shalwars, and green NG armbands welcomed S. Shaukat Hayat. S. Shaukat Hayat wanted Gandhi and Jinnah to compromise and said those who left their religion to become lambardars, jagirdars, etc. The League won the tehsil elections with youth support. In his book, Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza wrote that 15 students patrolled from December 13, 1945, supporting League candidate Mian Abdul Haque. They addressed 30,000 villagers in 40 villages, hoping League would succeed. The Report said liberty inspired people to end slavery. Ahmed Saeed Karmani, Punjab Students Federation Propaganda Secretary, advised Muslim youth to campaign differently. According to the Islamia College Election Office, hundreds of student groups completed their tasks in Okara and Depalpur. The League campaign sank the Unionist candidate in 1945-46.

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<sup>31</sup> Ian Talbot, *Second World War and Local Indian Politics 1939-1947*, Vol. 6 (Nov.1984),p.603

The electoral contest in Depalpur and other tehsils of Montgomery district reveals a highly contested political environment in which both the Unionist Party and the Muslim League relied on local influence, administrative support, and rural mobilization to secure victory. In Depalpur, the Unionists fielded powerful local notable Mian Noor Mohammad Manika Watto, whose dominance rested on strong biradari ties and longstanding influence in the area. The Muslim League, by contrast, nominated Pir Syed Ashiq Hussain of Shergarh, a prominent religious figure whose appeal lay in spiritual authority rather than entrenched landed power. Although the Unionist position initially appeared secure, it was briefly threatened when Mian Ghulam Mohy-ud-Din Watto entered the race as an independent candidate, exposing internal rivalries within the dominant Watto biradari.<sup>32</sup> The district administration, acting under Unionist pressure, intervened to ensure his withdrawal, thereby consolidating support behind Mian Noor Mohammad Manika. The 1937 electoral environment in Depalpur thus reflected the classic Unionist model of politics, where administrative machinery, biradari loyalty, and landed influence combined to maintain control. However, by the 1945–46 elections, this structure came under serious challenge. Despite overt support from district officials—who used inducements such as land grants, intimidation, and even coercive tactics against League supporters—the Muslim League succeeded in mobilizing rural voters. Religious leaders (molvis) actively campaigned for the League, framing electoral participation as a sacred duty, while students of the Muslim Students Federation conducted extensive grassroots canvassing. Administrative harassment, including false cases and punitive actions against League activists, failed to break voter commitment. Ultimately, Syed Ashiq Hussain’s victory symbolized the erosion of Unionist dominance and the effectiveness of ideological and religious mobilization over traditional patronage politics. A similar transformation can be observed in Pakpattan tehsil, though here the role of religious authority was even more pronounced. Historically regarded as a **केंद्र** of spiritual influence, Pakpattan’s politics revolved around powerful local families and shrine-based leadership. Following the Lahore Resolution of 1940, many prominent Muslim groups including Sayyids, Pathans, and Rajputs—began aligning with the Muslim League, reshaping the political landscape. The Unionists, recognizing the growing appeal of League, attempted to counter this shift by nominating Mian Mohammad Masood, a relative of influential Diwan family, and backing him with both state resources and religious prestige. The colonial administration, through mechanisms such as Court of Wards and financial support, actively facilitated his campaign. Despite these advantages, Unionist strategy faced significant resistance. The Muslim League candidate, Rana Abdul Hamid, though considered an outsider, benefited from an increasingly politicized rural population. Administrative interference reached unprecedented levels: officials were transferred, police were instructed to support Unionist candidates, and pro-League figures were harassed, dismissed or even imprisoned. Influential personalities who refused to support Unionists, such as local notables and shrine leaders, faced intimidation but often resisted, reinforcing the League’s moral position. Pir Syed Asghar Ali Jilani’s refusal to endorse the Unionists and his insistence on political neutrality or implicit support for the League illustrates the shifting alignment of religious authority. The Muslim League countered administrative pressure through organized and innovative mobilization strategies. Students played a particularly vital role, traveling across villages, organizing meetings, and disseminating League’s message. The role of the students could not be neglected in election campaign of 1945-46. “A batch of Montgomery Students Federation

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<sup>32</sup> Noraiz Shakoor, *The History of Muslim Politics in Montgomery District 1907-1947*, p.90

Toured Tehsil Pakpattan and visited 30 Chaks such as Khoblanwala, Siadanwala, Pattanwala, Kentarpur, Gharhi, Rekhiyan, Nishirkot, Bahawalnagar, Khokhranwala, Alwardi, Jafarka etc.”<sup>33</sup> Their organized propaganda convinced the people of tehsil to vote for League candidate. During period 1945-46, the students of Islamia College walked about 40 miles in the tehsil. They also organised public meetings, in which they explained cause of League manifesto for Pakistan. Their efforts, combined with growing resonance of Pakistan demand, helped galvanize rural voters. Even punitive measures against League sympathizers, such as dismissal of numberdars and confiscation of arms, failed to suppress this momentum. The League’s success in Pakpattan thus demonstrated how religious legitimacy, grassroots activism, and ideological appeal could overcome entrenched administrative and patronage networks.

In Montgomery tehsil, where Unionist influence had traditionally been strongest, the contest was equally intense. Malik Fateh Sher Langrial, a prominent Unionist leader, enjoyed strong administrative backing, which was openly displayed through symbolic gestures and institutional support. The Muslim League candidate, Malik Mehar Khan Mohammad Katia<sup>34</sup>, initially appeared weak in comparison, and even local observers doubted his chances. However, League’s campaign gradually gained traction through persistent grassroots efforts. Students once again played a central role, conducting village-level outreach and organizing public meetings to explain the League’s vision of Pakistan. Although early rallies attracted limited audiences, sustained propaganda efforts eventually expanded public engagement. The Unionist response relied heavily on administrative coercion, including the dismissal of pro-League officials and the filing of legal cases against activists. Nevertheless, these measures proved ineffective in the face of growing popular enthusiasm. The Muslim League also expanded its organizational base by incorporating women into the campaign, who actively participated in canvassing, fundraising, and voter mobilization. Their involvement not only broadened the League’s social reach but also demonstrated the depth of its popular appeal. By election day, despite police pressure and logistical challenges, voters turned out in significant numbers to support the League candidate. Taken together, these developments across Depalpur, Pakpattan, and Montgomery tehsils illustrate a **निर्णायक** shift in the nature of rural politics between 1937 and 1946. In the earlier period, elections were dominated by Unionist elites who relied on biradari loyalty, administrative support, and economic patronage. By contrast, the later elections were characterized by mass mobilization driven by ideological commitment, religious legitimacy, and grassroots activism. The Muslim League’s success lay not in dismantling existing social structures but in redefining their political function transforming biradari networks and rural communities into vehicles of nationalist mobilization. The election results from Montgomery District in 1946 clearly show how strongly the Muslim League had gained support across all major constituencies of the district. In Montgomery tehsil, Malik Mehar Khan Mohammad Katia won an overwhelming 83.5% of total votes, which indicates a decisive and one-sided victory. Similarly, in Okara, Mian Abdul Haq, representing the Muslim League, secured an even higher share of 87.9%, reflecting an almost complete consolidation of voters in favor of League. In Depalpur, Syed Ashiq Hussain also achieved a strong victory with 68.3% of vote, while in Pakpattan, Rana Abdul Hamid Khan won with 63.2%, showing that even in areas with strong traditional and religious influences, the League was able to command a clear majority. These results demonstrate that Muslim League did not merely win elections it dominated them across the district. The high

<sup>33</sup> Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza, *The Punjab Muslim Students Federation 1937-1947*, p.410

<sup>34</sup> Saeed Ahmed Butt, *British Colonial Montgomery (1857-1947)*

percentage of votes in each constituency indicates that support for the League cut across local divisions and represented a broad-based shift in political loyalties.

This transformation is vividly captured in the observation quoted by Mushtaq Adil from Rafique Safdar's *Tarikh-e-Sahiwal*, where he describes the public support for the Muslim League in 1946 as a "tsunami."<sup>35</sup> This metaphor reflects the speed, scale, and intensity with which people turned towards the League. What had once been a limited political presence in 1937 had, by 1946, become a mass movement that swept through district. Local leadership also played a crucial role in this success. The efforts of figures such as Syed Haider Imam and Syed Mohammad Shah helped mobilize voters and strengthen League's position. Their influence contributed to the League winning all four Muslim seats in Montgomery District and securing the highest vote shares. The defeats of prominent Unionist leaders further highlight this dramatic shift. In Pakpattan, Pir Masood Chishti, a figure associated with religious authority, was defeated by the Muslim League candidate Rana Abdul Rehman. In Depalpur, Khan Bahadur Noor Ahmad Khan, an experienced and influential politician, suffered his first electoral defeat at the hands of Syed Ashiq Hussain of Shergarh. In Okara, *Mian Abdul Haq* decisively defeated Unionist candidate Mian Chirag Din with a large majority. Even in Montgomery, where Unionist influence had been strong, Malik Mehar Khan Mohammad Katia secured victory over his rival Fateh Sher.<sup>36</sup> In simple terms, these results show that by 1946, the political landscape of Montgomery District had completely changed. The Muslim League was no longer a weak or marginal party; it had become the dominant political force. The combination of strong local leadership, effective mobilization, and a powerful ideological appeal led to a sweeping victory that reflected the broader momentum of the Pakistan Movement in Punjab.

**Conclusion:**

The political transformation of Montgomery District between 1937 and 1946 highlights the dynamic nature of colonial Punjab's political landscape. The rise of the Muslim League was not merely a product of elite negotiations but a reflection of deeper social and cultural shifts. By engaging with shrine networks, biradari structures, and rural elites, the League successfully redefined political mobilization. The 1946 elections marked the culmination of this process, paving the way for the creation of Pakistan. This study underscores the importance of microhistorical analysis in understanding broader historical processes. The case of Montgomery District demonstrates how local dynamics can illuminate the complexities of political transformation in colonial contexts.

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<sup>35</sup> *Mushtaq Adil, Tarikh-i-Sahiwal* (Sahiwal, May 2009), p.46-47

<sup>36</sup> Saeed Ahmed Butt, *British Colonial Montgomery (1857-1947)*